



# Chance

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**Category:** Romance, Adult

**Description:** Chance Daniels has always been the serious one. Maybe it's time he takes a chance on a Little Joy.

Boudoir photographer Joy Joplin loves her life until one fateful picture changes everything. On the run and out of options, she sneaks onto Wild River Ranch and finds a grumpy cowboy with a wicked talent for roping. Too bad he has no desire for a Little with trouble on her heels.

Chance Daniels is there for anyone who needs him—anyone he knows, that is. He runs Wild River Ranch like clockwork until trouble arrives in the shape of a Little blonde bombshell armed with a camera, chaos, and a promise of happiness the Daddy in him never thought he'd find.

He'll spend forever with her... if only he can stop whoever wants her silenced before it's too late.

**Total Pages (Source):** 57

## CHAPTER 1

Chance Daniels scanned the crowd, the largest they'd had for a Friendsgiving celebration yet. Wilder was a small town. It should be easy to spot an outsider, but with everyone wearing hats and heavy coats, it was proving more difficult.

He milled his way through well over one hundred friends, family, and acquaintances gathered outside in the courtyard, searching for the one person who shouldn't be there.

It was called "Friendsgiving" and not "Strangersgiving" for a reason. But there was a woman here he'd never seen before. With everything finally settled down on the ranch, the last thing he needed was some new problem to stir things back up. He was done with drama and intrigue. And she'd had trouble written all over her.

He had to admit, trouble had never looked so good. His instant attraction to someone he'd never seen before shocked the hell out of him. It also pissed him off. If he made a list of the top ten things he did not need right now, getting a hard on for a gorgeous blonde wearing... wait, was she wearing turquoise and pink combat boots, of all things? She was. Complete with a unicorn on each boot sporting a silver horn that sparkled in the midday sun.

That wouldn't be unusual for most of the women in Wilder, where DDlg couples were the norm, but he'd bet his prize bull, Ironside, she wasn't from around here.

Women around here knew how to dress for a Rocky Mountain winter day. This woman wore ripped jeans tucked into fucking combat boots, a thin shirt, and an even

thinner jacket. Even at high noon, it hadn't made it above freezing. In fact, Chance was surprised, considering the cold, so many people had turned out for their traditional outdoor meal. But everyone had dressed for the cold except her. His quick glimpse of her earlier revealed she was practically blue.

Even from this distance, he could tell her hands were red and chapped. Where the hell were her gloves? He needed to find out who she was, but first, he needed to take her into the house and find her something warm to wear before she made herself sick. Did she not have anyone looking out for her?

Damn it. He was not taking in one more stray. She was a grown woman, as evidenced by the delicious curves of her well-rounded hips. She had an ass that begged to be spanked, and his hand was itching to be the one to do it. She'd think twice before going out without her gloves and a decent coat once he was done.

But she wasn't his responsibility. And why did that send a pang through his chest? He was losing his mind. Hell, he didn't even know who she was.

Keeping Wild River Ranch running smoothly was hard enough. This coming winter was expected to be the coldest in over a decade. He'd hired extra men to ensure they were prepared to keep the animals safe and healthy. Not to mention, they needed to repair the fences and outlying cabins to get them ready for guests next season.

Even with the large crowd, it shouldn't be that hard to spot a stranger. Wilder was a small town. Strangers stood out like a sore thumb. And this woman was tall. Well, not tall compared to him, but then, at 6'4", not many people were. But for a woman, she was tall. With her lean, lithe body and long blonde hair flowing down her back like the wild river the ranch was named for, there was no reason spotting her should be this difficult.

Seeing two of his newer hires, Gus Moody and Silas Holland, he waved them over.

“Find her?” They both shook their heads.

Silas shrugged. “Maybe she knew you were onto her, boss. She probably ran when she saw you staring at her.”

Chance wouldn’t call it staring, but the woman was easy on the eyes. His gut heated at the thought of her wearing nothing but his ropes, bound and trussed up, waiting for him to do whatever he wanted. He took a deep breath and willed his body to relax.

He had spotted her once when the crowd parted, and once again, lifting her camera before stepping back to take a few pictures. What was that about? Who takes pictures of people they don’t even know? Was she scamming people?

Irritation and protectiveness for his friends had him loping in her direction. She must have had some sixth sense because she stiffened and looked over her shoulder directly at him.

Her eyes narrowed before she turned back to her latest subject. Placing a hand on the man’s arm, she whispered something into the man’s ear before vanishing into the crowd.

Now here it was, an hour later. He’d been looking for her ever since.

“Um, boss?” Gus said. “I think I know why we couldn’t find her in the crowd.”

“And why is that?” Chance asked, tipping up his Stetson.

“I think she decided to visit old Ironside.” Gus pointed to the holding pen where the largest bison they owned was housed temporarily.

Well. Shit.

The day had started out great for Calliope Joy Joplin. She had her camera, some photo booth props she kept in her trunk, and her can-do spirit. Everyone she asked allowed her to take their photo. It didn't take long for news to work through the crowd. By early afternoon, people were coming up to her.

There had to be over a hundred people standing around her, listening to a local band play at the Wild River Ranch Friendsgiving celebration. She'd been right. It was the perfect opportunity to earn some cash and get her name out in the community.

When she'd left home the way she had, she'd never imagined finding another town like Nameless. Oh, Wilder, Wyoming, had its differences. But another community built around people who enjoyed living a DDlg lifestyle? She'd thought it was lost to her forever.

Wilder even had a lot of the quirkiness she loved. Like holding a Friendsgiving celebration a few days before Christmas rather than Thanksgiving. All she knew was it suited her just fine.

She couldn't wait to set up her own studio here. Of course, first, she would need money. Thus, the necessity of sneaking onto Wild River Ranch to do what she did best, taking pictures that made people feel good.

Not that this was the kind of photography she normally did. She owned a studio in Nameless, at least she had before circumstances forced her to leave. People loved her work so well it became necessary for her clients to book appointments well in advance. Her calendar was always full, and her waiting list was long.

At least they used to. Now, no one was waiting. Her studio was over a thousand miles away. She had no idea when or if she'd ever be able to return.

## Page 2

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It was a good thing she enjoyed meeting new people. Looking people in the eye and convincing them to pose brought her back to when she first started photography.

“Thanks for allowing me to take your picture,” she told the cute young couple she’d just finished photographing. “That is the cutest baby I’ve ever seen!”

They walked away smiling, reminding her of why she loved what she did. Sure, when she told people she was a boudoir photographer, she got a funny look. But she helped people, mostly women, realize every single body was sexy. Sexy wasn’t about the outside of a person. Not really.

Sexy was about believing in your own power and appeal. Real sexiness came from the inside. She helped people find that. And she helped people preserve the special moments of their lives. She loved it.

Then a tickle of knowing shivered through Joy. Her granny would have said it meant someone had walked over her grave, but that wasn’t the case. Her mother would have said she needed a coat, but that wasn’t it, either. Joy knew without a shadow of a doubt someone was watching her.

With so many people milling around, she shouldn't be surprised. Technically, people had looked at her all day long.

But that was before, when all her memories were happy ones. Now, she slept with one eye open and broke out in a sweat whenever she sensed someone's gaze on her. Like she did now.

She scanned the crowd, hoping to spot the person staring at her. However, she was surrounded by strangers. No one seemed to be paying any particular attention to her. The guests here were just part of the landscape, not unlike the grand mountains and the tall pines and spruce.

There went that tickle of awareness again. She was probably paranoid. Then a tap on her shoulder made her jump out of her skin. Spinning around, relief flooded her when a clean-cut man in a white button-down and denim jacket smiled at her.

“I found my girl and our boy,” he said. “Can you take a picture of us now?”

Putting her fears on the back burner, she smiled. “I'd love to. Why don't we go to the wagon over there, and we'll get you posed up.”

The man had a beautiful family, and it didn't take long for her to provide several pictures for them to choose from. She showed the couple the images, and they selected their favorites. After they paid, she emailed them digital copies of their photos, and they left happier than when they'd arrived. Yes, she loved her job.

Then she spotted him, staring right at her. A tall, strong cowboy with a frown on his face. Glancing around, she looked for a place she could go to outside the gathering.

As if hearing her silent wish, Joy spotted the most breathtaking sight she'd ever seen. An adorable bison calf romped and cavorted around the pen, and she knew she'd found her special moment.

Why did they have such a cute calf penned up away from its herd? It didn't look sick or injured. It was getting older, but she'd be willing to bet it should still be nursing. Where was its mother?

Taking pictures of a creature so happy and carefree was just what the doctor ordered.

It would be so much fun, and it would get her away from the cowboy. Trying to appear as nonchalant as possible, Joy wove her way through the crowd.

The slats of the wooden fence were the perfect distance apart for climbing. She made it over in no time. Holding out her hand, she inched closer to the baby bison one tiny step at a time.

In her softest voice, she talked to the cutie. “Hi, there, sweetie. You are a cutie patootie, you know that?” She paused to take a few pictures. He was... oops, she was as cute as a button. “You are just adorable. I wanted to take a few pictures of you, but with that soft, downy fur, I will have to take a selfie of the two of us, too. You’d like that, wouldn’t you, girl?”

Moving slowly, she waited for the calf to feel comfortable. Then, stepping closer, she focused on getting the best picture possible. She might even leave one for the owner of the ranch to use in their advertising.

After snapping a few pictures, she turned to make her way back out of the pen, only to find herself face to face with the largest bison she’d ever seen in her life. It was all she could do not to scream. How in the heck had something roughly the size of a mountain snuck up on her?

She glared at her newly made baby bison friend. “I thought you said we were alone!”

## CHAPTER 2

Chance turned toward the holding pen and nearly lost his mind. Inside the pen, with the largest and most temperamental bull on the entire ranch, stood the stunning photographer. But did she notice the twenty-five-hundred-pound beast plodding up behind her? No, not until it was practically breathing down her neck.



All her focus had been on the orphaned calf housed in the holding pen until they could try to figure out where to place her. The woman treated it like a stray puppy.

Once she noticed the bull, did she run for the fence? Hell, no. She talked to the calf. Then, she placed herself between the calf and Ironside. Did she think she would be able to protect it if the bull decided to charge? Because charging was exactly the kind of thing Ironside would do.

See? Trouble.

After all, nothing said “Friendsgiving” like having a guest trampled by a bull.

Yelling orders to his men to get the bull back in the barn, he raced toward the holding pen, praying he would make it in time to keep her safe.

The fact that she was in the pen with Ironside was bad enough, but his heart nearly stopped when she started to inch closer to the bull. She extended her hand, palm up, as if she were approaching a stray dog rather than a two-thousand-pound, ill-tempered bison.

She was smiling, oblivious to the danger she’d put herself in. When he got his hands on her, she’d be one very sorry trespasser. As he approached the pen, he slowed to a jog, doing his best not to startle the beast.

## Page 3

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No wonder he hadn't spotted her. He'd been searching in the places where sane people would be found. Insane or not, no one had been killed on Wild River Ranch since its founding, and that record wasn't going to be broken on his watch.

He took off his hat, waving it slowly to capture the bull's attention. Then maybe his uninvited guest would have a chance to escape. When she didn't move, he tried to gently encourage her. In quiet tones, he said, "Don't know your name, but you have to the count to three to get your sweet ass out of my holding pen. Slow steps, starting now."

That was probably the most he'd spoken all week. He wasn't much for talking. He let his actions and his rope do the talking. He was about to give her a few choice words when she looked at him, making him forget what he was about to say.

She smiled at him like he carried the sun, moon, and stars. None of those celestial bodies could hold a candle to her smile. In that moment, the rest of the world became nothing more than a backdrop.

She was dazzling.

She shook her head. "Oh, thank you, but no. I haven't captured my special moment yet."

Her words broke the spell. It was without a doubt the politest disobedience he'd ever heard. But it was still disobedience. "Ma'am, if you don't start moving, you'll sit tender for a week."

Her jaw fell open. “Did... did you really just threaten to spank me?”

“No, ma’am,” he said. “I don’t threaten. But I do promise, and a promise is one thing I always keep.”

As Chance distracted Joy, Gus and Silas entered the pen, positioning themselves between Ironside and the insane woman clutching the camera to her chest. As his men backed Ironside toward the barn, she shot Chance a glare. “I didn’t get my photo!” she pouted.

Pouting or not, she didn’t need to worry about Ironside at all. She needed to worry about him. He was in the mood to teach this Little girl a lesson she wouldn’t soon forget.

Nope. Stop right there.

He wasn’t going down that road. Just because she had no sense of self-preservation and evidently a complete lack of fear, not to mention the most adorable combat boots he’d ever seen, didn’t mean she was a Little. The Daddy in him was seeing who he wanted her to be, not who she actually was.

Once she climbed back over the fence, he stalked toward her. Her eyes went wide, which should have alerted him. Quick as a wink, she turned and raced back toward the crowd.

Without hesitation, he reached for the rope coiled at his hip, only to discover he’d forgotten to grab one that morning. If he couldn’t lasso his troublesome photographer, he’d have to catch her the old-fashioned way. She had him reduced to chasing after her.

He didn’t like it. He prided himself on his control. It was necessary to keep a ranch

the size of Wild River Ranch running smoothly. He controlled everything in his life. Routine and predictability. Those were the principles that kept the ranch and his life running smoothly.

Doing that and keeping his family safe were the last promises he'd made to his dad. That meant, regardless of how his body responded to her, the woman with the camera had to go. At least, that was the plan.

She managed to get away from him again, vanishing amongst the guests when friends stopped him to talk. He'd admire her grit if he weren't ready to strangle her. But that was fine. She couldn't elude him forever. And when he found her, she would be one very sorry Little girl.

Chance wasted the rest of the day looking for the mystery photographer. He thought he'd seen a glimpse of her wild mane of blonde hair heading toward the toolshed, but by the time he reached it, she wasn't there anymore. She was like a bratty, blonde Houdini.

Clenching his jaw, he added another tally to the ever-growing list of the things she'd pay for when he found her. This was usually one of his favorite days of the year. But this year, he couldn't wait for the Friendsgiving celebration to be over.

By the end of the day, he had given up. The band moved inside and played in a corner while he sat with his family, roasting s'mores by the fireplace. If it hadn't been for Gus and Silas seeing her as well, he would have thought she was a figment of his imagination.

That would explain his reaction to her. If he created her, she would have checked all his boxes. He felt the need to schedule some time at The Red Barn, the local BDSM club on the outskirts of a neighboring town. Evidently, he needed to spend some time with a submissive decorated with all the designs he could make with his ropes.

There were a couple of submissives who liked rope play. Their Doms would stand by and watch his work. Once he was finished, he'd step aside, and their Doms would take over their play.

Unfortunately, he hadn't found a Little who liked Shibari or Semenawa for himself. He wasn't going to enter a relationship that would leave one or both partners unfulfilled, or worse, with feelings of trauma and abuse.

Lifting his glass to his lips, he took a long draw of his whiskey, resisting the urge to throw the crystal rock glass against the fireplace just to watch it shatter. Of course, it would never happen, and not because it was the finest Waterford crystal. No, he treated the glass with care because it had been his mother's favorite set.

"I don't understand why you can't just let it go." Leave it to his brother, Tanner, to cut straight to the heart of the matter.

Before he could speak, his brother, Trace, Tanner's twin, cut in. "Did she take anything, or destroy any ranch property? I'm a little confused as to why you can't let it go myself."

His brothers were missing the point. "I don't know what she did and didn't do. I just know she snuck onto the ranch and bothered all the guests. Not to mention she damn near got herself killed by climbing in the holding pen with Ironside."

That was the thing that had him breaking into a cold sweat every time he thought about it. She could have been killed.

"The only thing I heard was what a great photographer she was," Tildi said. Turning to Boone, she added, "I also heard she's a boudoir photographer. That sounds interesting, don't you think?"

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“Absolutely,” Boone agreed. “What the hell is a boudoir photographer?”

In answer, Tildi rolled her eyes. “It’s a photographer who specializes in taking sexy bedroom pictures. I wonder how good she is?”

Boone’s eyes narrowed. “Did you just roll your eyes at me, bluebell?”

“Um, no?”

Chance grinned. Tildi had added so much to their family in the short time she’d been there. She and his younger sister, Kenzie, were fast becoming the best of friends. Ruby, who kept the lodge running smoothly and kept them all fed, was thrilled to have someone in the kitchen learning all her best recipes. At least, that’s what she told everyone.

Ruby had been a part of their family since before Chance was born. She was the touchstone, stepping in for their mother after their parents had been killed.

Looking around the gathering, Tildi asked, “Where’s Kenzie?”

Trace spoke up first. “She went to bed already.” With a grin, he added, “She said she had a headache.”

Tanner snorted. “Yeah. A headache named Sev Midnight.”

Chance didn’t see anything about Seven Midnight as a laughing matter. “Why was he even here? The state of Washington is a long way to travel for a local Friendsgiving

celebration.”

Tanner shook his head. “I don’t think the celebration was his main reason for attending.”

Chance glared at Boone. “You better talk to him. There’s a lot of places to bury a body on this ranch.”

Trace must have agreed. “Especially the leader of a Cosa Nostra family who won’t quit nosing around our sister.”

“Damn straight,” Tanner agreed, raising his glass.

“I’m on it,” Boone assured them all, but Chance had a bad feeling they would be seeing a lot more of Boone’s friend.

Taking another swallow of his whiskey, he caught a flash of blonde reflected off the cut crystal of the rock glass. At first, he thought it was a trick of the firelight. But then he noticed Boone staring at the door to the kitchen.

“Got’cha,” he muttered and put his glass down on the coffee table. “I have to grab something in the kitchen. Limburger cheese is involved, so you may want to steer clear for a while.”

As he strode toward the kitchen, Tanner said, “I didn’t know he liked Limburger.”

The thud of a punch preceded Trace’s exasperated, “He doesn’t, you idiot.”

Chance only heard the scuffle behind him. It would have made him smile except for the sight that met him when he entered the kitchen. The woman he’d been trying to catch all day was helping herself to the leftovers from the Friendsgiving.

That just proved his suspicions. Slowly, so as not to draw attention, he took the rope, now right where it was supposed to be, coiled and hanging from the clasp on his belt.

The little thief looked up as soon as he started twirling his lasso, but it was too late. He tossed the loop and jerked the lariat taut as soon as it landed on its naughty target, causing her to drop the dipper she was holding back into its pot.

“Hey!” she called out, but no one would be coming to her defense.

“Howdy, ma’am. You should have tried saying hello earlier, instead of leadin’ me on a hell of a chase all day.”

She tugged on the rope and tried to pull it from his hands. “Get me out of this, you... you mean old rodeo clown. You can’t just lasso people for no reason.”

“Hey! Who are you callin’ old? And it’s my ranch you were puttin’ yourself in danger on. That means I can do whatever I want.”

Fuck, could he sound any less mature and in control?

He pulled her to him faster, before she could hurt herself. If she kept up all that racket, his entire family would soon be watching them from the kitchen doorway. Well, one way to fix that.

He hadn’t been born and raised on a ranch for nothing. As soon as she was close enough, he bound her wrists together as well as her ankles. “You might want to quit the struggle for this next part,” he warned her. “I’d hate to drop you.”

“Drop me? What do you mean—oof!”



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None too gently, he tossed the woman over his shoulder and headed for the walk-in pantry where they could continue their conversation in private. She fought more than a cutthroat trout on the hook. Giving in to his nature, he smacked her bottom. “I said, quit strugglin’. You’re gonna hurt yourself.”

She went rigid over his shoulder. He could have sworn he heard her say something about, “might as well be in Nameless,” but that didn’t make any sense.

Once they were in the pantry and out of sight of the crowd, he set her on her feet, leaning her against the large table in the middle of the room. He pinned her in place with a stern look. Calm, he needed to remain calm.

Starting at the free end of his rope, he took his time coiling it back up. “I’m going to take the rope off you so we can talk. But if you run, I’ll call Grant Spicer, the head of ranch security. He’ll haul you down to the sheriff’s office, and we can have our talk there. How does that sound?”

He hid his concern when the little color she had left in her cheeks disappeared. Was she in trouble with the law? That was the last thing he needed.

“You have security? For a ranch?”

They did now, after everything they’d gone through with the Midnight Cosa Nostra. “We have guests who come out to enjoy the ranch and hunt from late spring to early fall. Between that and the danger of rustlers, not to mention trespassers, we absolutely have security.”

Of course, they also knew their way around a ranch and could help with that as well, but she didn't need to know that. Her shoulders slumped, and the fight seemed to drain out of her before his eyes.

"I won't run. I wouldn't have run in the first place if you hadn't been barreling toward me wearing such a mean, scary face."

That hadn't been meanness. It had been terror. Still, he hated she'd been afraid of him for some reason. "Was it my fault you trespassed on my land? Or snuck into my house and helped yourself to my food? Was it also my fault you climbed a fence and got into a pen with the meanest bull this side of the Rockies? Do you have any idea what Ironside could have done to you? What the hell were you thinking, Little girl?"

He hadn't meant to call her that. He would have apologized, but she didn't seem to mind. Interesting. Still, he had no business calling her Little anything.

Instead of responding with the fear he expected, she wrinkled her nose as if she smelled something offensive. "Is that his name? I think you should change it. He doesn't look like an Ironside."

He shouldn't ask. He should find out if she mistreated any of the townspeople who were under his protection, since they were on his ranch. Then he should get her off his ranch. "And what name would you suggest?"

Damn it.

"Hmm. I think you should call him Bullwinkle."

She finished her declaration with a nod, beaming up at him as if waiting for praise.

"No," he said.

Her shoulders dropped again. “Why don’t you like Bullwinkle? Bullwinkle's a bull.”

“Ironside is a bison.”

She crossed her arms. “I know.”

“Bullwinkle is a moose.”

Her brow wrinkled and it was fucking adorable. “Oh. Right. Well, that doesn’t matter. He still looks like a Bullwinkle to me.”

This was the craziest conversation he’d ever had, and that was saying something with two Littles living in the family lodge. “Why were you taking pictures of the guests?”

“Why? Do you want a copy? They’d look great on your website and socials. I can share them with you.”

Here we go. Now they were getting somewhere. “For a reasonable fee, I suppose?”

She frowned. “Were you caught up in one of those pyramid schemes or something? To have so many friends at your Friendsgiving, you’re a tad on the ornery side.”

Chance sighed. He was being ornery, but he’d spent the entire day looking for her. And now, here she was. Gorgeous, with the most unusual eyes... blue, gray, and green all at once. Long, luscious, wavy blonde hair that hung almost to her waist, even though she had it caught up in a hair tie.

His hand itched to yank the tie out of her hair to free it to hang down. If she were his Little girl, he’d make her wear it that way all the time. Shit. The last thing he needed to think about right now was her being his.

He didn't even know if she was a Little. And what if she were? She lived like a damn gypsy, traveling around, probably conning people out of their money, breaking in and stealing his food.

Overreacting just a bit, aren't we?

## Page 6

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“No. I have never gotten caught up in a pyramid — never mind. What’s in this generous gesture for you?”

Great. Now he felt like an ass.

Probably because you’re acting like one.

Her eyes brightened with unshed tears. “I wasn’t getting anything. Sometimes it’s nice to be nice just because. People like getting their pictures taken. And then they have a memento to remember the day. And, okay, some of them paid me for the pictures, but?—”

Chance couldn’t hold back. “That’s what I figured.”

She held up her hand. “But! I sent the ones they liked to a lab that will process them, and they’ll be able to pick them up tomorrow at the photo counter at the drug store in Wilder. Since I had them anyway, I was going to give you a set to use for promotions. That’s all. Everyone is happy. Well, everyone except you.”

That checked with what Tildi had told him earlier. Still, he’d lost a lot of time recently with everything going on. The ranch was in desperate need of maintenance that needed to be done while it was cold. They had to check the fences and put windbreaks and sheds up in the pastures to protect the herds from the wind. Not to mention, make sure they had hay to eat.

This girl wasn’t his responsibility. He had to put his family first, right? The local community church ran a perfectly good shelter for people just like her. It wasn’t like

she'd have to sleep in her car and starve.

Right. Just look at her. She's nothing but trouble waiting to happen.

If she'd chosen the life of a gypsy, she was probably used to it. And if she was new to it, maybe having to stay in the shelter would make her choose to go back home. He had no reason to feel guilty.

So why did he still feel like a complete ass for what he was about to do? There was something about her that called to him. But he was responsible for keeping his family and those living on the ranch safe. Sometimes it wasn't a fun job, but it was what he had to do.

Before he could tell her that, she asked, "I was hoping, with a lodge this size, you might have a room. Do you have a place where I can stay? Just for a night or two?"

Damn, he hated to have to disappoint her. Why did she have to look so vulnerable and lost?

Because she is, that's why.

Still, it didn't change what he had to do. It wouldn't make looking in the mirror any easier either. "Look, I'm sorry I accused you of trying to con people. I'm sure you're a fantastic photographer. But you can't stay here. We aren't ready for guests. But the Wilder Community Church runs a shelter that's always open to whoever needs a place to stay. I can drive, and you can follow me, if that would help."

He lost those incredible eyes then. She stared at her feet. When she spoke, her voice was thick with tears. Damn it.

"No, that's okay. I just thought I'd ask. I can get directions in town. I, um, thank you

for not calling the sheriff. I won't bother you again. And you should give Bullwinkle an extra apple or something for not stabbing me with his horns."

He couldn't think of anything to say to make her feel better. It killed the Daddy in him to watch her head to the kitchen door leading outside. "Wait," he called. "Wait right there."

He walked to the coat closet and took out one of Kenzie's winter coats. He might not be able to let her stay on the ranch, but that didn't mean he'd let her freeze. The last time he'd checked, it was fifteen degrees outside.

"Here, put this on," he said, holding the thick coat open so she could slide into it. She was about the same size as Kenzie, so the coat fit well. Holding out his hand, he said, "Hand me your phone."

She stiffened. "Wh-why?" Suspicion darkened her eyes as her hands went behind her back.

Her reaction had the Daddy in him rising to the forefront. "I wanted to put in my phone number so you'll have someone to call if there's a problem. Is there a reason you don't want to hand it to me?"

"No!" she all but yelled. "I mean, I don't have a phone." Her eyes skirted to the side.

For the first time since he'd met her, she lied to him. It was obvious she wasn't used to lying. She was terrible at it. "Where are you from—" It suddenly occurred to him he didn't know her name. "What's your name, gypsy?"

"What?"

"Your name? And do not lie to me. You don't know me, so I'll let the whopper you

just told me slide. But don't lie to me again. Do you understand?"

"Um... sorry. I'm Joy."

"Joy is a pretty name. What's your last name?"

"Nothing. Just Joy."

"You don't have a last name?"



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“Not that I have to tell you. You might be the boss of this ranch, but you aren’t the boss of me.”

She was right. But suddenly, Chance very much wanted to be.

“Fair enough, gypsy. I don’t guess you’ll tell me where you’re from, either.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to.”

“Well then, take this.” Grabbing a notepad from the kitchen counter, he scribbled his phone number and handed her the paper. “This is my number. If you need anything or there’s any trouble, I want you to call me.”

A sorrow filled her eyes he didn’t understand. But he knew one thing. Gypsy would never use that number, no matter how desperate she got. “Thank you. I guess I’d better go.”

He walked her to her car and almost changed his mind when she stopped at the oldest Honda Civic he’d ever seen. It was damn near older than him. If it had been snowing, he’d have made her stay the night. But the night was clear, and the moon was full. And if he let her stay, he wasn’t sure he’d ever let her leave again.

Joy left, and he watched her drive away until she disappeared over the horizon.

Chance stared at the ceiling all night and worried.

## CHAPTER 3

It only took Joy thirty minutes to find the Wilder Community Church. Why in the world would the people want to hide it on a street named Church Street? That was so obvious she'd thought it couldn't possibly be there. The Pastor Sol, as he'd told her to call him, was younger than she'd expected and very nice. He didn't seem to mind at all that she'd gotten him out of bed.

Once he heard her story—the part of it she could tell—he called the shelter and reserved the last bed for Joy, which was really nice. It wasn't that she couldn't do things like that. She just didn't like to. And she'd never called a shelter before. But if she could sleep somewhere for free tonight instead of renting a hotel room, she could save the money she made that day on the ranch for gas and food when she left in the morning.

She'd been in and out of so many towns over the past week. The only thing she had to do was take out the special phone Detective James had given her before she left home and call him to let him know where she was and that she was all right.

With everything that had happened, she'd had to leave in a hurry. Now, even Detective James didn't know where she was. The last time they'd spoken, he'd tried to convince her to return home, promising he could protect her. She had no doubt he'd try, but she knew firsthand that if Eddie wanted her dead, he'd kill the detective, too. The detective was a married man with children of his own. She couldn't put his life at risk. She'd never forgive herself if something happened to him.

She'd sent her clients to a fellow photographer she trusted. She didn't have any family. Her parents had her late in life, and she'd lost them several years earlier. She had no one. Well, no one but Puggles, her stuffie. She'd thought she had Eddie, but that had all gone wrong in the worst possible way.

And now, not only was she alone, she was on the run from the one man she'd thought she could trust.

She found her bed and cuddled with her stuffie under the blanket Pastor Sol had given her. It was so soft even Puggles liked it. And it was blue, so it reminded Puggles of the creek he'd played in back home. She pressed a kiss to his head.

It turned out the bed, which was comfy, was open because it was between the door to the bathroom and a man who was already snoring louder than a brawling bear.

Unable to sleep, she sat on the side of her bed, going through the snack bag the shelter provided.

Glancing around, she fell into the largest blue eyes she had ever seen. They belonged to a tiny slip of a girl who couldn't be more than four or five. A teenage boy was reading a Dr. Seuss book to her. The boy noticed his little sister wasn't paying attention, so he followed the child's gaze to Joy.

The toddler tried to climb down from the bed, but the teen stopped her. "She's a stranger, Celie. Remember what mommy said? We never talk to strangers."

Celie's bottom lip trembled. Sensing a tantrum was imminent, Joy shifted closer without leaving her bed. Holding out her hand, she said, "Hi there. I'm Joy. You absolutely should listen to your brother, Suki. Strangers might be dangerous. But now that we've been introduced, maybe we can be friends." She held up Puggles. "This is Puggles. He's my friend, too. He's really nice. Can you introduce me to your brother?"

Celie lifted a questioning gaze to her brother. Giving Joy another hard stare, the boy relented and nodded at his sister.

The sweet girl smiled. Dropping her gaze to Puggles, the toddler held her pudgy hands out and made grabby hands.

Frowning, the teen put a protective arm around the girl, pulled her closer to his side, and began reading again. But the girl slipped out from under his arm, hopped off the bed, and raced to Joy, throwing her whole body onto Joy's lap.

