



# Protecting Little Phoebe (Littles of Rawhide Ranch #11)

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**Category:** Dark Erotica

**Description:** He wasn't enough. She's been told she's too much. Together, they might just be exactly right...

Left shattered by the revelation that his ex-wife only ever loved his money, Barren Rose heads to Rawhide Ranch in search of the Little girl he's always wanted.

And leaves disappointed yet again.

Until he spots an adorable woman with blonde pigtails broken down on the side of the road. From the moment he lays eyes on sweet Phoebe, he knows she's the Little girl he's dreamed of.

Even knowing he's twenty years older than her isn't enough to change his mind once he decides to claim Phoebe as his own.

He just has to be sure she wants him for all the right reasons. So he keeps his wealth a secret, determined that this time will be different.

But Barren isn't the only one with something to hide. And when his and Phoebe's worlds collide, and the truth of who they both are finally comes to light, the love they've found at Rawhide will be put to the ultimate test...

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# Page 1

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## PROLOGUE

Smash!

The bottle landed against the wall with a satisfying crash, glass falling on the floor.

Hmm. He should clean that up.

Why? There's only you here in this huge house.

A house that Barren had spent the last twenty years living in with his wife. Only, she wasn't his wife anymore. He glanced down at the divorce papers on the coffee table. It was official. They were divorced. He was single.

And that fucking scared him.

Was he going to spend the rest of his life alone? He'd been married to Krystal for twenty years. Did he know how to be on his own anymore?

You've been on your own these last ten months since she left you.

Yeah, but a part of him had hoped she would change her mind. That she'd decide that her new, younger man wasn't right for her and come back to him. He let out a sour laugh. That wasn't happening. Krystal was gone and his life was falling apart.

Barren glared over toward the front door as someone knocked on it. Who could that be?

Maybe it's Krystal.

Fuck. What if it was?

He was sitting here on his own, a complete and utter mess. He'd drunk half a bottle of vodka and now moved onto beer. The world definitely tilted as he got to his feet.

Don't open the door. You can't let her see you like this. You haven't showered in days.

Go to her. Beg her to come back to you. You can't survive on your own.

Fuck.

Opening the door, he stared blurrily at the person standing there. "You're not Krystal."

"Nope, I'm not," replied Eliot grimly. "And you're a mess. Why didn't you call me?"

"Was I supposed to?" He didn't remember that.

Eliot sighed. "Yes, you idiot. When you need me, you're supposed to call and tell me."

"I don't need you." What was he talking about?

"You don't?" Eliot asked. "So you're fine?"

"You got it." Barren tried to smile, but he wasn't sure he succeeded. "So, what are you doing here? Why aren't you at home with your Littles?" Eliot had two Littles, Isla and Marcus. The lucky bastard. Not that he was jealous or anything.

Sure you aren't. You're not jealous over the fact that he has two Littles and you have none.

And now you sound bitter.

Eliot deserved to be happy after losing his wife, Anna. They'd been so in love and Barren hadn't expected his friend to ever find someone else. Let alone two people to love.

"Because I came here to check on you. Melly called and said that the divorce papers came through. And you've stopped answering your phone."

"Melly should mind her own business. I'm her boss, not her friend."

"Melly cares about you," Eliot said firmly. "And I dare you to say that to her face."

Yeah, he wouldn't be doing that. Melly scared him. "I told you that I'm fine." He was getting sick of saying it, if he was honest.

"Walk in a straight line and I'll believe you."

Barren spun around to do just that. And found the floor coming toward him. How the hell had the floor moved like that?

Suddenly, Eliot wrapped an arm around him, holding him up.

"Shit," he muttered.

"Yep," Eliot agreed.

"I'm in a bad way."

“You are. But I’m here now. Let’s get some coffee into you and then tomorrow we can have a chat about what comes next.”

Fun. Talking was the last thing he wanted to do. Yet he knew Eliot was right. He couldn’t continue to drown his sorrows in vodka and beer.

Something had to change.

“What the hell was I thinking?” Barren moaned the next morning as he sat at the kitchen table. His head was thumping and he felt queasy. The smell of food cooking wasn’t helping. Nor was Eliot’s cheerful whistling. He loved the guy, but he needed to shut up.

Now.

Eliot placed a plate of toast in front of him along with a cup of coffee.

Barren took the coffee gratefully. The toast could wait until he knew it wasn’t going to come back up.

“You’re hurting,” Eliot told him. “I get it. I know what it’s like to lose someone you love.”

And now he felt like a complete asshole. Because Eliot’s wife had died. She hadn’t left him for a twenty-something nightclub DJ.

God.

How was this his life?

“I’m sorry,” he told Eliot.

“Why?” Eliot sat across from him with his own cup of coffee.

“For acting like an idiot and causing Melly to get so worried that she called you. Did you bring Isla and Marcus?” He hadn’t met Eliot’s new boyfriend and girlfriend. It was still hard to wrap his head around Eliot being with a man and a woman.

Two Littles.

Lucky bastard.

“Nope. They’re back home.”

“You left them alone?” He raised his eyebrows. He couldn’t imagine ever leaving his Little alone. He had the feeling he’d be so possessive and overprotective that they’d rarely be allowed out of his gaze.

And you’d probably cause them to run from you. Just like Krystal.

He winced as he recalled her yelling at him that he was too controlling.

You have to change.

“They’ll be all right for a couple of days. Marcus is busy at work, and I didn’t want to uproot him. Besides, you need my attention right now. They understand. They know you’re important to me. You can’t keep going like this, Barren.”

Barren rubbed his temple. God, the inside of his mouth was as dry as the desert. “I know,” Barren said. “I just needed to break down for a while. I spent so much of my life with Krystal and now it feels like all of those years were a waste. She said she didn’t love me. That she wasn’t sure she ever had loved me, and she only stayed with me because of my money.”

“That bitch,” Eliot said, making Barren raise his eyebrows.

He wasn't sure he'd ever heard Eliot call a woman a bitch.

“I'm just speaking the truth. She is a bitch to tell you that. And I don't think it's true, anyway. She did love you. She was just trying to hurt you.”

Well, she'd been successful.

“Is it all over for me?” he asked Eliot quietly.

Eliot leaned forward. “Of course it's not over.”

“I have no one. What am I supposed to do now? Who am I without her?”

“You pick yourself up and you find yourself some happiness. Your life isn't over. You have to figure out who you are without Krystal. And you never know, you might like that person better.”

Maybe. He didn't like who he was right now. “I'm too old to start over.”

