







# Grumpy Single Dad (Grump Town #4)

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**Category:** Action&Adventure

**Description:** A Grumpy meets Sunshine, insta-everything romance.

A sweet slice-of-life story that will warm your heart and refuel your faith in the spirit of small towns, like Mercy. Big storms, crazy-delicious ice cream, under-blanket fumbling in the dark and a chance for a two-scoop father/daughter combo to become a wholesome family unit. Can Mariah become their cherry-on-top?

Mariah

As the storms continue to beat down our little town, I struggle to keep the lights and freezers on in my ice cream shop.

A father and daughter dash in right before closing to get out of the rain. The grumpy duo is going through a lot, but I'm happy to be their shelter from the storm.

Dallas and his daughter, Frankie, end up melting my heart faster than my ice cream melts after the power goes out.

They quickly become the cherry on top of this semi-sweet life of mine. It's shocking to me that these two are the missing ingredients to my day. Even more surprising is that I'm adding a new flavor to their two-scoop family. We blend together better than a milkshake and french fries. Yet, Dallas's dismal disposition is harder to chip away at than I thought.

However, with a sprinkle of love and a drizzle of chocolate, we come together in more ways than one.

Creating an instant family has its challenges, but I hope our bond is strong enough to help us stick together better than a banana split on a hot day.

This is a short, steamy, small town, grumpy/sunshine insta-everything romance.

Each book in the series can be read as a standalone but characters recur in some stories.

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MARIAH

When it rains nonstop for days, the last thing anyone wants is ice cream. But every few hours, someone braves the elements for delicious scoops of whatever my flavor of the day is. Unfortunately, the lights flickering warn me that the power is more likely to go out than another customer showing up for a creamy treat.

The storm is worsening, forcing me to close up earlier than I want. The stores around me have their gates drawn and windows shuttered. I don't want any damage to come to my ice cream parlor. It's best to get my generator up and running to keep my freezers running through the stormy night. Once I finish that, I'll follow suit in pulling down the gates to at least block the heavy winds from blowing anything through the shop's windows.

After several minutes of grunting and dragging my generator out of the storage closet, I manage to connect my appliances. However, the chimes ringing above the entryway startle me.

"Fuck," I whisper to myself. "I forgot to lock the front."

The wind blows the rain in varying directions as someone battles against it to keep my door open. My neck twists and cranes to get a glimpse between the crack of swinging doors that separate the kitchen from the front of the parlor.

Bright white lights hover over several four-top tables around the dining area of my

shop. While I specialize in ice cream, I keep a few pastries and other dessert options to pair with my best-selling flavors.

Heavy winds push rain, leaves, and dirt onto my black and white tiled floors, along with two soaking-wet strangers. I take one last look around the kitchen before pushing through the swinging double doors to greet them.

"Hello?" A deeply masculine voice calls from just inside the doorway. His lips press into a thin line as soft brown eyes scan the surroundings.

There's another much younger, feminine voice whispering beside him. "See? I told you there wasn't anyone in here, Dad. No one wants ice cream on a day like this."

"Frankie, the door wouldn't be unlocked if there wasn't anyone here. Now, just sit tight." The man huffs as his wet footsteps approach the counter.

"Evening," I say with a smile. "It's kind of crazy out there. How can I help you?"

The smoldering scowl on this man's face is attractive and menacing. I sense he's more annoyed than dangerous, especially when I glance over his shoulder at the shivering little girl behind him. She has the same scowling brown eyes, so there's no mistaking that they're father and daughter.

His face is ripe with frustration as he says, "We just drove all the way from Whitewater Forest. The campgrounds are flooded out there?—"

"Because someone didn't even check the weather before dragging us out there," the little girl chides from behind him.

"That's enough, Francesca," her father replies sternly, forcing her to press her lips together. He returns his gaze to me. "I apologize for busting in here, but my car's

making a noise. I think it just needs some oil, but I don't want to risk driving it back to Cincinnati like this. I don't want to be stranded with my daughter."

"I understand," I tell him.

For the first time since he approached the counter, his eyes soften as he looks at me. The feeling is mutual because his chiseled jaw and broad shoulders have my libido spiking like never before. I have to calm myself down, but I still can't help but toss my dark blonde hair over my shoulder, hopefully with a flirtatious glint in my eyes.

Thunder booms and lightning crashes, shaking the building and sending the man's daughter scurrying into his side. He instinctively wraps his arms around her and brings me back to reality, where I shouldn't flirt with this man in distress—a father just wanting to keep his daughter out of the rain.

"I'm Mariah Monroe. This is my shop, and while this may sound a bit out of left field, I have plans on staying at a cabin not too far from here. You two are more than welcome to join me. All the shops and businesses are closed up until tomorrow or at least until these storms pass."

"Miss Monroe?—"

"Please. You can call me Rye."

He smiles with a gentle nod. "Rye, thank you for your kindness. I don't want to put you out. Is there a hotel or something nearby? I haven't been through Mercy in forever. I thought they would have upgraded this town a bit by now. "

"Unfortunately, not. My sister's got a place that she turned into a retreat. That's about as close to a motel as this town's going to get."

A gruff exhale pushes out of his nostrils. "Any vacancies?"

"Not quite. As luck has it, she wanted me to test out the new cabins she put on the property. She didn't think the storms would roll in this fast. That's about the only place where you could book a room of any kind."

He grunts. "You said she's testing the cabins out?"

"Yeah, it's like a soft opening to see how customers would use them and how they last through a short stay. The storms actually come in handy as she gets to see how the new construction stands up to the weather. You guys are more than welcome to come with me. We can hunker down until the morning."

"Dad, let's just go. I don't want to sleep in the car," the little girl moans against him. She turns to look around the shop, and her brows knit together as she peers inside the display case. "Did you make all of these?"

"Sure did. Go on and pick out a few flavors. Once you're both warm and I get some food in ya, we'll have dessert." I glance at her father, who nods with approval.

"Is that peach cobbler ice cream? And apple pie?" Her eyes squint with curiosity as she looks from one flavor to the next.

My eyes close as I tell her about one of my favorite flavors. "Yes, ma'am. The peach cobbler ice cream is actually a roasted peach ice cream with a caramel streusel swirl that has actual chunks of peach cobbler folded into it."

"What about the apple pie?" the dad asks, his gaze equally stoic as his daughter's.

A moan escapes my throat as if I can taste it coming off the spoon. My eyes close just thinking about another one of my favorite concoctions. "That is a cinnamon graham

cracker ice cream with apple pie filling swirls and little chunks of salted buttery pie crust. It's a customer favorite."

"I'm Dallas, by the way." He extends a wet hand but quickly offers me a grin before pulling back his soggy sleeves that drip drops of rain onto the counter. "Sorry about that, but yeah, I was saying I'm Dallas Kincaid, and this is my daughter, Francesca."

"I like Frankie better," she replies with a huff. "Why do you have so many flavors?"

She steps away from her dad, forgetting about the storm outside as she slinks from one display case to the next.