Joy smiled down at the tiny girl. "Well, hello there," she said.

The girl just continued to smile.

Joy tried again. "What's your name?"

The girl continued to beam at her, and the teen boy sauntered over.

"She don't talk," he said. "She hadn't talked since the night my dad went crazy and chased us all out of the house with a butcher's knife."

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Joy's heart broke that these children had already lived through something so traumatic. She had a fresh perspective on what trauma like that could do. Crinkling noises let her know the little girl was rifling through the snack bag from Pastor Sol.

The boy pulled her hand away. "You can't do that, Celie," he told the child. "That's not ours."

"No, it's alright," Joy assured him. She opened the bag so all the contents were visible. "Get whatever you like best."

The girl dug through the goodies and came out with a large package of peanut butter cups. "Yum, those are my favorite, too. Here, take another one."

She invited the boy to grab a few things as well. "Nah, that's okay. You keep your stuff. But thanks for sharing with Celie."

"I'm happy to," Joy said. "So, now I know Celie. What's your name?"

"Reggie."

"Well, Reggie. It must make your mom feel great knowing you are here to look after your little sister."

Reggie's eyes dimmed. "I hope so. She's been through a lot to keep us together."

Joy's eyes stung. There was too much sadness and hardship in the world. It was a reminder that what she was going through might be hard, but it was easier than what

many were enduring.

She stuck out her hand. Reggie stared at it a moment, then clasped it and gave her hand a shake.

They chatted for a while. Long enough to learn that Celie, Reggie, and their mom, Michelle, were long-term residents. Reggie had been looking forward to starting high school next fall. Michelle had gotten a waitressing job at a local Jenny's Diner there in Wilder with the hope of renting an apartment by then.

Celie tugged on Reggie's shirt and pointed to the window framing a swingset. Someone wanted to play.

"I can't right now, Celie girl. It's too cold outside, and besides, it's dark. Why don't I take you to go potty, then I'll read some more until you fall back asleep."

At his sister's nod, he picked her up and carried her to the bathroom in the hall. Joy should probably follow Reggie's advice for his sister, but she couldn't get everything Celie and her brother had endured out of her mind. Deciding a walk around the town might settle her mind, she put her coat back on and headed out. Maybe she could even find an all-night store to buy some treats to leave with the kids before she left the next day.

When she walked by Reggie's cot, she slipped seventy-five dollars of the hundred she'd earned that day into the backpack under his bed. She really didn't have money to spare, what with her needing to leave town tomorrow, but Reggie and Celie's mother was doing everything she could and needed help more than her.

Being attacked and abandoned by the people who were supposed to love you was awful. If she could help, even a little, she wanted to do it. It took half an hour to find a convenience store, but they had exactly what she was looking for. Once she had

what she wanted, she took everything to the checkout counter.

She pulled out her wallet to pull some cash from the emergency pocket behind her credit card. The one she hadn't used since she left Nameless. The one no longer in her wallet.

Where was her credit card? When was the last time she'd seen it? She ignored her racing heart and tried to remember.

As she drove into Wilder the day before, she was relieved to see a large gas station since she was running on fumes. Ten minutes later, her gas was pumped, and she'd been tempted to use her credit card because her cash was so low. She'd spotted the flyer for the Friendsgiving and used the rest of her cash for the gas.

She knew better than to use her card because, hello, true crime documentaries educated people. She'd be painting a bright red target on her back if she used her card. As the manager of the bank his father owned, Eddie would no doubt be watching her account. He might find her eventually, but she wasn't making it easy for him.

But now her card was gone. Had she dropped it at the gas station? Apologizing to the clerk, she left the candy on the counter and raced back to the church where she'd left her car.

The steering wheel slipped through her trembling fingers more than once as she drove to the gas station. The attendant on duty wasn't the same man who'd been there before. He couldn't find her card but said he'd call if they found it.

Turned out that when a person hyperventilated in eighteen-degree weather, their lungs burned like they were breathing fire. But Joy couldn't control her breathing. She blamed her racing heart.

Calm down, Calliope Joy. You don't know what happened.

Her mama always told her not to borrow trouble from tomorrow because today had enough of its own. The people at the gas station would probably call tomorrow. And even if they didn't, it could be anywhere. Probably. And she wasn't going to be in Wilder after tomorrow anyway.

## CHAPTER 4

Chance tossed yet another bale of hay onto the frozen ground of the western pasture. The sun wasn't even up yet, so why the fuck was he? Because he wasn't getting any sleep anyway, that's why. He might as well get some work done.

He should have let her spend the night at the ranch. Had she made it to the shelter in Wilder? Had she gotten any sleep? Was she safe? He was such an ass. He told himself he didn't want her to stay for the safety of those at the ranch. But was it the ranch he was worried about or himself?

The ranch had been his sole responsibility for the past seven years. Sure, everyone pitched in to help, but he was the one who made the decisions. If everything fell apart, if they lost the family ranch, that was all on him.



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Whenever he tried to do something for himself, he worried about what was happening at the ranch. If he felt the need, he'd leave mid-afternoon and drive to The Red Barn. An evening of play with a willing sub was normally enough.

At least, it was until a tiny blonde photographer with a smile that went straight to his dick had crashed into his world. He still didn't have time for the distraction she would be, but he couldn't stop thinking about her.

She had looked so defeated when she left. What kind of man let a woman unfamiliar with the area, or snow for that matter, drive off in a car that was so unsafe for the conditions? If something happened to her during the night, he would never forgive himself.

It took all his self-control not to forget about the chores, jump in his truck, and drive into Wilder to check on her. Come to think of it, he did need to stock up on some supplies, so he'd drive to town later and at least run by the church to make sure she'd gotten settled in all right.

Two hours later, his muscles aching from dropping and spreading hay, he took a break to answer his phone. Fuck. Recognizing Sam Nelson's number, he took the call, hoping against hope it had nothing to do with Joy.

"Morning, Sam. You're not usually up this early. What has the Chief of Police calling me?"

"Morning, Chance. I need you to come down to the station. I had a call about an hour ago from Detective Chris James that I think you're going to want to know about. Can

you stop long enough to run into town?”

He ran through everyone in his family. They were all on the ranch, safe and sound. No one got on the ranch now. Not after everything they'd gone through with Boone and Tildi.

Was something going on with the town? That couldn't be it. Why would some detective he'd never heard of be calling Sam about Wilder? He had a sneaking suspicion who this might involve.

Damn it. He'd forced her off the ranch. Sent her on her way. And now she was in trouble. That was the only explanation. And if she was in trouble, it was his fault.

“Of course, I can, Sam. But you want to give me a hint on what this is all about?”

“This is the kind of conversation best had in person.”

Damn. “All right. I can be there in an hour.”

The relief in Sam's voice couldn't be missed when he said, “Good. That's good. I'll see you in an hour.”

Chance made it to the police station in half that.

Sam waited for him in the main room of the police station. “Appreciate you coming in, Chance. Let's go back to my office.”

The tightness in Chance's chest intensified. When the office door closed, he was done. “I'm gettin' tired of being kept in the dark, Sam. What the hell is going on? And what does it have to do with me?”

“I hated not getting to the Friendsgiving yesterday. I hear you had a real good turnout. I need to talk to you about one of the people who was there.”

If Chance’s chest got any tighter, his heart would shoot out of his eye sockets. “Who?” he asked, even though he knew. It had to be Gypsy Joy.

“I got a call from a Detective James in a town just west of Austin, Texas, early this morning. He’s concerned about one of his confidential informants, a young woman named Calliope Joy Joplin. She’s a small-town photographer who, just over a week ago, happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time and witnessed a drug hit. She even managed to take pictures and turn them over to the police. They took her statement, then told her to ‘disappear’ until they could get all their ducks in a row to take down the main players.”

Drugs? How in the hell had Joy gotten mixed up with drugs? A tiny thing like her witnessing something so horrific. She must have been terrified.

“I met her,” Chance said. “She was tryin’ to make money taking pictures out at the ranch.” And he’d accused her of conning people out of their money. He ought to be horse-whipped. He’d done everything possible to make sure she had as little protection as possible. “Why in the hell would the law down there send her out alone with no protection?”

“I asked him that. He said he had arranged for her to stay in a hotel in Austin. He gave her a burner phone and told him to call in every day. She disappeared and they haven’t seen any sign of her until yesterday. She evidently used her credit card when she got to town. The man who is heading up the trafficking down there manages a bank, so they’ve been looking for something to show up on her card.”

“Holy shit. She might as well have called them and told them where she is.”

“That’s what Detective James thinks, too. He’s hoping we can find her and keep her in protective custody until he can get up here to take her back to Texas.”

Thank God Sam was taking it seriously. Chance had to fight back the urge to take a trip to Texas and deal with the threat himself. The idea that anyone would want to hurt his gypsy — damn it! He had to stop thinking of her as his. She wasn’t, and she never would be. He had too many people depending on him already.

Which was why Sam calling him into the station to tell him all this gave him a sinking feeling in his chest. Still, the thought didn’t bother him as much as it should. Best to lay all the cards on the table. “And you called me because...”

“I called you because the only thing I can do is throw her in a cell. That’s a mighty cold, scary place for a young thing like her to be. We don’t have a separate area for men and women, and there’s no telling what the Miller boys might say to her. You know how they let loose on the weekends.”

Damn it. Joy was too friendly, naïve, and way too innocent to be in a jail cell. From what he’d seen, she would go stir crazy in about a minute and a half. He knew where his friend was leading him, but Chance wanted him to say it. “True enough, but that doesn’t answer my question. Why are you telling all this to me?”

Sam glared at him. “You know damn well why. Wild River Security has the best protection services in the state. Add all the extra security you’ve added to your ranch in the past few weeks, and the best place for her to be is on Wild River Ranch. If you could watch over her for a day, two at best, the detective should be here to pick her up. He said he knows of a ranch down there where she can stay until the trial. Honestly, from what he said, it sounds similar to your spread.”

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His muscles tensed at the mention of her staying with someone else. What was that all about? He didn't need her around. Hell, he didn't want her around.

If you're gonna lie, at least don't lie to yourself.

Fine. He hated the idea of someone else keeping her safe, though he didn't want to think about why that bothered him so much. It was for her sake, not his. What if they didn't do a good job? She'd be practically in the backyard of whoever was after her.

Did they know her? Did they know they'd have to keep an eye on her? Even as little as he'd been around her, he knew the person she needed the most protection from was herself. He still shuddered at the sight of her standing in front of Bullwinkle, damn it, Ironside.

Fuck. He'd known she was trouble from the moment he'd laid eyes on her. But he hadn't expected anything this big. No way was he allowing that back on his ranch.

Like you are going to let anyone else try to keep her safe.

"You know that town she's from, Nameless? You should look it up. It might give you a new perspective on Miss Joplin."

What the hell did that mean?

"I don't have time for games, Sam. If I decide to let her back on the ranch, she'd only be there for a couple days. No need for me to be looking stuff up about her for that. Out of curiosity, what made you call me?"

The sheriff shrugged. “Like I said, you’re the obvious choice. Even better now, since you’ve obviously met her. Now all we need to do is locate her. I checked the hotels, and they don’t have anyone registered who fits her description.”

“If they saw her, they’d remember it.”

A knowing gleam Chance didn’t appreciate filled his friend’s eyes. “Really? Good to know. I can help you look. There aren’t that many places in Wilder she could be unless she’s already left town.”

Chance’s gut clenched at the thought of her traveling around by herself. It was a miracle nothing had happened to her already. He wasn’t sure how she’d kept that car of hers on the road.

Why did his palm always itch within minutes of him thinking about her? The woman didn’t need a keeper; she needed a warden.

“I know where she is. At least I know where she’d better be.”

A slow grin spread over his friend’s face.

Leaning back in his chair, Sam drawled, “I knew you were the right man to call.”

Standing, Chance said, “I’ll let you know when I find her.”

“Good deal. If she doesn’t want to stay on the ranch, let me know. I’ll try to come up with somewhere else.”

“She’ll stay.” He kept the “whether she wants to or not” to himself.

She’d made the choice to come onto his ranch in the first place. When it came to her

safety, what she wanted took a back seat. He just needed to make sure she understood the rules before she agreed to stay. And the consequences of breaking them.

An hour later, Chance knew two things. Joy Joplin was no longer in the town of Wilder. And if anything happened to her, it was all his fault.

## CHAPTER 5

Joy looked out the back window of the cabin she had found a week earlier. It wasn't in the best shape, but she had learned many things since being there. Important lessons like wet wood makes more smoke. Like, a lot more. And buying toilet paper was more important than buying candy... even if the candy was on sale. And you can eat the rice you find in the kitchen cabinet and the meat in the freezer, but not all the berries you find in the woods. That's how she learned the toilet paper rule.

Overall, it had been a great week. Swallowing to ease her throat, she whispered, "See, Puggles. There is always a silver lining. You just have to look for it." Puggles agreed. She could see it in his eyes. "Oh, let's see if our friend is here."

The best thing of all was she'd made a friend on her second day there. She had a dog! He was just a puppy, and he was the cutest thing she'd ever seen. She'd always wanted a dog, but her parents were older and didn't want the hassle.

Asking her boyfriend, Eddie, would have been a complete waste of time. When he took the time to answer her questions, he always said no. It was for the best. He treated his yes's as favors. Favors from Eddie came at far too high a price.

She tried to speak, even though it came out raspy. "Oh! There he is! See him? He's right where he always is."

She couldn't have a flare-up. Not now. She hadn't had one in over two years. Of

course, she ran out of her medicine a week ago. She hadn't paid any attention to her fatigue and sore joints. She'd chalked that up to not being used to trudging around in the deep snow.

But then her hand started twitching. And the rash probably wasn't due to the cold and snow as she'd tried to make herself believe. And now her throat was sore. If she wasn't better by tomorrow, she'd have to find a free clinic in Wilder. Rheumatic fever was nothing to play around with.



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She spotted her new puppy staring at her from the tree line, and all thoughts of fevers and doctors disappeared. How could they not? He was fluffy and dark gray, with the most brilliant light sky-blue eyes she'd ever seen. She didn't have any dog food, so she left meat on the back stoop twice every day. She'd tried to get him to come inside, but so far he hadn't wanted to do that.

Dropping back to a whisper, she turned to her stuffie. "What's that, Puggles? You want to pet him and snuggle in his fur? Me, too. We have to be patient. But we can go out on the back stoop. He doesn't run off when we do that anymore."

As deep as the snow was, her new puppy was hard to catch. She'd decided to name him Dodger because of how quickly he moved. "It's fun to just watch him play in the snow. What's that? Yes, I hope he starts trusting us soon."

Though he was small now, she could tell he would be large when he grew up. He had long legs and big paws. She wanted him to trust her before that.

Man, her throat hurt. Best to do something to take her mind off it until the soreness goes away. She should feel much better bytomorrow. Probably. Hopefully. Of course, that's what she'd said yesterday and the day before. Third time's the charm, though.

"That's okay. We have plenty to do." She set her stuffie down on the small couch and tried to decide what to do first— what she should do or what she wanted to do.

It was the first Christmas she'd spent alone, well, except for Puggles and Dodger. She cut down a small spruce tree... okay, a sapling... and dragged it inside. Even though she had no decorations, it filled the cabin with the smell of Christmas and put her in

the holiday spirit.

But she didn't have a Christmas tree stand, so it had been leaning in the corner of the cabin near the fireplace. Not too close, but still probably not the best spot for it. Now that it was in place, she didn't have the energy to move it.

Dragging it back into the trees would be a huge project. She had thought the snow would make it easier, but it hadn't. Mainly because the snow kept getting into her boots somehow. The only thing that hurt her throat worse than breathing in the cold air was breathing it in fast and deep. She should probably start exercising once she felt better.

"I think we'll take care of the roof first," she whispered to Puggles. Doing something fun would distract her. "We really don't know how sturdy this cabin is. What's that? Well, sure, it was built out of logs a thousand years ago and is still standing, but there's been a lot of snow."

Snow had piled up on her roof. It had to be heavy. It wouldn't be very nice of her to be a squatter in someone's cabin and let the roof cave in. It was her duty as an illegal tenant to climb up there and scrape it off. She loved it when chores could also be fun.

Puggle reminded her she still hadn't called Detective James to check in... all week. "I know. I know! You don't have to remind me. And talking on the phone hurts my throat." Not to mention, Detective James might notice her talking like a frog.

Her guilty conscience nagged at her enough since she'd ignored his attempts to call her.

It was probably for the best. If everyone assumed she was dead, then no one would look for her.

She avoided making the call because he had every right to be upset. “What if he’s mad at me?”

Experience had taught her to avoid making people angry at all costs. Eddie hadn’t been very nice most of the time, but when he was angry... well, she tried really, really hard not to provoke him.

But Detective James wasn’t like Eddie. He’d always been nice to her. She took the burner phone from her purse. Even holding the phone made her anxious. Soon she trembled so badly she had to put it on the table. Tomorrow. She’d check in with him tomorrow.

Now she needed to clear the roof. Dealing with the snow would be much easier if she had a shovel, but her plans were much more fun. Nature had grown the perfect ladder for her to use right beside the cabin.

Even the lowest branch was out of her reach, but she had a solution for that. Turning the large, oval washtub she had found by the woodpile upside down, she dragged out a wooden kitchen chair and stood it on top of the tub.

After three false starts, she figured out how to climb onto the chair without knocking it off the tub. Slipping only once or twice on icy branches, she successfully made it to the roof without dropping the tarp she’d found.

Thank goodness her mother had insisted she take gymnastics as a child. Who would have thought learning to walk on a balance beam would be useful later in life? She decided to start at the edge of the roof closer to her. That way, she’d have an easier path as she crossed to the other side.

She brushed the snow off the roof with her feet then sat on the tarp, spreading her legs as far as they would go. Leaning forward, she slid down the roof and plunged to

the ground, leaving a strip of snow-free roof in her wake. Why use a shovel when you could be a human snowplow?

Yes, the roof was slightly higher than she had realized. And sure, landing on the snow below wasn't quite as soft as she had thought. Scrambling up, she trudged through the snow and climbed the tree again.

Her heart raced. The wind stung her cheeks, but she didn't care. Even though her feet grew numb from the cold, it was the most fun she'd ever had in her entire life.

She made it all the way to the far side of the roof. Following the same process, she prepared for her final slide down the roof. Just as she sat down, a voice bellowed at her from nowhere. "What the hell are you doing?"

She screamed, then grabbed her throat, blinking tears from her eyes. Mental note: Do not scream with a sore throat.

Her survival instincts finally kicked in. She had been found!

She tried to stand but stumbled, falling backward down the wrong side of the roof. As she fought to regain her balance, she struggled to remember exactly where the woodpile was. She hadn't even checked the back of the cabin, so she had no idea what lay down there.

Thankfully, she missed the woodpile. Everything was fine. Without opening her eyes, she threw her hands up and croaked out, "Ta da! That didn't hurt at all!" She gasped. The fall didn't hurt, but yelling like that sure did. It was like the inside of her throat had been sliced with razors. She put her hand up to her throat, as if holding the outside could soothe the inside.

Suddenly, a man's deep, angry voice growled down at her. "Are you all right? Is

anything broken?” When she shook her head, he added, “Are you sure nothing hurts?  
Yet.”

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Her eyes flew open. How had he found her? And what the heck did he mean by “Yet”?

She didn’t need to see the man to recognize who he was. He seemed to be exercising every ounce of control he had. It was as if he could picture her over his knee. Yeah, she’d overheard enough at the Friendsgiving last week to understand that was a very real possibility. No matter how far she traveled, she couldn’t escape towns like Nameless. Not that she wanted to, but what were the odds?

“Yet?” Her voice still sounded like she had swallowed gravel, and she stifled a wince. She had hoped her throat would be better by now. Of course, screaming when she fell from the roof hadn’t helped.

Her mind felt fuzzy, but she needed to concentrate. He had asked her questions, and all she could do was stare up at him. He was just as gorgeous as she remembered. What was he doing here?

His face grew even harder as he stared down at her. “Yes, yet.”

Why had she said anything?

Without waiting for her to offer any explanations, he said, “I’m going to make sure you didn’t break anything, then we’re going inside to talk.”

That didn’t sound good. She had lived among Daddies long enough to know talk didn’t usually mean words. But that couldn’t be what he meant. They didn’t know each other. She wasn’t even sure if he was a Daddy. And he certainly couldn’t know

she was a Little. She was very good at keeping that part of herself hidden.

She stared up at him as he ran his hands along her ribs, abdomen, and legs. Even though he didn't touch any of her princess parts, her nipples peaked, and her pussy pulsed as if he had.

What was it about this man? Sure, he looked like an angel, even if he was a fallen one with dark hair and sunset-blue eyes. Physically, he was stunning. But that wasn't it.

She'd been around attractive men all her life. It was the sense of control and calm that surrounded him. Even when he was upset, as he clearly was right now, she wasn't afraid he'd lose control. Ofcourse, she was feeling a little woozy and off balance at the moment.

"Why are you here?" she whispered.

His eyes narrowed. "What's wrong with your voice?"

Oops. She really needed to learn to keep her mouth shut. She pointed to the roof and then made a gesture that looked more like she was playing an invisible piano than anything else. Ariel made it look so easy in *The Little Mermaid*. Maybe she needed a fork.

Deciding that wouldn't help, she settled for whispering. "Nothing. I just, um, don't want to make any loud noises that might make the rest of the snow fall off the roof."

A vein pulsed at his temple. "You do not want to add to the trouble you're in by lyin' to me, babygirl. Your bottom is going to be hurtin' soon enough. I'll make sure of it."

She shook her head, leaving her dizzy. What was wrong with her? Given the way Chance glared down at her, she didn't think it would be wise to ask him. He didn't

seem too pleased to find her in this cabin.

She sniffled. Story of her life. No one worth having wanted her.

Why should he care if she stayed in this cabin? She wasn't hurting it. She wasn't bothering anyone. She should give him a piece of her mind. "You're just a greedy meanie."

Ha! Take that!

If only she were brave enough to say that out loud. And had one of those long, pointy swords to poke him with. She giggled at the thought, but the pain quickly put an end to that.

He smirked at her. "You wound me, gypsy. Are you sure you didn't bump your head on somethin' in the snow?"

Oh, it was too late for him to play nice now. She'd gotten up at the crack of dawn, left the shelter, and driven what must have been a hundred miles. It felt like forever. Come to think of it, he shouldn't even be here. Why was he so far from his ranch?

"Why are you out here in the frontier wilderness? It's a long, long way from your ranch."

"There is no frontier anymore, gypsy. You only drove about ten miles. I'm here because this is my land. You're in my cabin. So, the one who shouldn't be here is you."

Rats! She hadn't meant to say that out loud. Wait. Had she said that out loud? And if he thought she'd only driven ten miles, his sense of direction was as bad as hers. Poor cowboy. There was no way that old dirt road she'd taken wasn't as long as it seemed.



Was she talking too much? “You’re rambling. Stop it.”

She squeaked when he scooped her up and stood. He seemed even taller from up here next to his head. He must really be strong. She hoped he hadn’t brought any rope with him this time. Was it just her, or was it hot out here?

He shook his head. “You’re the one runnin’ off at the mouth, darlin’. I’m saving my words for when I get you back to the lodge. Once I make sure you’re all right, trust me, we’re gonna talk. Long and hard.”

She chose to ignore the way his warning made her tummy and her bottom clench. “That’s okay. I was talking to me.”

“What?”

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“Me.” She pointed to her chest. “I was talking to me, but I didn’t mean to do it out loud. Sorry.”

He carried her up the back steps. What was up with her face? “When did you get this rash? Are you sure you’re feelin’ all right, babygirl?” He pressed his cheek against her forehead. She was so hot it damn near fried his skin. “Shit. You’re burning up, gypsy. Why in the hell aren’t you in bed?”

“Geez! At least buy me a drink first.” She snorted out a laugh at her joke and paid for it with a sharp pain. He didn’t crack a smile. Time for a change of subject. “Why do you call me a gypsy?”

“I’ll tell you when you aren’t drunk.”

She gasped and immediately wished she hadn’t. Was there truly nothing she could do without hurting her throat? Sheesh!

He opened the back door and carried her in a bridal style over the threshold. “I do,” she said and giggled again with a hard wince at the end.

“You do what?” Chance asked. “Never mind, stop talkin’.”

Like that was the first time anyone had told her that.

She felt awful. It must be from landing backward in the snow. She must be shivering because the melting snow soaked her clothes. “Am I wet? I don’t think I’m wet, am I?” Another sharp pain in her throat made her wish she had listened to him. Truth be

told, she was too giddy to care.

He groaned. “Please, for the love of all that’s holy, stop talking.”

The world spun, and her heart thumped like a bongo drum in her chest.

She needed to lie down, but in her current state, she decided a firm, muscular body would work just as well. Resting her head against Chance’s chest, she tried to breathe as the world faded to black.

## CHAPTER 6

Chance couldn’t find a thermometer. Why the hell weren’t the hunting cabins stocked with thermometers? Her temperature had to be dangerously high for her to pass out like that. He’d checked her breath but detected no alcohol. He needed to get her back to the lodge.

How had he not known she was here?

After spending every spare second the past week trying to track her down, you would have thought he would check in what was practically his own fuckin’ backyard. Instead, he’d called every hotel and shelter within fifty miles. No one had seen her, of course. Because she’d been hiding in a hunting cabin on the back side of his own damn ranch.

If it hadn’t been for Grant calling him earlier that day, saying he thought there might be a squatter holed up, they might not have found her until it was too late. He kicked himself for waiting the four hours he had before driving to check it out.

She could have died. When she passed out in his arms, he’d damn near had a heart attack. He put her on the couch to make sure she was breathing and get a cold rag to

put on her forehead. Once he realized how high her fever was, he knew he would need help.

Pulling out his phone, he made two calls. The first was to his younger brother, Trace. Trace picked up on the third ring.

“You got me. What’s going on? Find an animal down?”

“No, I found a woman in the cabin at the back of the north pasture. She’s burnin’ up with a fever. I’m headed to the lodge, and I need you to meet me there.”

After a short pause, Trace said, “You do remember I’m a veterinarian and not a medical doctor, right? How sick is this woman?”

“Sick enough that I’m willing to call a veterinarian who can look after her until Brad gets there. I’ll be at the lodge in ten minutes.”

He cut the call and then called the people doctor, Brad Weatherby. He’d grown up with Brad, and he made sure his friend had a freezer full of bison meat for just such emergencies.

Brad took his call. “I’m on my way, but I’m on the other side of the county. Take her vitals and call me back. It’ll take me at least thirty minutes to get there. Probably more like forty-five.”

By the time Chance made it back to the lodge, Trace was waiting for them. “Is this the photographer from the Friendsgiving?” he asked as he helped Chance get Joy to the couch. “Get her out of her coat. Why are her clothes wet?”

“Yes, it’s the photographer. And you don’t want to know how her clothes got wet.” The memory of her sliding off the roof would haunt him forever. She could have been

killed. When he'd seen her up there, he'd almost lost his mind.

She must have climbed the tree next to the cabin, though how she reached any of the branches he didn't want to know. As soon as she was better, he was cutting the damn thing down.

Trace glanced at him before turning his attention back to Joy. "Okay. Where did you find her?"

"In the north cabin. I'll fill you in on the details later. She's got a fever, and I need you to try to figure out why."

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Trace nodded. "I'll take care of your girl, brother. Let's take her temp. I don't like that wheeze when she takes in a breath."

Chance didn't waste time correcting his brother from calling Joy his girl. He wasn't sure what she was to him, but it wasn't that.

Not yet.

He had no business thinking that way. After the way he had treated her, she probably never wanted to speak to him again. Not that he could blame her. If he could go back in time and handle that whole situation differently, he would. But if there's one thing he'd learned the hard way, it was that life rarely gave second chances.

He wasn't used to being out of control. It wasn't a feeling he enjoyed. He liked to give his brother, Boone, a hard time about leaving the ranch to join the military. But they both knew managing Wild River Ranch was what Chance had been born to do.

He was good at his job, usually. He might not be able to keep anything bad from ever happening to his family, but he could damn sure keep it from happening on this ranch. At least, he usually could.

He should have done the same for the little gypsy. She wouldn't be in this condition if he'd been watching over her. The trouble she would have brought with her didn't seem important at all anymore. All that mattered was making sure she was okay.

He stood behind the couch, brushing Joy's hair from her rosy face. The last time he's seen her he'd thought her face was flushed because of the cold. Why hadn't he

checked to make sure she didn't have a fever?

Trace's whistle snapped him back to the present. "Tilt her head back a little so I can look down her throat," Trace said. He was all business now, which was good.

Chance did as his younger brother instructed before asking, "What is her temperature?"

Trace shook his head and threw Chance a worried look. "It's just over a hundred and three. That's not good."

Taking a penlight from his shirt pocket, he looked down Joy's throat. The grimace he gave a minute later didn't bode well. "She has white spots on her throat, which is a good indication she's got strep. What the fuck is taking Doc Brad so long?"

"You're doing fine. He'll be here in a few minutes." While Chance echoed his brother's sentiment, they both needed to stay calm and figure out what to do in the meantime. "What now?"

"Well, the first thing we've got to do is get her temperature down. We need to get her in a tub or, better yet, a shower. As weak as she is right now, I'm not sure she'll be able to do that by herself."

Not a problem. If she needed a shower to keep from having a seizure, he'd make it happen. "I'll take care of her. One cold shower coming up."

Trace shook his head. "Not cold. You need to make the water lukewarm. Trust me, that will feel cold to her."

Chance didn't waste time with any more words. He lifted Joy carefully from the couch and headed to his home in the lodge. Like his siblings, he had his own

apartment within the lodge building. It was his private retreat.

Joy roused and began to talk again when he lifted her, but she wasn't making any more sense than she had been when she'd spoken to him before.

"Don't you worry, gypsy." Chance did his best to speak gently. "I'm gonna take care of you. It's gonna be all right. You just need to focus on doing what I tell you and getting better."

When he arrived at his apartment, he carried her straight to the bathroom. After starting the shower, he set her on her feet and peeled off her adorable boots and wet socks.

"No. Mine!" She slapped at his hands, trying to keep him from removing her socks. "No. Give me my shoes back. I don't have any more. Stop it! No!" Her head lolled back and forth as she drifted in and out of coherence.

Keeping his voice low, he grabbed her hands. "Hush now, babygirl. I'm not gonna hurt you. I'm not stealin' your boots and socks. I know you don't feel well, but we have to get your fever down. That means we're taking a shower. Now, be still and let me remove the rest of your clothes so I can make it all better."

She whimpered, but at least she stopped struggling. He made quick work of stripping her jeans and shirt off. She still didn't have any warm clothes. There was no way she would survive without someone looking after her. He wasn't going to think about why he'd decided that someone had to be him. It just had.