“Bullshit. Look at me. I never thought I'd find someone after Anna's death and now I've got two amazing people waiting at home for me and probably getting up to way too much mischief. There is someone else out there for you.”

“I don't know. I don't know how to even find them.” He felt so lost. How did people even date now? Through apps and websites? God. He wasn't going to do that.

“You could go to Rawhide Ranch.”

Barren raised his gaze to his friend. “Go to Rawhide Ranch? The place you liked to

go with Anna?”

Eliot and Anna used to visit Rawhide Ranch regularly. It was a kink-friendly ranch in Montana that provided a safe haven for submissives and Littles to be themselves. Or that’s how Eliot had explained it. It was also where Eliot had met Isla and Marcus.

Did he really think that Barren could find someone there? Krystal had always refused to go there, even though she was a submissive. Or she had pretended to be in the beginning of their relationship. It had been years since they’d played. How had he been so blind?

“You know that Anna loved Rawhide Ranch. It’s also where I met Marcus and Isla. Sometimes, I think she sent them to me.”

“Really? You think it was fate?” he asked, shocked.

Eliot shrugged. “Maybe? I don’t know. I just know I thought I would never be happy again after Anna died. That she was the only person I could ever love. I still love her. But I love them too. A visit to Rawhide could be good for you. Would you want a relationship with a Little?”

“I don’t know. I don’t feel like I’d be a good Daddy right now.”

“Perhaps they’d give you a reason to find your Daddy again. Also, eat your toast.”

Barren ran his hand over his face. He wasn’t a person who liked to talk about his feelings or his needs. What he liked most was to take care of other people, not have them look after him.

“I’m not one of your Littles,” he warned.



Eliot just raised his eyebrows, looking unperturbed. “Seems like you could use someone to take care of you.”

Fuck.

The last thing he needed was Daddy Eliot hovering around him. Perhaps it was time to figure out who he was without Krystal. But did he really need to go somewhere to do that?

“Rawhide Ranch could help you find yourself.”

Barren snorted. “Find myself?”

“There’s something healing about being there. About being surrounded by people who are supportive. Who care about each other. Just think about it.”

Sure. He’d think about it.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:18 am*

### CHAPTER 1

Barren stared at the rising sun, one boot-clad foot resting on the lowest rung of the wooden fence. It was chilly this morning. When he'd been younger, he'd never felt the cold. But he was now closer to fifty than forty. And it felt like the chill now settled into his bones.

Fuck.

He hated this feeling in his gut. Regret. Worry. Anger. Had he wasted most of his life? Had he spent the best years of his life in love with a woman who, it turned out, hadn't actually loved him back? Who'd just been with him for his money?

"Good place to watch the sun rise."

Barren's lips twitched in amusement as he glanced at Derek Hawkins, the owner of Rawhide Ranch, as the man stepped up beside him, leaning against the fence.

"Do you have cameras out here or something?" He glanced around as though looking for them.

"Why? Are you doing something you need to hide?" Derek asked, sounding amused.

"Not today," Barren joked. "But either you have cameras or some sort of sixth sense about when you're needed."

"You need me?"

“Nope. That sixth sense must be broken,” he told the other man.

“Strange. It hasn’t put me wrong yet,” Derek replied. “Everything all right?”

Barren sighed. He didn’t need to talk about his feelings. He’d done that with Eliot over several days. Several sober days. Yeah, he’d tried to drink away his feelings.

He hadn’t been successful.

After going back with Eliot to his place and meeting his Littles, Barren had decided to take a chance and come to Rawhide Ranch. His friend was ridiculously happy living his dream life with Marcus and Isla. A life where he didn’t have to hide his Dominant side. Where he didn’t have to hold back his need to protect, support, indulge, and discipline.

Barren wanted that.

When those divorce papers had come in, he’d spiralled down into a dark place. If it wasn’t for Eliot, he might not have found his way back out. He might not have made the decision to find his own Little. Someone he could take care of. Who would appreciate his protective, possessive streak and wouldn’t find him smothering, old-fashioned, and controlling.

Krystal’s words.

So he’d come here. Unfortunately, it hadn’t been a successful trip.

You were hoping for too much.

Yep, he’d gotten his hopes up. It was ridiculous and a forty-eight-year-old man should know better. Had he really expected to just find someone? That they would

magically be waiting here for him? He had to be patient. Hopefully it would happen.

“I just need more patience,” he said.

“You don’t seem like a man who lacks patience,” Derek replied mildly. “But sometimes it’s when you least expect it that fate steps in and gives you what you were looking for.”

Right. Sure. He just hoped that fate remembered that he wasn’t getting any younger.

“I’m going to head home today,” he told Derek.

“You sure?”

“Yep. I’ve been gone over a week now. I should really get back to work.”

Derek nodded. “Work is important.”

Except it wasn’t anymore, was it? He had more money than he knew what to do with. And he could do a lot of his work from here anyway. However, the longer he stayed here without meeting a Little who suited him, who wanted him, the more depressed he grew. So for his peace of mind he was going. Perhaps he’d come back another time.

Or maybe you won’t.

“I can’t stop you from leaving, but we’ll miss you,” Derek told him.

He raised his eyebrows. “You barely know me.”

“I’m a good judge of character and you’re a good man, Barren. You’ll find her. She’s

out there.”

Barren sighed. He wasn't so sure.

Barren drove out of Rawhide Ranch's gates, waving at the security guard as he went past. He liked how secure this place was. Derek took the safety of everyone on the Ranch seriously, especially the Littles.

It was too bad that he hadn't clicked with any of the Littles who currently lived on the Ranch. However, no one had seemed right. And he didn't want to make another mistake like he had with Krystal. This time he was determined to find the perfect Little. He kept driving. Perhaps he'd come back another time.

About half an hour into his drive, he saw someone on the opposite side of the road. A bright red classic Chevrolet pickup was pulled over without its hazard lights on. There was a woman standing next to the pickup. Suddenly, she kicked one of the tires, before grabbing her foot and nearly falling over as she jumped around.

He quickly turned around and drove up behind the pickup, turning on his hazard lights as he parked his truck. The woman didn't even notice him as she hopped back and forth, swearing. Annoyance filled him. As a woman alone, she should be aware of her surroundings at all times. What was she thinking?

The urge to scold her was strong, but he held himself in check. This girl wasn't his. Barren took a quick moment to study her. She definitely looked younger than him. She had her pale blonde hair up in two pigtails with red and white ribbons. She wore a pair of white cut-off shorts, red pantyhose, and sparkly red boots. A cropped white sweater with a red heart stitched on the front completed the outfit.