"There's only about fifteen flavors. I like to keep things simple," I tell them with a chuckle. I remember the onslaught of preteen snark from my youth, but Frankie's keeping it mild. I'm certain the distinct look of faux indifference is her default, but with every longing glance, her smile widens just a smidge.

My voice draws her softening gaze to me as I say, "Besides, fifteen is a number just high enough to keep customers coming back. Everyone wants to try a new flavor or a flavor they haven't eaten in a while. How about you choose a few flavors to take to the cabin?"

I can tell she's having a hard time from the way her eyes dart back and forth to multiple tubs.

"How about this? Let's do a baker's dozen," I tell them both with a raise of my eyebrows.

"What's that?" Frankie asks.

I grin and lean forward to point at the different buckets under the curved glass. "It's



like a sample tray. You get two scoops of whatever flavors you want. It's like picking out your favorite donuts. But with a baker's dozen, you actually get 13 cups. Sometimes, the customers will let me pick a surprise flavor for the 13th cup."

"How much?" Dallas asks abruptly.

"This is free of charge," I tell him with a shrug. "I was going to bring some with me to pig out and watch movies later. It's going to be way better to share what I already planned to bring. What do you guys say?"

"Come on, Dad, please?" she begs. "You pick six. Then I can pick six, and Miss Rye can pick the last one. Maybe we can even smoosh them all together to make a milkshake."

"That sounds like a lot of sugar," he grumbles.

In a moment to ease his hesitation, I offer a solution. "All the cups come in resealable cardboard containers. You don't have to eat a ton of ice cream in one sitting. You can save some for tomorrow?—"

This time, Frankie interjects, "And then help save the planet by recycling."

"Exactly, Frankie." I give her a nod and a wink.

He runs his fingers through his soaking-wet brown hair. "Okay, but we really should find a place to grab something to eat first. No ice cream until after dinner, Frankie."

Frankie rolls her eyes, but there's no room for debate. With everything all set, I close the shop while Dallas and Frankie grab their stuff from their car. It doesn't take long to drive out to the old Garrett farm. It's where my sister, Maddie, dedicates every waking hour, turning the place into some sort of creative artist retreat destination.

The main house and barn serve as a bed-and-breakfast and an event venue. Smaller cabins are spread out across the property. There are four right now, but none of them are actually close to any other cabin. Rain beats down on the lush acres of fresh-cut grass as we drive to my reserved cabin. The sound of my keys jingling around my finger echoes between the beats of the storm as I lead Dallas and Frankie inside.

It's one of the biggest cabins on the property, and I knew I wanted to stay here when Maddie offered to have me test it out. There are two bedrooms, two bathrooms, an office, a living room, and a kitchenette. There's also a porch swing that lets you sit outside to watch the sun setting beneath the horizon. However, on a stormy night like this, it's best to stay inside by the fireplace.

"Let's get you guys settled, and then I'll head into the main house, where I'm sure there's plenty of food I can bring back here."

After showing them around and setting them up with clean linens to get comfortable, I jog to the main house as the rain slows down. As soon as I step inside, I see my sister mopping the floors.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"I didn't shut that door, and the wind blew in a bunch of water. It doesn't make sense to get housekeeping when I'm right here," Maddie says.

"Is there any food left?" I ask as I make my way toward the large kitchen. It's beautiful, with white subway tiles, cherry wood cabinets, and a butcher block countertop.

"There's plenty, Rye. Actually, you can take most of it home with you if you want. Mackenna can't come because of something that broke at the bar. Dad's stuck at the office. Chase will stay here with me and the staff, but the other guests didn't want to

chance coming out here in the storm. I really want to get those new roads done soon," she mumbles to herself.

I shrug and make my way into the kitchen, where I pile some food into takeaway containers. I'm not sure what Dallas and his daughter eat, but I think a little bit of everything should do the trick.

"Are you feeding a small army?" Maddie asks with a chuckle.

"No, just a small family. A guy and his daughter got stranded by my shop in town. There's something wrong with their car," I tell her with a mild rise and fall of my shoulders. "Since you gave me the big cabin, I told them they could crash there, and then tomorrow, I'll help them get back on the road."

"Gave you the big cabin ? " she asks, her tone dripping in sarcasm.

I snicker. "I know. You caved into my baby sister vibes to show everyone that you love me the most, and so far, I love the place. It holds a family of three very well."

Maddie shakes her head and grins. "You're such a brat. But yes, I actually do value your opinion since you and Dad have different points of view on customer service. So, thank you for still coming even though it's raining cats and dogs out there. Oh, and I can have Chase take a look at their car in the morning."

"That's perfect. Thanks, Maddie."

"Any time. I can also have Chase come by the cabin to check on you too, tonight."

I grin. "That's fine. It'll be nice to let them know that I have people in my corner in case they turn out to be crazed aliens looking to abduct me."

"Abduction is not funny, Rye," she says flatly.

"Lighten up, Maddie. It's a joke, or did you purposely ignore the part I said about aliens? I'm going to head back before the storm starts raging again. Make sure to close this door behind me. Thanks for the food." I blow her a kiss as I dash from the main house back to the cabin.

Sounds of conversation waft through the door as I walk inside. The television above the fireplace is on, playing a movie I haven't seen since I was a kid. Frankie's sitting in a pair of pink pajamas on the sofa and laughing at the screen.

"Have you seen this movie, Miss Rye?"

"I haven't seen that movie since I was probably around your age," I tell her.

Her snark from earlier is gone, most likely due to getting out of rain-soaked clothes. She looks cozy under a blanket and snacking on popcorn while she talks about the movie. "I like it whenever the twins switch places to confuse their parents. The mom and dad fall in love. Did you know that it's one girl playing both parts? Not like the other one Dad showed me where they used actual twins."

"Do you like that movie better than this one?"

She shrugs. "A little bit. I like to see if I can pick out which twin is Mary-Kate and which one is Ashley."

"That sounds like a fun game to play. How about we watch that after I finish putting dinner together?"

"That's a great idea. I don't think Dad's watched either one in a long time, either. So what is for dinner?" She stops the movie to join me in the kitchen.

"I have some chicken tenders, french fries, a garden salad, baked salmon, rice, broccoli, and roasted chicken. Do you know what you'd like?"

"I'll have the baked salmon, rice, and broccoli. You should give Dad the chicken fingers." She laughs.

"I think he needs a bit more food than that, but I have enough for all of us to have some of everything. I don't meet too many kids who like salmon."

"I'm not a kid. I'm almost a teenager. I'll be ten next month."

"Wow, double digits, huh? You're almost as old as me."

She laughs and shakes her head in disbelief. We continue to put the dinner together as Dallas comes downstairs. I spot him just watching us silently. An indiscernible expression rides his face, but there's a softness in his eyes that wasn't there earlier.

He doesn't linger too long as he comes to help us set the food up in the living room. The fireplace is roaring, toasty with heat, even though the flames are fake. The movie is playing, and we're sitting around the coffee table like this is our typical family dinner routine. It's crazy how comfortable and effortless this feels. I look at them both and wonder if there's anyone in Cincinnati who takes care of them.