His first order of business once she was better was to shop for winter clothes. If she was going to be staying on the ranch, she should damn well be dressed in clothes that would keep her from freezing to death.



Once he'd checked the water temperature, Chance toed off his boots. Wrapping one arm across her chest, he eased her into the shower, holding her to his chest so she wouldn't slip.

She struggled against his hold as soon as the water hit her fevered skin. "Cold. It's too cold. I want out. Let me out! It hurts. Please. Please! Let. Me. Out! I hate you."

She was killing him. Her skin was hot to the touch, but he didn't care as he wrapped both arms around her, pulling her back to his chest. "I know, babygirl. I know. You're being so brave. It won't be long. As soon as you're all better, we'll get you a warm shower, or you can soak in the tub."

She looked down and screamed in fear. "Snake! I have snakes on me. Get them off. Get them off me!" She rubbed her arms and abdomen, trying to swipe away things that weren't there.

Chance grabbed her hands and held them to her chest to keep her from hurting herself. He'd never heard of strep causing hallucinations like this. Was she on drugs? Was that what this was, a bad reaction to some illegal drug? He'd heard around town that drugs in Wilder were on the rise, like they were everywhere these days. Had she gotten pills off the street that were laced with something dangerous?

That would explain her cheap car and lack of decent clothes. But it didn't fit the woman he'd met a week ago.

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Her anger finally exhausted her. She grew heavier in his arms, and her anger melted into pain-filled pleas. "It's c-cold. I want out... please? I'm sorry, Daddy! I'm sorry I was bad. I'll be good. I'll be good. Promise, Daddy. Promise."

"You are not bad, sweet girl. You're sick. We have to do this to get you better. It's almost over, babygirl. I'm so proud of you. Daddy's gonna take care of everything."

Whether from the tone of his voice or his use of the word, Daddy, she calmed. Eventually, she began to shiver. That was his signal to get her out and dried off. She leaned against him and sobbed.

His poor girl. With perfect timing, Trace called to him from the door to Chance's suite, "Doc Bradford is here. Call me when you're ready for him to come look at Joy."

"Hear that, gypsy? We can get you out now. Daddy's got you. You're gonna feel better in no time. That's my good girl. You just trust Daddy, and he'll take care of everything."

Turning off the water, he wrapped her in a towel. She snuggled into the soft cloth. Lifting her in his arms again, he carried her to his bed. They could figure out a room for her once she was on the mend.

Another knock at the door broke the silence. Joy was practically asleep in his arms. Before he could speak, the door opened, and Kenzie stood there with a small gift bag in her hands. "I thought Joy might need these."

Motioning his sister in, he asked, "What is it?"

"Trace told me Joy was back. I'm so glad you finally found her. I've been worried sick. Anyway, I remembered what she wore at the Friendsgiving, and I thought she might be able to use something warmer to wear. I brought some pajamas and something comfortable for her to wear once she feels better."

That was his sister, Kenzie. All heart. They might tease her, calling her tiger, and Lord knew she did have a temper and could have a smart mouth. But she had a heart of gold, and never met a soul she wasn't willing to help.

"Thank you, honey," he said. "I think that's perfect. Would you tell Trace to bring Doc Brad up here in about five minutes?"

Kenzie nodded. "Sure thing. Let me know if she needs anything else."

When the door clicked shut, Chance pulled out the pajamas Kenzie had brought. He helped Joy with the purple pajama bottoms and pink thermal top. When Joy felt better, she would enjoy the cartoon animals on the pants and the giant bear face on the top.

He looked in the bag to see what else Kenzie brought and found the well-loved purple duckbilled platypus he'd grabbed from the cabin as they'd left. Taking it out, he tucked it in beside her on the bed.

When Chance called, Trace brought Doc Bradford to Chance's room.

"Thanks for the house call, Doc," Chance said. "This is Joy. She hasn't been in town long, and I found her at one of our cabins. Trace says she has white spots on her throat, but we need you to look at her and get her some medicine. Her fever is almost a hundred and four. I had her in the shower, but it's already starting to climb."

“All right, let me see what we have here. I don’t suppose you want to leave the room.”

There was a bigger chance of having a snowball fight in hell. “No, I don’t suppose I do.”

With a nod, Doc began his exam. “Yep, she’s got white spots down there. Do you have any guesses about how long she’s been sick?”

Damn, he hated to admit this. “No. Today’s the first time I’ve seen her since the Friendsgiving.”

Doc nodded, putting his stethoscope to Joy’s chest. He listened for what felt like a long time. That didn’t bode well. The tightness in Chance’s chest grew tighter.

Doc turned his head to Chance and asked, “I don’t suppose you know if she’s always had a heart murmur.”

Fuck. “No. Is that dangerous?”

“Not necessarily. But it’s something that needs keeping an eye on.”

Doc turned back to Joy, uncovering her and pulling up her top to expose her abdomen. And fuck if he didn’t want to shove the doctor away and pull her shirt back down. What was this Little girl doing to him?

“Come take a look at this. I want you to know what to look for in case it happens again while she’s...visitingyou.”

Chance stepped close and looked down at Joy’s stomach, ignoring the fact that the old sawbones was way too perceptive. What he saw explained Joy’s earlier behavior

in the shower. “Snakes on her skin.”

Doc nodded. “Yes. In medical terms, it’s a macular rash. This, coupled with the spots on her throat and the heart murmur, leads me to think she is in the middle of a rheumatic fever flare-up. She probably had strep throat as a child, left untreated. I’m leaving prescriptions, one for an antibiotic and the other for an anti-inflammatory medication. I’ll call Stan at the drug store and tell him to have them ready.” He glanced down at Joy. “I’ll have him make up exactly what you’ll need. Keep her calm and quiet for atleast a week. Once she’s been fever-free for a week, bring her into the office and I’ll do some more tests.”

“Rheumatic fever. Is that dangerous?” Then, thinking of Kenzie and Tilde, he added, “Is it contagious?”

“The rheumatic fever isn’t, but the strep throat that triggered it is. And it can be dangerous. If she had frequent or severe flare-ups, it could damage the valves of her heart. But we’ll do tests to see about that once she’s better. Keep a close eye on her. Remember, rest and quiet for now.”

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Chance nodded. "I'll take care of her."

Doc Bradford studied him, then smiled. "Yes. Yes, I believe you will. Congratulations, son."

Congratulations? What was that about? "Thanks, Doc. Though I'm not sure what I won."

"I see that," Doc said, putting his equipment back in his satchel. "But you will."

Once the old doctor left, Chance sat beside his bed watching Joy sleep. He didn't have time to wonder what Doc Bradford had been talking about. Joy was now his responsibility, and he found he didn't mind the thought at all.

She was his to care for, at least for the next few weeks. He'd let her down once. He wouldn't be doing that again.

## CHAPTER 7

Joy was so relaxed.

She hadn't felt so peaceful in years. It was as if she were wrapped in a blanket, ready for a snuggle. No wonder babies settled when they were swaddled. Her muscles held no tension at all.

The blanket wrapping her held everything in still, safe silence. Worry and fear didn't exist in this space. It was nothing but bliss.

Only her nose itched. She reached up to give it a scratch, but the blankets kept her from moving. Whimpering when scrunching and twitching her nose didn't help, and she struggled again to wrestle the blankets off her. Nothing worked. Holy cow! How wrapped up in blankets could you be?

"Stop, baby girl. Don't fight the ropes. Just relax and go back to sleep. Rest is what you need."

That voice. She recognized that voice. Why did she recognize it? She couldn't remember, but she did know she'd never heard it filled with so much concern.

She tried to reach out to him. To touch him. If she could convince him to come into her blanket, maybe he would be better, too. But she still couldn't move. And her mind was fuzzy.

"I promise you're safe, little one. I'm right here. Your fever is still too high. You need to be still and rest."

A gentle hand brushed away the hair clinging to her cheeks. Why was her hair stuck to her face?

Wait, did he say she had a fever? Was that why she couldn't move? Did fevers freeze your bones and muscles? It had never frozen her muscles before. Her eyes refused to open, no matter how hard she tried.

The last thing she remembered was being on the roof of her cabin. She was about to slide, but then someone scared her. And then she was falling.

Cracking one eye open, she glanced around a darkened room. A room she had never seen before. But she had definitely heard a voice. Why couldn't she remember who the voice belonged to?

"Sleep, baby girl. I'm right here with you. I won't let anything happen to you. Not again. You just focus on getting better."

She liked the voice. She wished it didn't sound so worried, but she had to admit, it felt good for someone to be worried about her.

Her brain was tired. It was going to be easy to follow the voice's instructions.

## CHAPTER 8

Joy awoke, realizing she had died and gone to heaven. The light surrounding her was too bright for anything else. She hadn't been certain heaven was real, but now she guessed it was. It kind of shocked her she'd made the cut to get in, though.

Her eyes felt scratchy, as if she had slept in sand. A throbbing pain pulsed through her head, and her ears felt like they were submerged underwater. She opened her mouth as wide as she could in an attempt to pop them and nearly screamed.

She tried to scream, actually, but no sound came out. It was like she was the victim in every horror movie she'd ever watched. She would have tried again if it weren't for the razor blades shredding the inside of her throat. Swallowing her saliva hurt. Breathing hurt.

She whimpered, but that made her throat hurt even worse. Tears stung her eyes. She wanted to move, to escape the pain, but her body felt like it was made of lead. Moving required too much effort. She didn't have the energy.

She couldn't be in heaven and hurt this badly. So, where was she? Turning her head to the side, she realized she was lying in a bed large enough to hold her and five other people. She blinked her eyes a few times to bring the bedroom into focus. A bedroom that wasn't hers. Bit by bit, things began to come back to her. Things like how



Chance had picked her up and brought her to the ranch.

The wooden walls gleamed in the sunlight. From the faint scent of Christmas in the room, she guessed they were cedar. A window occupied almost the entire wall on her left, which explained the brightness. The clear blue sky she'd come to expect from Wyoming filled the window, showcasing the snow-capped peaks of the Rockies in the distance. Even with an aching throat and extreme weakness, she couldn't help but be glad she was here.

When she didn't feel so awful, she'd worry about whose room she was in. And why. Like she didn't already know. No, this room screamed grumpy, controlling cowboy. Once her immune system wasn't trying to kill her, no doubt she'd be more appreciative of her surroundings.

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Slowly, since any movement of her head made the room spin and the last thing she wanted was to vomit in the middle of the bed, she turned to study the seating area near the window and froze.

Chance Daniels lay on the bed next to her, eyes closed and breathing steadily. Every sexy, muscled inch of him. How could something between her thighs pulse when she felt so bad?

“Holy hotness on a cloud,” she said, unable to keep the words inside.

A new memory, one of him holding her as she fought the pain and fever until she drifted off to sleep, formed in her mind. Would a mean, grumpy cowboy do that? Probably not.

“Good morning to you, too, gypsy,” he said without opening his eyes. “How’re you feelin’?”

His voice was raspy and delicious. It made her want to lick him. Instead of doing that, she focused on returning his greeting, wishing him good morning, too.

But what came out was “I need to pee.”

Oh sure. Now her voice worked. Sort of. And when it did, that was what came out of her mouth. At least she was still whispering. Maybe he didn’t hear her.

Even though she willed him to go back to sleep, he opened his eyes, allowing her to study them. As a photographer, she had seen a lot of eyes. But she’d never seen

anyone with eyes the same deep, vivid blue. The color of the sky at sunset. His pupils had a darker ring around the outer rim.

He smiled, and her throat stopped hurting quite so badly. She thought he'd worked some sort of magic until spots floated before her eyes, and she realized she'd stopped breathing. Gasping for air, she fought back the dizziness and tried to throw back the covers.

Instantly, he was on his feet. "Be still, and I'll come around to your side of the bed and help you."

How did he move so fast? Weren't giants supposed to be lumbering?

Even with his help, it drained most of her energy to swing her legs off the side of the bed once he moved the covers. When he pointed to the bathroom door, she almost cried. It was only across the room, but it might as well have been a thousand miles away.

Placing one arm under her knees and the other behind her back, he lifted her off the bed. "I've got you, babygirl. Just let me take care of you."

Even while he did all the work, the room swayed as he carried her to the bathroom. He shushed her when she whimpered as he took her all the way to the toilet, pulled down her panties, and helped her sit. "There's no reason to be embarrassed, little one. Everyone needs help from time to time."

Too embarrassed for words, she just sat there, unable to even get started. Just when she had given up, he turned on the water in the sink. That did the trick, and she was finally able to pee.

Trying to block out the entire situation, she glanced down and realized she was

wearing a man's T-shirt. Although she wasn't short, when she stood up after finishing, the bottom of the T-shirt fell almost to her knees. It was black and featured a large red barn across the chest. A sign reading The Red Barn hung over the building's double doors. Above and below the barn were the words "What Happens In The Barn - Stays In The Barn."

Wait. Someone had undressed her. Had he undressed her? Peering down the neck of the T-shirt, she saw nothing but skin. She only thought she'd been embarrassed to pee. It was nothing compared to the thought of him seeing her naked.

She was in so much trouble. Again. And this time, it was all her fault.

She should have followed the plan Detective James had given her. Instead, she stopped checking in and tried to disappear. It would have been so much better for everyone to believe she was dead. Well, the joke was on her because she almost had been.

That was still a good plan. She needed to disappear again, only do a better job of it. Even though Chance was a grumpy, gorgeous, probably Daddy man who had scared her and made her fall, she didn't want him or his family hurt or exposed to any danger. Especially since she now knew exactly how dangerous Eddie could be.

Her mother used to say she got a wild hair and acted the fool. A twinge of guilt pinched her chest. Guess that was something she'd never outgrow.

Of course, she couldn't say any of that to Chance. He'd made it clear she was going to be right there for a few more days.

"Come on, Little gypsy, let's get you back in bed." Within minutes, she was back in bed, sheets tucked in tight, cocooning her in warmth. He picked up two large brown medicine bottles from the coffee table in the sitting area and brought them to her side

of the bed. He must have noticed something on her face because he asked, “Are you all right, babygirl?”

Joy smiled as best she could, even though it hurt her throat, and lied. “Yes,” she whispered.

He studied her, and a line formed between his eyebrows as they came together. “Rule number one. Do not lie. Ever.”

Rules? He was giving her rules? That was outrageous, right? So why did it send a pulse of excitement through her?

But now she felt trapped. She didn’t want to tell the truth. Yet, she was a good girl—well, as much as she could be—so she couldn’t lie. She chose option three and got angry.

“I didn’t lie,” she snapped, then winced.

His brows went up, and he leaned forward, resting his hands on the mattress to look her in the eye. “Come again?”

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She nibbled her lip then studied her fingernails. “I said I didn’t lie,” she lied again.

“You’re pale as a ghost, and you sound like a frog.”

“Well, I’m better than I was.” Man, this lying thing was hard.

“You don’t sound better than you did at the Friendsgiving.”

“We will have to agree to disagree.”

Narrowing his eyes, he nodded slowly. “For now. But we’ll be revisiting this conversation when you’re better. Along with a few other things.”

After retrieving a spoon, he picked up the medicine and read the label. Liquid medicine. How had he known she struggled to swallow pills? And that was even without a sore throat. He poured a dose of thick amber liquid from the first bottle.

Yeah. She hoped he liked the taste because she wasn’t going to try a spoonful of something that reminded her of molasses. Just the thought of swallowing it sent a shiver of disgust down her spine.

He held out the spoon without spilling a drop. What would happen if she knocked the spoon from his hand? He couldn’t exactly make her lick it off the floor.

“I know what you’re thinkin’, naughty girl. Your bottom will never survive cashing that check. You have two options, and I don’t care which you choose. You can swallow this medicine like a big girl and chase it down with a juice box. Or I can roll

you over onto your tummy and put the medicine in your bottom using the suppositories Doc Bradford left.”

She gasped, tears welling in her eyes. “He did not!”

“Oh, he absolutely did. You are not the first stubborn Little patient he’s dealt with. He’s been a doctor here in Wilder for a long time. Now, which is it to be? This medicine is going in one end or the other.”

How had she come to this? “Why can’t I take a pill?” she demanded, her relief at not having to swallow one a thing of the past.

“First of all, your throat is too raw and swollen. Doc Bradford was worried you’d choke. Second, pills are not for Little girls like you.”

He knew! How did he know? “I never said I was a Little.”

“Of course you did, sweetie. You told me the minute you showed up at the Friendsgiving celebration wearin’ bright pink, unicorn combat boots and pigtails in your hair.”

“They’re called angel wings, thank you very much.”

His lips twitched. “I beg your pardon. Angel wings.”

Wait. Had she just given herself away? Again?

She didn’t see that she had much choice. There was no way he was sticking anything in her bottom. Still, she couldn’t make it too easy for him.

“What kind of juice box?” As a stalling technique, it wasn’t the best. But it would

have to do. She wasn't about to swallow goopy medicine for just any flavored juice box. Even a girl with a super sore throat had standards.

Chance didn't miss a beat. "Apple juice or white grape?"

In the snootiest tone a frog could manage, she said, "I find your terms acceptable. I'd like apple juice, please."

Once he retrieved the juice from the kitchenette in his suite, he poured another spoonful of the yucky medicine. With the juice box in hand, she held her nose and opened her mouth.

It turned out that the medicine wasn't very thick and tasted like lemon drops. She loved lemon drops. Still, she shuddered and made a face anyway, just so he wouldn't know he was right.

He leaned over and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "See, not as bad as you thought. Let's get you back under the covers. I can tell you're getting tired. Doc Bradford said not to overdo it."

She hadn't fooled him at all. If he wasn't a Daddy, he ought to be. She'd love a Daddy like Chance.

"I'm not tired. I just woke up." Yeah, that would have been more effective if it hadn't ended in a yawn.

"I know. Just humor me."

Lucky for him, she was starting to feel lightheaded. And sleepy, although she'd never admit it. As he adjusted her covers, something struck her. "How did I get here?" she asked.



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“When you passed out in my arms, I carried you to my truck and drove you to the lodge.”

“No.” She battled against sleep and tried once more. “I’m talking about this room. It belongs to you, right? How did I end up here?” The pain in her throat was excruciating but she really wanted to know.

“The same way I did, gypsy. Up the stairs. I brought you up here after the doctor left. You needed watchin’ over by someone, and I decided it was going to be me. I brought you to my room so I’d be right here if you need anything. As long as you’re on my ranch, I’m in charge.”

He stared down at her, all stern and Daddy-like, as if he expected her to object. And maybe if she felt better, she would have. But somehow, she didn’t think so. He just stepped up and took charge, but it was always for the good of those he considered his. If he wanted her to be one of those people, even for a short time, she wasn’t about to say no.

There was just something about him. He could be gruff, but he was always good. From what the people at the Friendsgiving had said, he cared about the people. He’d keep her safe, and she hadn’t felt safe in a long time.

And he was so fun to tease. “Did you change my clothes, too?”

“Yep, but don’t you worry, babygirl. Daddy’s gonna take care of you. Besides, it ain’t nothin’ I haven’t seen before,” he answered, as if he did things like that all the time.

Maybe he did. Maybe he'd brought a lot of Littles up to his room and taken care of them. She probably wasn't special at all.

She had never been special to anyone. She was used to it.

But it sure would have been nice to be special to Chance.

Chance watched over Joy as she drifted off to sleep. She could be quite the Little spitfire when she was under the weather, couldn't she? He smiled. That was one Little girl who'd give her Daddy a run for his money.

No problem, he'd had plenty of practice dealing with spitfires thanks to Kenzie. Those two would be fast friends. Add in Tildi and there was no telling what they'd be up to. All the Daddies would have to stay sharp. But he could handle his Little gypsy just fine.

Except she wasn't his. He was pretty sure she'd never want to be. Not when she really got to know him and everything he needed from her.

But she could be as sweet as a coltsfoot blossom in winter when she wanted to be. The way her face lit up when she was happy.

Someone needed to warn her about her smiles. She handed them out far too freely. Her kind of smile, the one that lit up her entire body, should be reserved for the people who meant the most to her.

Reserved just for him, that was. If he saw her smile at some other man that way, he might just have to kill him.

## CHAPTER 9

Two days later, she still felt like poo.

Her throat would never recover. It took everything she had to sit up in bed. Her throat felt like dry parchment paper all the time. To make matters worse, she could barely drink anything because it hurt.

She did her best to hide it. Chance hadn't left the room for three days. What was he giving up to take care of her? If anyone wanted to know what a burden looked like, her picture was probably right there next to the definition.

Speak of the devil, and up he popped. Chance headed her way with the foul-tasting spray that numbed her throat. He might not be a devil, but that spray was definitely witch's brew.

"Open wide and stick out your tongue." Chance lifted the bottle, prepared to spray. When she refused to comply, he tapped the nozzle against her bottom lip. "Open up, little girl. You know it will feel better once we spray your throat."

She shook her head, pressing her lips together as tightly as she could.

Sighing, he shook his head. "Why do we have to go through this every time? Open, or I'll add another tally to your naughty girl book."

He had begun threatening her with tally marks in a naughty girl book the day before. She hadn't thought he would go through with it, but by the end of the day, she had seven tally marks. She had no idea how many she had now. Her bottom clenched at the thought of what that might mean.

Knowing she wouldn't win a battle of wills with him, she opened her mouth. The spray wasn't really that bad, and within seconds, her throat felt better.

"Now, drink this." The cup he held up made her giggle every time. It was a sparkly wine glass with a pale pink sippy cup lid. "At least five big swallows. We don't need you to get dehydrated."

Even for a Daddy, he was bossy. She'd tell him that as soon as she could speak again. Right now, her voice still sounded raspy, and it hurt to talk. At least she didn't sound like a croaking frog anymore. She did manage a whispered, "Bossy."

He grinned. "Hmm. And here I was thinkin' the problem was that for a Little, you're very stubborn."

Even though he was teasing her, his words stung. She had been right. She was a burden. She managed a "Sorry," but that was hardly enough for all the time he had spent taking care of her. She had been a pain in the butt. She couldn't stop herself from whispering, "Better, now." After swallowing, she added, "Leaving soon. Trouble." She pointed to her chest on that last word.

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He shook his head with... was that guilt? “I’m the one who should be sorry, babygirl. I should have given you a room after the Friendsgiving. And that’s another tally in your naughty girl book. You are no longer allowed to put yourself down. You are not trouble.”

His stern tone made her heart skip, and not out of fear. She liked it. A lot. Too much. She couldn’t get used to Chance as aDaddy. He was only going to be her Daddy while she was at the ranch.

It would be hard enough to leave as it was. The thought of being alone and on the run terrified her. Even though she had been sick, these had been the best three days of her life.

“Hey, babygirl. What’s that sad face about?”

“Nothing.” The narrowing of his eyes proved he didn’t believe her. Time for a new topic of conversation. She patted the mattress. “How long?”

He held her gaze, studying her. Thankfully, he decided to let it go. “The same number of days as when you asked an hour ago. Your fever was so high you were having seizures, babygirl. I’m not doing anything to risk you having a relapse. Doc Bradford said bed for seven days, and seven days is what we’re gonna do.”

That wasn’t what she wanted to hear. There had to be things he’d rather be doing. Things he wasn’t doing because of her. There were a million things more important than her. She shook her head and pointed to him. “Busy.”

“Don't you worry about that, little gypsy.”

It was about more than just him. Ruby, the ranch's housekeeper and the best cook Joy had ever known, had to be tired of making extra meals to send up to her. This time, she pointed to the tray of empty dishes on the counter in the kitchenette. Ruby would soon be up to collect them. “Too busy.”

Chance smirked. “That just shows you don't know Ruby. She's worried about you. And happy to do anything that will help you get better.”

She shook her head again. He didn't understand. Sure, people were catering to her every need and doing the work Chance would normally handle. But that was because of him. He was the boss. He didn't even have to say to jump around here. People jumped without even asking how high. “For you,” she whispered. Even though that hurt, she still rasped, “Not me.”

She shouldn't have said that. Not because it wasn't true, but because it made him smile. He looked stunning when he smiled.

“How about you, gypsy? Will you stay in bed and get better for me? Will you do whatever I say?”

She would have laughed if she didn't know it would hurt so much. She shook her head, no. But inside, her heart was screaming, “Yes. Anything.”

“You might wanna think about changin' your tune, little girl. You're rackin' up quite a few tallies in your naughty girl book. There's gonna be quite a price for you to pay once you're feeling better.”

Since she couldn't stomp her feet, she did the next best thing. Slapping her covers, she pointed toward his dratted book. “No list. No punish.” She probably pushed it

over the edge into melodrama when, clutching her throat with both hands, she stuck out her bottom lip and whispered, “Sick.”

“Did you have a Daddy takin’ care of you back in Nameless?”

The abrupt shift in topic startled her.

She wasn’t going there. Not in a million years. The last person she wanted to think about right now was Eddie. Sure, she’d convinced herself he was her Daddy. But now that she had a glimpse of what a real Daddy was like, she realized how wrong she’d been.

What if she told him about Eddie? Would he believe her? No one in their right mind would stay with someone who treated them like Eddie had treated her. She had been such a fool.

She shook her head again. “No Daddy.” That might not be the whole truth, but it would have to do. Tears stung her eyes, another sure sign of a flare-up. She never cried, not ever. But flare-ups of her rheumatic fever always made her more emotional.

She shifted her gaze toward the window so he wouldn’t be able to see her face.

He ran his finger down her cheek and gently caught her chin, turning her back to face him. “I didn’t mean to pry, babygirl. If I ask you somethin’ you don’t want to talk about, we won’t talk about it. Before you get tired, can I ask you about your rheumatic fever?”

Relieved he wasn’t angry, she nodded.

“Thank you, darlin’. When did you catch rheumatic fever?”

She shrugged. Holding up five fingers, she croaked out, “Strep. In school.”

He nodded. “I see. From what I’ve read, that’s a common way for it to start. When you got sick, didn’t your parents take you to the doctor?”

She shook her head. This not being able to talk was for the birds. If she kept shaking her head, she was going to make herself seasick.

She needed to explain it was in the middle of the fall harvest, and her mom and pop were busy. By the time they finished gathering the crops, her throat felt better. Instead, she had to settle for explaining all that by saying, “No need.”

His scowl indicated she wasn’t explaining anything well. “Of course, there was a need. You developed rheumatic fever. How sick did you get?” When she pinched her thumb and pointer finger together and held them up to him, he snorted in disbelief.



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She was messing everything up. Her parents weren't bad people. Not really.

"If this gets to be too much, I want you to tell me. When did they figure out you had rheumatic fever?"

That one was simple. "Christmas."

A yawn tried to break free, but it hurt so much she clenched her teeth. She should have let it out, but despite what she'd said earlier about being a pain in the butt, she didn't want to waste a minute of the short time she would have with him on sleep.

"How could they not take you to the doctor?" Chancedemanded. He seemed upset, not because of her but on her behalf. Maybe he did care about her, at least a tiny bit.

But she couldn't have him thinking poorly of her parents. "Folks, older."

For the most part, they managed their farm by themselves. She didn't think it occurred to them that her sore throat could be anything serious. Even if they had, they didn't have the money to run to the doctor when she was already feeling better.

It didn't seem her words made him feel any better. As a matter of fact, he looked even more upset. So, she tried again. "Suspicious of doctors. Loved me."

She chose not to bring up how upset her parents were about the cost of those tests. It wasn't like they didn't love her. They were both pragmatic, stoic people. She couldn't have been more different from them if she'd tried.

At some point in her efforts, he started holding her hand. She couldn't look away from the way he rubbed his thumb back and forth across her skin. He held on extra tight when her hand jerked or flinched. Thank goodness it wasn't doing that as much today.

She hated it when her body did things without her permission. She felt like a puppet whose strings were being pulled by someone she couldn't see. And it was embarrassing. The kids at school used to make fun of her. She had taken to sitting on her hands so no one could see.

Chance gazed at her then, regret filling his eyes. "I'm sorry I didn't understand when you said there were snakes on you. You were talkin' about the rash, weren't you?"

He was worried about that? She barely remembered it happening. She squeezed his hand. "It's okay," she whispered.

That's what the rash looked like to her. Especially during a bad flare-up. When the rash was a deep red. No doubt he thought she was crazy. Or on drugs.

"I wish I'd known you had flare-ups. We'll be much more careful in the future. Doc Bradford wants to see you once your fever's gone. He has tests he wants to run."

Her heart leaped. Did he think they had a future? Even though she warned herself not to get excited, she couldn't help it, at least a little bit.

Wait. He thought he was taking her to see the doctor again? And for more expensive tests?

"No," she said, trying her best not to panic. The last thing she needed to do right now was make her flare-up worse. "No doctors."

There was no way she could afford the doctor's visit that had already occurred. She certainly couldn't pay for another one. She had no idea what she would do, but she couldn't let him take her to the doctor.

He didn't say anything for a moment. Instead, he took a slow breath. "First, you do not tell Daddy no. That is against your rules?—"

"No rules! Too many."

"We'll get you a book of your own. You can write lines in it, too, which is what you'll be doin' the next time you interrupt Daddy."

Her cheeks flushed. She needed to be nicer. He was doing so much for her, and she was being a pain in the butt. He'd be happy to get rid of her if she kept this up.

Staring at her lap as if she had just discovered it, she said, "Sorry."

"I'm sorry, who?" he asked. He raised his hand to stop her from answering. "I don't want you to answer that now, but once your throat is better, you'll say, 'Sorry, Daddy'. Understood?"

Her gaze shot to his. He wanted her to call him Daddy? Out loud?

Wide-eyed, she replied even though he'd told her not to. "Sorry... D-Daddy?"

"I said when your throat is better, little gypsy." Yet, he smiled at her words, melting her heart.

She'd lived with Eddie for two years. He told her he was a Daddy Dom, but he hadn't been one. He didn't want her to call him Daddy, even in private. But he certainly wanted someone to cook and clean. And other things. For the past year, other

things were off the table, and he didn't care. In fact, he barely noticed because he'd found someone else to get those other things.

She was so foolish. Who wouldn't recognize that for the glaring red flag it was?

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“Thank you, babygirl. I like the sound of that. Now, tell Daddy why you don’t want to go to the doctor.”

It wasn’t a question of not wanting to. It was a question of signing her death warrant if she did. Hers and how many others? Eddie and his crew would find her eventually. She couldn’t let that happen while she was here in Wilder. Everyone she met here was so kind. She owed it to them, and especially to Chance, to disappear as soon as she could.

But she couldn’t tell her Daddy that. So instead, she whispered, “No money.”

He nodded. “I thought that might be it. Here’s the thing, darlin’. The fact you had a flare-up is on me. If you’d spent the night here, you might never have gotten sick at all. So, covering any costs for getting you well is on me, too.”