She was absolutely adorable.

And not dressed for the weather at all. While they had hit spring and the sun was shining, it was only around fifty-eight degrees outside. Not warm enough for tiny shorts.

“Miss? Are you all right?” he asked as he approached her.

She suddenly spun with a cry. He expected her to show fear or worry. To step back, away from him. What he didn’t expect was for her to move toward him, for her to reach out and... hug him? Was she really hugging him? Who was this woman? Was she all right? Maybe she’d hit her head?

“Um, are you all right?” he asked again.

“I’m really, really not,” she told him, stepping back. “But I’m so glad to see you.”

“You are?” he asked slowly. What was going on?

“Uh-huh. I was getting worried that no one was going to drive along this road. And that I was going to have to camp overnight in Cherry.”

“Cherry?” he asked.

She patted the bright red pickup. “This is Cherry.”

“You thought you would spend the night in your vehicle? Do you know how low the temperature gets at night?” Not to mention how unsafe that was for a woman alone.

She held up a finger. “I do not. But, also, I hate camping. And I think I would really hate camping in Cherry in the dark and cold. So that’s why I’m so happy to see you. I mean, not just because I need help. I’m sure I’d be happy to see you anyway.”

“You would be?” he asked, feeling more confused by the moment.

“Sure.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Um, I don’t know. You seem like a nice guy.” She looked him over and nodded.

“Yes, I declare that you’re a good guy. Hi, I’m Phoebe.” She held out her hand and he stared down at it.

She had small red hearts painted on her nails.

Dear lord.

Who was this girl? And how had she landed in his path?

Sometimes it’s when you least expect it that fate steps in.

Nope. He wasn’t listening to Derek right now. That was ridiculous and this girl wasn’t for him. She was too young. Too impetuous and lacking in self-preservation. Not for him.

Or maybe she’d be perfect for you, idiot. If you just took a chance. If you let someone in.

Dear lord. He’d only just met her, and he knew nothing about her, other than the fact that she knew nothing about vehicles, couldn’t dress for the weather, and seemed overly friendly.

“You can’t know that just from looking at me.”

“Why not? You’ve got a kind aura.”

“A kind aura?” He frowned and shook his head at her. “That’s not a thing.”

“Sure it is.”

Sighing, he took her hand to shake it and realized how cold it was. “Your hand is like a block of ice.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” She tried to tug it free, but he held it tight in his. “I’ve always run cold.”

Run cold?

“Um, can I have it back?”

“What back?”

“My hand.” She glanced down at where he was still holding on to her.

Shit. What was wrong with him? He quickly let go of her hand and turned back toward his truck.

“Oh no, are you leaving?” she asked. “I’m so sorry! You can have it back. Keep it if you like.”

The panic in her voice made him pause and turn back to her slowly, his hands in the air. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m just getting my jacket.”

Her shoulders slumped as she sighed in relief. “Oh, good. That’s a relief.”



Grabbing his jacket from the backseat, he turned and banged right into her. Shit! Reaching out, he grabbed her arms as she wobbled on her high-heeled boots.

“I didn’t even hear you move up behind me,” he said. “Are you all right?”

“Oh, yes. Sorry! Eric always hates when I do that to him.”

“Who is Eric?” he snapped. Then he took a breath. Shit. What was wrong with him? What did it matter who Eric was? And why did he feel a surge of jealousy?

“Oh, he’s one of my dickhead brothers,” she said cheerfully.

He gently guided her back a couple of steps so he could move away from the truck door. Then he swung his jacket around her shoulders.

“You have more than one?” he asked.

“Huh?” She gaped up at him, looking shocked.

“Brothers? You have more than one dickhead brother?” His lips twitched at the description. He had two younger brothers, so he knew how she felt. He loved them, but they could be complete assholes sometimes.

Which reminded him that he should call them. They’d both tried to contact him over the last few months, but he’d been in too much of a dark place to call them back.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Putting my jacket over you. You’re cold. Actually, you should put your arms in the sleeves so it doesn’t slide off.”

When she didn't move, he took control. That was what he did best. He slid her arms into the jacket. There, that should keep her warmer.

"Why?"

Barren frowned. "Why? Because you're cold."

"You gave me your jacket to wear because you thought I was cold?" she asked.

"I didn't think you were cold; I knew you were. Your skin was freezing."

"But that's probably just bad circulation."

"Maybe. But it's also fifty-eight out today and you aren't wearing enough clothes."

Phoebe glanced down at herself, then up at him, her lower lip dropping into a pout. "You don't like what I'm wearing."

He held up his hands, realizing it was a trap. "I never said that. You look gorgeous. But you aren't wearing enough clothing to keep you warm." There. Had he worded that carefully enough?

Phoebe huffed out a breath. "I guess not. When I saw the sun shining this morning, I got excited. It doesn't get this cold in April where I live."

"Where is that?" he asked.

"I live in Las Vegas. I mean, it gets cooler in December, but it's spring! So, yeah. I don't have many warm clothes with me."

"Did you drive from Las Vegas?" he asked skeptically.

“Uh-huh.” She nodded. “I left yesterday afternoon, stayed in a hotel overnight, then got up this morning to drive some more.”

“That’s a long drive,” he scolded. He didn’t like the thought of her driving all that way on her own.

“Tell me about it. My butt is kind of numb.”

He knew a remedy for that.

Nope.

Do not offer to spank her.

No matter how much she seemed to need it.

“You drove all that way alone?” he asked.

“Yep! Didn’t I do well? I didn’t crash or get one speeding ticket. Well, that I know about, anyway.”

He sighed.

“You sigh a lot. Is that normal for you?” she asked him, curiously.

“Not really. It seems to be a new affliction.”

“Huh. You might want to get that looked at.”

“I’ll take it under consideration,” he said dryly. “I have a feeling I know what will cure it.”

“That’s good then!” she said cheerfully, bouncing up and down on her toes.

“Uh, please don’t do that.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because you’ll fall over and hurt yourself and that’s unacceptable.”

Shit. He probably shouldn’t have said that. He was coming on too strong. Being too bossy. He didn’t even know her.

“Aww, that’s so sweet.”

It was? Barren was starting to wonder if there was something wrong with this girl. She seemed so positive and happy.

Was that normal? Or had he become too used to people being angry and emotional? Was his compass on what was normal behavior skewed?

Perhaps.