## Page 2

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DALLAS

The sight of Frankie growing close to this beautiful stranger warms my heart. I don't want to be smitten, but these two are bound to have me wrapped around their fingers. Damn. Listen to me.

I sigh, shaking my head because dating is the last thing that should be on my mind.

What was supposed to be a fun father-daughter camping trip turned into a disaster. But I have to say that running into Mariah at her ice cream shop was the best thing I could have imagined.

Dinner is delicious, and the ice cream is even better. We're about to put on another movie for Frankie, but it's clear that she can't keep her eyes open much longer.

"She's had a long day," Rye whispers to me as she strokes my daughter's hair.

I know it's not intentional, but as Frankie leans against Rye, I can sense the comfort and safety my daughter feels with this woman. Once Rye started moving her fingers through Frankie's dark brown strands, Frankie dozed off.

I don't know what these feelings surging through me mean. I don't want my heart putting Frankie on the line because I see the potential of who this random stranger could become for the both of us. I resign myself to keeping my distance from the generous woman who owns an ice cream shop.

Memories of the last time I carried Frankie to bed are fleeting. She might have been five or six, and she's definitely heavier than I remember. But the moment I put her in bed, she smiles and turns over. Her breathing is soft, and watching her sleep eases my nerves.

The faintest whisper reaches me as I leave the bedroom. "Night, Dad."

"Good night, Frankie," I tell her softly and head back downstairs. Rye's washing dishes, drawing me close, and I stop myself just as she tosses a glance over her shoulder.

"Is she all tucked in?" she asks, using a towel to dry the wet dishes and place them back into the cabinets. "You can crash in the other bedroom. The sofa in the office pulls out into a bed. I can sleep in there."

"No." My voice is low and gruff as I say, "I'll take the sofa bed, and you take the spare bedroom. You've done more than enough for me and Frankie. I won't let you sleep on a couch on top of that."

Something about the mere mention of what Rye should or shouldn't be sleeping on top of drags my mind down to the gutter. I'd much rather her sleep on top of me, but that's just my little head speaking for the bigger one—the bigger one that knows better. My lack of a love life is no reason to let my lewd imagination take over.

"Sleeping on that couch won't be the hardest thing I've ever slept on," she replies with a grin that sends tingles down my spine.

Tipping my head to the side, I can't stop myself from asking her, "What's the hardest thing you've ever?—"

Before I can get my question out, the storm outside surges. A crash of lightning and

an explosion of thunder rattles the walls. My head shifts and my ears perk as I listen for the sounds of Frankie waking up. Thankfully, there's nothing but silence until a thud from outside rattles the two of us.

"I'll go take a look." I move toward my coat hanging by the front door. On the floor right under it is the gun case I bring while traveling. I never leave home without it. However, I don't remember bringing it inside.

I'm certain the confusion on my face propels her to speak as Rye says, "I brought it in. Doesn't make sense to leave that in the car. It won't be of much use to anyone out there."

I give her a slight nod. "Thank you. I didn't want to assume or bring it in here without letting you know I have that with me."

"It's fine, Dallas. Truly, it is. I'm actually surprised you don't have more firearms since y'all were going to be camping," she says, walking toward me and drying her hands with the dish towel.

The slightest whiff of raspberries comes off her hair as she moves by me to squat and examine the case. She doesn't touch it but eyes it with curiosity. When I kneel beside her, our bodies lightly touch. It ignites something buried deep inside of me. Buried so deep I've forgotten what it feels like, and the intensity is almost like a gut punch.

To avoid putting my foot in my mouth or using my mouth to capture hers, I grab the case and rise to my feet. When I extend my hand for her to take, the graze of our palms touching is like a jolt to my system. Blood and primitive urges of excitement course through my body at a pace that has my heart pounding.

The desperate yearning of my body to be close to hers is distracting me from going outside to check on the noise. Her supple pink lips, perfectly kissable in every way.



The curves of her silhouette make me want to take her into my arms and hold her against me forever.

Delicately shaking away my burgeoning sexual fantasies, I find my voice to tell her, "I didn't want to bring an entire arsenal with me. I picked one of the sites that have a mix of stuff for kids and campers. The campsite has showers, a pool, and a bunch of stuff to make sure everyone has plenty to do. With all that entertainment, they keep wildlife and riff-raff at bay."

"Wildlife and riff-raff, huh?" she chuckles. "That sounds like one of those things my dad says."

Jesus. I don't want to sound old.

"How old are you?" I ask her.

"Twenty-five."

"Thirty-six," I reply. "You're so young and running that ice cream shop all by yourself?"

She shrugs. "My first job about a decade ago was there. When the previous owner wanted to retire, they left the business to me. I've only ever worked there. So youth and experience don't exactly line up here."

"I'm impressed," I admit, but the perverted corners of my mind bully their way to the forefront. I can't stop myself from wondering about her experience in other aspects of her life. I want to know what her hand looks like wrapping around my cock, what her tongue tastes like, how that ass of hers feels bouncing up and down on my lap.

Thankfully, someone knocks on the door, causing Rye to yelp and turn into me for

protection. It's instinctual between us as I grab her around the waist to hold her steady. I can only hope that she doesn't feel the hardness growing behind the crotch of my jeans.

The softness of her body against mine is better than I could have ever imagined. Her subtle floral and fruity scent washes over me like I'm walking through a meadow. She's like sunshine in my arms, but another round of hard knocks against the door snaps me out of this euphoria.

I shuffle Rye behind me as I unlatch my Glock, arm it, and approach the door to open it. She's only a few inches behind me. Her small fingertips clutch my shirt with every step. I want to feel her body against my back, but the fantasy has to wait. The door swings open to reveal a familiar face rather than an intruding stranger.

"Chase?" we both ask simultaneously.

I turn to face Rye, who locks eyes with me as we both ask in unison, "How do you know Chase?"

I holster my weapon after ejecting the bullet in the chamber to add it back to the clip. Chase steps out of the rain, puts a large crate on the ground, and laughs. "How did you two hook up? Where's the munchkin?"

"Sleeping upstairs," I tell him as we embrace.

"How is this a thing?" Rye gestures with a finger between me and Chase.

I laugh. "We went to high school together, and he does work on my clients' cars."

Chase adds, "And now I also help manage this property. My fiancée runs the place. She said to come check on our sister. I'll happily let Maddie know that Rye's in good

hands. It's such a small world. Maddie also said something about you having car trouble?"

"Yeah, I took Frankie to Whitewater. The rain flooded the grounds. Then my car just up and gave out on us about a block away from her ice cream shop. Well, it didn't give up so much as I gave up. There is a clanging noise that's gotten too loud to ignore."

"Are you parked near the curb or in the middle of the street? I can take a ride into town to haul it to my shop if you want."

Rye doesn't like the sound of that any more than I do as she protests, "Chase, stay with Maddie. There's already debris flying around from this storm. Something just crashed out there?—"

"Don't worry about me, Rye," Chase tells her. "I'll take a look out back on my way to the main house. Inside the box is a two-way radio. The channels are set to the ones in the main house, just in case things get a bit sketchy out here. The main road is flooded, but we should be all right since we're about a mile off."