He truly was a wonderful Daddy. A really good man, period. “Not true.”

“It’s true if I say it’s true. That’s a Daddy privilege. If that’s all you’re worried about, problem solved.”

The sparkle in his eyes when he thought he’d won a disagreement sent a delightful tingling through her tummy. And in areas further down. It was all she could do to keep from squirming.

“No need. Lost card.” She cut herself off when he snapped fully alert. Did he think she was stupid? Or worse, that she was asking for a handout?

“What?”

She shook her head and would have refused to answer. But she didn't think his pointed glance at her naughty girl book was an accident.

Slumping lower, she confessed to him just how absent-minded she was. “Lost credit card,” she whispered.

He snapped to attention. “When was that, gypsy?”

She held up one finger. “Before Friendsgiving.”

His eyes held a different kind of spark now. Not exactly angry, but close to it. “The day before the Friendsgiving. Where were you when you noticed you'd lost your credit card?”

“Here.”

“Fuck.”

Wow. He was really upset with her. Sure, she had been careless. Even though she had tried hard not to use it, she hadn't actually used it at all. She didn't understand why he was so upset. She canceled it as soon as she got back to the shelter, when she realized what had happened.

Before she could ask, he took out his phone and made a call. “Kaya, this is Chance Daniels. Put me through to the sheriff, please. Thanks.”

What in the world? Why would he involve the sheriff? That was the last thing she needed. He was going to get her killed. Maybe get them all killed.

As if he could read her mind, he said, “If anyone used your card here in Wilder, the people you’re running from can find you.”

Oh no. Oh God! She had worked so hard not to use her card. How could she not have realized that if someone stole it, they might be able to access it?

She had to leave—now. There was no time to waste. Struggling with the covers, she fought her way to the edge of the bed.

A hand clamped down on her leg, holding her in place. “Do not move,” he said, before turning back to his phone. “Hello, Sam? I think we might have a problem.”

## CHAPTER 10

The longest week of her life!

And that was with her mostly sleeping through the first three days of it.

Today, the gorgeous room she’d been confined to was again bright with daylight streaming through a large picture window. Not that she’d gotten to view the scenery outside the window. No, she’d been in bed. For seven days.

Chance had growled at her yesterday when she’d tried to get up. Growled. Like a bear or something. “You better get yourself back under those covers, naughty girl. With the discussion we’re having as soon as you get cleared by Doc Bradford, you want to be on your best behavior. I promised you.”

“I wasn’t getting out of bed. I was just giving my foot some air.”

“Is that the same as yesterday when I caught you sticking your tongue out at me? I guess you were giving that some air, too.”

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She'd blushed to the tips of her hair, but reminded him, "I told you I was licking my lips."

When she'd accused him of being bossy, he'd grinned and told her to get used to it.

Those first two days, he would check her temperature every hour, lift her from the bed, and carry her to the bathroom. She had thought that was embarrassing until he'd kept walking through the door and over to the toilet.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"I'm helping you go to the potty." She wondered why a nice avalanche couldn't bury her when she needed it.

Yesterday morning, she'd put her foot down. At least, she'd tried. "I do not need you to help me go to the potty anymore. I'm all better, and I've been doing it on my own since I was a year and a half old."

"A year and a half? You've been an over achiever since birth, haven't you, gypsy?"

She'd shrugged and attempted to shove him out of the water closet.

He'd allowed it, thank goodness. "I'll be right outside the door. Call out if you need me. That's if you get dizzy or feel sick. I don't want you falling and injuring yourself." He winked at her as she started closing the door. "Or if you just want help wiping your bottom."



She'd slammed the door on his laugh at her horrified gasp. He was such a Daddy.

Today, she woke up alone for the first time. He'd stayed by her side for seven days, but today he'd left a note about riding out to check on the bison in the north pasture and ride the fences.

Even though she'd been encouraging him to get back to his life, she missed him. But his brothers and the ranch hands had been working hard to do everything Chance usually did. And that was a lot.

Then it occurred to her it would probably take all morning. He shouldn't be back until later in the afternoon. That would give her plenty of time to take a shower and still be able to rest. He would never know.

To be on the safe side, she waited five entire minutes before climbing out of bed. Tingles ran along the bottoms of her feet when she settled all her weight on them for the first time in a week. A wave of dizziness almost sent her to her knees. She tried to grab the bedside but hit the lamp instead, sending it crashing to the ground.

The door flung open. Chance rushed in, coming straight to her. He lifted her and set her on the edge of the bed. "What the hell do you think you're doing, babygirl? Did you cut yourself?" He checked her hands and arms before carrying her to the sitting area and standing beside the couch. "You are in big trouble, little girl. Don't you move an inch. There's broken glass on the floor. I don't want you to get any glass splinters in your feet."

As soon as he had her settled, he picked the larger pieces of the broken lamp from the floor before calling Ruby, the family's housekeeper, and told her to send someone up to clean the rest of the mess.

Things became uncomfortable after that. Chance crossed his arms over his chest and

glared down at her. “Would you like to tell me what you were doing out of bed? I'm very disappointed in you.”

Well, now she felt horrible. On top of recovering from the flare-up, now she felt guilty.

You should feel guilty. You deliberately disobeyed him the minute his back was turned.

Worrying her fingers, she said, “I'm sorry I broke your lamp.”

“You think I'm worried about the lamp? You could have seriously hurt yourself, little one. That's what worries me. I have to be able to trust you to behave when I'm not in the room.”

Her stomach tumbled. “I know. You can. But Daddy, I have to get out of this bed. Seven days is too long. I feel fine. I didn't run a fever all day yesterday. All I wanted was to take a shower.”

By the flash of anger in his eyes, she wasn't making her situation any better. “That's fine, gypsy, but you're still weak. You need my help to take a shower. What if you had slipped and hurt yourself? No one would have come in to check on you until lunch. They shouldn't have had to. You were supposed to be in bed. If Doc Bradford hadn't called to say he was on the way out to check on you, I might not have made it back until this afternoon.”

She got that she'd messed up. He didn't have to make her feel worse than she already did. Now she wished she hadn't broken the lamp, so she could throw it at him. At the very least, she wished the bed wasn't so high so she could stomp her foot.

“I can take a shower all by myself!”

“There is no ‘all by myself,’ damn it. That’s not how things are gonna work.” Chance’s anger practically radiated from him in waves. She thought she’d seen him angry before, but she’d been wrong. Very wrong.

It sent a frisson of fear up her spine. Not a fear of her Daddy. Never that. But a fear of what her life would be like without him. She shouldn’t say anything.

Unfortunately, she wasn’t the best at following advice, even when it was her own. “Even for a Daddy, you’re a bit of a control freak. Has anyone ever told you that?” When his jaw clenched, she quickly kept going. “I appreciate all your concern. I’ve never had anyone care about me like you do. You control everyone and everything because you’re a Daddy, and that’s what Daddies do. But I have to do things by myself. I came here by myself, and I’ll leave by myself. And since I’ll be by myself for the rest of my life, I have to get used to doing things by myself. So, for me, there is a ‘by myself’ whether you like it or not.”

Okay, that came out a lot harsher when she said it than it had sounded in her head. He was trying to take care of her. She loved it, but it was going to make leaving too hard. And she had to leave because eventually she would only bring more trouble to the ranch and all the people he cared about. Then he wouldn’t want her anywhere near him. She wasn’t sure she could survive that, so she had to leave. And soon.

He lowered his chin like a bull getting ready to charge. “That is not how you talk to your Daddy, naughty girl.”

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She hadn't known him long, but he struck her as the kind of man with a long fuse before his anger exploded. How did she always seem to set it off? This was the point in the conversation most people would run.

But, hey. Show no fear, right?

She notched up her chin and ran her finger across the side table. Thinking her butt might be more in need of protection than anything else, she did her best to appear casual as she baby stepped closer to the couch.

Feeling the need to establish a boundary, she said the first adult thing that came to her mind. "You may be the boss of the ranch, but you still aren't the boss of me."

"Sit down." He didn't raise his voice, but that had definitely been an order.

A full-on, deep, rumbling Daddy voice order if she'd ever heard one. She lost all semblance of poise when she slipped on the wooden floor and plopped down on the sofa.

Stupid footed pajamas. She'd forgotten she still had them on. Wearing pajamas when he was fully clothed left her feeling vulnerable and exposed. And Little.

Why hadn't she taken the time to get dressed? Oh yeah, because she'd been on the way to take a shower. But she couldn't project a woman of the world and in control persona in footed onesie pajamas. Not that she presented that image well with all her clothes on.

Besides, she liked how her pajamas made her feel pretty and Little. Especially now that he stood in front of her, all growly Daddy Dom. And didn't that just say everything?

How did he do that? Command her body so completely it followed his orders without her permission. Lucky for her, her body and her mind were two different things. She shot to her feet.

"Not smart, sassy girl." He stepped closer until he was in her space. The heat of his body warmed her. A feeling she liked way too much. "You should have stuck with your gut. That attitude ain't going to do anything for you except make sittin' way less comfortable."

"I don't have to do what you say." Yeah, her mouth had a mind of its own, which always landed her in a world of trouble. She and her mouth were going to have a talk. If her Daddy didn't kill her first. The look in his eyes made her take a step back, pressing her calves against the couch.

Not that stepping back did any good. He followed her, continuing to invade her space. With a thick, rough finger, he lifted her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze. "One of us is going to take care of you, babygirl. And that one's gonna be me. So, as long as you're here, you damn well do have to do what I say, when I say it."

Her anger battled with her desire, not to mention a healthy dose of her self-preservation. Self-preservation won, and she would have taken another step back if the couch hadn't stopped her. She would have toppled back down if he hadn't caught her. All that did was make her madder.

She stomped her foot, wishing she were brave enough to stomp on his. "Step back."

He grinned with anything but humor as he answered her demand. "No."

Her nipples hardened from the heat in his gaze. There was more than anger there. Now she was the one with reddening cheeks.

Bad nipples. Down.

She turned away from the couch, continuing to back away from him until her back pressed against the window. The cold window pane chilled her even through her pajamas.

He followed, flattening his palms against the window, capturing her. "I think it's about time to have that discussion I told you about, Calliope Joy Joplin. We obviously need to get a few things straight. Now go sit down on that couch where I told you to."

She sucked in a breath, cool air filling her lungs. That was probably the cause of the wicked tingling dancing through her body at his words. She released the breath she hadn't meant to hold and tried to breathe out slowly, trying to control herself.

She'd been around men like Chance all her life. Okay, not as gorgeously sexy, but still. She knew what Daddies expected. Unless he was around, she was a good girl. Giving in and keeping the peace was her go-to strategy. She could easily say the right words and make everything better.

She considered this option. For two seconds. But something inside her wouldn't let her do that. Not now. And not with him. Something about him drove her to push the limits to see what would happen.

Maybe it was because she knew she'd have to leave soon, and the unfairness of it made her mad. She wanted more from him. Wanted more with him. And sometimes that meant giving as good as she got and worrying about the consequences later.

So, she said the one thing guaranteed to push him over the edge. "Make me, Chan?—"

He grabbed her arms, pulled her to him, and crashed his lips down on hers before she finished saying his name.

It was a good thing he held her because the fire in his kiss weakened her knees. Pressed against his chest, her nipples scraped against him, and the fire that stirred completely consumed her. Forget the blizzards of Wyoming and the thunder and lightning of Texas, his kiss created the fiercest storm inside her she'd ever known.

All thought disappeared as her body took control.

She would have said she'd been kissed before. But if this was what a kiss could be, she had not. She was swept up in the tumult of want and need. No, she hadn't known kisses like this existed.

It wasn't a gentle kiss, but then Chance wasn't a gentle man. This kiss was firm, angry, and filled with more passion than she ever could've imagined.

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A few times, she'd thought he came close to kissing her, but he'd always held himself back. She had no idea what had changed, and she didn't care. Not right now. This moment was made for one thing, and it wasn't regret. This moment was made for this kiss.

And at that moment, she knew only one thing. There would be no turning back now. Ever. When he broke their kiss, he pinned her in place with a gaze filled with the same desires coursing through her. He recognized the moment for what it was, just like her.

It may not be something that lasts, but it marked the beginning of something new.

Determination shone through his gaze. His jaw tightened, stirring a flutter in her abdomen. "Definitely time for that discussion, gypsy."

"What discussion?" she asked, as if she didn't know. Holy crap.

## CHAPTER 11

As Chance guided his naughty little gypsy toward the couch, someone knocked on the door and cracked it open before Chance could tell them to stay out.

Doc Bradford poked his head in. Sizing up the situation, he asked, "Am I preventing you from something?"

The doctor had practiced medicine in Wilder long enough to know exactly what he'd interrupted, namely Chance's wrath descending on his naughty girl's ass by way



of his palm. He had no doubt the man had seen his fair share of reddened backsides. It was probably for the best. Once his gypsy had been checked over, he'd feel better about turning her over his knee.

Glaring down at Joy, he made sure she understood this was not a reprieve. "Not preventing, Doc, just postponing. Come on in."

Eyes twinkling, the doctor crossed the room. "This shouldn't take too long. It looks like she's doing well. Let's get her on the bed so I can examine her."

"That's all right. I'm feeling all better now," Joy said, throwing Chance a look of triumph. Minx.

That was all right. He cast a sideways glance at her naughty girl book. The shiver that ran through her at that made him smile. Maybe a spanking wasn't what was called for right now. He didn't want to trigger another flare-up, just get her attention and make her regret her bad choices.

He had other, much more creative ways to do that. Once she was settled on the bed, he crossed to the closet and retrieved his play bag. Yes, it was time to teach her a lesson and see how compatible he and his gypsy were.

It had been a dealbreaker every time he'd tried with the Little's he'd been attracted to. His ropes stripped away their sense of safety and control. Most Littles didn't enjoy the experience. He had a feeling his Little gypsy might be different.

At least, he hoped so because he was falling for her, fast and hard, and he needed to pull back on the reins if she couldn't deal with rope play. It was a part of him he wasn't sure he could live without and be happy. He just hoped it wasn't too late.

"I think she's doing well," Doc said after he finished his exam. "She seems to be on

track, and she knows what to look for as far as symptoms go. I still want to perform an ultrasound of her heart and an ECG. Mainly to establish a baseline for her, so I'll know where her norms are. That way, I'll be able to catch any changes in the future."

Chance hoped there would be a future. He guessed he'd find out soon.

Not as soon as he would have liked, as it turned out. Once Doc Bradford left, Kenzie called to let him know the sheriff was waiting downstairs with questions for Joy about her situation. Chance wanted the same thing. "Tell him we'll be right down, tiger," he said before turning to his babygirl. "How are you feeling, little one?"

"I'm okay. I'm sorry for what I said earlier."

He helped her dress in one of the new outfits Kenzie and Tilde had helped him find online. "We'll work that out later. Right now, I need to tell you that outfit looks adorable on you, Gypsy. White with all those sequins makes you look like a Little snow bunny. Now we need to hop downstairs and meet with the sheriff."

"Wh-why are we meeting with him? Am I in trouble? Well, more trouble."

"I don't think so. Should you be?"

If she shook her head any harder, it would fall off her shoulders. "All right, babygirl. I believe you. I think he wants to find out the details of what happened and how you came about losing your credit card."

He hadn't asked her again since he had called Sam earlier. He figured if it were a problem, Sam would call him back. Truth be told, the fact that Sam drove out all this way had him concerned, too. But there was no need to make his Little girl any more nervous than she already was. If there was a problem, he would take care of it before it could affect her.

Downstairs, Chance greeted his friend before sitting in the armchair across from Sam and settling Joy on his lap. He thought he could trust his friend, but he wasn't willing to take risks when it came to his girl. "Mornin', Sam. What brings you all this way?"

Sam nodded and got right to business. "When you called me about the missing credit card, the first thing I did was put a call in to Detective James. He was, of course, concerned about what that might mean for Miss Joy and her safety. He said he wanted to check a few things out and he'd call me back."

"Well, I don't see a problem so far. So why the visit?" Chance wanted to get this over and done with so he could get his girl back upstairs for a nap. Doc Bradford might have said she was doing fine, but that didn't mean she still didn't need her rest.

"I got a callback today from the detective. He mentioned there were some 'grave concerns' because her credit card was used once before she cancelled it. He's afraid that means the people she's running from might have a way of tracking her down."

Joy stiffened in his lap then attempted to jump down. "Whoa, little girl. You aren't goin' anywhere. The sheriff and I are going to take care of this. I don't want you worryin' about anything but getting better. The rest of it is my job now." Turning to the sheriff, he added, "I want to bring Grant in on this. He'll want to be up to speed on anything that could affect the ranch."

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In the end, the whole family joined them. His gypsy shrank back against him. She would have burrowed under him if she could have. It would have been nice if she'd been able to meet them before having to talk about her past, but there was nothing he could do about that now.

Best to make introductions. "First of all, everyone, this is Joy. She's staying with us for the foreseeable future, and she's under my protection. You just treat her as part of the family."

She squeezed his arm. "No one is going to want someone like me as part of the family."

Tilting Joy's chin up, he forced her to meet his gaze. "Do you remember what I said about lying?"

Her pupils were dilated, and her breathing was rapid and shallow. He needed to calm her down before she hyperventilated. Resting his forehead against hers so his face was all she could see, he lowered his voice. "Listen to me, Little gypsy. I am right here. I will not leave you. I will not let anyone say anything to upset you. You are safe here, and my family is going to love you. The people in this room are only here to help. Right now, we need information only you can give us. So, I need you to be brave for just a little while longer. Then we will go back upstairs together. Deal?"

She searched his eyes as he held his breath. He wasn't sure what they would do if she couldn't talk to them. What he did know was her mental and physical health came first, so if they had to figure out a plan B, they would.

Whatever she was searching for, she must have found it. She nodded, and he swayed his head with hers, unwilling to break the skin-to-skin contact with her. “I may have to squeeze your finger.”

He held up his pointer finger and smiled. “One finger, at your disposal, gypsy.”

She had a surprisingly firm grip, but he didn’t say a word. He had a friend whose finger was crooked because he had tried the same move with his wife while she was in labor with their first child. Hopefully, his finger would fare better.

“All right, Sam. I think we’re ready. What is it you want to know?”

Pulling out a small, beat-up notebook, Sam said, “Well, there’s no better place to start than the beginning. Miss Joplin, can you tell me what happened that sent you running from the only place you’ve ever called home?”

Joy nodded. Her whole body trembled. The pulse in her neck ticked much faster than it should. She glanced over at the others sitting around the room.

If they had known each other longer, he would have blindfolded and bound her. By the time he finished, she would feel secure and cradled. But he couldn’t do that yet. So he said, “Eyes to me, little one. You keep your eyes on me. We are the only two people in the room. Now, tell Daddy what happened that forced you to leave Texas.”

She never took her eyes off him. Trying to smile, she answered his question.

“I’m the only person in the world who can get lost in my own hometown.”

That was not what he had expected. “You left because you got lost?”

He must have looked as confused as he sounded because her smile reached her eyes.

“In a manner of speaking. I only wanted one more good picture of the light from the streetlights sparkling off the wet pavement downtown. It had rained, and the reflection off the puddles was beautiful. Well, that and to jump in a few of the puddles.” She stopped speaking, and her smile faded. “It didn’t seem like too much to ask. It was late, well past midnight, but I wasn’t worried. Well, not too much. It wasn’t like I had anyone to go home to. Eddie was always out until the wee hours of the morning. Besides, Nameless is a small, peaceful town.”

She fell silent, so Chance asked the one question he wanted the answer to. More than he should, probably. “Who is Eddie, and why were you livin’ with him?”

Her cheeks flushed with color. “His name is Eddie Sharp. He was supposed to be my husband and my Daddy. But after two years, we never got around to the first, and he couldn’t have been the second if he tried. Which he didn’t. What he wanted was a live-in cook and maid.” She shuddered, and when she spoke again, it was in a whisper. “And he was mean.”

Chance would have said he knew what rage felt like. But until that moment, he did not. In that moment, his mind sheeted white, and it took all he could do not to leave right then for Nameless, Texas, and teach Eddie a few pain-filled lessons on how to treat a precious gift like Joy.

He was so busy planning the ass-kicking he would deliver, he almost missed Joy's next words. “But I got lost. I’m so stupid! Who gets lost in a town of nine hundred eighty-two people? There’s one grocery store, two drugstores, three churches, and four gas stations. We don’t even have any stoplights. Who could possibly get lost in Nameless? Me. That’s who. Calliope Joy Joplin, the girl with the worst sense of direction in the entire state of Texas.”

Oh, hell no. He wasn’t going to stand for that. How had she convinced herself this situation was her fault? That stopped right now. He took her cheeks between his

hands. Her gaze shot to his. “You listen to me, little girl. What did I just say about lying?”

“But I didn’t lie, Daddy. That’s what happened.”

“You didn’t lie about that, but you did lie about yourself. Because you are not stupid. You are one of the smartest people I know. And on top of that, you’re brave, kind, funny, and beautiful. Trust me when I say you can’t afford any more tally marks until we take care of the ones you have. You will not lie to people. And newsflash, gypsy, you are people, too. I will blister your bottom anytime, anywhere, and with anyone watching if I ever hear you say something like that again. Do you understand me?”

He couldn’t read her expression, but he hoped she was listening. Because he was completely serious. From what he could tell, she had been lied to her entire life. The people who should have built her up had instead taught her to lower herself to what made them comfortable.

After a quick glance at those gathered in the room, she looked back at him and nodded. “Yes, Daddy.”

“Now, tell me why you believe you have a poor sense of direction.”

Her brows scrunched in concentration, hitting him straight in the heart. Hard. She was adorable. “I guess that’s what people always told me. My mom used to say when I fell, I fell up, not down.”

Chance gritted his teeth like a dam against the words he wanted to say. His mother would never have said something like that. She was their number one cheerleader, the one who believed in them no matter what and made sure they knew it.

It broke his heart that his gypsy hadn’t grown up in the same environment. He

couldn't change the past, but he could damn sure teach her how wonderful she was now. "Did you ever get lost when you were driving north to get away from Eddie?"



“Um, well, no. But?—”

“Did you get lost the two days you were in Wilder?”

“No, Daddy. I...” She raised her gaze to his once more, her eyes filled with realization and wonder. He felt privileged to witness a link in the chain that had held her self-esteem down for so long break. “I didn’t get lost. Not any of those times. Why did I think I had a bad sense of direction?”

His girl. She put that together quickly. “I don’t know, gypsy. But now you know it isn’t true. And I bet the more you start to think about it, the more you’ll realize there are other things you believe about yourself that aren’t true.”

Sam cleared his throat. “I have a few more questions, if you don’t mind.”

Chance glared at his friend but nodded. “Go ahead.”

Sam smiled at Joy before asking, “So, what happened after you took the pictures and realized you were lost?”

Joy tightened her grip on Chance’s finger. He would give anything to be able to do this for her, but he couldn’t.

“I figured out I was in the alley behind the One Shot Saloon. I was about to leave the alley when the door behind the saloon opened. A man I’d never seen before stumbled out, or at least I thought he stumbled.”

Sam nodded. “Did something happen to change your mind?”

Joy’s breathing quickened as she pressed tighter against Chance’s side. While it felt great that she considered him a safe harbor, he hated she needed one. He caressed her arm, trying to offer what little comfort he could.

“Yes,” she said, her voice growing softer, as if the words themselves might hurt her. “Eddie stepped out after the man.”

“Were you surprised to see him?”

She shook her head. “No, you could find Eddie there most nights. What surprised me was he had a gun pointed at the other man. If it was his, it was a Colt forty-five.”

Sam jotted the information down in his notebook, and Joy turned to him. “I thought it was a joke, at first. I promise. If I’d known, I would have... well, I don’t know what I would have done. But I would have tried to do something.”

Thank God she hadn’t. Chance couldn’t even think about her trying to distract Eddie. She could have been killed. “You did the right thing, babygirl. There was nothing more you could have done.”

Sam had more questions. Chance wished he could relive what happened that night for his gypsy so she wouldn’t have to. But all he could do was hold her and help her through it. Sam better damn well get all his questions asked and answered because Chance wasn’t going to let her live through this again.

Sam waited for Chance to give the go-ahead, then said, “I know this is hard, Miss Joy, but can you tell me what happened next?”

Joy was trembling so hard she might as well have been having another seizure. “E-

Eddie sh-shot him.” She shook her head as if to wipe away the memory like those Etch-a-Sketches he played with as a child. “I... he just forced the man to his knees, pointed the gun at his chest, and... and shot him.”

Tears streamed down Joy’s face. Chance had never felt more helpless in his life. “It’s okay, babygirl. Daddy’s got you. We’re all here for you. No one can hurt you now.”

“Oh, God, Daddy. I w-was so sc-scared. I tried to back up, get closer to the wall so he wouldn’t see me. But I tripped.”

Chance closed his eyes, holding her close as he rocked her in his lap.

“It was h-horrible. I fell, and when I did, my finger was on the shutter button. The flash was on, so when I fell, the camera lit up the alley. Eddie saw me. And his face, I’ll never forget the look on his face. He was so angry.”

She turned to face him and grabbed his shirt. “I knew, Daddy. I knew if he caught me, he’d shoot me just like he had that man. But I twisted my ankle when I ran, and he was catching up to me. He almost had me, but Jordy Carter was working late at the bakery and backed out from behind his store just in time to block Eddie.”

Thank God! Chance’s heart was beating almost as fast as hisgypsy’s must be. He could have lost her before he ever knew her. His blood turned cold.

“Keep going, Miss Joy,” Sam said. “Just get it out so we can move on from the scary part.”

Joy continued her story. “I made it to my car and got inside. After I locked the door, I tried to start my car, but it w-wouldn’t crank. Eddie c-came running around the corner and made it up to the car. He wasn’t thinking about anything but getting to me because he was screaming at me to open the door. When I told him no, he aimed the

gun at me, and I knew he was going to shoot. But when he pulled the trigger, it didn't fire. He tried over and over, but it wouldn't fire. I finally got my car to crank and drove straight to the police station."

"That's good, Miss Joy. You're doing real good. Is that where you met Detective James?"

Chance shot Sam a look he hoped the sheriff understood. Friend or not, the sheriff needed to wrap this up. He needed to get her upstairs, find a way to help her calm down, and forget everything she had just had to remember.

"Last thing, Miss Joy. What did Detective James tell you? Was it his idea for you to go into witness protection?"

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“Sort of, but not exactly. Nameless isn’t big enough to have a witness protection fund. After I told him what happened, he did like you and took a lot of notes. He tried to take my camera as evidence for the pictures. When I said no, he gave in and let me email him a copy of the photographs I had. He said I needed to get out of town to be safe and to keep Eddie from finding me. He even got me a hotel room in Austin and a burner phone. I was supposed to stay there for a few days until he could get Eddie arrested. Then he would call me to tell me when it was safe to go home.”

Sam looked up from his notebook. “You say that’s what you were supposed to do. What did you actually do?”

“Well, I was thinking when I was alone in that hotel. Eddie’s the oldest son in the most powerful family in town. In the entire tri-county area. I knew if he wanted to kill me, he’d find a way to do it. And if the detective stood in his way, he’d kill him, too. Detective James has a wife and two kids. I couldn’t take the kids’ father away from them. I couldn’t live with myself. So, early the next morning, I left the hotel and headed north. I didn’t tell him where I was when I checked in with him, only that I was still safe.”

Sam nodded. “We’ll need to talk a bit more later, but I think I have the gist of it. Now let me share a few things with you, then I’ll go. Someone stole your card at the gas station you stopped at when you arrived in Wilder. They hacked into it and used it twice before you canceled your card. Eddie, the manager of the bank down there where you have your account, received the fraud alert when that happened. Evidently, Detective James keeps his card close to his chest, because Eddie reported you as missing and possibly in danger. He also reported the fraud alert here in Wilder. That’s how the detective knew to contact me.”

Grant spoke for the first time. “Does that mean Eddie Sharp is headed this way?”

“God, I hope so,” Boone said, anger graveling his voice.

Grant nodded. “I agree, but that means we need to heighten ranch security.”

Boone agreed, adding, “I’ll get Grif to coordinate with you. Wilder Security can help.”

Chance stood with Joy still in his arms. “I agree as well. We’ll meet first thing tomorrow morning to plan out what that means and how to secure the ranch to keep everyone safe. But right now, I need to take care of my Little girl. Sam, I’ll be in touch with you tomorrow morning as well. Thanks for your help. One of the others will see you out.”

Joy had her face turned toward his chest. Kenzie and Tildi both had tears in their eyes. He should never have allowed them in the room, but Boone wanted Tildi with him, and Kenzie wasn’t about to be the only one left out. Hopefully, what they heard would make both of them more cautious.

He couldn’t worry about them right now. He signaled to Trace to look after Kenzie as Tanner escorted Sam to the door.

With everyone taken care of for now, it was time for him to focus on his babygirl.

## CHAPTER 12

By the time he reached his room, Joy had completely withdrawn into herself. The haunted look in her eyes gutted him. He was willing to do whatever it took to remove that expression from her eyes and never see it again. Sitting her on the edge of the bed, he took her hands. Ice felt warmer than her skin.

“Gypsy,” he said, rubbing his hands up and down her arms. “Babygirl, I need you to focus on Daddy.” When she didn’t respond, he spoke in his sternest Daddy voice. “I said, look at me, young lady. Do not make me ask you again.”

Her eyes locked onto his, brimming with rage and sorrow. He preferred that any day over being dull and empty. “Can I have Puggles?” she asked.

“Absolutely, Gypsy. Let me get her.” He pulled Puggles from a pillow close by and placed it in her arms. Her arms wrapped around Puggles as she hugged her friend to her chest. “Is there anything else you need?”

Suddenly, she struggled to get off the bed. “Dodger! I’ve been so sick, I hadn’t thought about Dodger. We need to get him.”

He had no idea what she was talking about. “Who is Dodger, darlin’?”

“Dodger is my puppy. I found him in the woods outside the cabin.”

The last thing he needed on the ranch with livestock was a stray dog. “I don’t remember seeing a puppy at the cabin, Gypsy. But we’ll have new puppies here soon. You can have the pick of the litter.”

“No, we have to find Dodger.”

He didn’t want to upset her again by telling her the chances of finding the pup after a week of winter weather were not good. “All right, babygirl. Once you’re feeling better, we’ll try.” That was the best he could promise.

She whimpered. At first, he thought she was upset about the puppy. But then she let go of her stuffie and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. Hard.

“Hey,” he said, pulling her hands away and holding them. “Hey now, little girl. Don’t do that. You’re going to hurt your eyes.”