Or perhaps she was hiding something behind all that positivity.

“It is?”

“Yeah. I can’t remember the last time someone was concerned that I would hurt myself. Or was worried about me getting cold.”

“Not even your brother?”

“Which one? Oh, it doesn’t matter. None of them would care.”

Really?

“How many do you have?”

“Seven,” she told him with a smile.

“Seven?”

“I know. It’s a lot. I told them that they’re like the seven dwarfs. I even gave them all nicknames. They didn’t appreciate that. It took me a lot of time to come up with those nicknames. They were Bossy, Bumbly, Grunty, Flappy, Mumbly, Sneaky, and Joe.”

“You have seven brothers and not one of them stopped you from driving all this way alone? Are they all younger than you?” That might explain things. “Wait. And Joe?”

“Yeah. His name is Joseph. Honestly, I just got tired of thinking up nicknames. Besides, he’s kind of the nicest out of all of them. And no, they’re all older than me. I’m the baby. Apparently, Mama wanted a girl and was determined to keep trying until she got one.”

“She must have been pleased to get you,” he said.

“Maybe? My Uncle Tim said she was, but she died soon after I was born so she never got to enjoy me. I think that might be why my older brothers hate me. They blame me for her death. Do you know how far away Rawhide Ranch is?”

He didn’t even know where to start with everything she’d just told him. Opening his mouth, he closed it again abruptly.

Shit.

“Sweetheart,” he whispered. “You think your brothers blame you for your mother’s death? Even though you were just a baby? One it sounds like she wanted a lot?”

She blinked up at him, those big blue eyes filled with wonder. They shone and he wondered for a moment if she was going to cry. Instead of feeling panic at the thought of having caused her tears, he almost wished she would cry. So he could hold her tight and hug her.

“You called me sweetheart,” she said quietly.

“I’m sorry.” He felt a surge of panic. “That was inappropriate.”

“Oh.” A look of dejection filled her face. “It was? I liked it. But Paul will tell you that I’m often inappropriate.”

“Paul?”

“Another dickhead brother. Seven of them, remember? And they do blame me for her death. I heard them talking about it once. Well, some of them. The older ones. The younger three weren’t in the room. They don’t have much of a memory of Mama. Uncle Tim used to tell me stories about her, though. He was her older brother and he adored her. I often wished one of my brothers would adore me. But my dad did, so that was enough. Until he died, too. And now it’s just me with my dickhead brothers.”

Jesus.

“Your Uncle Tim?”

“He’s living in Hawaii now. He told me to come live with him. I’m thinking about it. Do you think I’d like Hawaii?”

“I suppose so. It’s hard to say.”

Phoebe nodded. “Well, I figured if I was going to go for a change of scenery, I’d go for something completely different and come to Montana.” She breathed in deep. “I already feel better. Well, except for Cherry breaking down and my phone dying, and no one driving along this road. Except for you. My hero.”

He snorted. “I’m no one’s hero, sweetheart.” And he really shouldn’t call her sweetheart.

“You are to me.” She clasped her hands together. “Do you think I could use your phone to call roadside assistance?”

Great.

He should have offered to do that as soon as he got out of his truck.

“Of course.” He went back to his truck to grab his phone. “Wait, did you ask if I knew where Rawhide Ranch was?”

“Yep! That’s where I’m headed. Do you know of it?”

“You were headed to Rawhide Ranch?” Actually, that kind of made sense. “You’re a Little.”

It wasn’t a question. And as soon as he said it, he wished the words back.

### CHAPTER 2

Her brothers thought aura reading was dumb and pointless. A lot of the time, she was pretty sure that they felt the same way about her. When her dad was alive, they had mostly just ignored her. They went on with their lives and she did what she liked. Her dad used to tell her that they were jealous of her. But she didn't see why.

She wasn't as smart as Paul or Joe. Or charismatic like Clay. A leader like Eric. Or popular like Tony. Good at sports like Darin or able to draw like Zane. Nor was she good looking like, well, any of them.

They were all gorgeous and popular. While she was quirky and weird. She knew that and she was okay with it. Normally. But sometimes it hurt when people stared at her like she was crazy.

Her dad had just told her that not everyone could handle how amazing she was. But she wasn't sure she believed that anymore. Perhaps she was just too much for people. Over the last month since her dad died, her brothers had told her several times to tone herself down. To grow up.

They were probably right. It wasn't normal for a twenty-eight-year-old to squeal when she saw something pretty and sparkly. To own nine pairs of light-up, glittery sneakers, and about a billion fluffy pillows. To have a collection of toy horses and a special one that she slept with every night.

It didn't matter that she'd tried to explain to them that she was a Little. That had just made her weirder in their eyes. Paul had even told her that she was just seeking



attention by trying to be a child forever. It had hurt.

God, their words had hurt. Especially as they'd become bolder with them since their dad died. Which is why she'd left. She hadn't told any of them where she was going. Basically, at twenty-eight, she'd run away from home. And she was running straight to Rawhide Ranch. Which seemed to be one of the few places where Littles and submissives were not only accepted but cared for.

Protected.

Her dad had always protected her. But she also longed for a Daddy to do even more. It likely wouldn't happen. Even if she met someone who would want her, which was a big ask, her relationship with him would never be accepted by her brothers. Although sometimes she did wonder why she cared about them...

She just wanted to do this for herself. To feel accepted and safe for once. Was that too much to ask?

They might think you're too much as well... maybe that's just who you are. The girl no one wants to be around.

All right. Now, that was just mean.

"Phoebe? I'm sorry if that upset you. Are you all right?"

She startled and nearly toppled over on her boots.

"Shit!" The kind man, who hadn't told her his name yet, grabbed hold of her arms and steadied her.

Wow. He really was hero material. "You keep rescuing me," she told him dreamily.

If she could have come up with a dream Daddy, it might have been him. Those wide gray eyes, and that firm chin. Dreamy. He was older, that was clear from the salt in his hair and the lines by his eyes. But, lord, those things just made him hotter.

He was hot Daddy.

Hot, silver fox Daddy.

Hot, silver fox, spanky Daddy.

Yeah. That was her dream. A gorgeous, stern, sexy Daddy who liked to spank.

Phoebe's bottom tingled just thinking about going over his knee.

Quit it. You don't even know if he is a Daddy. But he knows that you're a Little.

Phoebe wasn't sure if she should be concerned or not that he'd figured her out so easily. Maybe she should work on her mysteriousness... wait, was that a word? Yep, she thought it was.