"And thankfully, we're uphill from there. Don't worry about the car, Chase. I'll take care of it as soon as I can. Thanks for coming out here and for bringing this," I tell him as I stoop down to grab the crate.

"Yeah, there's some other supplies and a bunch of food in case the power goes out. It's likely that we won't get flooded, but if we have to get out of here, we'll need some rowboats. Keep the channels open, and I'll keep y'all updated." He tips his head to both of us. "You two, have a good night."

Once he leaves, I start unpacking the box. Rye doesn't let me do it alone.

"I can't believe you know Chase," she says. "I can picture the two of you running around in high school, leaving destruction and broken hearts trailing behind you."

"We kind of kept to ourselves. I ended up with my high school girlfriend, married her, and then we had Frankie. We were divorced two years later. Frankie's mom, Shelly, took off when Frankie was around two. It's been seven years now, and not a peep out of her."

The moment I feel Rye's hand stroking my shoulder, I'm reminded that I'm doing the exact opposite of what I should. I want to keep my guard up, but Rye has this unarming sincerity about her. She pulls this protective beast out of me, making me want to bring her home with Frankie and me. Rye makes me feel free to express all of my emotions. Passion and lust are fighting for the top spot.

"I'm sorry, Dallas. It's been about seven years since my mom died. I understand holding a spot for someone who's not coming back."

"Shelly's definitely not coming back, but I don't want to talk about that. How do you come up with such amazing ice cream flavors? I know Frankie's going to want one named after her." My eyes drift up, where my daughter is still sound asleep.

"I will try just about anything that pops into my head. I've done matcha green tea with a coconut cream swirl and white chocolate chips. It did very well at a pop-up shop in LA, but not so much out here. I can offer my more eccentric flavors as specialty, made-to-order items. I guess I'm not afraid to fail."

"How long have you had the ice cream shop?"

"About four years now. It was rough in the beginning, but I finally have a system that works. I have good employees and a strong town that loves homemade ice cream year-round."

I walk to the freezer and pull out a small pint-sized carton of peach cobbler ice cream.

"This one is my favorite. Who thinks of adding peach cobbler to ice cream?" I ask with a spoonful hovering above the container. I move toward Rye and hold the spoon out to her.

She wraps her lips around it and moans with delight. "I forgot how good that one is."

"I really like the s'mores one, too. That graham cracker swirl with the dark chocolate chips is amazing."

She snickers and goes into the freezer to pull out another container of ice cream. "You should get it at On the Rocks. My oldest sister, Mackenna, well, we call her Kennie. Anyway, she and the bartender, Dean, are an item. Kennie worked a deal out for the bar and my shop. So he combined this s'mores ice cream with some coconut rum and made a mudslide milkshake thing. He torches a marshmallow on top, and oh my God, it's to die for."

She scoops a spoonful out and offers it to me, which I take against my better judgment. Every minute we spend together is another minute I want to let Mariah in. She has such a delicate name, but I see strength and resilience as she talks about what she loves. It lets my imagination wander to a time in the future when her eyes light up the same way when she talks about us.

"Ice cream and rum sounds pretty damn good," I admit.

Rye reaches down into the box and pulls out a bottle of vodka. Both of our eyes light up as we head into the freezer to grab more cartons of ice cream. This day isn't going the way I planned, but I'm falling in love with the way it's ending.

### MARIAH

There are two crinkles beside Dallas's warm brown eyes that render a softness to his chiseled face. He's handsome, quiet, but interesting. We start blending flavors with the bottle of vodka when Chase's voice cracks through the air from the radio. Fortunately, it's an update on the sound we heard outside—just a few branches that fell.

After pouring shots of vodka into some glasses, we hold them up to one another.

Dallas toasts first. "Cheers to a sweeter-than-ice cream stranger for taking pity on a father and his kid."

My cheeks warm from his adoration. I nod and clink our glasses before adding my own toast. "And cheers to you two for not being aliens looking to abduct me."

That melts his fading grumpy disposition into laughter. The way his face lights up when joy overcomes him is such a wholesome thing to witness. Yet, it doesn't diminish his hard-lined features. The squareness of his jaw, when it sets into a half-cocked grin, sets my heart on fire.

"Yes," he agrees between chuckles. "Cheers to us not being aliens. I can't believe I've been working in Cincinnati all this time and not once did we ever cross paths."

"Well, the shop keeps me pretty busy. I don't head into Cincinnati unless I'm meeting

up with friends or going out to eat. What do you do again?"

"I own a private security firm specializing in protecting individuals and sometimes their property."

"That sounds like it can get pretty dangerous." My eyes glance over to the gun case before shifting back to him.

"It can be. My last gig just wrapped up. I was in charge of protecting a musician's daughter. But she just left for college and wanted to travel."

My gaze unintentionally shifts upward to where Frankie's asleep.

Dallas nods as he mouths another spoonful of ice cream. "The family didn't want me to uproot Frankie, and I agreed. This weekend was supposed to be the kickoff to me having some much-needed time off."

"How much time off were you thinking about taking?"

He shrugs and holds out a spoonful for me. I let the subtle flavors dance on my tongue, closing my eyes, but the slight flickering of the cabin's lights force my eyes back open.

"What now?" I groan just as the lights snap off and stay off.

"Power's out." He flicks the light switch up and down. "Where's the fuse box?"

I shrug. "It might be outside. I'm not sure, but we can call Chase to find out."

It doesn't take long to get a hold of my sister and Chase. They tell us to stay inside like the guests we're supposed to be and let them worry about the power. It's going to

be a few hours, so Dallas and I decide to take the vodka and our favorite flavors of ice cream to eat by the fire.

Conversation and laughter flow easily in front of the flickering flames, highlighting Dallas's chiseled features. I find myself licking my lips and tossing my hair over my shoulder. The liquor is dropping our shields, and we end up sitting on the floor, surrounded by pillows and blankets.

"Here, let me get that for you." Dallas reaches over with his thumb to gently wipe away a drop of ice cream on the corner of my mouth. My pussy instantly clenches, and my mouth moves like it has a mind of its own, taking his thumb between my lips. I let my tongue swirl around it, drawing out a low hum from deep in his throat.

"Fuck," he hisses and pulls his thumb out of my mouth. However, before I can apologize for caving to my fantasies, Dallas guides me by the chin and lifts my face to his. The warmth of his mouth capturing mine mingles with the cold sensation left on my tongue by the ice cream.

It seems we're both leaning into our desires as we grab at one another. Our tongues waltz, and our bodies move as if we're never going to see each other again. I'm sure that won't be the case, but if tonight's all we have, I want to enjoy every moment.

We pull away. Shock in our eyes melts away with the growing lust between us.

"Shh," I warn him, my eyes darting upward. Dallas nods, holding his index finger up to his lips before hooking it back and forth to beckon me back to him.

The idea of keeping quiet, fighting not to be loud, only drives us to embrace more passionately. It's like a sexual demon is possessing us, but the ripples of pleasure remind me that it's been too long since I've felt the rough touch of sexual anticipation.