“I have to,” she cried, trying to pull her hands away from him. “I can’t get the pictures out of my head.”

“What pictures, Gypsy?” he asked, but he already knew.

“The pictures of Eddie shooting that man. Of him trying to shoot me. I was so scared. I can hear the click his gun made. Over and over. I can’t make it stop.” She turned her gaze to him, eyes brimming with tears. “Can you make it stop, Daddy?”

He could. He knew he could. He just wasn’t sure she would find his solution any better.

“I have something we can do together that will give you something to focus on other than the past. Some people find it similar to meditation.”



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She would enjoy it if she could get past any preconceived notions she might have. She had never fallen asleep faster in the past week than during the times he tucked the sheet around her so tightly she couldn't move. Her response to his ropes when she'd been delirious with fever was more than he could have asked for. She had calmed beautifully.

“What is it, Daddy? I'll try anything.”

He hoped he wouldn't have to remind her of those words.

Holding out his hand to her, he was pleased when she took it without hesitation. Leading her to the door he always kept locked, he grinned. “You said you wanted to know where this door led. Now I get to show you.”

After entering the key code, he opened the door and ushered her into the room. “We can stay or leave, it's up to you. There is no pressure either way. This is something I enjoy, and it helps me to clear my mind and relax. Take a second to look around, and ask me any questions you think of.”

He imagined the room where he practiced his Shibari, sometimes inviting a woman to spend the night. Usually, he went to The Red Barn. He intentionally kept the lighting in the room low. It was hard to relax under a spotlight. The room had subtle aromas of lavender, frankincense, and sandalwood to encourage relaxation and tranquility.

Releasing his hand, his Little gypsy turned in a slow circle, taking everything in before speaking. “Why are the walls all mirrored?”

“Shibari is an art, Gypsy. Like a lot of art, it’s a visual experience. I want you to see how beautiful you are in my designs.”

She nodded. He liked that she listened to his answer and considered it thoughtfully. Bracing himself as she crossed to his rig in the center of the room, he studied her, watching for signs of distress. She appeared calmer already.

Running her hand along one of the brace poles, she asked, “What is this for?”

“It’s called a suspension frame. We aren’t using it tonight. But if you enjoy our floorwork, we can discuss using it in the future.”

She tilted her head and stared at him, as if trying to muster the courage to tell him something. His heart sank. She didn’t want to try rope play with him. He understood. It could be intimidating. Couldn’t she at least try it, explore the idea with him?

“You keep using those words,” she said.

What was she talking about? He hadn’t used any Shibari terms she couldn’t understand. “What words, babygirl?”

“The future,” she said. “You keep talking about the future, acting like I will be part of that future with you. It isn’t nice to say things like that if you don’t mean them. It’s too easy for people to misunderstand and get their hopes up, and—Daddy!”

He crossed the room to her before he realized his feet were moving. Then she was in his arms. He had wanted to distract her. This was better than anything he had planned.

His girl would be disappointed if his future didn’t include her. He had decided a week ago that wasn’t going to happen. She was his, both in the present and definitely in the

future.

“Gypsy, you aren’t in my future. You are my future.” And then he was kissing her. Deep. Wet. Hard. She wrapped her hands behind his neck and kissed him back. It was beautiful.

He reached for the zipper of her tracksuit, pulling it down so he had access to her skin. He needed to touch her. Feel the warmth of her. The softness.

He ran his finger along the edge of her bra, dipping underneath to tease increasingly sensitive skin. His other hand snaked into her hair, wrapping the long, silken strands around his fingers. As he tugged, she tilted her head back, giving him access to the column of her neck.

She tasted like the sweetest strawberry wine. His tongue explored her neck, searching out each and every sensitive spot. Raking his teeth along the cord of her neck, he reveled in her every response.

Her nipples, taut and diamond-hard, pebbled against his palm. As he drew his thumb across the sensitive bud, he waited for her gasp of pleasure, and she did not disappoint him. His cock strained against his zipper to the point of pain.

Pulling back, he drew in a ragged breath, willing himself to slow down. He was not going to make love to her for the first time by pounding into her on the floor of his playroom.

With considerable effort, he gentled his kisses. She wasn’t making it easy, pressing her body against his and making the most delicious whimpers and moans of pleasure.

She pulled his head down to press kisses along his jaw. When she reached his ear, she caught his lobe between her teeth and bit, gently, but enough he damn near came in

his pants on the spot.

“Naughty girl,” he rasped, scraping the shadow of his beard along her neck. “Gypsies who bite their Daddies get punished.”

“Mm,” she hummed in his ear, then gently bit him again and whispered, “Daddy, show me how your ropes work.”

Fuck. His babygirl wanted to play.

He cupped her face in his hands, searching her eyes for any sign of fear. He found nothing but desire.

“All right, babygirl. I need to collect a few things. I want you to stand right here and be very still.”

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The first thing he did was grab Puggles from the bed for his Little gypsy to hold. “I thought you might like company while you wait for Daddy to gather his things. It won’t take long.”

It took only moments for him to gather the ropes he wanted to use along with a pair of safety scissors. “Good girl, Gypsy. You did exactly what Daddy told you to. I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you, Daddy,” she said. “Are we going to start now?”

“Yes, babygirl. When it is just the two of us in this room, I will want you naked. But if you aren’t comfortable with that yet, I understand.”

Her eyes widened, then she grinned. “I think once you’ve wiped someone's bottom for them, modesty is a thing of the past.”

He stared at her, then threw back his head and laughed. Would she ever cease to surprise him with the things she said? “Fair enough, babygirl. Let’s get the rest of those clothes off.”

He helped her with the rest of her clothes. God, she was gorgeous. Perfect for him in every way, from the top of her head that barely reached his chin to the tips of her toes with the fire engine red polish.

“Before we do anything, I want you to pick a safeword. Do you already have one?” She shook her head. “That’s okay. Let’s pick one now. What’s a word you can remember, but not something you regularly say?”

He waited while she thought about it. “How about tambourine?”

“That’s a great word. What made you choose that?”

“Well, I figured if you were going to call me gypsy, that would match.”

With yet another grin, he agreed. “That’s good, Gypsy. I like it. Now, if you feel uncomfortable at any time... physically, mentally, or emotionally... you say tambourine, and we will stop and talk through what’s going on. When it comes to rope play, you make the call. Got it?”

She nodded. “Got it.”

“Good. Now hold out your hands.” As he bound her wrists, he made sure to tell her exactly what he was doing. He wasn’t doing anything elaborate that would take too long. “I’m putting this knot in your hand, and this loop in your other one. This is a quick release. If you ever need to get out fast, pull the loop and the knot unties.”

She smiled, as bright a smile as she had at the Friendsgiving celebration. He hadn’t realized how much he needed that smile until she gave it to him. Something in his chest loosened. “I want to play with you once you are wrapped up like my pretty Little present. Is that something you would like?”

Her cheeks reddened at his words, but she nodded again and gave him a soft, “Yes, Daddy. I’d like that.” His girl was fuckin’ adorable.

He talked her through what he was doing each step of the way. When he finished, her arms were bound to her chest in a way that left her pretty pink nipples on display. He bound her calves to the back of her thighs and secured legs to her waist in a way that prevented her from closing her thighs, giving him access to her glistening pussy.

Oh, yeah. His Little girl liked rope play.

Lifting her, he carried her to the bed and laid her on her back. Her glazed eyes and dreamy expression told him all he needed to know. His babygirl was headed deep into subspace.

“You just lie back and enjoy, little gypsy. Daddy wants to open his present.”

## CHAPTER 13

Joy floated to the bed, or at least, that’s how it felt. She hadn’t been sure in the beginning, caught somewhere between scared and excited. But now? Now peace and serenity enveloped her. If this was what babies experienced when swaddled, she understood now why it worked to calm them.

And it wasn’t just her emotions. Her body was loose and relaxed. It was beyond her comprehension how a complete change could happen in such a short amount of time.

“How are you feeling, Gypsy?” The strong rumble of her Daddy’s voice sent bolts of pleasure and need zinging throughout her body to settle in her clit. “Eyes to me, little one.”

Once she did as he said, he smiled. “You look beautiful in my ropes, babygirl. The ropes shouldn’t be painful. Do you feel any discomfort?”

“Yes, Daddy,” she answered immediately.

Concern clouded his face. “Where are you uncomfortable, Gypsy? Tell Daddy so he can fix it.”

Thank goodness for that. “I don’t know, Daddy. My nipples ache. And my pussy is

needy, too.”

His eyes flared with the same heat coursing through her. “Poor baby,” he said. “Does my gypsy need Daddy’s attention?” She nodded, the most adorable pout on her face. “Daddy will take care of you, babygirl. But he wants to play a bit first. Didn’t you enjoy our rope play session?”

Her nod came almost before he finished speaking. She had enjoyed it more than anything she’d ever done. It was like her Daddy hadn’t tied her up. He’d tied up the bad voices in her head. The ones who told her everything she did was wrong, and called her bad names.



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But she wanted to touch him. Show him how much she loved it. How much she loved him for giving that to her. Only she couldn't move. She couldn't hug him. Or wrap her legs around him. Or take his cock in her hands.

Sometimes, she wished she knew what it felt like to have an orgasm. She liked the act of sex, but mainly because it was nice to be close to someone. For the short time it lasted, anyway.

It certainly wasn't because of all those things she'd read in the books about how unbelievable it made a girl feel. She was obviously missing some important anatomical part. She'd never felt anything like that. Never.

Eddie had. But not her. Still, she knew just what to do so Chance would feel good. She should focus on her Daddy and do whatever she could to make him feel amazing, too.

"Babygirl, Daddy asked you a question. Did you enjoy the session we did?"

Great. Now he looked worried. She always messed up everything.

"I did, Daddy. I loved it so much. But now I need these off."

Chance's eyes sharpened. He checked to make sure the ropes weren't too tight and that her circulation was still good. "Are your hands or feet going to sleep? Is something hurtin' you?"

She wiggled her arms and legs as if he couldn't see the ropes. "No, Daddy. I'm fine.

Nothing hurts.”

“What should you do if something’s hurting you?”

Grr! She had ruined the mood. “I say tambourine, Daddy. It’s not hurting. But I want to be able to touch you.”

He relaxed and ran the back of his fingers down her cheek. “You will, babygirl. But first, Daddy gets rewarded for doing such a good job. Part of that reward is making you come.”

Oh. Oh no. “Daddy, I have something to tell you. It’s so sweet of you to want to do that for me. But... well... what I need to tell you is, I can’t do that.”

He cocked his head to the side and looked at her as if she’d told him elephants could fly.

“Can’t do what, Gypsy?”

Her cheeks flamed at having to say it out loud. “Come, Daddy. I can’t do that. But I can make sure you do. I promise.”

His brows descended into a scowl. “Who told you that? Did you go see a doctor?”

Oh, for heaven’s sake. “No, Daddy. Of course not. It’s not like I’ll die if I don’t have them.” At least, that’s what Eddie had told her. “The closest gynecologist was an hour away. Eddie said that was a long way for something that won’t kill you.”

Suddenly, Chance grew very serious. “Are you saying you were with Eddie for an entire year, and he had orgasms, but he never gave you one?”

“It’s okay, Daddy. Really. He tried, but it was no use. I’m broken... down there.”

If she hadn’t been trussed up like a Christmas turkey, she’d have scooted to the other side of the bed. He looked ready to murder someone. Hopefully, it wasn’t her.

“It’s okay. Really. I’m used to?—”

He pressed a hard finger to her lips. “Hush now, and let daddy play. Thank you for telling me that. Now there are no expectations for either of us other than having fun. Do you understand?”

She nodded. “Yes, Daddy. But I just don’t want you to be disappointed?—”

His kiss silenced whatever she was about to say. Ten seconds later, she couldn’t remember why it had been important. She loved his kisses. His kisses made her princess parts clench in the best ways. She only responded that way to him.

He deepened the kiss, his tongue demanding entrance. As it swirled and prodded, her tongue joined the dance, following his every move. He demanded more. She gave him deeper access by tilting back her head. He took full advantage of her move.

She longed to be able to run her finger through his close-cropped hair and clutch his broad shoulders in her hands. But all she could do was arch her back to press her breasts against his chest. The scattering of coarse hair on his chest tickled her nipples, drawing them to tight points of aching need.

That was new. She had never felt that before. Clutching her hands together so hard her nails pressed into her palms, she trembled.

He drifted from her mouth and trailed kisses along her jaw, not stopping until he reached the sensitive spot behind her ear. He nipped her earlobe, then licked the pain

away.

The contrast of pain and pleasure confused her senses. She had never responded like this to a kiss. Was it possible she would be able to reach something she'd never experienced before?

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When he found a sensitive area that pulled a reaction from her, he took his time there, exploring and learning her body. It drove the craving inside her higher.

She sucked in a breath when he pinched her nipple between his rough, calloused fingers. Someone in the room was moaning with pleasure. A moment passed before she realized it was her.

What was he doing to her?? Was he trying to kill her? Had anyone ever drowned in the tidal wave of all the feelings of want and need? If not, she would surely be the first. He drew her higher and higher, to heights that were frightening. Surely if she fell from such heights, she would die.

“I’m going to put my mouth on you, darlin. Has anyone ever done that for you before?”

“N-no.” Would he think she was too inexperienced? There’d only been Eddie, and he never wanted to do that. He said it was gross.

Chance’s lips tightened. She worried for a second he might stop. But he shook his head and smiled at her. “That’s just another first for me, Gypsy.”

Before she could process his words, he pulled her, settling her butt off the edge of the mattress before dropping to his knees.

Wait. She tried to force her legs together, but the ropes held her thighs spread wide. “Close your eyes, Gypsy. I want you to focus on how it feels.”

That was fine, but... he wasn't... no, he couldn't be thinking of putting his mouth down there. She wasn't clean. She didn't taste good. Eddie had told her so. She had to stop him.

But her bindings held her immobile. "If you hate it, you have your safeword, babygirl. It's all right if you have to use it, but I want you to at least try it and see if you like it. For me."

"But Eddie said?—"

"Eddie is a fuckin' asshole, so everything he says is shit. And that is the last time that name will be used in this room. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Daddy." That was kind of funny. If her Daddy wanted to try, then she would. For him. He would probably give up in seconds.

He pressed kisses along the top of her mound. That was nice. It felt sweet. This might not be so bad.

Her breathing sped up as he ran his tongue down the length of her pussy from her clit to her core. "Babygirl, you taste amazing. I'll take this for dessert every day."

That was sweet. He didn't have to say things like that just to make her feel better. She couldn't hold back a gasp when he pushed her thighs further open and, placing a thumb on either side of the opening to her core, pulled her pussy lips wide and exposed her channel.

"Ah, Gypsy," he rumbled against her sex. "You are so wet for me. So slick. Still thinking about your safeword?"

Safe what? Was he kidding?

He buried his face between her thighs, pressing in deeper. She held her breath. He couldn't possibly want to— "Oh my god!

His tongue plunged deep into her core, allowing his face to create so much glorious pressure on her taint and the outer lips of her pussy, she instantly tried to grind against him.

"Daddy!" A desperate need for... something burned through her like wildfire. She couldn't think. She could barely breathe. What was he doing to her?

Humming. That's what he was doing. And the vibrations washing over her were taking her to the edge of her sanity.

She wanted... no, that wasn't right. She needed... but she wasn't sure what. "Daddy, please! Please!" She rocked her pussy against his face in a way that she'd probably be embarrassed about later. But right now, she couldn't have stopped herself if she tried.

Lifting his head slightly, he turned his gaze from her pussy to her face. "Please what, babygirl? Tell Daddy what you want."

Tell him? With words? She couldn't do that. When she didn't speak, he went back to his task. Her slickness already coated his face. Again, he plunged his tongue deep.

The worst part was not being able to do anything to help her reach her orgasm, because that was what this had to be. She was on the edge of her first orgasm, but was completely dependent on Chance.

He kissed and licked and bit his way back up her pussy to spend time worshipping her clit. But still, though the pleasure almost consumed her, it didn't take her far enough. She needed more.

Then he slid his finger in where his tongue had been. Oh god! She'd thought his tongue was good, but his finger was so much better. He slid his finger out and replaced it with two fingers.

The push and pull of those fingers had tears running down the sides of her face. So close. She was almost there.

Then he crooked his fingers in a come-hither motion, and her world sheeted white. The muscles in her channel tightened and an eruption of sheer, euphoric pleasure swept from the base of her pussy over every inch of her body. "Chance! Oh! Oh god! Daddy!"



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She was glad for the ropes then. Without them, she would have fractured into tiny pieces and drifted away. Shivers wracked her body even as she climaxed.

Her clit was too sensitive to the touch of his tongue, so he shifted it more to the side, extending her pleasure. Through it all, he held her. She was safe in his arms.

He returned to his position by her side on the bed, running his fingers through her hair. He kissed her with the most tenderness she'd ever experienced. When she had recovered, he said, "I love that I could give you that, little gypsy. Let's get these ropes off you and get you tucked in."

It was so hard to keep her eyes open, but still she tried. The last thing she wanted, after everything he'd just given her, was to be selfish. "What about you, Daddy? Don't you want to come?"

"There'll be time enough for that, babygirl. Tonight was about you."

She smiled at that. "I like your ropes, Daddy."

He huffed a laugh. "You can be my forever rope bunny, Gypsy. Now you rest while Daddy unties the ropes."

She wanted to see her skin once the ropes were gone. Would she have the pattern left on her skin? She also needed to talk to him. Did future and forever mean the same thing to him as it did to her?

She wanted to do both those things. She did neither, as sleep overtook her and pulled

her under its spell.

## CHAPTER 14

Four days later, he was still riding the high of Gypsy's body held motionless by his ropes, straining to reach him as he fucked her sweet pussy with his tongue before finishing her off with his fingers. It had taken every ounce of Chance's self-control not to slam his dick inside her and fuck her until they both found relief. But he already had plans for the first time they made love, and that wasn't it.

Three days ago, he had to get back to work. His brothers and the hands had carried his part of the load for too long now, but he hated being unable to call her throughout the day to make sure she was doing okay. All she had was the burner phone the detective had given her.

Two days ago, he had driven into Wilder and bought his girl a new phone. When he gave it to her at lunch that day, she acted like he'd given her a bar of gold. The memory of her jumping up and down, squealing, before throwing her arms around his neck and pressing kisses all over his cheeks never failed to make him smile. Not to mention every time she texted him one of the countless pictures she'd colored or asked some question about some word grouping game called Connections.

It made him feel good that he'd given her something she needed, something she also enjoyed. He probably went over the top, buying her the latest model with all the bells and whistles, but he wanted nothing but the best for his little girl.

She'd worried at first about Eddie being able to find her. When he explained it wasn't a public number and her name wasn't attached to the phone at all, she reluctantly agreed when he told her to always keep the phone with her.

Yesterday, she started working in the kitchen with Ruby, Kenzie, and Tildi. They

were good for her and helped keep her mind off Texas. She'd also taken over the ranch's website and social media. That was huge because he hated that shit. She showed him the progress she'd made last night, and it was stunning. He wasn't sure they were ready for the uptick in guests they'd be getting from her efforts, but he'd worry about that later.

When she'd shown him her photography website, he'd been amazed. And turned on. She was an incredible photographer. And he was already planning a photo album of her in those poses wearing nothing but his ropes. He knew exactly why she'd named her company Smile, Beautiful. It was evident in every picture she took. She brought out the beauty in everyone she photographed.

Chance was thrilled with the way Joy had settled into his home. It was as if she'd always been there. And if he had anything to say about it, she always would be. Because letting her go wasn't an option. Not anymore. His life was settled into a peaceful, predictable routine. Just like he liked it. He relaxed back into his life, where he was in complete control.

Today, well. That peace of mind was what led to the situation he faced now. He'd let his guard down. To say he was surprised to see Joy outside in the cold was an understatement.

He had told her to stay inside the house unless she had one of his brothers with her. Best he could tell, she was all alone. At least she'd better be, with what she was doing. If not, one of his brothers was a dead man.

He blinked twice, just to make sure what he was seeing wasn't some type of snow mirage. But no, it was her, live and in person. She stood, no hat and no gloves, tossing a giant beach ball at Bullwinkle – fuck – Ironside.

He took off at a run, too scared to shout her name for fear of upsetting the bull. The

sense of déjà vu irony was not lost on him. If he'd handled that like he should have, she wouldn't be out here, putting her life at risk again in less than a month.

Hearing her laughter on the breeze only stoked his anger. She was about to learn there was nothing fun about putting herself in harm's way. Especially harm that could gore and trample her. What the hell was she thinking?

Even as he asked the question, he knew. She didn't think. She just acted, expecting everything to be sunshine and roses. She needed to wake up to a few of life's realities. Life didn't guarantee sunshine, roses, and happily ever after.

Sometimes, when everything was going well, life kicked you in the balls and dumped everything on your shoulders. Whether you were ready or not. He'd learned that lesson years ago when his parents left on a routine errand and never came home.

There she stood, standing with her feet on the bottom slat of the fence, leaning into the holding pen by balancing her hips on the top slat. She tossed the giant ball into the center of the pen.

Bullwinkle—fuck it—Bullwinkle watched the ball sail to the center of the holding area. Shock at what happened next halted him in his tracks. The bull trotted off toward the ball, then, gentle as a lamb, retrieved the ball by pushing it back to Gypsy with his nose.

What. The. Fuck. No, really, what the everlovin' fuck?

The ball rolled to a stop just out of reach. So, climbing up to the third slat, she leaned into the pen and stretched out her hand for the ball. Bullwinkle watched, swinging his tail in excitement.

Chance had lived on the ranch all of his thirty-three years, and he'd seen how quickly

things could change when animals were involved. He had to stop her from getting hurt, even as he recognized when he got his hands on her, he was tanning her ass. The difference was, though it would hurt, she'd live through a spanking.

"Joy!" Chance yelled. "Stop!"

Evidently, his voice, or the fact that he shouted, popped the bubble of safety that somehow seemed to always surround Joy. Time slowed, and his worst fears were realized as everything happened at once.

Joy straightened too fast as she turned to see him. Her quick movements threw her balance off, and she tumbled head over heels into the holding pen.

Bullwinkle startled. His lungs seized when, instead of running away from the commotion, the bull charged toward his little gypsy. Chance's heart dropped to his boots. He wasn't going to make it in time. He would fail to keep someone he loved safe. Again. Just as he'd failed his parent eight years ago.

Fuck that. That was not happening. Not today. He forced his body to unlock, and raced toward his Little girl.

"Trace! Tanner! Fuck, anybody! I need help in the holding pen." He didn't try to hold the words back, even though he knew they would do no good. The bull was headed straight for Joy. And Bullwinkle was much closer.

Out of options, he pulled his Colt from where it always stayed when he was working the pastures. Without slowing down, he pointed his gun at Bullwinkle. He didn't want to shoot the animal for acting according to its nature, but he had no choice.

Suddenly, a dark gray wolf raced toward the holding pen, growling and snarling as he ran. He didn't slow as he reached the fence, leaping up and using the top wrung as a

launching pad. He ran toward Bullwinkle.

The wolf snapped and nipped at the bull's hooves, effectively herding Bullwinkle away from Joy and toward the holding pen shed.

If he tried to tell someone what he was witnessing, no one would believe him. Hell, it was happening before his eyes, and even he couldn't believe it. Things like that didn't happen in real life.

Unless you were Joy Joplin, that was. Wasn't there some saying about angels guarding innocents and fools? She was no fool, but innocent? Hell yes. Joy's guardian angel had been granted strength, patience, and a lot of luck. And, it seemed, the ability to communicate with animals.

As Chance made it over the fence, the wolf dog stopped dead in his tracks and turned to face him. Great. Chance wasn't sure if his situation was now better or worse. Joy struggled to her feet. So, she was fine. But the low growl coming from the wolf was a different matter.

Following his gut, Chance called out, "Dodger!" because in Gypsy world, what other wolf could it be?

He had hoped he was wrong, but the wolf headed toward Gypsy at a trot. All Chance could think of doing to keep his Little girl safe was to shoot the wolf before it reached her.

Joy watched as he aimed his gun again, this time at the wolf. She ran to his side, yelling, "Wait, Daddy. Stop! Don't shoot my puppy!"

Chance looked at the dog more closely. A young wolf, probably male. But not a full-blooded wolf. That dog was a mix, maybe wolf and husky or shepherd. He was going

with husky with those blue eyes. But even if it was a mix, it wasn't safe. Wolfdogs were unpredictable at best.

As he studied the wolfdog, he got the distinct impression the wolfdog was studying him as well. It didn't seem the animal was impressed with what he saw.

Chance shook his head. Only Gypsy would find a wolfdog pup in the woods and try to make it a pet. Wolfdogs were not pets. It wasn't legal to have one as a pet in most states, including Wyoming, with good reason. Wolf dogs were wild animals, uncontrollable, unpredictable, unfit for domestication.

The wolf glanced at Joy, then back at him. If he could put words to the look the wolf gave him, it would have been, "Keep an eye on her this time." But that was the adrenaline in his system, causing an overactive imagination.

Reality clicked back into place, and Chance saw red. Grabbing her shoulders, he gave her a shake to get her attention. "What in the hell did you think you were doing? I told you to stay inside. This is not inside."

"I'm sorry," Joy said. "I was inside. I stayed inside all day. But then I saw Bullwinkle outside in the cold all by himself. He was lonely, and I know what that's like. So, I came outside for just a minute to make him feel better. I was only outside for a second or two. Um, what time is it?"

The sun had begun to set. And the temperature was dropping fast. "We'll finish this discussion inside," Chance growled.

Scooping Joy up, he tossed her over his shoulder. Keeping his eye on Dodger to make sure the wolfdog kept going, he marched through the snow to the gate.

She wiggled to try and get off his shoulder. He answered by smacking her on the ass.



She froze. "Wait! I can explain it better!"

Not damn likely. He gave her a solid piece of advice. "If you have a snowball's chance in hell of ever sitting down again, you'll stop talking now and wait till we get to our room."

## CHAPTER 15

The clatter and chatter of women talking from the kitchen let him know the three of them were fixing supper. He didn't have time to tell them that neither he nor Gypsy would feel much like sitting at the table by the time he was finished with her.

He gritted his teeth and did everything he could not to strangle her on the way up the stairs. He had to hold her legs, which she was kicking, with a tight grip before she toppled them both back down the stairs. Entering the bedroom, he tossed her on the bed before crossing back to slam the door shut.

Not trusting himself to come any closer to her, he leaned his back against the door, crossing his arms and ankles. "Would you like to explain to me what you were thinking?"

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She stared at him from the bed, all wide-eyed and innocent. Worrying her hands in her lap, she looked at anything and everything in the room. Everything except him, not that he blamed her. If the angry heat burning his face was anything to go by, he looked like a fear-crazed, wild man. He felt like one, too.

Primarily because he was a fear crazed, crazy man. Trying to banish the visions of Joy in the holding pen with a spooked bull, he decided to file the picture away in his brain in the same file that housed the picture from the Friendsgiving celebration.

He gave her a minute to answer his question before he couldn't take the silence any longer. "Why?" he bit out, fighting with all he had in him to stay relaxed against the door.

Gypsy nibbled her bottom lip, a decidedly worried look passing over her face when he took one step toward her. Holding up one hand like a traffic cop holding cars back so children could cross the street, she said, "I said I can explain."

He narrowed his gaze on her. "If you have an explanation, you'd best go ahead and tell me what it is. And if I detect any fibs in what you say, the amount of trouble you're already in doubles."

Joy winced and scooted a little further back on the bed. He let her have that move because it wouldn't help. Then again, with the stunt she had pulled, there was nothing much that would. "I, well, I stayed inside just like you said, ninety-nine percent of the day."

"You already said that," he growled.

"I know, but really, you should see everything I got done. I learned how to make homemade biscuits. I love Ruby. She's amazing. I wish working with my mom in the kitchen growing up had been that pleasant." She stared at her knees briefly, then her head snapped up, startled. "That's not to say Kenzie and Tildi weren't nice, too. They were. I already know I'm going to love them. If I stay. Which I know you said you wanted, but I think now you may have changed your mind."

Chance drew in a slow breath and took even longer pushing the air back out. He had no desire to frighten her, but she wasn't half as scared as he had been when he saw her in that fucking holding pen. "I have not now, nor will I ever, change my mind about you staying here. I want you here as long as you want. But that can only happen if I can trust you to mind me. That's the only way for you to stay safe and in one piece. You had a rule. Don't go outside without one of my brothers. The only reason for you to bring up Ruby, Kenzie, and Tildi is if one of them forced you into your coat and tossed you out the door. Is that what happened?"

He'd never doubted his gypsy was a Little, but her words and actions today solidified that in his mind. Wide-eyed, she shook her head. "Um, no, they didn't do that. The opposite, actually. Ruby reminded me of what you said. Kenzie and Tildi warned me you might be upset."

"That's what I figured. So why didn't you listen to them?"

She dropped her gaze back to her knees. "I was worried about Bullwinkle."

"Ironside."

She stared at him for a minute, and who could blame her? She had him talking like a lunatic. "Right, Ironside. Who has been alone since I've been back, so at least a week. I only went to the holding pen. It was right there, close to the lodge. People could look through the window and see me. I didn't think you'd find out."

She stiffened as soon as the words left her mouth, clapping her hand over her lips and staring at him in horror. Then she went into damage control. "That wasn't... I mean, I didn't..."

He fought to hold back the grin fighting for a place on his face. The last thing he needed to do was encourage her. "Thank you for being honest."

She shook her head. "I wasn't trying to be bad."

"Naughty," he corrected. She wasn't going to think she was bad because she wasn't. She was too thoughtful, if anything. Even about two thousand pound, ornery bulls.

She nodded. "Okay, but I just wanted you to know, I didn't sit around all day, trying to think of ways to disobey you."

"You went outside," he growled. "Alone. Without your hat and mittens."

"But... I had to. I told you. Bull?—"

"Ironside," he corrected the same time she corrected herself.

"Ironside." She grinned. "Jinx," she said. "Anyway, Ironside was lonely."

"Yes, you said that. And how exactly did you know he was lonely?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I just did."

"So you decided to go outside, by yourself, without your mittens and hat. To play fetch with a bull bison!" He was shouting by the time he finished speaking. He never shouted. He was the calm, cool, collected one.

"What you did was very dangerous. Bullwinkle?—"

"Ironside," she corrected.

He glared at her. "Bullwinkle could have killed you. He is not a pet. And you damn sure don't play ball with him."

Her lip trembled, but he couldn't let that sway him. This was too important. "There's only one question that matters. Where is the holding pen? Inside or outside?"

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Her shoulders slumped. "Outside, Daddy. I'm sorry." Her voice wobbled when she spoke.