And maybe he is a Daddy and that's how he knows what you are.

"You shouldn't be wearing those boots," he grumbled. "If you were mine, they'd go straight into the trash can."

"Hey! These are great boots. Look, they have pearls inset into the heels. And they're red. And sparkly. You can't get better than red and sparkly. And the pearls add class. It's a great combo."

"But you can't walk in them."

“That’s hardly the point.” Didn’t he get it? They were pretty.

“Uh, you need to be able to walk in your footwear. That’s the point of them. To support your feet.”

“That sounds a bit boring. Maybe my boots don’t want to be supportive. Perhaps they want to be... the star!” she sang the last two words while putting her hands up into the air.

“Footwear can be pretty and not twist your ankles,” he told her.

Hmm. Maybe.

“How did you know?” she whispered, circling back to what he’d said before. About her being a Little.

He stared down at her intently. “I am sorry if I upset you.”

“More like you caught me by surprise,” she told him. “Is it that obvious?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say obvious. Would you be less worried if I told you that I’ve just come from Rawhide Ranch?”

Relief filled her. That did make her feel better. “So, um, are you a Dom?”

“I’m a Daddy Dom,” he told her.

“And that’s how you knew I was a Little?”

“I suppose it is. Especially when you said you’re going to Rawhide Ranch. Are you going there to attend the University?”

“What? No. I’m just going for a holiday. I might stay a week, maybe two.”

“You don’t have a job to get back to?”

“I’m between jobs. So is it far?”

“It’s about an hour away.”

She sighed. “Bummer. Is there a town nearby where I could get Cherry fixed?”

“Yeah, there’s Porter’s Corner. I’m sure there’s a mechanic there. Did it make any funny noises? Did any lights come on?”

“Ah, yeah.”

“Yeah, what?” he asked, looking up from his phone.

“Yeah, to both of those things. A light came on the dashboard and then it made a strange noise, and I pulled it to the side of the road and turned it off. Then when I tried to turn it on again... it just wouldn’t.”

“That sounds odd.”

“Do you know anything about cars?” she asked.

“Not a lot, I’m afraid.”

“I get that. It’s all magic to me.”

“Magic?” he asked.

“Yep. I like to think there are fairies in the engine making it work. Magic.”

“I don’t think that’s quite how it works.”

Bummer.

She felt her lower lip slip out in a pout. It wasn’t like her to let her Little out this much around a stranger. But his aura was so pretty. All golden with sparkly bits. Plus, he was a Daddy. And a sexy one.

“Do you like to spank?” she asked as he brought his phone to his ear.

“I, uh... well... yes, hello.”

He turned away and her shoulders slumped. She smacked the palm of her hand against her forehead. What a dumbass! Who asked things like that? She did. That’s who. When was she ever going to learn to be cool?

### CHAPTER 3

Did he like to spank?

Had she really asked him that? And what the hell had he done? Gotten all flustered and turned away from her? At forty-eight, he'd thought he was too old to get flustered and embarrassed. Turned out, he wasn't.

Clearing his throat, he turned to find her sitting sideways in the driver's side of her pickup with her legs out the door. She seemed to be muttering to herself while holding a stuffed horse in her arms.

He strode toward her, coming to an abrupt stop as she glanced up at him. There was such naked vulnerability in her face that it caught him by surprise. Barren cleared his throat as he crouched in front of her. "Phoebe, are you all right?"

Of course she's not all right. Look at her. She looks like she's close to tears.

"What's your name?" she asked, surprising him.

Jesus. Where was his brain? "I'm so sorry. It's Barren."

"Barren?" She blinked, looking surprised. "That's not what I expected you to say."

"It isn't?"

"Nope. That's a really cool name."

“Is it? Am I not cool enough to pull it off?” he asked, feeling amused.

“Oh no,” she said hastily. “I’m sure you’re very, uh, cool.”

He snorted. “No lying, little girl.” Fuck. What was he doing? “I’m sorry,” he said hastily.

“You don’t have to apologize,” she replied.

“Yes, I do. I shouldn’t have said that. Whether you’re a Little or not, it’s inappropriate.” He was really off his game at the moment.

“All right,” she whispered, looking more uncomfortable by the moment.

Fuck. What could he say to make this better? “Who is this?” He gestured at the horse in her hands.

To his surprise, she gasped and hid the horse behind her back. Then she shied back from him. As though... as though she was afraid of him?

Shit.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to have him out.”

“Hey, you don’t have to hide him,” he told her gently.

She eyed him suspiciously.

“I wasn’t going to take him from you.”

Hmm, she didn’t flinch or change expression so that didn’t seem to be her worry.

“Or make fun of you,” he added.

This time, she winced. That was it. Had someone made fun of her for needing a soft toy? There could be assholes out there. People who didn’t understand the Daddy/Little dynamic.

And Phoebe was so open and unguarded with her Little and her feelings. He could see how she could be easily hurt or ridiculed. Anger flooded him at the thought of someone putting this girl down or making her feel less.

“Please bring him out again.” He kept his tone soft but injected a firm note in his tone so she knew he meant business. “I would like to meet him.”

“Really?” she asked. “He... he doesn’t really like meeting new people. Not everyone understands him.” Her voice was growing younger, and she raised her hand to her mouth, chewing on her thumbnail.

Barren knew it wasn’t his place, that he was overstepping. But her distress wasn’t something he could ignore. The Daddy part of him was yelling at him to fix this. To help her. So he grasped hold of her hand before he could talk himself out of it, pulling it from her mouth. “Don’t chew your nails.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. But before she could say anything, he spoke again. “I would like to meet him.” There was no mistaking the stern note in his voice.

Slowly, she reached back and drew out the tan-colored horse. It had a large white patch on its back, and it looked soft and well-loved.

“Well, hello, and what is your name?” he asked the horse, not looking at Phoebe.

“This is Snickerdoodle,” she told him. “He’s a bit shy.”



“That’s all right, Snickerdoodle. Nothing wrong with being shy. Can I pet him?”

This time, he glanced up at Phoebe. Her lips were parted, and she was staring at him with a look of wonder on her face. It was pretty obvious she wasn’t used to such acceptance. Had she ever had a Daddy? Was that why she was on her way to Rawhide? Was she looking for a Daddy?

He had to stifle a wave of irrational anger over that thought. After all, hadn’t he gone to Rawhide hoping he might find a Little? He should be happy that she was going somewhere where she’d be safe and accepted.

Then she slowly nodded.