The kiss leads to groping and then to lying on the pile of blankets. We toss a blanket over us to muffle our noises as Dallas slides his hand into my sweatpants to find my center. I reach into his to grab his shaft. Our hands move in unison, with me stroking his shaft while he glides two fingers inside of me.

He pulls his fingers out of me to suck on them, moaning and whispering, "You taste so good."

Dallas gasps like he's about to dive underwater. He moves under the blanket. One of his hands reaches up to cup my mouth shut while his mouth envelops my clit. There's a slight tug, pull, slide, and suckling rhythm to Dallas's mouth as he works my pussy into an erotic frenzy.

My hips roll and buck against his face. My moans try to escape from behind his hand, but I help Dallas by using a pillow to bite through the onslaught of orgasms he's pulling out of me. I'm practically whimpering with every swipe of his tongue. When he slides his fingers back inside of me to assist his mouth, I'm ready to inhale the pillow just to keep my mouth shut.

I finally pull the pillow off my face to get some air and beg, "Please, I need to feel you inside of me."

Dallas obliges as he rubs the tip of his cock at my entrance before pushing himself inside. My walls expand and contract around each inch. He slams his mouth over mine, his thrusts increasing their pace. I'm not sure how much the blanket's helping to silence the sounds of our bodies crashing together.

I reach up to run my fingers through his hair and stroke the side of his face as I whisper, "You have to take it easy. You'll make me scream."

"Scream for ice cream?" He quips with a smirk and a powerful thrust that forces me

to clamp my own hand over my mouth. I can see the delight in his eyes with a flash of mischief.

"Don't," I warn him in a hushed tone, still cracking a smile.

Dallas pulls out and drives his cock inside my walls with bliss-inducing power that makes me clench around his thickness.

I slam both hands over my mouth while Dallas holds my thighs as far apart as he can. The weight of his palms holding them in place hardens my nipples and makes me wet and ready for more. Dallas pounds into my walls without restraint.

My orgasm comes and comes and comes.

Dallas holds my gaze, our eyes locking and both traveling down the center of our bodies to see the bright flames lighting my glistening essence covering his cock. He slows down to watch every inch move in and out of my pussy. The abrupt change in pace draws another climax out of me to the point where my thighs shake.

Dallas releases his grip and lowers himself closer to me. The quiet strokes of his dick rolling in and out of my walls practically bring a tear to my eye.

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*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:44 am*

4

### DALLAS

Rye's warm walls clenching my shaft sends ripples of pleasure shooting down my body. Every stroke in and out of her as she desperately tries to stay quiet brings the beast out of me. I need to help her in a better position.

I pull my cock out of her and flip Rye onto her stomach. After I slip my throbbing erection back inside of her from behind, I lean forward to cover her mouth with my hand before I start pumping in and out of her with ease.

Rye comes all over me. The unyielding tremors of her thighs, her climax, and the wetness of her walls all serve to weaken my reserve to make this moment last longer. We roll onto our sides, with me still thrusting inside her. With my hand muffling her moans of bliss, my other hand is free to reach around to massage her clit.

The tips of my fingers rub and slide against her pulsing nub. When I apply pressure, Rye's hips buck, and she reaches behind to brace herself against my torso, tilts her pelvis, and pushes against my cock. She's moving in a rhythm to meet my cock in the middle. The vibration of our bodies slamming together is enough to nearly make me cry out.

The stunted noise slipping out of me makes Rye come off my dick to face me. We're both on our sides, looking longingly into each other's eyes as she uses one hand to grip me by the hair, and her mouth crashes over mine.

Our kiss muffles the increasing heights of our pleasure as Rye angles herself in a way to ride me. My hands are free to grab her ass and give her some leverage to ride me over a climactic cliff. The closer I get to that same edge, the tighter I hold her ass.

She yelps in our kiss and bites my tongue before a wildness fills her eyes as she moves her hands down to my neck. She uses the leverage from her thighs to push me onto my back, where she sits up on my cock.

Rye rolls and bucks her hips as she closes her small hands over my throat. She's not strong enough to choke me, but the pressure sends a new sensation of pleasure ricocheting across all my nerves.

We fuck frantically on the floor, desperate to chase the orgasm that's guiding us through this storm of sexual release. Thunder crashes outside as if to agree with my sentiments.

Rye moves her hips upward before slamming down for a final time. Her body goes rigid from her core-tightening, pussy-clenching, thigh-locking climax. Soft cries of her orgasm slip beyond her lips. I yank her down to use my mouth to silence her.

The way our tongues swirl and lips move gives my body another burst of energy. I can feel myself getting hard all over again. However, the lights shooting back on and a crackling noise from the radio put me back on my descent from that orgasmic high.

A few more shy kisses help us pull apart to check things out. Thankfully, Frankie's still asleep. When I return downstairs, Rye's sitting in front of the fireplace with a cup of vodka in her hand. She holds out a glass for me to join her.

I ease onto the floor, my back against the couch, and we sit there in the silence of the aftermath. Silence doesn't last long as she finally says, "That was great."

I take a swig of my drink. It heats my throat on the way down. "It was. I'm sorry about just going for it. I've got a clean bill of health. I can send you my latest results to put you at ease."

"And I can send you mine," she replies, tilting her head to rest on my shoulder. "I'm on birth control too. We should have started this thing way differently, but I'm happy to get this ending."

"I'm happy we came out of this storm together."

She laughs softly with a playful elbow into my side. "I don't even want to think about what comes next."

"I think you mean, who comes next? I feel like I have to get as many orgasms out of you as possible."

She sighs, "I wish every night could be like this. How far is your place from here?"

"About thirty to forty minutes. Frankie's school is about twenty minutes from here. I'm sure she'll love that, being able to pop in at our favorite ice cream shop whenever she feels like it."

"Two new routine customers are great for business. You already have my creative juices flowing. I want to put together some new flavors inspired by this weekend."

"Well, I'm here if you need other juices to flow out of you," I reply, relaxing. I maneuver my arm around her and pull her to my side so we can snuggle together in front of the cozy fire. Sleep finds us quickly, and so does the dawn.

When I open my eyes, my back is sore from falling asleep sitting against the sofa. Sunlight is barely streaming through the windows, but it's just bright enough to see

Rye's face resting in my lap. Heat blankets my face as my morning erection grows exponentially harder the longer I look at her beautiful face and supple lips a few centimeters away from my cock.

I close my eyes and look up to the ceiling with the hope of willing myself to get soft again. After trying to take a few deep breaths and thinking about baseball, I realize nothing is working.

"Go down," I growl in a low whisper.

"I prefer good morning, but I'm equally happy to start my day like this," Rye replies sleepily.

A smirk spreads across my face as I look down. Our eyes meet, and Rye slips her hand into my pajama bottoms to pull my cock out. She licks her lips and wraps them around the tip. I clamp my mouth shut as she moves her head up and down over the shaft.

She sucks me off as quietly as she can until she pulls her mouth away. Rye takes a deep breath and goes back down to finish, but I don't want to finish like this. Instead, I move her onto her back and slip my sopping-wet hardness inside of her waiting walls.