"You aren't half as sorry as you're about to be, little girl. What did I tell you would happen if I came home and found out you had not minded me?"

"You said I'd get a spanking on top of the one I was already owed." Her gaze found his again as she added, "But I forgot about that in the moment."

Well, that was good to know. At least she hadn't completely blown him off. Not that he'd ever thought that's what happened. She wasn't a naughty girl. She just let her heart get ahead of her brain sometimes.

She attempted a smile but couldn't pull it off. "I said I was sorry, Daddy. I was afraid Ironside?—"

"Bullwinkle," he corrected without thinking.

She nodded her head. "Right, Bullwinkle. I was afraid that if Bullwinkle was lonely, he might do something desperate. Or he might get heart sick. I didn't know if bulls could get heart sick. But I figured, if there was ever a bull who could, it would be sweet, lovable, Ironside, Bullwinkle."

"That's good to know," he growled, making no effort to match his expression to his words. You see something in Bullwinkle the rest of us have yet to find."

"I try to see the good in people," she said. "Even if the people is a bull."

She did, too. She always found the beauty in everyone. Frankly, that scared the shit out of him. The woman had no radar for the bad in people. She needed to develop one. It would help keep her safe.

"You disobeyed, daddy, little gypsy. You broke damn near every one of your rules. All of them."

She cringed. "When you put it that way, it sounds really bad."

"It is really bad," he practically roared. "You could have been seriously hurt, young lady. That's why we have rules. Rules keep you safe. And speakin' about safety, we have to talk about Dodger. But not right now."

"What about Dodger? I can't believe you found him. I didn't even know you were looking for him, Daddy. But you did it. You found him!"

She was going to be very disappointed with their discussion. But he could not have a wolfdog wandering the ranch. It was too dangerous. "We'll talk about it later."

Nodding, she returned her gaze to her knees. "I really am sorry, Daddy."

"You're sorry," he repeated. He wasn't sure she even knew what that meant. But she was about to find out. "Time to make sure."

He stalked across the room, not slowing until he stood beside her at the bed. Wrapping his hands around her arms, he stood her in front of him. Turning so he was closest to the bed, he sat down and pulled her face down over his thigh.

Joy let out a squeal of surprise.

He didn't waste a second, lifting his arm high, then bringing his hand crashing down

on her backside.

He smacked her bottom without holding anything back. It didn't take him many swats to realize that spanking her over her jeans, and probably her thermal long johns, was hurting his hand more than her bottom.

Fortunately, he had a remedy for that. Pinning her hands behind her back, he grasped the top of her pants and panties and yanked them down past her knees.

Her bottom bared before him, he took a second to appreciate the pale pink canvas of her ass. Perfect curves in all the right places. He was so focused on her blushing bottom she was able to wrench one hand out of his grasp.

Reaching a hand behind her, fingers sprayed wide to cover the very same bottom he wanted to sink his teeth into, she let out a startled, "Don't. Wait."

"Don't wait? Your wish is my command, Gypsy."

"No, wait. That's not what I meant. Ouch!" She cried. She fluttered her feet and smacked her hands against the mattress. "Please, owie. Stop, I said I was sorry!"

He placed a hand in the small of her back, holding her firmly in place. After the next two smacks, she went completely rigid.

"Wow! Stop! I don't like this! Ouch!" This time her voice came out as a shout. She tried to reach back again, but this time he caught her hand, pinning it to her back.

"I'll stop when I'm finished. And that won't be until I think you've learned your lesson." The room was soundproof, and no one was around his suite anyway. Chance clapped his hand down on her bottom, flattening her cheeks with the impact.



Joy cried out over and over again. Chance paid no attention. He didn't even blame her. He focused on spanking her long and hard. He wasn't angry, but damn it felt good to deliver a few just desserts.

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Slowly but surely, smack after smack, he felt his sense of control return. He smacked her curvy bottom, enjoying every jiggle and bounce, painting the pale curves of her thrashing backside a firecracker red, a color of which he was particularly fond.

He probably should feel guilty about the way his cock swelled as she wiggled her bottom up and down, back-and-forth, anything to avoid his hand. But he did not feel bad at all. His gypsy had a great ass.

Before he finished, her bottom darkened from firecracker to ripe cherry red. He left no spot from the top of her bottom to the middle of her thighs unscathed, despite all her kicking and scissoring and wagging.

Soon she was sobbing over his lap. "Please. Please! Oh, please, Daddy! Please! I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I promise, I'm sorry!"

Only when at last her struggles ceased, and she lay limp and crying over his lap, did he decide he was done. Setting her on her feet, he was not surprised when her hands immediately reached behind her to cup her red-hot bottom.

He reached for her again, pulling her back on his lap. This time facing forward, sitting on his thighs so he could hold her tight and tell her what a good girl she was as she calmed. "This may not be the right time to say it, baby girl, but I love you."

He worried when the pause lasted, and she did not answer him. Had her punishment changed her mind about being his Little girl? He didn't regret spanking her. She deserved every swat he'd given her. But he did regret the ill-timed declaration of love.

His heart eased when, with a snuffle, she said, "I-I love you, too, Daddy. But you spank really, really hard."

"Keep that in mind, Gypsy, and you'll never have to get another one."

Well, not one for punishment, anyway. She'd said she loved him, too. Simple as that even with a burning ass, she loved him. He hoped she knew what she was saying. He was never letting her take it back.

## CHAPTER 16

Lunch on Sundays was Chance's favorite meal of the week. On Sunday, the entire family, those related by kinship and those related by friendship, all gathered together around the table to enjoy the food and fellowship. He and Joy had missed the past two weeks because she'd been sick, but she'd declared herself "all better," so they were headed downstairs.

Holding his hand, Joy hopped down the stairs, making sure to land on each step. "Thank you for my new anklet, Daddy. I love tiny bells. They make it sound like my ankle laughs every time I move!"

"I like it, too, babygirl. Every gypsy needs bells on her ankles. How often do gypsies take their anklets off?"

"Never. Once it's on, it stays forever and always. That way, if they get lost, you can always find me. That's smart, Daddy."

He'd been afraid to let her out of his sight since she told him she'd gotten lost in her hometown on multiple occasions. He could see her wandering off and getting lost in the woods. The dime-sized charm on her anklet was a micro tracking device. He could look at his phone and see where she was any time he wanted to.

“‘Bout time you two got down here,” Tanner said, grinning as he set a large tub of ice on a side table by the window. “I thought I was going to have to entertain all the women by myself.”

“You wish,” Trace said. “Are any of those cans cold already?”

Without asking what he wanted, Tanner dug through the tub and tossed Trace a cold beer before grabbing one for himself.

Boone walked in from the front porch, scowling, with Tildi following close behind. The front of Boone’s shirt was soaking wet.

She was trying to blot his shirt with the sleeve of her coat. “I really thought that would work, Daddy. It should have worked. I think there’s something wrong with the thermometer today.”

“What does the thermometer have to do with anything?”

“It was supposed to turn to snow. Really, it was.”

Ruby grabbed a towel and headed their way. “Oh, dear. What happened?”

Before either Boone or Tildi could answer, Kenzie looked up and burst out laughing. “I’m not sure what you were trying to do, Tildi, but great job!”

Chance smiled. It was good to hear his sister laugh. Chance hadn’t heard that since the Friendsgiving. He hadn’t even seen his sister smile. Something was wrong, and he needed to get to the bottom of it. He’d been so busy caring for Joy, he hadn’t had time. He’d find time in the coming week to have a cup of coffee with her to see what was bothering her.

“You can laugh,” Boone grouched. “You’re not the one she emptied a water bottle all over.”

“Hush, now,” Ruby scolded. “You’ll hurt her feelings. Here, dry off with this towel and then go get changed. Lunch will be ready in just a few minutes.”

“I’m not going to hurt her feelings. I’m gonna hurt her backside.”

Tildi gasped. “Daddy! Don’t tell everyone that.”

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Boone raised his brows. “And why not, Bluebell?”

Tildi stomped her foot. “Just because! That’s why.”

Joy tucked herself close to his side. He put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her even closer. Not everyone grew up with a large, loving, insane family like his. But he wouldn’t trade any of them.

When Tildi spotted his Little gypsy, she shook her head. “That was no good, Joy. The water stayed liquid. It didn’t turn to snow at all.”

“I can’t imagine what went wrong. It worked on the TikTok video.”

“I know. I don’t understand, either. We’ll have to watch it again and try it on Trace.”

“Hey! What did I do?”

Tildi grinned at him. “You didn’t do anything. But in the Daddy Dearest Award ceremony we held yesterday, you were voted least likely to spank. So, you’re the safest choice.”

Chance hid his grin. The girls had drastically underestimated Trace. He might be the most easygoing of all the brothers, but when he finally did get angry, everyone needed to dive for cover.

Boone stopped wiping his shirt. “What was I voted?”

Tildi's eyes grew wide, and Kenzie suddenly became very interested in the potatoes on the stove.

"Oh... um... well, I don't really 'member, Daddy. And if I did, I wouldn't tell you. Probably."

Chance leaned down to his girl. "You can tell me later, Gypsy," he whispered.

She shook her head. "That would break the Girl Posse Code, Daddy. Kenzie says what happens between girls stays between girls. My hands are tied."

"Not yet, Gypsy, but they might be later."

He loved how responsive she was. Her cheeks always turned the cutest rose color when she was embarrassed.

"Well, we are never going to eat if we don't get busy," Rose said. "Kenzie, the potatoes need a bit more broth. Tildi, the veggies are already chopped. Can you spread them on the roasting sheet and season them?" She turned to Joy. "And you, Poppet. Can you fix the deviled eggs the way I showed you yesterday?"

Joy nodded, racing toward the kitchen until Chance bit out a sharp, "Walk!"

She didn't look back, but she did slow down. Shaking his head, he left her in Ruby's capable hands and went to his office to see what was on the calendar for the upcoming week.

Just as he sat down, his phone rang. Seeing it was Sam, he took the call. It was unusual for the sheriff to call on a Sunday. Best find out what was up. "Hi, Sam. What's going on?"

Sam didn't hesitate. "We have another visitor in town, Chance. Says he needs to see you and Miss Joy. I was hoping Ruby had one of her roasts cooking for Sunday dinner, and we might could impose on your hospitality."

Chance grinned. Sam knew as well as everyone else in the area that Ruby was the best cook in three states. He wasn't sure his friend's timing was an accident. "Sam, you're always welcome at our table. You know that. Who's the mysterious visitor?"

"Detective James showed up in my office not ten minutes ago. He has some follow-up questions for Joy he didn't feel comfortable asking over the phone. He'd like to come out and speak with her."

Chance leaned back in his chair and pushed up the brim of his hat. What could the detective possibly need to ask Joy he couldn't have asked over the phone? He guessed he'd find that out soon enough.

"That's not a problem, Sam. You and Detective James are welcome. But if you want any dessert, you'd better head this way. You know how Ruby gets when people come to the table late."

Chance heard the smile in Sam's voice when he said, "Don't want to miss any of Ruby's good cooking, no matter what it is. We're headed that way now."

Chance disconnected the call. He ought to get back to work planning out next week's schedule, but he couldn't get his mind off what kind of questions the detective might need to ask his Little girl. Was she in some new danger? If that was the case, the detective should've called, not wasted two days driving up here from Texas.

Picking up his phone, he called Boone. "Hey, brother. Just got a call from Sam. He says the detective from Joy's hometown is here and has more questions. Do you think there's anything for me to worry about?"



"I doubt it," Boone said. "He probably just wants more details of what she's already said. Sort of like what Sam did the other night. You need to tell him he's not talking to her without you being present, though, just in case."

"That goes without sayin'. Thanks." He disconnected the call.

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The idea that Sam, Detective James, or anyone else would talk to his gypsy without him being there had Chance's hackles rising. She was such an innocent. The wrong kind of man could lead her into saying anything.

Chance was much harder to lead. It was his job to protect his Little girl from any and all threats. That was a job he took very seriously.

If Detective James wanted to talk one-on-one with someone, that someone was gonna be him.

Twenty minutes later, Chance had the schedule worked out. The dinner bell rang downstairs as he finished, just in time to head to the table.

Joy met him at the bottom of the stairs. "Daddy, I got to ring the bell. Did you hear it?"

She was bouncing with excitement. Then again, Chance had never met a Little yet who could resist ringing the dinner bell.

Smiling down at her, he tapped her nose with his finger. "Well, I'm here, right? You did a great job ringin' that bell. Now, what was that I heard about Ruby asking you to fix deviled eggs?"

She nodded. "I did, too. I used my own recipe and she said they were amazing."

She was too damn adorable for words. It took too much effort to resist kissing her, so he didn't try. Too soon, they were interrupted by a knock at the door. Although the

massive double doors were solid wood, long etched glass windows framed each side, allowing Chance to see he was opening the door for Sam and Detective James.

"Thanks for having us out, Chance," Sam said. "This is Detective Chris James from the Nameless, Texas Police Department."

Chance shook the detective's hand. "You fellows got here just in time. Come join us at the table. You can sit anywhere you like."

"Obliged," the detective said, not waiting for Sam before he headed for the dining room.

Sam threw a look at Chance, as if to say, Texans, before following the detective to the dining room.

When Joy saw Detective James, she flew across the room and threw herself into his arms. "Detective James, you're here! I can't believe you're really here! Wait, is anything wrong?"

It was easy to read the relief the detective felt at finding Joy safe and unharmed. He hugged her just as hard as she hugged him. Too hard in Chance's opinion.

"It is good to see you, Joy. I can't tell you how worried I've been. When you stopped checking in and stopped taking my calls, I didn't know what to think. I was afraid Eddie or one of his cronies might have caught up with you."

Chance watched a blanket of guilt settle on his Little girl's shoulders. He wasn't going to have anyone making Gypsy feel guilt-ridden. Especially not this guy.

"Well then, Detective," Chance said as he crossed to his girl. "I guess it's good you only had to suffer a few days before you figured out where she was. At least, I hope

you were the only one who figured that out. But if this Eddie Sharp thinks he can come on this ranch and hurt Gypsy, he has another thing coming. I assure you, she's in good hands now. Mine."

Frowning, Detective James turned his gaze to Chance. After a long pause, the detective smiled. "I see that," he said with a grin. "It looks like she picked the perfect place for a new home."

Chance did not return the man's smile. "It looks like she did."

Sam's gaze bounced between Chance and the detective before stepping in. "Well, now that we have that settled, let's not keep Miss Ruby and the other ladies who made this fine meal wait any longer. Who's hungry?"

The detective nodded and held out his hand. Chance had lost his appetite.

## CHAPTER 17

Once everyone had finished eating, Joy moved with the rest of the family to the adjoining gathering room where Sam had questioned her before. This time, Chance led her to the rounded leather love seat and, again, pulled her onto his lap. She liked this seat better than the armchair. From here, she had a view of the snowcapped mountains and could watch the sunlight sparkle and dance on the frozen pond just behind the lodge.

Stress had no place in this meeting, Joy reminded herself. Detective James was a nice man who had looked after her from the minute she ran screaming and crying into the police station. When he heard her story, he insisted on handling her case personally.

And he had. She couldn't have asked for anyone more attentive and helpful than he had been ever since that night when everything in her world had fallen apart. The

least she could do was answer a few more questions. She could handle it. Talking about all the details wasn't that big a deal. It wasn't like anyone, not even Eddie or any of his henchmen, could hurt her.

But that didn't mean she was looking forward to talking about this. Her hands trembled, and if she was going to talk a lot, she needed a cup of water. Hopefully, her Daddy would put it in her water bottle with the whale that blew bubbles every time she sipped.

Unlike Sam had done, the detective took out a voice recorder instead of a notebook and placed it on the coffee table in front of her. A cold knot of dread dropped into her stomach. Why was that so much more intimidating?

What if she said something wrong? Would she get in trouble? She hadn't realized her foot was bouncing on the floor so fast it shook the chair until her Daddy lifted her legs and lay them over his lap. He rubbed her legs, giving her a feeling to center on.

No one had ever done anything like that before. Closing her eyes, she tried to recreate the scene of him wrapping his ropes around her. It had been so centering and relaxing. Maybe she could ask him to do it again?

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Lost in the thoughts of him tying her, Joy jumped when the detective spoke. "I'd like to start at the very beginning, Joy. I need to make sure I understand every detail, no matter how small. If you don't mind, of course."

"Oh, I don't... what do you mean by beginning?" Joy asked, her voice trembling already. And they hadn't even started.

Tension tightened every muscle in Chance's body. "Is it really necessary to put her through relivin' everything she went through? Did you read through Sam's notes? He was very thorough."

The detective leveled a cool look at Chance. She'd never seen that look on the man's face before. "I have. And while I'm sure the sheriff did the best job he could, there are quite a few details he didn't explore."

How her Daddy's eyes narrowed didn't bode well for the detective. Before this was over, it might be him who needed to be tied up.

"I realize you have a job to do, Detective James. But you might as well deal with the fact I have a job to do, too. My job is keeping this woman safe from any and all predators, or anyone else who might endanger her physically, emotionally, or mentally. So if she's willing to answer your questions, that's fine. But the choice is hers. And if she says no, well, I'm a firm believer that no means no."

Joy stared at Chance in wonder. No one, not in her whole life, had ever stood up for her like that. Her shoulders relaxed, and she breathed easier because she knew her Daddy would keep her safe. "It's all right," she said. "What's your first question,

detective?"

It occurred to her then she might have a few questions of her own. Just like it was her Daddy's job to keep her safe, it was her job to protect him, too. That meant making sure the trouble following her did not endanger anyone on the ranch.

She ran her fingers lightly over the back of Chance's hand and prepared for Detective James's first question.

Instead, Detective James led with a statement. "You know, Joy, if you aren't comfortable discussing this in front of –" he gazed around the room before returning his eyes to her – "your new friends, I have no problem asking them to leave."

Joy's mouth went dry at the very thought. There was no way she would be able to answer any questions without her Daddy there. And as for everyone else, if she was putting them in danger, they had a right to know everything. It was the only way they could decide if they wanted her to leave.

God, she hoped they didn't want her to leave.

"It's all right, Detective James. I don't have any secrets. And I didn't do anything wrong. So, I really have no reason to be uncomfortable."

The look Chance gave her then shot desire straight to her clit. He was proud of her. Had anyone ever been proud of her?

Running her fingers lightly over the back of Chance's hand, she waited for Detective James's first question.

"All right, how long was it before you started living with Eddie Sharp after your parents died?"

Chance almost jumped out of the seat. "Why the fuck do you need to know that?" he demanded.

Reacting to the tension now snapping through the air, Sam said, "Hold on now. Let's not get riled up."

Joy wasn't sure Sam's words helped the situation very much. But it was Boone's expression and deep voice that made the difference. He exchanged a look with Chance and said, "Easy." Something passed between the two of them she didn't understand, but her Daddy relaxed.

Joy didn't mind answering the question, but she agreed with Chance. Why did the detective need to know that? "It wasn't very long. After Pop passed, Mom didn't last long. She kept her heart hidden from most people. Even me, most of the time. But she loved Pop. With me grown, I think she decided she'd rather be with him."

It wasn't that she didn't miss her parents, but they were hard to get close to. They were from the stiff upper lip, pull yourself up by your bootstraps, generation.

"It wasn't until after they died that I found out they had mortgaged the house to pay for I have no idea what. Eddie's bank foreclosed on the loan, and Eddie offered to let me stay with him for a price."

She hadn't really understood at the time exactly what kind of price he was talking about. She truly believed he wanted her to cook and clean and run errands. She had been so gullible. So stupid. And she'd paid such a high price.

"I see, so he coerced you into living with him?"

"I don't know if coerced is the right word. He did expect everything he said he would. He just added to the list once I moved in."



"And while you lived in Mr. Sharp's home, did you see any drugs?"

Joy shook her head. "No, I didn't. It was almost a year before I found out he even did drugs, much less sold them. I didn't know that until you told me."

She wanted to look around the room to see what Chance's family felt about all they were hearing, but she didn't have the nerve. They had every right to hate her. Who would want someone caught up in the drug trafficking trade to be in their house? Not even considering the danger, the reputation of the ranch itself could be at stake.

No guest would want to visit a resort that was connected in any way to that kind of thing. Her heartbeat sped up. It became difficult to breathe. She had ruined everything for people who had done nothing but help her. How could she have been so selfish? Dizziness attacked her. She felt like she was drowning.

Suddenly, a deep voice broke through the chaos in her mind.

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"Eyes to me, Gypsy." Without thought or hesitation, she obeyed Chance's command.

In his face, she found nothing but concern and love. He loved her. Of all the things she doubted, she didn't doubt that.

"Breathe with me, Gypsy," he said. "Slowly breathe as I do. In one. Two. Three. Four. Five. Now out, one. Two. Three. Four. Five." He searched her eyes. "We're all right here with you, Calliope Joy Joplin. The only thing I know about everything that happened is that none of it was your fault. No one here blames you for anything. Not even Detective James."

She lost his eyes then as he glared across the table at the detective. "Isn't that right, detective?"

"Of course," Detective James said immediately. "I'm just trying to get a picture of the situation. I am asking nothing the defense won't ask. Assuming we ever have enough to bring charges against Eddie Sharp."

Then her Daddy's eyes were back on her. "Hear that little gypsy? No one thinks you're guilty of anything."

Sam spoke up then. "Detective, how long are you planning on being in town?"

"As long as I need to be. Why?"

Sam stood before answering. "Because I think we've put these good people through enough for today. Your witness is obviously upset. And with the time that's passed by

since the crime occurred, it's not likely she's going to forget something tomorrow that she remembered today. So, I suggest we table this discussion... pardon, interview... and try again tomorrow."

She hadn't known relief could feel so good. But before she could enjoy it, Detective James had a suggestion of his own. "We've had additional funds come into the police department back home. Now we have the funds to provide protection for Joy. I suggest she come back to Nameless with me." He lifted his hand when Chance started to speak. "It will be easier for everyone concerned. And she'll be safer in her hometown, surrounded by people who love her, and under the protection of the local authorities."

Joy's world turned gray at the very thought of leaving the ranch. Maybe the detective was right. Maybe it was for the best if she wasn't in Wilder. They would have to worry about being in danger. Her situation wouldn't put the reputation of Wild River Ranch at risk.

The thought of leaving broke her heart. But for these people, who'd been so kind, and for her Daddy's sake, she'd do it.

The words she had to say tried to choke her, but she forced them out. "Maybe you're right. I?—"

Chance didn't give her the opportunity to finish. "That's not gonna happen, Chris. I can call you, Chris, right?"

Holy cow! She had never seen so much anger on Chance's face before. She was just thankful he didn't seem to be angry at her. Well, she hoped he wasn't angry with her.

She would have tried to speak again, but her Daddy wasn't done.

He stood and prowled the room like a caged animal before returning to stand by the coffee table. "There's no one living in Nameless who'll love her more or better than the people in this room. As for you keeping her safer than I can here on the ranch? Well, that's nothing but a load of horse shit. No one makes it onto my ranch without me knowing it. There are four men in this family who would lay down their lives down to protect her, not to mention more than a dozen ranch hands. Wilder Security, whose job is to protect people and keep them safe in situations just like this, is on this property. And to finish, Chris, if the Nameless PD was half the law office Sam Nelson runs, there wouldn't have been drug wreakin' havoc in the town because of some rich asshole who wants power and doesn't give a fuck how he gets it. So as much as I appreciate your suggestion, Chris, I can tell you right now she isn't going anywhere. Even though she might have a house in Nameless, Texas, her home is in Wilder, Wyoming, on the Wild River Ranch."

Everything else in the room seemed to disappear.

Chance didn't want her to leave. More than that, her Daddy had said he wouldn't allow her to leave. His words gave her the courage to look into the faces of everyone else in his family. They were all offended, not of her, but on her behalf.

None of them wanted her to leave. Her parents might have done the best they could, but she'd never known what a family could be. No, what a family should be, until she found Chance and his family on Wild River Ranch.

## CHAPTER 18

"Trust me," he'd said. And she did.

"It's easy," he'd said. Well, once you know how.

"You're going to love it," he'd said. And he meant it. He should have known it

wouldn't be that easy when his gypsy was involved. After a quick nap, he coaxed Joy out with promises of a new adventure. Gypsy did love a new adventure, and he loved her for it.

"Let's get you dressed in something warm. Layers will be better for this. It'll add warmth as well as padding."

She frowned at him with suspicion. "I'm not getting a spanking, right?"

He grinned.

"Why? Have you earned a spanking?"

The suspicion in her eyes was quickly replaced by the innocence of a babygirl talking her way out of trouble. "No, Daddy. I've been as sweet as ice cream and as pure as the driven snow." Once again, her expression shifted, this time from innocence to confusion. "Daddy, what is driven snow?"

With a shake of his head, he helped her with her jacket. "That question is over my pay grade, Gypsy. Spanking is more my territory, so I can answer that one. First of all, if you were gettin' a spanking, I wouldn't be puttin' clothes on your bottom. And second of all, if your clothes were already on your bottom, they wouldn't be padded."

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She grinned. "Good point," she said. "So, what are we doing? What's the adventure?"

Chance wiggled his eyebrows. "You'll see," he said. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes! Oh, wait, I have to say goodbye to Puggles."

He waited as she touched her stuffie under the covers and pressed two kisses on Puggle's duckbill. Adorable.

After leading her downstairs, he led her to the back courtyard instead of leaving through the front door as they normally did. Without missing a step, he led her to the small pond directly behind the lodge. In the summer, they called it the swimming hole. They kept it clean and had added a slide and a diving board for the family and the families of their guests to enjoy.

But with the cold winters, especially this winter by this time of the year, it wasn't unusual for the pond to be frozen over.

"Oh, Daddy, that's so cool." Joy skipped over the snow-covered ground to stand at the edge of the pond. "This is one big difference between Texas and Wyoming. Where I live, we never get frozen ponds in Texas."

"I know, gypsy. That's why I thought this might be an adventure."

"What kind of adventure, Daddy?"

"Have you ever been ice-skating outside?"

She shook her head. "I have never been ice-skating outside. Or inside, for that matter. If there's one thing Nameless lacks, it's a good ice-skating pond."

She threw her head back and laughed at her own joke. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He thought her face lit up when she smiled that gorgeous, beaming smile. And it was beautiful. But it didn't hold a candle to his gypsy laughing.

She didn't hold back and try to sound dainty. She laughed from her belly up, practically shaking. He thought for a moment she would fall before they ever got on the ice.

"Woah there, Gypsy." He grabbed her shoulders to keep her steady. Wrapping her arms around his waist, she tilted her face to him, and it took everything in him not to toss her over his shoulder and take her back to their bedroom. Suddenly, kissing her senseless was a much higher priority.

Then it occurred to him. He loved her, and she loved him. He didn't have to refrain from kissing her senseless.

So, he did. Long and deep and wet. He had to stop himself before he threw her onto the snow covered ground and fucked her silly in the courtyard where God and everyone could see.

Forcing himself to remember the plan for the evening, he grasped her hand and led her to the bench at the side of the pond. He pulled out the ice skates he'd hidden under the bench earlier that day. Holding them up for her inspection, he said, "I know they're not bright pink with unicorns and sparkles, but I hope you'll try these on."

She squealed with excitement and clapped her mittened hands. "Oh, yes," she said, almost slipping on the snow. "Yes, please."

In a monumental feat of strength and agility, Chance managed to finally get a skate on each foot. The task was made much more difficult than it should have been because his little gypsy couldn't sit still long enough for him to get them tied. He finally had to threaten her with the spanking they'd talked about earlier.

"All right, I want you to sit right here on the bench while Daddy gets his skates on." He swore he only took his eyes off her for a second. But a second was obviously plenty of time for an excited, energetic Little to decide not to listen to her Daddy.

Before he could stop her, she stood up from the bench, pushed her skates against the ground, and sailed out onto the ice. Windmilling her arms like, well, like someone who had never ice skated before. She made it about three yards before attempting some kind of leap. Instead, her feet flew up, and her bottom crashed to the ice. Because of her momentum, she wound up sliding all the way to the middle of the pond.

"Calliope Joy Joplin! Are you all right?" Not daring to take his eyes off her, he finished tying his skates and slid/skated to the center of the pond, going down on one knee beside her. "What did Daddy say to do, naughty girl?"

With her lip poking out in a pout too cute for words, she said, "Sit on the bench. But, Daddy! You were taking forever!"

"Well, all you did by not minding was add to the time it will be before you can skate." Guiding her back to the bench, he sat her down again. "You will sit right there for five minutes and think about being patient."

She flung herself across the bench. "Five minutes! Daddy, that's the same as forever!"

He glared at her. "Would you like to rephrase that, little girl? Or would you like me



to march you right back upstairs and have you standing in your naughty corner, bottom bared and on display, for fifteen minutes instead?"

She shook her head. "What I meant to say was thank you, Daddy, for bringing me to the ice pond. I'm sorry I didn't sit on the bench."

Damn straight. "And how did not minding work out for you?"

"Not very good, Daddy. Now I have to sit here longer. And I busted my bottom. I don't like figure skating."

"Is that what you were doing? I believe we need to operate here on the same premise as learnin' to walk before you run, Gypsy. You have to learn basic skatin' before you can do fancy figure skatin' moves."

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"That's one thing I love about you, Daddy. You are a regular Florence Nightingale."

"That's enough sass out of you, naughty girl. And the next time you deliberately disobey Daddy, we'll go back inside, and you'll see what getting your butt busted really feels like."

Scrunching her nose, she answered, "Yes, Daddy. I'm sorry."

"I just want you to be safe, little one. The ice is a lot of fun, but it can be dangerous if you don't mind Daddy. I'm setting the timer on my watch for five minutes."

She spent her time singing "One Hundred Bottles of Beer on the Wall," changing beer to milk when he stalked her way. He pulled her to her feet, swatted her bottom twice, and started the timer over.

Thankfully, the second time she made it the five minutes without incident.

"Are you ready to be my sweet gypsy now?" he asked when the timer dinged.

"Yes, Daddy. I'm sorry I didn't stay where you told me."

"You did the crime. You paid the time. Now all is forgiven and forgotten. Let's get you out on the ice."

She stepped on the ice and would have fallen again, but he held her up. Turning to skate backward, he held out his hands so she could use them as braces as she found her balance. After a couple minutes, she pushed herself back a bit to keep steady

without him.

He had to bite the inside of his cheeks to keep from laughing out loud when she began to scissor her feet frantically back and forth. With quick movements, he helped her regain her control, then kept silent and watched, ensuring she didn't fall.

He tried to tell her what to do, but she insisted she could do it herself. Shaking his head, he let her learn the hard way. She'd wear herself out eventually, and then maybe she would listen to him.