“Thank you,” he told her solemnly as he reached out and lightly patted Snickerdoodle. “It’s good to meet you, Snickerdoodle. You’re a very handsome boy.”

“He likes being called handsome,” she told him.

“Just the truth.”

She tried to put the horse behind her again, but he reached out and placed his hand on the toy, stopping her.

“Does holding Snickerdoodle make you feel better?”

“Yes,” she replied. “He’s my best friend.”

“Then don’t put him away,” he told her.

“Someone else might come.”

He glanced around and then back at her. “Doesn’t look like that’s going to happen anytime soon. And if someone comes, you can put him away then if you’d like. But I want you to feel settled and it’s obvious he helps. Not that you need to feel upset for asking me if I liked spanking.”

“I shouldn’t have said that.” Her shoulders were slumped, her gaze on her lap.

And he hated that she looked so dejected. Working on instinct, he reached out and cupped her chin, tilting her head up so she had to look at him. “You did nothing wrong, and I won’t have you feeling ashamed. Understand me?”

“Not really,” she replied. “You’re kind of confusing.”

He couldn’t blame her for feeling that way. He was confusing himself. “I wasn’t offended. I promise. So you don’t need to be embarrassed or upset. Now, I talked to roadside assistance and they’re going to be twenty minutes.”

“Oh.” She chewed her lip and glanced around. This road was quiet, and he could see she was nervous. “Thank you. I suppose I better let you get on your way.”

That wasn’t happening. “You really think I’m going to leave you here alone?” He stood. “Sorry, can’t crouch down forever. I no longer have twenty-year-old knees.”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” She stood quickly. “Are you all right? Do you want to sit down?”

Barren waved her off. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure you can stay? Weren’t you headed somewhere? I don’t want to make you late.”

He didn’t want to tell her that he’d likely already missed his plane. “I have nowhere

to be.” It wasn’t entirely untrue. “I just need to make a couple of calls.”

With a sigh, Phoebe watched him walk away. She should insist that he leave. It was unlikely that a man like him didn’t have somewhere he was supposed to be. She was being selfish because she didn’t want to be out here on her own.

It was just too quiet out here. So she kept quiet and held on to Snickerdoodle as she stared at Barren. He paced back and forth as he spoke into his phone. Did he have a girlfriend? A wife? Surely a man that gorgeous was taken? But he didn’t act like he had a wife. And she got the feeling he’d be a very possessive husband. She sighed dreamily at the thought.

Maybe he was already taken, but a girl could dream. And she’d never had anyone talk to her or treat her like he did. With acceptance and caring. Her dad had loved her, but he hadn’t always understood her. Same with Uncle Tim. It was a bit sad that she’d felt more acceptance with a stranger than she ever had with the majority of her family.

As a truck pulled up, she set Snickerdoodle into the backseat and got out with a sigh. Time to adult again. Which really sucked.

### CHAPTER 4

“Are you sure you’re okay to drop me off at Rawhide Ranch?”

Barren glanced over at Phoebe. She was tense as she sat in his passenger seat, her hands twisting together nervously. She raised her thumb to her mouth, chewing on the nail. He wanted to tell her to stop, but he didn’t really have that right.

Roadside assistance had been unable to get her vehicle going, so they were towing it to the closest garage in Porter’s Corner. They’d offered to give her a lift, but he’d been able to tell that she was uncomfortable with that.

So he’d opened his mouth and said he would drop her off. Probably a really dumb idea. He should be driving to Missoula so he could catch his early morning flight. But he just didn’t seem to be able to say goodbye to this girl. “Of course it’s fine.”

“Aren’t you heading home, though? Are you driving?”

“No, I have a flight back to Connecticut in the morning.”

“Oh, you live in Connecticut? It’s so pretty there. I used to go to New York a lot with my dad. We also visited Connecticut a few times.”

“Is this your first time visiting Rawhide Ranch?” he asked her.

“Uh-huh. I’m a bit nervous.”

“Don’t be. Everyone here is really nice, and they’ll take care of you.”

Just don’t let anyone take care of you too well.

“Have you ever been in a relationship with a Daddy before?” he asked her.

She shook her head. “No. Never. I’ve dated before, of course. I was with my high school boyfriend for years. He wasn’t a Daddy, though. That was before I even knew that I was a Little. He broke things off after five years because he said I wasn’t mature enough for him. That he wanted someone who would settle down and be serious. I just... what’s the point of being serious all the time? You only get one life; can’t it be a fun one?”

He hummed as he thought over his own life. Had it been fun? Or had he spent most of it working hard to provide Krystal with everything that she wanted? Catering to all her needs because that fulfilled something inside him... only, had it made him happy?

Sometimes.

Maybe not at the end.

“You don’t agree. I get it. I should be an adult and knuckle down. Do my job. Stop playing around.”

“Hey, don’t put words in my mouth.” They reached the gates and he spoke to the guard briefly, showing him Phoebe’s papers before he let them through. “That’s not what I said. It’s okay to have fun. Sometimes you have to be serious too, though.”

“I know. Anyway, after we broke up, I started reading Daddy Dom books and something inside me just clicked. I knew why I’d felt... different all my life. I’ve never really felt like I fit in until I found a group of Littles online who all follow my

favorite author. They became my friends, my team, my family. And they're the ones who told me about Rawhide. But I've only just managed to find the courage to visit."

"You're being very brave. It took me a while to work up the courage to visit too."

"Really?" She glanced over at him skeptically. "You?"

"Yep. I was nervous. I wasn't sure what to expect. Or what would happen. You have this. You're going to have a great time."

She took a deep breath and nodded, then turned to him. "Thank you for dropping me off."

Barren raised his eyebrows. "None of that. I expect a proper goodbye. After I carry your bags inside. Now, wait there until I come around and open your door."

"Barren?" She reached out and grabbed his hand and he stilled.

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," he replied huskily.

"I thought you'd be back, but I didn't know it would be so soon."

Barren turned toward Derek, shaking his head. "I'm not staying."

"No?"

"I'm just dropping Phoebe off, then I'll be leaving."

Derek nodded, glancing over at where Phoebe was smiling as Erika spoke to her.

“Where did you find her?” Derek asked.

“Her vehicle had broken down. It’s been towed to Porter’s Corner. Someone will have to drive her in to get it once it’s fixed.”

“We can arrange that.”

Barren frowned, feeling unhappy about that but unsure why.

“We’ll take care of her,” Derek reassured him. “The way we do all our guests.”