This is far quicker than last night as I push and pull myself in and out of Rye until I feel her moist release coating my shaft. Every throb of my release spilling inside of her makes me miss her before she's even gone.

"I don't want this to stop," I blurt out as I soften inside of her.

"I don't want this to stop either," she replies.

Rye begins moving her hips in a way to arouse me for another round. I shake my head, hating to disappoint her but knowing it's nearly impossible for me to be ready to go again so soon. Somehow, she gets me erect once again. I lose count of how many times we have sex before we get up from our cozy spot in front of the fireplace.

After cleaning up, we start moving around the kitchen to make breakfast. When Frankie comes down, sleep in her eyes and hair frizzy, she smiles at the sight of Rye and me in the kitchen together. I can see the happiness in her eyes.

I'm not sure if she sees Rye as a permanent part of our lives or if it's just nice to see her dad smiling with someone.

"We have pancakes made from some leftover ice cream," Rye tells Frankie as she sets a plate before her. There's no syrup, but the cinnamon sugar butter Rye was able to whip up goes perfectly on top of the fluffy flapjacks.

"This is delicious," Frankie says between mouthfuls.

"Thank you," Rye smiles widely. "So Frankie, what do you think about making this a new ice cream flavor?"

Frankie's eyes open with joy. "How can we do that?"

"Well, we'd go back to the shop, but I'm thinking of a cinnamon sugar ice cream with soft, fluffy, fruity pancake chunks. We can call it Frankie's Favorite Flapjacks."

"Can we, really?" She grins goofily and beats the tabletop like a drummer full of excitement. "Can we add pancake syrup to it, too?"

Rye knits her brows together in thought before nodding slowly. "I think we can make a maple-flavored caramel swirl so it's thick enough to withstand sitting in ice cream. I

think pure pancake syrup would freeze into sugar crystals, but that's why we would do this at the shop. We can try a few recipes and combinations until it's perfect."

I add, "While you two do that, I can meet up with Chase to get the car fixed. Maybe if everything isn't too soggy, we can head back out to finish our camping trip."

Frankie's delight softens, but then she perks back up. "Can Miss Rye come camping with us, Dad? You got that really big tent. There's plenty of room, right?"

"Well, that's up to her." I glance at Rye. My head gently sways from side to side, trying to silently tell her she doesn't have to come, but Rye looks excited to be invited. I'd be happy to have her.

"I don't want to crash your dad and daughter trip—" Rye starts.

Frankie cuts her off. "You're not crashing it. You're bringing fun ideas, and we can talk about a gazillion other flavors I have ideas about. I can't wait to go to school and tell everybody I have ice cream named after me."

I chuckle. "Oh, so that's code for you just wanting to turn her into your personal ice cream supplier."

"No," Frankie says right before shoveling another piece of food into her mouth. "She likes the same kind of movies I like, and she knows games we can play. You know games we can play as a family, right?"

Rye's on the spot but laughs it off with a slight tip of her head in the affirmative. "I sure do. I used to love playing UNO on our family game nights. It's been a long time since my family got together to do anything fun like that."

"Do you want to ask them to come too?" Frankie offers. "The tent really is insanely



big. I saw it. It's like a small house."

"It's not that big," I say.

"It's big enough to have three bedrooms. This actual cabin doesn't even have three bedrooms, but the tent has three rooms and a family room," Frankie replies with a touch of snarkiness.

Rye laughs. "I'll come as long as there is plenty of room, and it sounds like there is. How about we plan a family game night? My dad and my sisters with their fellas, and you and your dad can come. We can do a taco bar for dinner."

"And an ice cream bar for dessert?" Frankie suggests with an aggressive wriggle of her eyebrows that brings laughter out of all of us.

By the time we finish breakfast, it feels like we're a family unit moving into a regular day. This is going fast, but there's something I trust about Rye that puts me at ease. Perhaps it's because Frankie's so easygoing around her.

My daughter's right on the money when it comes to people. Whether Frankie realizes it or not, she warms up to good people almost immediately. I'm happy to follow her lead.

As we set out for the day, Rye takes us into town. Thankfully, the storms didn't cause too much damage. At least, that's what it looks like until we reach my car. There's some debris from fallen trees and loose trash that's been thrown about. The thing that stands out the most is the trash can-sized dent in the rear door of my car.

The levity in my mood sinks as I call Chase. He's on his way while Frankie and Rye head into her ice cream shop. I can't stop walking around my car to see if there's any damage deeper than the dent in the door.

Once Chase arrives, he whistles as he walks around the car and runs his hand along its lines around the damage.

"You got knocked around pretty good," he says.

"Yeah, and that happened after we pulled over."

Chase looks around. "Where's Rye and Frankie? Are they okay? How did you guys make out last night?"

The corner of my mouth tips up in a sheepish grin. "Rye took Frankie to the shop to make a new flavor, which she and Frankie thought up this morning. As far as how we made out, do you really want a play-by-play?"

Chase stops looking at the car and turns to me, raising an eyebrow. "Not when you put it that way. So, are you going to pursue something with Rye? Don't get her hopes up just to let her down or Frankie, man."

"I have no intentions of doing anything like that. I like her. It's moving quick as hell, but I can just feel it in my gut that we're meant for something more than a shared night together. The way Frankie took right to her makes me want to try love again."

Chase smiles as he hooks my car up to his tow truck. "Good for you. It's about time you start dating again. Even better that it's my lady's younger sister. About your car, I can let you drive one of mine until yours is fixed. It might be a few days, but I won't know for sure until I get under the hood and see how deep that dent goes."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

We shake hands and part ways. My mind wanders to Mariah and Frankie bonding over ice cream recipes. My heart warms in a way I haven't felt in forever. Yet, I don't

want to feel like I'm forcing Rye to blend our families.

5

MARIAH

"Are you sure you want to go camping with us, Miss Rye?" Frankie asks as I yank the gate open.

Fortunately, the generator's still humming as we head inside to start opening. "Of course I want to go. Don't you want to give your dad another shot at just a trip with the two of you?"

"I don't mind." She shrugs. "We don't really like the same stuff anymore. He's always busy with work, and I mean, I don't want to be stuck in the woods with just my dad. He'll start telling me the same old stories from his job."

"You don't like what he does for a living?"

"It's not that," she says with thoughtful consideration trickling across her face. "His job is actually really cool. He's like one of those guys you see in action movies where things explode, and he saves the president or something."

"That sounds dangerous."

Frankie nods. "It is. But he doesn't ever tell me about the explosions. He tells me the same stories about the one time he guarded some really famous pop star and saved him from a crazy fan."

"Wow. I imagine he must have a crazy kind of schedule."

Frankie sighs. "Not really. The last person he was in charge of protecting let me hang out with their daughter, and we went to the same school. We have a regular schedule. What's your schedule like, Miss Rye? Do you have to get up before sunrise or something crazy like that?"

I chuckle. "Oh no, I can't do that every day. If I were running a bakery or restaurant that sold breakfast, I would. Luckily, all I have to do is make my ice cream bases for whatever I'm selling for the week."

"That's so cool. What's the craziest flavor you've ever made?" she asks excitedly.