"Daddy!" she yelled on her twentieth failed attempt. "These skates are broken. Is there a different pair I can try?"

"Before we do that, little gypsy, why don't you try listening to Daddy instead."

She tapped her chin with one finger, as if thinking it over. Of course, with mittens on, tapping one finger meant she shifted her entire hand, slapping herself on the chin. "I think that might work," she said.

"That's funny, I think that might work, too."

He decided on this first lesson to help her get used to moving on the ice so she wouldn't be afraid. The second he had that thought, he realized he'd forgotten something important. "Listen to me, little girl. You may never, ever get on the ice unless I am with you. I am very serious about this. Do you understand?"

Giving him the best innocent expression he'd seen on her face yet, she nodded. "Ice skate only with Daddy. Got it."

Figuring this was another thing she would more than likely have to learn the hard way, he slowly turned her in his arms until her back was pressed against his chest. He

wrapped his arms around her waist, spreading his feet wide to bracket hers in the middle. "I want you to work on keeping your skates pointed straight ahead. Daddy is going to do all the moving right now."

When she nodded, causing the bunny ears on the hood of her coat to flap around his face, he slowly moved forward.

At first, she stiffened in his arms, but in no time at all, she relaxed, holding her arms out to the side. She cried out, "Look at me, Daddy. I'm flying! I'm flying!"

"I see that, babygirl. How would you like to do a spin?"

"Oh, yes, Daddy! Yes, please! I want to spin."

Angling his feet, he took them in a small circle, lifting her from the ground so her skates wouldn't get caught on the ice. "When I put you back down, I want you to point your toes out and bring your heels closer together. Can you do that?"

Because of his height, he could lean over her shoulder and watch her as she concentrated. Tongue peeping out the corner of her mouth, she tried to do what he said. When her feet were in position, he pushed them in a circle again.

They played on the ice for an hour. The sun slowly set behind the mountains. The outdoor lights all around the swimming hole flared to life.

He could tell his babygirl was getting tired. Turning her back to face him, he lifted her from the ice. "Wrap your legs around my hips, Gypsy."

It was a bit of a struggle because her legs were tired, but she did what he asked. He took a few slow laps around the rink. With a large harvest moon rising, he guided them off the ice, pressing her against the railing of the path to the lodge.

When he looked down into her eyes, the desire he saw there burned through him. She deserved tenderness. He should be gentle with her. She was so fragile in some ways, and so strong in others. But when she looked up at him, lids half closed, lips parted, he could barely remember his own name.

She ran the tip of her tongue over her plump lower lip, and his heart thundered. Even with the snow beginning to fall and the freezing temperatures, heat overwhelmed him. He didn't think about control. Or responsibilities. Or anything other than what this woman was doing to him.

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Lowering his lips to hers, he took her mouth. There was no plan. No rules at all. Just his need fueled by hers. His tongue swept inside her mouth as he claimed his girl.

Pressing his hips into hers, he let her feel the hardness of his cock. What she did to him. She tasted of sweetness and wanton passion. He wasn't gentle, but she kissed him back with the same fevered need that consumed him.

She shoved her hands under his coat and ran her nails down his back. He did the same, palming her breast and pinching the nipple as it pebbled against his hand.

She whimpered, but not in pain. A groan rumbled up from his chest. He reached behind her and squeezed her ass and she shivered.

"Chance!" She called out his name and rocked her hips against him. His babygirl wanted more. He wanted more as well, but not out here in the snow. They couldn't stay there because he needed her naked. He wanted to feel her skin against his.

And if he didn't get his jeans off soon, his cock was going to bust through his zipper. He broke the kiss. She chased his lips with her own, not wanting to lose him.

"No," she cried out. "Please, don't stop."

"We have to stop, Gypsy, but only long enough to get back to the bedroom. I promise, I have plans for you, babygirl."

He led her to the bench and removed their skates as fast as he could, then carried her to their room, her face snuggled against him and pressing kisses along his neck and

collarbone.

He had the whole night to worship her body. It might not be enough, but that was all right. They had forever.

## CHAPTER 19

It took all Joy could do to be still as he carried her up the stairs to their suite. Her mind stuttered at the word their. But that was what it was. She was in their suite. She was in their home. She was a part of their family. Theirs. Chance's and hers.

Because he wanted her there.

Because he loved her.

When they reached the bedroom, Chance carried her inside like he'd done the first time she entered.

She expected him to take her to the playroom. She'd been looking forward to it. Instead, he carried her to the bed, gently sitting her on the edge.

He cupped her face and kissed her. She really, really loved his kisses. Her body trembled as he sucked her bottom lip into his mouth, tasting her. Holding her. Loving her.

When he released her mouth, she asked, "Aren't we going to the playroom?"

"Not tonight. Tonight, I plan to make love to you, sweetly, slowly, and thoroughly." He must've seen the disappointment in her eyes. He smiled, brushing her hair back from her face. "Don't worry, my sweet little gypsy. You'll still get my ropes. The playroom isn't the only place to use them. Tonight, you'll understand why we have a

four-poster bed."

At his words, arousal flooded her pussy, soaking her panties. If her nipples got any harder, they would cut through the fabric of her shirt.

"Stand here and let me undress you."

She'd never known disrobing could be so erotic. There wasn't an inch of her that he didn't touch. Trailing his fingers down the throat. Running his tongue along her collarbone. Nipping the sensitive places where her neck curved into her shoulder and behind her ear.

Her nipples drew so taut she feared they might burst as he ran his lips over the swell of her breasts, the heat of his breath setting her on fire. Kneeling before her, he slid her pants and panties off, nuzzling her inner thighs and the backs of her knees.

By the time she stood before him, she was a quivering mass of need greater than she knew could exist.

Taking a slight step back, he held out his arms to the side parallel to the floor. "Undress me, Gypsy."

Reaching for him with trembling hands, she said. "I thought you'd never ask." She delighted in repaying inch by inch, holding his gaze as she unbuttoned his shirt. When his chest was bare, she stepped into him, pressing her nipples to his chest.

When she flicked her tongue over his nipples before sucking each one in turn into her mouth, she reveled in his groan of pleasure.

Dropping to her knees, she stripped him of his pants and boxer briefs. His thick, hard cock stood at full attention. "This looks painful," she said, her desire darkening her



voice to one she almost didn't recognize.

"I really should do something about this," she said. "PoorDaddy." Sliding her finger over the head of his cock, she spread the pre-cum beaded there. She leaned forward, opening her mouth wide. So wide that, though he was inside her mouth, she didn't touch him, merely blew warm air over the sensitive tip.

"Vixen," he growled, hooking her under her arms and tossing her in the middle of the bed. "Hands above your head, legs spread wide, babygirl. It's Daddy's turn again."

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Her heart thundered in desperate anticipation of what he might do to pay her back for her teasing.

Taking four coils of rope, he secured her to the posts of the bed by her hands and feet, leaving her spread-eagled and exposed. She tugged on each rope, not to get away, but to prove to herself she couldn't. She was deliciously at his mercy.

"I made the loops snug, but they shouldn't be tight enough to cause pain or lack of circulation. What do you say if they get uncomfortable or your hands or feet start to go numb?"

"Tambourine, Daddy."

"Good girl. Now it's time for Daddy to play."

He climbed onto the bed beside her and brushed his fingers along her ribs. She squealed with laughter, jerking to the side. "No, Daddy! That tickles!"

"Really?" he teased. "Are you sure? I'd better check." He ran his fingers down her other side.

"Please, Daddy. Don't!"

"You are awfully ticklish, Gypsy. If my fingers are too much, how about this?"

He kissed his way down her ribs to her hips, with her squirming, or trying to, the entire time. Only now, the tickling was different. He was building a whirlwind of

need inside her.

When he pressed a kiss to the top of her mound right above her clit, she gasped.

“I have some other new toys for us to play with, Gypsy. Since you like the bells on your anklet so much, I got you a matching decoration for your pretty nipples. Look how hard they are. And what a deep, rosy color. All they’re missing are some clamps.”

Reaching under her pillow, he pulled out a tiny box. She thought at first he’d drawn out a pair of clip-on earrings. But when he took them out of the box, he didn’t head for her ears.

Crawling up her body, he rested on her pelvis. It took everything in her not to rock her pussy against his rock hard abs. Holding them up, he explained. “These are nipple noose clamps. These loops fit over your nipples, and I can tighten or loosen them as I see fit. First, I need to make sure your nipples are nice and hard for Daddy.”

Without any more warning, his mouth was on her nipples, and he was licking and sucking until she thought the pleasure might kill her. She was so wet they might have to change the sheets when they were done.

One by one, he slipped them over her nipples, tightening each noose until she felt pressure. It made her constantly aware of her breasts, stoking the flames burning her from the inside even higher. Every time she moved, they jingled and pulled. And sent pulses of desire straight to her clit.

Chance ran his finger along the slit of her pussy. It came away slick with her arousal. “Someone likes their nipple loops,” he said, before putting his finger to his mouth and licking it clean.

Sliding back down her body, he stopped with his mouth at her pussy. “Daddy wants to taste.”

And then his mouth was on her. Her body took control, bucking against his face as he rasped her clit with the flat of his tongue. Her pussy spasmed as he slowly ran his tongue down her sex to her core.

“Daddy,” she whimpered. “I need your cock inside me.”

Her body moved of its own volition. She tugged at the ropes binding her for real now. She needed her hands to hold his head in place so she could increase the pressure of his contact.

When he lifted his head, she couldn’t hold back her cries. “No, Daddy. Don’t stop.”

“I won’t, but I want you to stay perfectly still. If you move again, I’ll stop.”

What? How was she supposed to control that?

He put his hands under her bottom, lifting her hips so he could have better access. And then he feasted. She felt ravaged in the best way possible. He brought her to the edge of climax over and over.

She clenched the muscles in her legs, hoping against hope that it would help her not move. He had her so close she could feel the muscles inside her quivering. Her hips rocked up to meet the thrusts of his tongue.

And then he pulled away. “No!” she screamed. If he didn’t start back, she was going to cry. “Please, Daddy, please! I didn’t mean to move. I need you to keep going.”

“All right, little gypsy. But if you move again, I’ll stop.”

Afraid she might say the wrong thing and he'd leave her like this, she nodded. He redoubled his efforts, adding his finger, stroking that magic spot inside her.

Once again, he had her so close she could taste it. And once again, he stopped. Only this time was different. This time, he pulled on the knots of the ropes binding her ankles, and the ropes fell away.

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“I want your legs around me, babygirl.”

That was all the warning he gave her before he put the tip of his cock just inside her pussy. He was as hard as steel, and the thickness of his cock stretched her pussy. “Deeper, Daddy. I need more of you.”

“That’s all you get right now, Gypsy. I want to see if you can come like this.”

There was no way. She needed him all the way inside her, filling her.

And then he started to move. Little pulses into her pussy, barely penetrating her at all. And something deep inside her started to grow. It built higher and higher. So high it was frightening.

And then the walls of her pussy began to spasm as she teetered on the edge of the biggest climax of her life.

“Grip me tighter, little gypsy. Fuck me as hard as you can.”

He shoved all the way inside her, stretching her almost to the point of pain, throwing her over the cliff into perfect, all-consuming bliss. She screamed his name over and over, coming so hard black spots blotted her vision. Her orgasm seemed to go on and on, wave after wave. She thought she might drown, but she looked at Chance and held on.

He pounded into her, and she arched into him. She never felt so full in her life. He hammered into her deep, hard, and fast, gripping her so tight she knew she’d have

bruises the next day. Badges of honor. Burying himself deep inside her, he bellowed out his own climax.

Rolling off her, he reached up and released her wrists. She was so exhausted, she left her arms where they were.

“That was the most incredible thing that has ever happened to me,” she said.

Chance grinned down at her. “Well, Lord knows I try, Gypsy.” Then his smile faded. He lowered her arms and brought her hand to his lips. “I never thought I’d meet anyone like you, babygirl. I believed I’d have to give up a part of who I am, either the Daddy in me or my love of ropes. But then you showed up and rocked my world. You complete me in every way I could ever imagine. Your parents may not have given you much, but they gave you the perfect name. You are the Joy of my life, and I love you with everything I am.”

Tears stung her eyes. “You are everything I never even knew to wish for. But if every person has a soulmate, you are mine. I love you now and always.”

He kissed her, his lips gentle and loving. She had no idea what she’d ever done to deserve him, and she didn’t care. As long as he was hers, she’d be happy. She’d licked him more times than she could count, so he was hers.

“Let me go get a cloth to clean you up,” he said. She watched him as he crossed to the bathroom. Oh yes, she was definitely keeping him.

## CHAPTER 20

Some men looked forward to a morning cup of coffee. Chance looked forward to a morning taste of his girl’s pussy. When he got his hands on her, she would be one sorry Little girl if she didn’t have a good reason for denying him his morning treat.

As he got dressed for the day, he headed downstairs to the kitchen, thinking she might be hungry or had decided to make him breakfast in bed. Yeah, that last thought was probably wishful thinking on his part.

The kitchen bustled with activity. Ranch life started early every day. Ruby was pulling a tray of biscuits from the oven while Boone sat at the table, drinking a cup of coffee. Trace and Tanner should already be in the field by now, and they probably wouldn't see Kenzie for another hour or two.

Throwing the question out to the room in general, Chance asked, "Has anyone seen Joy?"

Without looking up, Ruby said, "I haven't seen her this morning. But if I do, do you want me to tell her you're looking for her?"

Chance shook his head. "That's all right. I can find her on my phone."

Boone snorted. "I can't believe you put a tracker on a piece of jewelry. More than that, I can't believe she wears it."

Chance refused to rise to the bait his brother dangled with his comment. "She doesn't know the tracker's there." Talk about the pot calling the kettle black. "Not all of us are willing to embed a tracker in our Little girl's arm."

Boone snorted again. "Not all of us have a Little like Tildi. You wait until the Cosa Nostra tries to get to you through your woman."

Not willing to waste any more time arguing, Chance pulled out his phone and opened the app that would show him where his naughty gypsy was. When he saw the dot blinking on the pond behind the lodge, anger shot through him. With gritted teeth, he muttered, "Never mind. I found her."



He couldn't believe she had gone out to the pond with no one with her, after he specifically told her what would happen if she did. Looks like his little gypsy would be learning a lesson the hard way.

Not bothering to hide his urgency now, Chance jogged through the lodge and slammed out the back door. Sure enough, Joy stood in the middle of the pond, scissoring her feet back-and-forth in a futile attempt to move. If she wasn't in possible danger, he'd be tempted to leave her stuck there. It would serve her right for going out on the pond by herself in the first place.

He knew the second she spotted him stalking toward her. Her body snapped, ramrod straight. She stopped trying to move, instead holding out her hands, as if that would keep him from busting her tail.

"Daddy, I can explain."

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This should be good. It wasn't going to save her backside, but it would probably be entertaining. "I'd love to hear you try, Gypsy. How can you explain finding you in the one place I told you never to be by yourself?"

"I was doing it for you, Daddy. I wanted to surprise you by being able to skate with you. I wanted to make you proud of me."

"I'm already proud of you, babygirl. Especially when you mind me. What would you have done if you had fallen and really hurt yourself?"

As if his words were magic, her feet shot out from under her, and she landed on her back with a resounding thump. "Gypsy, baby girl, are you OK?" he asked as he jogged across the ice toward her.

"I think so, Daddy," she said as she pushed up to a sitting position, wincing when her weight put pressure on her backside. "Only now my bottom hurts."

"Gypsy, your bottom hasn't even begun to hurt. When I get you back to our room, you'll know what a hurting bottom really feels like."

"But, Daddy!"

Helping her up, he growled, "Don't you Daddy me, little girl. You knew you weren't supposed to be here without me, and you came out here anyway. If you're gonna dance to that tune, you have to pay the fiddler."

As he pulled her off the ice, she wailed, "But I don't want to pay the fiddler!"

"Tough. You should've thought of that before you got on the pond without me."

When they got to their room, he helped her with her jacket and skates. He didn't bother sending her to the corner to think about what she'd done. She already knew what she'd done. No, he moved them straight toward the bed after one small stop in the bathroom for her wooden hairbrush.

Being Little and knowing what was about to happen, she refused to walk. Unfortunately for her, socks on a wooden floor made pulling her behind him easy.

She attempted, unsuccessfully, to pull her hand from his grasp. "You can't do this, Daddy! I didn't get hurt! I was trying to get better for you! It's not fair?—"

"Not much about life is fair, Gypsy. But this is. This you earned. I hope you enjoy what you work so hard for."

Reaching the bed, he sat down and pulled her over his thigh. With one hand on her back, he leaned back, undid his belt, and pulled it out of the loops before laying it on the bed beside her hairbrush. She promptly burst back into tears.

"It was an accident, Daddy!" She lied through her tears. "I didn't mean to!"

"Lying is not going to help your cause, naughty girl. You did not accidentally put on skates. You did not accidentally go outside and get onto the pond. Those weren't accidents. They were choices. And not very good ones."

His Little girl was a fighter, he'd give her that. She squirmed and struggled as he wrestled her across his thighs. When she didn't calm down, he shifted her long enough to clamp one of his legs over hers. At least now she couldn't hurt herself by falling off his lap.

When he caught her flailing arms and pinned both in one hand at the small of her back, she gave up the fight and went limp across his lap.

"This spanking is not because Daddy is mad at you. This spanking is the consequence of bad choices on your part to help you remember not to make those choices again."

Joy jerked as his hand grabbed the waist of her pants and panties and tugged them down past her knees. In one last attempt to avoid her punishment, she finally said the one thing she should have said from the start. "I'm sorry, Daddy! Really, really, really sorry!"

Too little, too late. "There's a difference between regret and remorse. Let's see if you can figure out what that difference is."

He stared down at the luscious, if somewhat vulnerable, curves of her backside. Feeling generous, he rubbed the skin of her ass as a warm-up. If they had to repeat this spanking for the same reason, she'd find out just how generous he'd been. Hopefully, she'd never know.

She began to cry before he landed the first swat, tensing in anticipation. "You're gonna want to relax, little gypsy. If you tense your bottom, you'll wind up much sorer." Resting his hand on her buttocks, he asked, "What is the rule about skating on the pond?"

She sniffled. "N-Never get on or in the p-pond without Daddy."

"Right. And why did Daddy make that rule?"

"Because," she said, her breath hitching with her tears. "Because it's not safe."

"That's right. Never go to the pond without Daddy. Ever. No exceptions. Do you

understand?"

"Y-Yes, Daddy."

“Just so I know you understand, repeat what I just said."

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"N-Never go to the pond w-without Daddy, ever, no exceptions. But please, Daddy, please just use your hand. I've never been spanked with a brush or a belt before."

"Whether you earn a belt or hairbrush spanking is up to you, Gypsy. Putting yourself in danger will find you in this position, getting your bottom blistered with the brush. Lie and you'll earn stripes with my belt every time."

"But I don't want a spanking."

"Well, if you did, it wouldn't be much of a deterrent, now would it?"

"But if I don't want it, can I say tambourine?"

Her question gave him pause. He would never want to do something that truly harmed her in any way. He knew spankings, while definitely painful, would not harm her. At the same time, he wanted her to know she could use her safe word whenever she truly needed it.

"Nobody wants a spanking, Gypsy. That's why they're a good consequence. But even if you don't want it, do you think you deserve it?"

She stayed silent so long he thought she wasn't going to answer him. But then, sobbing as she spoke, she stuttered out a whined, "Y-Y-Yes."

"Do you think it's good to use your safeword to get out of a punishment you deserve?"

Her shoulders shook. "No, Daddy."

"I don't think so, either. Safewords are not there to help you avoid the consequences of your bad behavior. I'm proud of you for realizing that." He gave her bottom a few more rubs. "All right, let's get this over with."

When he lifted his hand, she tensed her bottom again. He couldn't blame her for that. He brought his hand down with a hard smack right in the center of both cheeks.

It was good he held her legs in place, because she started kicking immediately. She cried out with every swat, her fingers clawing at the comforter as she tried to pull herself off his lap.

As her backside darkened from pale to pink, she cried out, promising to be good and begging him to stop. When she finally realized that wasn't going to work, she buried her face in the comforter and cried.

She cried for a long time because he did not want to have to teach this lesson again. When he thought of the ice cracking and her disappearing beneath the waters, he redoubled his efforts and smacked her even harder.

Once her cheeks had darkened into a blushing rose, he shifted his attention to the tops of her defenseless thighs.

"Please, Daddy. Please. I'm sorry!" She continued to wail. "I'm sorry! I'm so, so sorry! Please, Daddy, please stop! That's enough!"

Unfortunately for her, he'd been a Daddy long enough to know the difference between not wanting any more swats and truly being sorry for what she'd done. She still didn't understand the difference between regret and remorse.

"Those swats were for breaking your rule about minding Daddy," he said, reaching for the hairbrush. "You're getting ten smacks with the hairbrush for doing something so dangerous and putting your health and safety at risk. That will earn you the hairbrush every time."

Without pausing, he delivered ten sharp smacks with the hairbrush, five to each cheek, all in the same spot. By the time he was finished, she was howling.

Tossing the hairbrush back on the bed, he released her hands. Sliding her off his lap, he shifted her so she was bent over the side of the bed. His mattress was so high, she had to stand on her tiptoes to remain in place.

He wished he could stop right then. Her cries wrenched his heart. Every tear was precious to him, but he had one final lesson to drive home.

Reaching for the belt, he folded it in half and wrapped the buckle end around his fist. "Not only did you intentionally break a rule and put your safety in danger, but you also lied to Daddy about it when you got caught. Is lying to Daddy ever okay?"

Sobbing, she shook her head. "No, Daddy."

"That's right. We never ever lie. I will never lie to you. And I expect you never to lie to me. Lying creates distrust. It ruins relationships. I love you too much to let that happen. You will always receive stripes with the belt when you lie. That's how seriously I take this."

He drew the belt across the under curve of her bottom where her backside met her thighs. "This is a count of three. I don't ever want to have to do this again."

"You won't, Daddy," she said, and he knew she meant it.



Deciding not to draw this out, he brought the belt down in three sharp, quick swats, covering the top, middle, and bottom of her sit spots. As soon as he finished, he tossed the belt to the floor. Lifting his Little girl, he carried her to the couch, holding her in his arms until her tears slowed.

He stroked her hair, pressing kisses to her forehead, and assuring her of his love. He would've held her for the rest of the day, but his phone alerted him to a text. Knowing it probably concerned ranch business, he checked and saw that it was from Javier Barajas, his ranch foreman.

The text was simple, straight to the point. Bison out on the Castelo Place. Not sure how many. Calling everyone in to get them back in the pasture and repair the fence.

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There were at least thirty bison in the Castelo pasture. Glancing at her, he kissed his little girl again before saying, "Daddy has to go catch some bison who got out of their pasture. I want you to stay in the lodge or in the yard close to the building. No wandering off. When I get back, we'll think of something fun to do. Eyes to me, little one." He waited until he had her attention before adding, "I love you, Gypsy. All my heart."

Giving him a watery smile, she answered, "All my soul." It was something they had started saying at some point during the past week. He liked it. She must have as well because they said the words every time they had to separate.

Knowing he had to go and hating it, he took her hand and let her downstairs. All the girls were in the kitchen, experimenting with coffee flavors and decorating heart-shaped cookies. Knowing he was leaving her in good hands, he headed to the barn to go re-pasture his bison, already planning what they'd do when he got back.

## CHAPTER 21

As soon as Chance had Jasper saddled and ready, he headed out to the Castelo Place. It would take time to get there on horseback because, of course, it was the easternmost pasture on the ranch. He had to take Jasper, though. The four-wheelers would be much more likely to spook the bison.

Most people saw bison and thought they were just bigger cows. That couldn't be further from the truth. Bison were wild creatures. Not only were they larger than cows, but they responded like non-domesticated animals. Take them out of the pasture they were used to, and they became unpredictable.

The thing that really worried him was they had finally moved Bullwinkle from the holding pen a few days ago and relocated him to the Castelo Place pasture. If he was one of the bison who'd gotten out, there was no telling the destruction the bull could cause if he got rattled. He just hoped they could get Bullwinkle back to the right pasture without having to put him down.

Something moved to Chance's left at the edge of the horizon. There were no main roads over there. Looking closer, he couldn't see anything out of place. It had probably been a wolf or a flock of low-flying birds. With one more scan, he returned his attention to the problem at hand.

When he reached the cattle pasture, Trace was already there unloading the Australian shepherds they used as herding dogs. They were experienced with moving bison, and Trace was the best handler Chance had ever seen.

Each dog had its own set of whistles. Trace controlled each dog every step of the way just by varying the sound.

Leaving Jasper to forage among the brush, Chance headed for Javier. "What's the latest, Javi? Have you been able to find the missing stock?"

Javi ducked his head to spit. "Yeah. But frankly, I don't know how they made it as far as they did. Normally, they just eat their way across the pasture and don't go too far past it as long as there's food and shade. There's both right here, but these strays made it a little over two miles before someone spotted them and gave me a call. It's gonna be a hell of a long day getting them back in. And then we have to patch the place where they got out, once we find it."

Two miles? Javi was right. Unless something spooked them and caused them to stampede through the fence, there wouldn't be any reason for them to go that far. If that was the case, they're just lucky the herd stopped when it did.

"Did you see any evidence of wolves or cougars? I thought I saw somethin' on the way over here."

"Nope, nothing like that."

This was something they could deal with later. Turning to Javi, Chance said, "Well, we can try to figure out what happened once we get'em back. Daylight's burnin' and we best get to it."

He started back toward Jasper, then remembered what he wanted to ask Javi about the bull. "Did you put eyes on Bullwinkle?"

Javi cocked his head. "Who?"

Dammit. He hadn't meant to call the bull that name. The fact Ironside was now Bullwinkle was supposed to be a secret, just his and his gypsy's. Now he was gonna have to explain to Javi. Old women didn't hold a candle to ranch hands when it came to gossip. He was never gonna live this down.

"Ironside," he growled. "I'm talking about Ironside."

Javier's brows shot up in disbelief. Then he grinned, which was worse. "How's Joy settling in, by the way?"

Fucker. "Shut the hell up." Chance didn't have time for this shit. "These bison ain't gonna herd themselves. I suggest you get everybody on their horses and let's get this taken care of. I don't have all day." Chance walked away with the sound of laughter echoing in his ears.

It turned out Bullwinkle was one of the bison that had broken out of the fence because, of course, he was. But it actually turned out to be an advantage. All the other

bison saw Bullwinkle as the lead bull. Since bison are social creatures and are perfectly willing to follow, the only bull they really had to worry about was Bullwinkle.

At first, the massive bison had been in no mood to lead the herd anywhere. No matter what he tried or how much he coaxed, Bullwinkle wouldn't cooperate. This was not the same bull that played fetch with his Little girl the week before. Chance hadn't even told anyone about that because, if he did, no one would have believed him. Hell, he'd seen it with his own two eyes, and he didn't believe it. But he couldn't help but wonder how the bull would react if they had a ball to toss right now.

Remembering his brother Trace had come in his truck, Chance figured they didn't have anything to lose. He might as well say something because the men were laughing at him anyway. He caught Trace's attention and asked, "Do you have any of your training supplies in your truck?"

Trace looked confused at the question but answered it anyway. "Of course, I always have stuff in my truck."

Was Chance really doing this? Yes, he guessed he was. "You don't happen to have a ball in with your supplies, do you?"

"I do. Why do you want to know?"

Chance didn't want to take the time to explain. Instead, he simply told Trace to get the ball out of his truck and hand it to him.

Guiding Jasper to the front of the herd, Chance stared at the ornery bull. Narrowing his eyes, he said, "Don't you go making a bigger fool out of me than these guys already think I am."

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Not quite believing what he was about to do, he tossed the ball ahead of Bulwinkle in the direction of the fence. After pausing a minute to watch the ball roll down a hill, Bullwinkle trotted after it.

Behind him, Javi said, "You are shitting me."

Shouts varying between amazement and amusement filled the air behind Chance, but he didn't care. Yes, it was stupid. Yes, it was unexpected. But if it worked, it worked.

Javi's prediction was spot on. It took them several hours to herd the bison back into the correct pasture. After taking a break for a late lunch, they started riding the fence to find out where the bison escaped. It was by sheer luck they found it. There was no food or water outside the fence to draw the herd there. It didn't look like any fence broken down by a herd of bison he'd ever seen. But it was more important to get the thing patched.

Chance grabbed a post hole digger and was headed toward the spot when his phone rang. After the morning he'd had with Joy, he wasn't about to ignore the call. It surprised him to see Sam Nelson's name on his caller ID. What did the sheriff want this time of day?

If Detective Jackass James tried to come back out to the ranch, he was gonna find the gate shut and locked. He was about sick of seeing that man's face. And if James tried to talk his gypsy into leaving him and going back to Texas one more time, Chance was gonna punch him in the mouth.

Taking the call, Chance said, "Hey, Sam. What's going on? I kinda have a situation

here, so if it can wait, I'll call you back."

"I'll be quick, but I think you're gonna want to hear this."

Great. What now? If one more bad thing happened today, he was gonna shoot somebody. "All right, Sam. Hold on. Let me hand this off to one of my men, and then we can talk." After tossing the post hole digger to Javi, Chance walked away from the noise and asked, "OK, Sam, what's all this about?"

Sam did not make him wait. "I know you've never been especially fond of our detective friend from Texas, but because of his badge, I was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt."

Chance narrowed his eyes at the sheriff's use of *was instead of am*.

"Exactly what do you mean by *was willing* to give him the benefit of the doubt, Sam? Has something happened that made you change your mind about that?"

"You could say that. The last two days, I've watched the detective get more and more insistent about talking with Joy and taking her back to Texas. It started hitting me wrong, so I thought I'd do a little research."

Chance got a cold feeling in his chest that had nothing to do with the freezing temperature. "And what did your research find?"

"Nothing good. The detective said the Nameless PD sent him up here specifically to talk to Joy. He said he was assigned to ask her questions and get her back home. But here's the thing: when I talked to the chief of police down there, he said Chris James was on extended leave. A leave, mind you, that he requested."

Well fuck. "Are you telling me James is not here representing the Nameless PD?"

“Not officially. But it gets worse.”

Of course, it did. That cold, sick feeling spread from his chest into his gut. Before Sam said another word, Chance headed for Jasper to get him saddled up. "Don't make me play twenty-two questions, Sam. What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the chief of police not even knowing there was an open case against Eddie Sharp. Much less that Sharp had killed someone. He didn't say much after that, except that he'd be looking into it and he'd get back to me. I thought you should know."

Hell, yes, he should know. He needed to get home to Joy. He wasn't letting her out of his sight until they knew exactly where Detective Chris James was. And only then if he was headed back to Texas in handcuffs. "Obliged for the information, Sam. Let me know if you hear anything else."