“I know that,” he snapped before shaking his head. What was going on with him? He shouldn’t be snapping at Derek just because his brain was in turmoil, warring against his instincts. He should leave. But he wanted to stay. “I need to get going.”

“Sure. We’ll see you soon.”

Well. What did he mean by that? But before he could question the other man, Phoebe skipped up to him. Well, he assumed she was trying to skip, but her boots made it difficult, and she tumbled into him.

“Oomph!” she cried. “I’m so sorry! Did I hurt you?”

“As if you could hurt me, little girl.” Damn it. There he went again. He straightened her up, then took a step back. Was that a hint of sadness in her eyes? If there was, it was gone as quick as it appeared.

“Um, well,” she said awkwardly as she straightened her clothes. “Thanks for stopping to help me. And for dropping me off here. You’re like a Knight in Pressed Pants.”

He had no idea if that was a compliment or not. “You are welcome. But in the future, you will not drive anywhere without first making certain that your phone is fully charged.”

Her eyes widened. “I won’t?”

“You will not.”

“Um. Okay.”

“Good girl,” he praised her. “I also want your word that you will wear a jacket when you are outside.”

“I suppose I can do that.”

“Good.”

“Um. Yes. Good.” She rubbed her head. “Well, I guess this is goodbye.”

“Goodbye.” He forced himself to turn and walk out the door. A feeling of wrongness hit him as he stepped outside.

Why was he leaving her? Should he stay? No. There was no real reason for him to stay.

“Barren! Barren, wait!”

He turned to see Phoebe running toward him. In bare feet! What was she thinking?

“Where are your boots?” he demanded.



“I took them off. I can’t run in them. Here, you forgot your jacket.”

“You could have kept the jacket, sweetheart,” he told her, taking it. He actually liked the idea of her keeping it, wearing something from him.

“That... that wasn’t the only reason I ran to catch up with you,” she told him. “I owe you an apology.”

His eyebrows rose. “What do you mean? Why?”

“Because you apologized for calling me Little girl which means I should apologize. Because I liked it.”

“You did?” he asked.

“Yes.” She twisted her fingers together. “Are you sure it’s safe to drive? It’s getting late.”

He felt a surge of something toward her affection? Attraction? He should go. He’d packed his bags, changed his flight, and Melly was expecting him in the office in the morning. But here was this girl looking up at him with concern in her gaze. For him? Or was she nervous about staying here?

“I know you’re nervous, but the people here are going to take care of you.”

“Oh, you’re right. I’m so sorry. I’m being selfish. Please drive carefully and don’t worry about me!”

She turned away, starting to run back inside and he couldn’t stand it. He didn’t want things to end like this. With her running off from him.

“Phoebe, wait!” He half expected her to ignore him and keep running. But to his relief, she turned and stared back at him.

“Yes?”

“I’m actually tired and hungry. I thought I might stay for dinner and leave early in the morning.” He’d likely have to get up very early to make his flight. But any lack of sleep was worth it to see the smile on her face.

### CHAPTER 5

What was she going to wear? Phoebe threw the clothes out of her suitcase in a rush. She didn't look where they landed. She didn't have time for that. She had a date.

Okay... okay... it was a... a friendship date. A thank you to her Knight in Pressed Pants for rescuing her. It was so romantic when she thought about it... but this wasn't a romantic dinner and she needed to get that out of her head.

Chill. Calm or you're going to make an idiot of yourself.

She hadn't brought anything formal to wear. Everything in her suitcase was more playful and fun. It was what she preferred to wear even if some of her brothers rolled their eyes at her choice of wardrobe.

It hurt that they didn't understand her. That they constantly wanted her to change and grow up. But that was a big part of the reason she'd come here to Rawhide so she could just be herself without worrying about anyone judging her. Without anyone trying to change her.

Acceptance was just a big thing for her. It was all she wanted from her family and something that she rarely felt. Finally, she decided to wear her favorite white T-shirt dress with a red jacket and some pretty, glittery red shoes.

Everything was better with a bit of glitter. She kept her hair up in pigtails but put some glittery eyeshadow on and some bright red lipstick. A knock on the door had her rushing over and opening it.

“Little girl, you shouldn’t open the door unless you know who is on the other side,” Barren scolded.

Lord, he looked gorgeous. That salt and pepper hair was cut short, but it looked amazing on him. He had lines and wrinkles, but somehow they made him appear more attractive. He wore black pants and an off-white shirt. Simple, but classic.

Perfect.

“Oh, but I knew it was going to be you.”

He shook his head, giving her a stern look. “You should still check. Are you ready to go? I’m glad to see you have a jacket on even though we’re not going outside. I don’t want you getting cold.”

He was so very sweet.

“Got your key card?”

“Yep!” She patted the pocket of her jacket. “I’m all set!” She shut the door behind her, and he checked to make sure it was locked.

“You know, my dad always did that too. He was always checking that the doors were locked. I never had to worry about stuff like that when I lived with him.”

Darn it. Why was she talking about her dad? Most of the time she managed to push her sorrow deep. To put on a happy face. But sometimes it still hit her hard that he was gone. Her biggest supporter. Her best friend.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart. How long has he been gone?”

“Eight months,” she replied as she walked beside him. “I still miss him a lot. We were really close. I still lived at home. Which sounds a bit bizarre when I’m twenty-eight. But I had my own apartment in the basement with my own entrance. I just didn’t like to be alone and neither did he.”

“If I had a daughter, I wouldn’t want her to live alone,” he said firmly. “And of course you still miss him. I still miss my parents and it’s been years since they died. What happened to your dad if you don’t mind me asking?”

They’d reached the restaurant by now and the server led them to a table. Barren drew out her chair and pushed it in for her.

She could feel herself blushing with pleasure. “He had a heart attack. His job was stressful. And he didn’t take care of himself very well. I should have helped take care of him better.”

Barren reached out and clasped her hand. “Look at me.”

Phoebe glanced up at him. “I’m sorry.”

Surprise filled his face. “Why are you sorry, sweetheart?”

“This was supposed to be a thank you for rescuing me and all I’ve done is talk about sad things.” Nothing good came from talking about stuff. It only made her feel worse.

“No.”

“No?” she asked curiously.

“No, you aren’t to apologize for that. You haven’t done anything wrong, understand? And your dad wouldn’t want you thinking that you could have helped him or that you

did something wrong. He'd want you to live your life."

She managed a shaky smile. "I'm trying. So, tell me about you. What brings you here?"

"A divorce," he replied.