"Um, good or bad?"

She giggles. "Bad."

"That would be chocolate creme brulee toffee. It ended up tasting like black licorice." My nose scrunches, my mouth desperate to never remember that flavor.

"Eww," she says, sticking her tongue out. "Okay, what's about the best good one?"

"If we're talking about crazy and tasting good? That would be my seasonal Thanksgiving Fixins."

"As ice cream?"

"Yup. I was able to make a macaroni and cheddar waffle cone. Sweet potato ice cream with a marshmallow swirl and a sage sausage crumble. I don't know how I even got to those flavors, but I only do it for the month of November because it's a nightmare trying to get everything right."

"I'd have to taste it. I can't imagine it in my head. Can you show me how to make it after we make this pancake one today?"

"Sure, why not? It's better to share the recipes so they're not lost to time."

Frankie lets me walk her around the kitchen and shop to show her how everything works. She's attentive and asks questions as if she has plans to work here. I don't mind, and it's nice to have someone as interested in ice cream as I am.

We spend the next hour crafting different parts of the newest recipe with her name on it. Once Dallas arrives, he smiles as we sit him down to try out every variation we've crafted.

"How's the car?" I ask him as he tastes the first sample.

He nods. "This is good but very sweet. The car's going to Chase's shop. He's bringing me a loaner until it's fixed."

"Try this one next, Dad," Frankie insists, pushing a cup covered in a tart strawberry syrup.

She anxiously waits for his reaction. The way his eyes snap shut and mouth puckers send Frankie into a fit of giggles. She can barely get her words out. "That's the one with lemonade pancakes and sour candy swirls."

"Oh, so you set me up?" He grabs Frankie to hug and tickle her. They continue to laugh as I bring over the rest of our samples.

"It was Miss Rye's idea," Frankie blurts out.

"Hey!" I reply, faking shock with a hand clutching my chest. "I would never put out

something so sour."

"If it was blue raspberry, it would taste great. Just like those tangy candy straws. What else can we make?" Frankie asks, her eyes darting around.

"I think we need to slow down," Dallas says. "I can see the sugar bouncing off you, Frankie. How about we grab lunch? Are you two hungry?"

"Aww, Dad, but Miss Rye said she knows how to make Thanksgiving ice cream. We can have that for lunch."

I step up to help Dallas sway her, saying, "All of those components take hours to put together, Frankie. I think your dad is right. Let's grab lunch, and we can make a big batch of your favorite sample for you guys to take home. How does that sound?"

Frankie scoffs. "It sounds like you two are in cahoots to get me to eat regular food. You're like those twins working together to trick me."

Dallas and I laugh as I assure her, "Frankie, I promise that's not what's happening. You should eat some regular food because too much sugar and dairy will upset your stomach."

"Fine," she relents. "Let's go have lunch."

It becomes crystal clear that many restaurants won't open until later. Every place we go to has some sort of sign about damage or no employees being able to come in. I think it's best to lock up my place too. People will be out for essentials, and I can use a day off. Instead of traveling around Mercy, we head back to Cincinnati.

The city is bustling like it never rained furiously for the past three days and nights. I imagine that's why Dallas didn't think the rain would make that much of a difference

at the campgrounds. The wet streets don't slow us down as they take me to one of their favorite burger spots.

After lunch, Frankie insists that I see what her room looks like and how big their kitchen is. You know, just in case I spend the night and make ice cream for her one night.

Dallas and I share knowing glances as we let her get away with believing she's persuading me into coming over. I can't stop my imagination from fantasizing about being a permanent part of their family. Frankie's so spunky, inquisitive, and smart. She reminds me of myself at her age. I'm excited to see if this instant connection lasts.

Dallas drives us to one of the tallest buildings in the city, right off the river. Frankie gushes over the pet park, which she can see from the balcony of their condo. The view is amazing from their third-floor abode, which is so spacious and has touches of Frankie and Dallas all over it.

While Dallas said his ex wasn't in their lives, it's all the more evident as I walk around. Family pictures include Dallas and Frankie, with a few popular athletes at various events and on vacation. None of them have a woman that looks remotely attached to them. I feel like an asshole for the relief washing over me, but I want to fill some of those spaces missing in their photos.

"What do you think, Miss Rye?" Frankie asks. "Isn't our kitchen big enough to make ice cream? I know we don't have those big fancy mixers and stoves, but we can do small batches, right?"

"We sure can. I can actually show you one of my favorite ways of making ice cream in a freezer bag."



Frankie's widen. "What?! Do you mean it's been that easy this entire time?"

She slaps herself on the forehead, driving Dallas and me into laughter.

"It's easy, but ice cream made in the kitchen always tastes better to me," I tell her. This method is good if you just want something quick and fun to munch on."

I notice Dallas standing beside me, his hand hovering over my lower back, as Frankie spins on a high stool across the large island that separates their kitchen and living room. The ceilings are at least ten feet high, giving the home a loft-type feel. But there's a long hallway on either side of the kitchen. From what they've shown me, their rooms are on opposite sides of the condo.

We wouldn't have to be nearly as quiet as we were in the cabin.

Heat floods my cheeks when I think back to last night and this morning. I have to gulp down my lust as our conversation shifts to the science of making ice cream in a Ziploc bag. Frankie's enthusiasm to try anything is motivating and keeps my mind from wandering to the dirtier corners where I want to get Dallas alone once again.

We find ourselves in a familiar rhythm, preparing dinner and testing out a few of Frankie's bags of ice cream concoctions. Time flies by, and before I know it, I find myself gazing up from the balcony off their living room after Frankie heads to bed. The moon is sitting high in the night sky as the reflection of stars across the river twinkle over subtle waves. The calm and cool breeze feels great compared to the storms we've had.

Dallas joins me by wrapping his arms around me, keeping me warm in his embrace as we watch the quiet flow of the river.

"I'd love for you to spend the night, Rye," Dallas mutters. "But if you want to go

home, I can have a car take you. I'm sure at least one of my drivers is on call."

I rest the back of my head against his chest, slowly shaking my head, "No. Don't do that. I don't want to drag anyone away from what they're doing. This isn't an emergency, and I don't have a problem crashing on the couch."

"What did I tell you about sleeping on the couch?" he says in a low growl. "That's not going to happen around me."

"What would you like to happen around you?" I ask him, rubbing the top of his hands as they continue to hold me around the waist.

"I'd rather feel something around me," he says against my ear, licking the shell and making me shiver.

The mild vibrations send signals directly to my nipples that harden under my shirt. He reaches his hands up to rub them. After noticing their perky delight, he slips a hand under the bottom to pinch and caress them. I grip the top of the balcony's glass wall to hold myself steady while Dallas uses his free hand to slip into my jeans.

My body shakes with anticipation as Dallas uses his mouth along my neck, his hand on my breast, and his fingers in my pussy to deliver an intense orgasm. There's a slight sliver of fear as I cry out when another orgasm washes over me.

"You can be as loud as you want out here. Those doors are soundproof," Dallas says, his voice dripping with dark promise.