"Will do, Chance. And if the detective shows up at Wild River Ranch, I expect a call from you. This is a police matter now. I don't want you to go off halfcocked and wind up sitting in jail."

The hell he would. His gypsy was just that. His. He would protect her at all costs. Now that he knew what the detective was up to, he'd make sure the man didn't get anywhere close to his Gypsy.

## CHAPTER 22

Joy sat on the front porch, wishing she could have gone into town with Ruby, Kenzie, and Tildi to deliver the cookies they had all decorated. But she'd promised Chance she'd stay in or around the lodge.

Besides, she wasn't sure her bottom was up to riding down the rough mountain roads



between Wilder and the ranch. The ache in her backside was enough to have her sitting on a cushion on the front porch swing.

Of course, the ache wasn't all bad. Now that the sting had finally calmed down, the ache in her bottom had caused another, equally troublesome ache between her thighs. If she knew Chance wouldn't mind, she would go up to their suite and tend to that one right now. As it was, she didn't know, and she wasn't willing to risk it. Not today, anyway.

Tucking Puggles into her backpack carrier, she pushed off the porch swing and hopped down off the front porch. "I know we have to stay close," she told Puggles, who worried a lot more these days about getting into trouble than she used to. "We can still walkaround the lodge. We need new pictures to post on the ranch's social media pages and the website."

It was hard to believe their followers had tripled in less than a week. She needed to design a new photography company website, too. So far, she hadn't settled on a name for her new company. She'd loved the name of her studio in Nameless. Smile, Beautiful said everything she wanted to convey.

A noise interrupted her thoughts. Was that a car door slamming? They never had company. Ruby said it was too early in the season, but that soon they'd have a steady stream of hunters and campers in the cabins.

There was no reason anyone would be here now. Chance and his brothers were trying to deal with the bison getting out. Ruby and the girls should be back for at least another couple of hours.

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It was probably one of those random ranch noise things.

As she rounded the back corner, a dark shadow streaked across the courtyard. "Dodger!" she squealed. She almost never saw him, but she knew he was around because his food bowl was empty every morning. "Come here, Dodger."

His head cocked to the side. Well, what did she expect? Dodger probably couldn't speak English any more than she could speak canine. She'd tried howling at him a few days ago, and that had him running off even quicker. She had no idea what she'd said, but she hoped she hadn't hurt his feelings. She'd never been gifted in languages.

Dodger cocked his head again, but this time stared toward her. Bending his legs as if preparing to pounce, he growled.

Joy froze. What was going on? She'd never seen Dodger do that before. Not to her. Not to anyone. Fear prickled the hairs on the back of her neck, but not soon enough.

Spinning to face her attacker, she was shocked to find Detective James standing right behind her. Before she could say a word, he lifted both hands in surrender and took two steps backward. "Sorry about that. I wasn't trying to sneak up on you. I called out, asking if anyone was here. Didn't you hear me?"

"No, I didn't," she said. "But then Dodger, Puggles, and I were carrying on quite a conversation. I'm sorry, Dodger is growling. I'm not sure what's gotten into him. It's very unlike him."

As if her words gave him permission, he snarled once and ran off around the corner.

It was silly how abandoned she felt as he disappeared.

Slowly, Detective James lowered his hands. "That's all right. I'm sorry I startled you."

"That's okay. It seems to happen more often these days. You know, you're a really good sneaker. I bet you kill at hide and seek."

The way he stared at her made her think she'd said something wrong. "You know, you're not the first to tell me that," he said.

He seemed to be smiling... sort of... but it must be at a joke inside his head because she hadn't said anything funny.

Her Daddy didn't like Detective James, but she did. She owed her life to him. If he hadn't helped her, she wouldn't have survived. Some people thought that's just what policemen did, and they'd be right. But Detective James had really gone above and beyond the call of duty.

He had insisted whenever she thought of something or had a question, she ask him specifically. He'd even given her his personal phone number so she could call him directly if he wasn't at the station.

It had been such a comfort before she'd found her Daddy to know that she could talk to the same person every time. That way, she didn't have to start from the beginning and relive everything. At least, he had until he'd come to Wilder.

Still, there seemed to be something off about him today. She couldn't put her finger on it, but something was definitely not right. Normally, she'd invite someone inside when they came to visit, but she didn't like the idea of being alone in the house with Detective James. Especially not with Dodger growling at him non-stop before he

ran off.

Settling for the next best thing, she asked, "Would you like to go back to the front porch and swing? It's lots of fun and very relaxing. You seem kind of stressed today. Is everything all right?"

For some reason, that made him frown, but only for a second. Then the happy smile was back on his face. "To be honest, things have been a little stressful. I understand the people around you are being protective, but I don't understand why they feel they need to protect you from me. Have I ever done anything to make you feel uncomfortable?"

She hated he felt that way after all he'd done. He'd driven all the way up to Wyoming to complete his assignment. "No. Never." She walked around the corner of the lodge back toward the front, hoping he would take the hint and follow her.

After a pause, he did just that. "Actually, I think it's good that we stumbled across each other today. I do still have some questions, but whenever I try to ask them, your Daddy shuts me down."

"Well, I wouldn't say we exactly stumbled across each other. It's more like you drove all the way out here and stumbled across me. Is that why you came out here today? To ask me more questions? I really don't know of anything else I can tell you."

Again, he frowned at her words. "Well, I'm headed back to Nameless tomorrow, so I wanted to try one more time to talk you into going with me. I know these people think that they can keep you safe, but they don't have the backing of the law behind them. And if Eddie Sharp finds out where you are, he'll send someone after you. Any or all of the people who live here could get hurt. Their pain would be your fault. You don't want that, would you?"

Wow. He'd just summed up her biggest concerns in one sentence. Could she really hurt them by staying? She would never do anything to hurt any of the people on Wild River Ranch. They were her family. She loved them.

She placed a hand on her stomach. The tight ball of worry that burned there seemed to form whenever he was around. Just like it was doing now.

Even the thought of leaving broke her heart. How could she walk away from the only real family she'd ever known? Then again, if she loved them like her family, how could she stay if it put them in danger?

Turning her attention back to the detective, she asked, "Do you really think the people here are in danger because of me?"

A sadness came over his expression. He nodded his head. "I hate to say it, but I really do."

She guessed that was that. But not entirely. "I'm not going back to Nameless. I would be terrified the whole time Eddie or one of his goons would find me and hurt me. Is there any other place I can go? Any place to make it safe for everyone?"

He frowned. Again. It wasn't a good look for him. "Obviously, there are other places you could go. But none of them will be as safe as being under police protection in Nameless. But hey, you don't have to decide right now. I was hoping someone would be here to show me around the ranch before I leave tomorrow, but it looks like no one's here."

She shook her head. "No, not right now. Ruby and the girls should be back soon."

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His body tensed at that information. It was probably nothing. He was probably just nervous knowing the people here didn't like him.

Maybe she shouldn't have told him she was alone and would be for the foreseeable future. That didn't sound safe. Darn it! She needed him to leave so her Daddy wouldn't know he'd been there alone with her. Her bottom couldn't take another spanking today.

"And your Daddy? Is he here?"

Going with her instincts, she said. "Oh yes, he is. He's working with the, um, the horses out in the barn. And so is Trace. Yep. Trace and my Daddy are right there. I mean, it's not like I'm alone or anything. I'm sure he'll walk up any minute."

Shut up! You're babbling again.

She wasn't selling the idea. Then again, maybe she was because Detective James glanced around as if her Daddy would appear any second. He turned back to her and smiled. But she didn't like this smile. This smile was like a shark.

He pulled open his blazer and dug through the inside pocket. "Well, I guess if he's here, we should go ahead and leave without a fuss."

Her heart pounded harder. "What do you mean leave? I'm not supposed to leave the house today."

"Oh really? And why is that?" Her heart sank. She really didn't want to answer any of

his questions, not without her Daddy here. She was starting to think her Daddy may have been right about the detective all along. "If you're looking for your notebook, you won't need it. I really don't feel like talking today."

She froze when he pulled out a gun and pointed it straight at her chest. What was he doing? Why was he pointing his gun at her?

She laughed, but it came more as hysteria. "You don't need a gun to protect yourself. Or me. Or anyone else, really. You're safe here. People are always safe on the ranch."

"People aren't always safe anywhere," he snarled. She'd never heard him speak like that before. "You of all people should know that by now."

She couldn't take her eyes off the gun pointed at her. It took her straight back to that night in the car when Eddie stood at her window and tried to kill her. "What... what are you doing?"

"You really are stupid, aren't you. I thought it was an act, but you are really just that dumb." He wiggled the gun in her face. "Your hick cowboy Daddy can't keep anyone safe. Especially not you. Now get on your feet and walk to the car. We're going to take a little ride. And you are not going to do anything to alert the people watching the cameras scattered all over this godforsaken place that you're not going of your own free will."

What was happening? She felt like the Earth had shifted under her feet. "But I don't understand. I thought you were trying to help me."

He rolled his eyes. Her Daddy was right. It was very unattractive. "You stupid, stupid bitch. It's time you learned. No one ever helps anyone unless there's something in it for themselves."

“You weren’t getting anything.”

“I’ve been on Eddie’s payroll for years. Why do you think I worked it, so you only talked to me? Why did I let you keep your camera instead of collecting it as evidence? The last thing I needed was for evidence to turn up for a case that was never filed.”

“But... I thought you were my friend.”

“I don’t have any friends. I do my job and cover up Eddie’s stupid mistakes. I make his problems go away, and it’s time for you to disappear.”

## CHAPTER 23

He knew what she was going to say as soon as her name flashed on his screen. It hit him like a punch in the gut. Thank god Trace had agreed to ride Jasper home so he could use his brother's truck.

Bracing, he took the call. “Chance? Oh, God, Chance!” Kenzie’s voice bordered on hysterical.

“Settle down and talk to me, Tiger. What’s happened?” But he knew.

“It, it’s Joy, Chance. We weren’t gone that long. An hour and a half, maybe. But when we got home, the front door was wide open.”

“Where’s Joy, Kenzie? Is she alright?” The steering wheel creaked, so he loosened his grip.

“I don’t know, Chance. I..I don’t know. Nothing is missing. Her purse is here. but she isn’t. And... and, oh, God, Chance, Puggles is lying on the floor just inside the door.”



“Fuck!” Rage devoured him. That fucking fucker had his Little girl. “Tiger, hang up and call the sheriff. Tell Sam exactly what you told me. He’ll head that way. I’m almost there. Call Sam.”

Disconnecting, he punched in Boone’s number. “Yellow,” Boone answered the call as if the world hadn’t just gone black.

“He took her, brother. That fucking detective took Joy.”

“Details. How long?”

Chance sucked in a breath. It didn’t help worth shit. “Not sure exactly, but within the last two hours, probably the last hour and a half.”

“Grif!” Boone yelled, “Get on the camera feed. Time frame today, the past two hours. I need to know who was on the ranch that shouldn’t have been, and I want to know yesterday. Get me?”

“On it, bossman. Any specific location. This is a bigass ranch.”

Chance answered. “The lodge first. After that, I need the footage for the last twenty-four hours for the Castelo pasture. Somebody cut the fence and spooked the bison. Obviously, to get us all away from home. I know who it was. I need to know where he took her. I pray to God he took her somewhere on the ranch.”

If he did, if James had taken her and headed out of state, it would be harder to get to her.

“The ranch makes more sense. Harder for police to get access to private property, and there are plenty of places to hide. We’ll find her brother. I’ve been where you are. Stay calm, and don’t kill him until we have a disposal plan.”

Chance disconnected the call. He didn’t think a disposal plan was too far-fetched at all. The only thing he knew to do was head back to the Castelo place. One cabin stood about a mile from where James had cut the fence. They hadn’t rented it out in years because most guests wanted to be as close to the mountains as possible. The

Castelo cabin had no view to speak so it would be a logical place to hold up.

He scanned the fields on both sides of the road, slamming on the brakes when he returned his attention to the road. A young dark charcoal wolfdog with blue eyes stood in the middle of the road.

“Damn it, Dodger. I don’t have time for this.”

The wolfdog wouldn’t move, even when he blew the horn. He tried to pull around, but the wolfdog moved with him, continuing to block his way.

Letting the window down, he yelled, “Get out of the way, Dodger! Move!”

The dog stared at him, then darted to the north. “About damn time.”

But when Chance started down the road again, Dodger jumped back in front of the truck. No matter what Chance tried, the damn wolfdog put himself in the way. Finally, Dodger darted to the north, looked back at him and barked. When Chance didn’t follow, Dodger ran back to him and did it again.

Chance was a practical man. He wasn’t prone to fantasy and fairy tales. What he was thinking made no sense. None at all.

He wasted precious minutes struggling with a decision that went against everything he’d ever thought to be true.

One final time, Dodger ran back to him, barked his alarm, and took off toward the north. This time, Dodger did not turn back. Chance watched the wolfdog until it was almost out of sight.

“Fuck it,” he growled. Throwing the truck back into gear, he left the road and

followed Dodger north.

To be fair, he'd seen stranger things that day, and Dodger had way more conviction in the right way to go than Chance had in the way he had been headed. So, he followed the wolfdog and prayed like hell guardian angels were real.

## CHAPTER 24

It wasn't until they pulled up in front of the cabin and she saw the giant tree brushing up against the right side that she realized he had brought her to her cabin. The one she stayed in after she left the shelter.

Detective James had come in a different way than she had. Or she thought it was different. And when she'd left the cabin to go to the lodge, she'd been all but unconscious.

Before she could even imagine her Daddy thinking of looking for her there, Detective James scoffed at her. "I don't want to give you any false hope. There's no way anyone from the ranch will look for you here. Not in time anyway."

Refusing to let go of her hope, Joy lifted her chin. "You don't know that."

He wore a smirk she wanted to claw off his face. "Sure, I do. They're going to the opposite side of the ranch, almost."

Her hope flickered, but didn't die out. "You don't know that either."

"Course I do. I left a trail of breadcrumbs no one could miss. Who do you think made the bison herd stampede and bust through the fence on the east side of the ranch?"

Joy's heart sank. She knew that's where they had gone. She'd heard Trace talking

about grabbing the dogs and heading that way. The smile on his face froze when she asked if he wanted Dodger to go with them. "Maybe next time, darlin'."

Still, she wasn't ready to give up. "That doesn't mean they won't look here."

"Boy, you really are a dreamer, aren't you? They won't look here because there's a cabin less than a mile from where I cut the fence. Why do you think I cut the fence where I did? I left tracks even a blind man could follow from the edge of the pasture straight to the cabin. Besides, I don't need them to believe it for long, just long enough."

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The blood drained from her face. "Just long enough for what?"

Instead of answering, the detective reached into a small satchel sitting between them on the seat. He pulled out a syringe. A syringe filled with a clear liquid and a very long needle."

Joy hated needles. She'd hated them since the first time she came down with rheumatic fever. Back then, she'd had to get a shot every day. Sometimes it was medicine. Sometimes it was vitamins. Sometimes she thought the doctor just wanted to stick somebody with a sharp pointy thing.

She didn't need to know what the clear liquid was, but she couldn't stop herself from asking. "What is that?" She hated the tremble in her voice.

The sneer on the detective's face was not encouraging. "Let's just say it's a special gift to you from Eddie."

Joy's blood grew cold.

Eddie dealt illegal drugs. She wasn't sure exactly what kind, she just knew he liked to mix things together. She could hear him, with his smarmy voice, saying, "The lower the cost, the higher the profit."

Money was all that had ever mattered to Eddie. She certainly hadn't.

But if her illness had taught her one thing, it was that it was okay to feel fear as long as you don't let that fear control you.

She refused to let her fear control her. Look at everything she had to look forward to. She was starting a new life. With a new family. And a Daddy who loved her. He wouldn't let anything bad happen to her.

## CHAPTER 25

Chance lay on his stomach in the snow outside the north pasture cabin, ignoring the cold. When he got Gypsy out of there, he was burning that fucking cabin to the ground.

Now that he'd actually had eyes on her and the detective, he put in a call to his brother.

Boone answered on the first ring. "Hey, where the hell are you?"

"I'm at the north pasture cabin. James is here and he has Joy. He's got her tied with her arms in front of her. I'm not sure what's going on. All I know is my Little girl needs me, and I'm standing outside watching like a fuckin' Peeping Tom. "

"I know, brother. But you're doing her no favors if you bust in there like a wild man and get shot right in front of her. Just hold tight. We're headed that way. We can be there in five. Do not, I repeat, do not go by yourself. You need backup. James may be an ass, but he's a trained ass. Don't forget it. He has a gun. He knows how to use it. And he will shoot you before he lets you stop him."

The rage simmering inside Chance boiled over. "That's great. I'll give you five minutes, and then I'm going in. With or without you. And, brother, at five minutes, all bets are off."

He disconnected the call and crawled backwards until the truck blocked anyone's view of him from the cabin.

He might not go in alone, but that didn't mean he could just sit on his ass and wait, hoping for the best. He needed to get closer so at least he could tell if Gypsy was all right.

His mind tried to talk to him about what his babygirl was going through, but he had to shut the thoughts down. If he focused on how terrified she must be, he'd lose his mind.

He'd followed Dodger all the way from Castello Road to the north pasture. At some point in the pasture, he lost sight of the wolfdog. He would have lost him sooner, but Dodger had doubled back and waited for him to catch up.

He had to shut those thoughts down, too. Because that was just crazy.

By the time he'd lost sight of Dodger the last time, he knew where the wolfdog had been leading him.

Slowly, he began to inch his way toward the window on the right side of the cabin. He could use the tree for cover if need be. If James had hurt his babygirl, Chance would take whatever consequences came his way, but James was a dead man.

Before he could make it as far as the window, his phone buzzed. Looking at the screen, he took the call. Sam would keep calling until Chance answered anyway. Gritting his teeth, he said, "Kind of in the middle of something right now, Sam. What is it?"

Sam didn't believe in wasting time. "Chance, you son of a bitch. I told you to wait for me. If anything happens to James, you'll go away for a long time. This country still takes exception to people killing cops, even bad ones."

"Noted. Any other sage advice?"



“No, you won't listen anyway. Just be careful and be smart.” This time it was Sam who disconnected the call.

Turning his phone to silent, he took in a breath. Everything in him wanted to storm the room. Instead, he tucked it in his pocket and made his way to the window. Even though the glass was frosted over, he could see in.

He'd been right, James had tied Joy's arms tied, the dick. Like she would be able to overpower him.

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The man had used some spare rope he'd found somewhere, probably in the cabin. It was rough, and the man had tied it too tightly. He could already tell Joy's hands and feet were losing circulation. If Sam and Boone wanted to be here before he went in, they'd better hurry. A slight scuffle behind him told him Trace and Boone were there. Relief washed through him as his brothers crawled to his side.

He brought them up to speed, then said, "We're not gonna be able to wait on Sam."

If they needed any more persuasion than that, a scream ripped through the air.

A woman's scream.

Joy's scream.

Chance's mind blanked. He reacted with pure instinct, taking a step back and then crashing in through the window.

He rolled to his feet, ignoring the stinging gash in his arm.

James stood at Gypsy's side, a syringe in his hand. He'd positioned the needle just above the vein in the crease of her elbow. "I figured you'd crash the party soon enough, but I'll admit I didn't think you'd be so literal. You don't want to do anything stupid because your Little girl here will be the one who pays."

Chance kept his voice calm, even if his words were not. "If you harm one hair on her head, if anything from that damn needle makes it into her body, I will knock you out and drag you up the mountain. I know where the grizzlies feed. They're always

looking for a nice snack. You're a little fatty, but I don't imagine they turn down fresh meat. Especially if it's still alive."

The detective forced out a laugh, but the pallor of his face told a different story. Chance knew better than to make the man think there was no escape. The only thing James had going for him was the hope he'd make it out of this cabin alive.

As if James could read his mind, he said, "This doesn't have to end badly. Nobody has to die today. I'm thinking we can tell Eddie I took care of your Little girl here. He'll never know. I can walk away. You can walk away. She can walk away. Everybody lives happily ever after."

Chance hadn't been born yesterday. "If you thought that was a real solution, you'd have done it in the first place. Hell, you never had to show up in Wilder at all. If you were gonna lie to your boss, you could have done it two weeks ago. But you know that, unlike you, Eddie is smart. I don't imagine he trusts you very much. So, you're in a little bit of a bind here, Detective James. You're right, though. You don't have to leave here in a body bag. You have an option, and if you listen, I might even let you live long enough to benefit from it."

"Oh yeah, and what's that?"

Before he answered James's question he turned to his gypsy. "Babygirl, are you all right?"

Pasting on a terrified smile, she nodded. "I'm fine, Daddy. No worries about me."

Damn, he loved his gypsy. "It's gonna be OK," he said, and it was. There was no other option.

Joy sucked in a breath when James placed the needle against her flesh.

When Chance moved forward, the detective said, "She's okay, for now. I haven't stuck her yet. If I do, depending on how hard I push it, she'll probably have barely enough to need a trip to the hospital. If you get all hero stupid, she's a dead woman, and that will be on you. I told you nobody has to get hurt."

Chance's temper held on by a thread. "I believe we were talking about your options, not mine," he said. "Way I see it, you don't have an out. Except for one and that is to put down that syringe, sit your ass down on that couch, and wait for the sheriff to get here. He has connections. I'm sure that there are federal agents somewhere with their eye on Eddie Sharp. You cooperate with them. They'll work with you. It's your best shot and you know it."

James snarled. "You know what happens to cops in prison. I get any time at all. I'm a dead man. So, as options go, that one sucks." Chance took a step forward. James shifted the needle into place, pricking the skin of Joy's arm. "I told you, back away. I'll barely push the syringe plunger down, not nearly enough of this shit will get into her system. She'll be fine. You can take her to the hospital. I can get away. It's a win-win for everybody involved."

This man had lost his ever fucking mind. "I'm telling you right now, James, you put any of that poison in my babygirl, you have zero chance of survival. And I will make sure your death is as brutal as I can. You will beg to die before you do."

The detective shook his head. Dammit! That fucker was gonna do it. He was gonna inject that shit into his Little girl.

Chance started calculating the distance, trying to figure out how fast he could get to James. Could he make it before the guy pushed the plunger down in the syringe? Did he have another option?

Boone and Trace had angled around and were ready to break in at his signal, but he

didn't have time for that.

Praying that her guardian angel was still hanging around, Chance nodded. "All right. You win. We'll play this your way. I'm gonna walk over to that chair and have a seat. You need to know if she has trouble getting over whatever a sick fuck like you likes to do to people. I will hunt you down. And when I find you, all bets are off."

Chance took one step toward the table.

Trace shattered the window on the opposite side of the room and then stepped back. Before Chance could react, Dodger leaped through the window. He sank his sharp teeth into the detective's free arm and pulled him away from Gypsy.

James howled, fighting to wrest his arm from the wolf's maw. The cloth of James's sleeve tore, sending Dodger skittering across the room.

Bellowing in rage, James lunged for Joy, the syringe in hand, ready to attack. Chance got to James just before he reached his gypsy, tackling James to the floor. The man tried to twist and jab the syringe into Chance, but Chance avoided the man's effort. James landed on his stomach, face to the wooden floor.

Chance stepped back, shoving Joy behind him and scooting the chair she was in toward the door. He watched as the detective rolled to his back on the floor.

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Something was wrong. The detective was shaking and gasping for breath. Surely a fall couldn't hurt a grown man that badly. That's what he thought, until he caught sight of the syringe sticking out from the man's chest over his heart.

Joy tried to look around him, but Chance held her face against him. His Little girl didn't need to see that.

Boone entered through the back door. Kneeling by the detective, he checked for a pulse. "Fuck. There's nothing we can do for him now."

Trace looked in from the window. "There was nothing you could have done, Chance. He did that to himself." Chance had no idea how to respond.

He lifted Joy from the chair, arms still bound, and carried her to the waiting truck.

Once he had her in the cab, he checked her arm. How was he supposed to tell if James had dosed her?

"Did that maniac stick the needle of that shot in your skin?" he demanded.

She shook her head. "No, Daddy. I don't think so. I didn't feel anything at all. I think I'm fine."

"Thinking is not good enough, babygirl." Flipping on the interior light, he scanned Joy's skin for anything that looked like a needle mark. He didn't see anything, but he could have missed a mark that small. Chance raced around the truck to the driver's seat and spun out, spraying snow in all directions. He redialed the last person who

called, which turned out to be Sam. “We're headed back to the lodge. Get Doc Bradford to meet us there, and tell him to bring Narcan, just in case.”

Disconnecting, he turned to Gypsy. “You’re all right, babygirl. We’ll be home soon. I’m gonna take care

Gypsy smiled. “I’m going to be okay.” Then, with wonder in her eyes, she said. “Did you see what Dodger did?”

“You don’t know the half of it, babygirl.”

Come to think of it, where did that wolfdog get off to after he attacked James? He wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

## CHAPTER 26

Joy’s first thought when she awoke to the soft glow of the light filling the room was, once again, she was in heaven. Glancing to the left, she gazed at the peaceful face of the cowboy angel sleeping beside her and knew her first thought was true. She hadn’t died, but she was absolutely in heaven.

She thought back on the tragic events of the month before, sad that the life of Detective James had been so much less than it could have been. One good thing that had happened as a result was that Eddie’s case had been given to an honest detective who had arrested Eddie after viewing the photograph and hearing her story. It looked like Eddie was going away for a very long time.

With a sigh, she tried to slip out of bed without waking Chance. She should have known it was a wasted effort. Slipping an arm underneath her waist, he pulled her across the bed to spoon him. "And where do you think you're going, little gypsy?"

"I thought I was going to get my Daddy a tray and some of Ruby's yummy biscuits and honey, so we could eat in bed."

With a grin, he opened his eyes, the sunset blue of them stealing her breath. Grinning, he said, "It's funny you should say that. I was also thinking of eating in bed this morning. But I'll find my honey without leaving the bed."

You'd think after waking up with him every morning for the past three weeks, she would be used to his pillow talk. The blush heating her cheeks clearly stated you would be wrong. "That's not exactly the honey I was talking about, Daddy."

Rolling on top of her, he slid down on the bed, meeting her eyes before he disappeared beneath the covers. "I don't see why this has to be an either-or situation. Do you remember what I told you would happen the next time you snuck out without giving me my treat first thing in the morning?"

Oh, she remembered all right. She couldn't meet anyone else in the family in the eye for three whole days. He said some of the wickedest things sometimes. "Daddy, you wouldn't really kiss my princess parts in the kitchen, would you?"

"Gypsy, I will take my treat wherever I find it. If you don't want me eatin' in front of the others, you should make sure I find my treat in our bed."

Later that morning, after Chance had finished his treat and she had a treat of her own, she snuggled against him.

"I love you, babygirl. Yesterday, when I realized your tracker wasn't attached to your anklet, I had a vision of what my life was like before I met you. I would have told you I was happy, but that's only because I didn't know what real happiness was until I met you."



Her heart melted with his words. He was indeed her cowboy angel. “I love you, too, Daddy. You’ve given me a family and a home. I never thought I’d have either. There is nothing more I’ll ever need.”

Reaching across her, he pulled out a small box wrapped in glossy red paper. “Well, I guess I’ll have to return this then.”

“For me? Why? I mean, what’s the occasion?”

“Well, I know we have a room for almost everything in this house. But it occurred to me something was missing.”

“If that’s true, I have no idea what it could be. There’s a theatre and bowling room, and you can skate downstairs in the basement. Um... roller skate. Kenzie, Tildi, and I go down there sometimes. Kenzie’s the one who figured out it was the place to roller skate.”

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Her pussy fluttered at the stern look he gave her. “I’m filing that away for future discussion, little girl. And I’ll want to see the skating area. But this thing is something that isn’t in the house, or wasn’t. I had it done just for you.”

Now he really had her interest piqued. “Can I see it?”

“Yes, Gypsy. I’m excited for you to see it, too. But first you have to open your present here.”

The moment he placed it in her hand, she ripped the paper off and opened the box. Inside, she found a single gold key.

“What is it a key to?” she asked.

“I’m glad you asked, Gypsy. Put on your robe and come with me.”

Excitement strummed through her. She made a thousand guesses as she walked to an area of the lodge she’d never explored. It was above the garage, and had its own private entrance.

“You mean I can go in and out of the lodge now without anyone knowing?”

Chance raised a brow. “No, that is not what it means. Would you like to see inside?”

She clapped her hand, bouncing on her toes. No one had gotten her anything but the most practical gifts before. She’d certainly never been given a whole room.

“Well, you are holdin’ the key, babygirl. I’ll help you through the door, so you can keep your eyes closed. I’ll tell you when to open them.”

“So mysterious!” she said. It thrilled her heart that he would do such trouble for her. He’d have to be careful, or she’d get spoiled. Okay, so that ship had probably already sailed, but still.

“Close your eyes, little girl.”

She did as she was told. Something about the room spoke to her before she even opened her eyes. “Can I open them now, Daddy? Please. I want to see what it is!”

He led her several steps into the room. “Okay, babygirl. On the count of three. One. Two. Three!”

She opened her eyes, and for a second, she thought her brain must have short-circuited. Her heart soared as she tried to process what she was looking at. She had no words.

He’d gone to... well, she couldn’t imagine the lengths he’d gone to.

She couldn’t believe it. He built her a photography studio. But not just any photography studio.

Spinning to face him, she said, “You brought my photograph studio all the way from Nameless?”

She walked through her studio. Every piece of the business she’d adored. The one she’d built over years of collecting exactly the right thing, from the cameras to the props, to the bed, and even the pictures she’d had hanging on the wall.

Her life, the best, most important part of her life, before she’d met him. The life she’d

willingly left behind to stay with him. Somehow, he'd given it all back to her.

She threw herself into his arms. She'd never understood the tears of happiness thing until now. She was bawling like a baby.

"I never said anything. I didn't even tell you where it was. How? How did you do this?"

He sat in an open-sided settee and pulled her into his lap, rocking her until she calmed down. "I love you so much, Daddy. You are the most wonderful person I've ever met. I'm so excited to live the rest of my life with you."

"Me, too, babygirl. This room doesn't come close to giving you all that you have given me. Now, at the risk of sparking more tears, I wanted you to see this. This is for you to decide. I took the first step for you, but I only want this for you if you want it."

She took the envelope he held out to her and opened it. It held two official-looking papers, a business license for Smile, Beautiful of Wilder, and a marriage license. Her wide eyes shot to his.

"No rush on that second one. We can fill in the date when you're ready. I just wanted you to know what I mean when I say forever."

He held her close. "All my heart, little one."

She held him closer. "All my soul, Daddy."

Forever.

THE END