However, I don't get to test that out just yet as he captures my lips in a passionate kiss that forces me to turn around and face him. My arms wrap around Dallas's neck as his knee nudges my legs apart after he slides my jeans down to the ground.

### DALLAS

There's not a soul outside right now. At least no one that I can see or hear. But I have to admit that's a part of the intrigue. When Mariah spreads her legs for me, knowing we can get caught at any moment, she reveals she's just as adventurous as I am.

It doesn't take long to pull my cock out and bury it inside her walls. I sink myself into her, having to stoop down and push up for her pussy to engulf every throbbing inch. I don't want this to end quickly, but I also don't want to get caught out here by Frankie or a nosy neighbor.

Every stroke we make together feels like the perfect fit. Her walls contract and release around me, hugging my cock like it's missed me since the last time we were together a few hours ago this morning. The sound of her moist enjoyment coating every inch of my erection drives me to push in and out of her.

Instincts tell me to hoist her into my arms, having Rye's legs wrap around me as she begins to writhe against me. She's determined to make herself come. My knees nearly buckle as I walk us over to the patio furniture and bend that tight little ass of hers over a chair.

The animal inside of me that craves her, that wants to drown in her, drives me in and out of her with such force that she covers her own mouth from screaming out in ecstasy. Her wet satisfaction makes it easier for me to move in and out of her over and over again until I feel that earth-shattering quake of her thighs when she

climaxes.

The crest of our orgasm carries us back inside and down the hall into my bedroom, where we spend the night trying to best one another with our sexual prowess. When the morning comes, we're spent but glowing at the possibility of our new lives.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:44 am*

### DALLAS

Over the next few months, we celebrate Frankie's tenth birthday, which only draws us closer together. The way our families blend together effortlessly pushes me to make up my mind. I know what I want. I know who I want, and I want to talk to Frankie before I decide to change our lives.

It's a beautiful spring afternoon when I pick up Frankie from school. She's got a huge smile as she jogs to the car. I barely get a word out as she explodes the details of her day onto me. I don't mind, but as we take the forty-minute drive to Mercy, she senses my nerves.

"What's wrong, Dad?" Frankie asks.

"Nothing. I, um, I don't know how to talk about this, but?—"

She cuts me off. "Okay, Dad. We'll do it like you do to me. No judgment, no repercussions. Just spit it out, and we'll decide what to do next together."

I nod in amazement. I never thought I'd have my parenting thrown back at me, but this is for the best. The slight bulge of the ring in my pocket urges me to get this out.

"I like Mariah."

She giggles. "Duh, Dad. She's the only woman you let in the house, and she's great. You'd be silly not to."

"I mean, I really like her, like I think I'm in love with her and want to ask her to marry me. I don't want to do that if that's something you're not comfortable with."

Frankie shifts her tiny frame in the back seat to make sure our eyes meet in the mirror. "Dad, be so serious right now. I love Rye. She's so smart, and cool, and funny. She even laughs at your bad jokes. She cooks for us and loves camping way more than I do. You should definitely marry her and have a forever camping buddy."

"You're absolutely certain you're okay with her joining our family?"

"Of course I am, Dad. You're way easy to talk to when she's around, and you haven't been back to work for weeks. I like having her around if it's going to keep you home more often."

"I'm thinking about selling my security firm. Then I'll have plenty of time to?—"

Her dark brown eyes widen with joy as she cuts me off again. "Then you'll have plenty of time to look for a place for us to live near the ice cream shop and her house, right? Or do we get a place altogether?"

"One thing at a time, Frankie," I tell her with a laugh. "She has to say yes first."

"She's going to say yes," Frankie states with finality. "It has to be romantic, too. Like in the movies, there are a thousand candles and daisies or her favorite flower. Do you know what her favorite flower is, Dad?"

"Lavender," I spit out, not remembering when I picked up that detail, but I know it like I know my favorite football team stats.

"That's a pretty purple color. Maybe we can make her a special ice cream and use the lavender somehow. But we have to be careful, or it'll taste like soap."

I raise an eyebrow at her as we head out of town.

She giggles. "We did a lot of experiments with flowers and ice cream for her Mother's Day special. Um, Dad?"

The lightness in her eyes fades as she bites the corner of her lip and stares at me.

"What's up?"

"So that means I can look at the ring, right?" she asks.

"What? How did you...? Who told you?" I squint my eyes, holding back my laughter. I'm terrible at keeping things secret from Frankie.

"No one. You left the bag on the counter the night you brought it home. I peeked, thinking it was a gift for me," she says, her eyes shifting to her feet.

"I do have something for you, but yes, you can see it. Just don't drop it." I fish it out of my pocket and hand the box to her. She gushes for a minute but then hurriedly closes it to avoid dropping it in the car.

By the time we arrive at the ice cream parlor, people are moving in and out, happiness written all over their faces. The smell of fresh waffle cones fills the air, and I can't wait until I have the chance to get Rye alone.

Yet, the moment we enter, my mind changes as I see her father in the corner with Chase and her older sister, Maddie. We head in their direction as Dr. Monroe makes Chase pull another table over to join them. The laughs and conversation flow, and as the afternoon turns into evening, the timing couldn't be more perfect.

The oldest Monroe sister, Kennie, comes in with her husband, Dean. With all of Rye's family there, I tip my head for her to come out from behind the counter.

When I stand up in the center of the dining area, all eyes are on me, and Frankie is fidgeting with joyous anticipation.

"This isn't how I planned for my life to go. Meeting all of you and seeing how welcoming you are to Frankie and me is the best thing to come out of that stormy season. Thank you so, so much," I begin before turning to Rye and taking her hands into mine. "But, I never thought I'd fall head over heels for someone this beautiful so fast. I never thought I'd find someone who'd love me and Frankie the way you do, and there's nothing I want more than to spend the rest of our lives as a family."

They all murmur and whisper among themselves as I drop to one knee and pull out the leather ring box that opens from the middle. Inside is an engagement ring in rose gold, with a center pearl surrounded by small-cut diamonds. Under the lights, her favorite stone gleams in hues of lavender and pink as I slip it onto Rye's finger.

"Mariah, the love of our lives, will you do me the greatest honor and become my wife?"

Tears well in her eyes as she moves her head up and down. "Yes, of course I will."

I rise to my feet, taking her into my arms and planting a soft kiss on her lips, resisting the urge to claim her mouth in full view of our family.

"I love you both so much," Rye exclaims.

Not to be left out, Frankie jumps out of her seat to join us, and we three hug in the middle of an ice cream parlor. Family and friends around us make this the perfect moment.

Frankie beams as she shouts above the erupting applause and cheers. "Since you said yes, does that mean I get to call you Mom?"



Rye runs her hand over Frankie's hair, bending slightly to kiss the top of her head. "I'd love nothing more. Thank you for letting me hold that spot for you, Francesca. This is the cherry on top of a perfect day."

"You mean a sundae, right?" Frankie wriggles her brows, making everyone laugh.

Rye turns to face me. I can't stop a single tear from falling down my face, and she reaches to wipe it with her thumb. I can't believe this is our family now and forever. Love is the perfect topping to this perfect day.

The End

Thanks for reading!