Phoebe grimaced. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It was really tough at the time, but I think it might end up being a good thing. I'm not sure that I was happy for a long time."

"Maybe we should change the conversation. So, come here often?" She wriggled her eyebrows at him.

"Not often, no."

"Hmm. Are you from Tennessee? Because you're the only ten I see."

He groaned. "That was terrible."

"It was? Let me try harder. Did you just come out of the oven because you're smoking hot?"

This time, he laughed.

Mission accomplished.

Barren couldn't believe that he'd such a good time tonight. They were so far apart in age that they shouldn't have had much in common. But it was surprising how easy the conversation had gone.

And as he walked her back to her room, he found himself reluctant to say goodbye. They reached her door and he leaned against the wall, staring down at her. “I had a really good evening, Phoebe.”

She licked her lips, most of her lipstick had disappeared over the course of the evening. Reaching out, he brushed some of her hair off her cheek. Her skin was so smooth. He swallowed heavily.

It wasn't right to be attracted to her. But it was hard not to be. She was gorgeous, funny, sweet. She was the first person he'd been attracted to since Krystal. Which was hard to get his head around and, at the same time, a relief. Because he never thought he'd be attracted to someone else.

He leaned in. “Phoebe, I need to?—”

Bang!

A door slammed down the corridor and he stepped back. Shit! Had he been about to kiss her.

“What is it?” she asked. “Is something wrong?”

He cleared his throat. “No, sweetheart. I just wanted to wish you good night and to tell you to have a good time here. You've got my phone number if you need it.” They'd exchanged phone numbers earlier. “I hope you find what you're looking for.” Turning, he strode off, ignoring the urge to turn around and kiss her. To see if she tasted as good as she looked.

It's better this way.

He hoped.

### CHAPTER 6

Barren paced back and forth across his office in irritation. Why wasn't she answering her phone? He'd sent her several text messages. And had nothing back in reply. Last night he'd given in and called her. It had gone straight to voicemail.

Was it him? Was she ignoring his messages and calls? He'd gotten her number so he could check in with her and to make sure that everything went okay with her pickup. He'd had to force himself not to message her for at least forty-eight hours. So he didn't seem like a stalker.

But she was always on his mind. He was worried that someone might take advantage of her happy, sweet nature. That she might find herself doing something she didn't want to do because no one was watching out for her. Then he reminded herself that Rawhide was the safest place for her....

Well, other than by your side.

"Not your girl," he told himself. His phone rang and he fumbled as he tried to answer it. He was like a damn teenager with a crush. It was ridiculous.

"Hello?"

"Barren, it's Eliot."

"Oh."



There was a beat of silence. “Sorry, were you expecting someone else?” There was a hint of amusement in Eliot’s voice.

“Ah, yeah. Sorry.”

“Really? Who were you expecting to call?”

“It was nothing. Forget I said anything. How are you? Are Isla and Marcus all right?”

“They’re fine. I wouldn’t allow them to be otherwise. But I wanted to know how your trip to Rawhide went. Did you meet anyone?”

“No. Well, maybe.”

“Maybe?” Eliot asked.

“I didn’t meet someone at Rawhide, but I met her when she was on her way there. Her vehicle broke down.”

“Obviously she made an impression.”

“She was very sweet and kind. So open and bubbly and adorable.” Shit. Could he hear himself?

“Please tell me you got her phone number? Does she live somewhere close? Have you called her?”

“Wow. Slow down, I only met her once. I don’t even know her. Although she is rather open about her life, so I probably know more about her than I would someone else after a few dates.”

“That’s good for you. The last thing you need is someone secretive in your life.”

No. He’d experienced enough secrets with Krystal to last him a lifetime. “She’s not in my life. She’s a girl I met for a few hours who I helped out of a sticky situation.”

And who called you her Knight in Pressed Pants. He’d be lying if he said he didn’t like that nickname. “And she is literally a girl. I’m old enough to be her father.”

“And there’s something wrong with being with someone younger than you?”

Shit. Shit. Shit.

He needed to watch what he said. Isla and Marcus were far younger than Eliot. “No, of course not.”

“I know it’s strange to come out of a long-term relationship and think of being with someone else. I never thought I would, but I know that Anna wouldn’t want me to be miserable. She’d want me to be happy.”

“Of course she would. I don’t think Krystal is wishing happiness on me.”

“No, she took all of your happiness and it’s time to get it back. It might be with this girl, or it might not. But don’t rule her out simply because she’s younger. Maybe you’re what she needs, did you ever think about that?”

“Well, if she’s been thinking about me then how come she won’t answer her phone?”

“She might be busy? Or her phone might be off?” Eliot suggested.

Barren groaned, running his hand over his face. “Yeah, it’s possible. Still, I have no way to contact her if she doesn’t answer her phone and I’m heading into stalker

territory if I keep ringing.”

“You could call Rawhide Ranch to check on her,” Eliot suggested.

“Again, heading into stalker territory.”

“And they likely wouldn’t tell you anything as it would breach her privacy. You could go for another visit?”

“What if she wants nothing to do with me?”

“Just... don’t let what Krystal said about you affect the way you feel about yourself or getting into another relationship. She’s a liar and a manipulator. Maybe this girl isn’t the one. But there will be someone out there.”

Uh-huh. Sure. He ended the call as his assistant knocked on his door.

“Hey, Melly.”

“I’ve got Mr. Lancaster on the phone,” she told him. “He wants to speak to you again about finding a buyer for his company and why they can’t proceed further.”

“Jesus, I explained to him that all of the owners have to agree to the sale. What does he expect me to do? I’m not going to find a buyer if the company isn’t actually for sale. Anyway, arrange another Zoom meeting with him, will you? But make it next week when I have more patience.”

She nodded and left as his phone rang again. It was an unknown number, but it was coming from Montana.

Was it her? A surge of excitement ran through him, and he had to calm himself. This

was really ridiculous. “Hello?”

“Yeah, hi. This is Zeus Matherson from ZM Mechanics in Porter’s Corner. I’m calling about a 1970s cherry-red Chev that got towed to my garage five days ago? I have an owner name listed and a number, but I haven’t been able to get hold of her.”

“You haven’t?” he asked. So maybe she wasn’t screening just his calls?

“Nope, I had your number on here from roadside assistance. Figured you might know how to get hold of her? Her vehicle is ready to be collected.”

“Uh, thanks for calling. I’ll get in touch with her and get her to call you or come in.”

“Thanks, appreciate it. Really nice ride she has. I’m sure she’s eager to get it back.”

Barren sat there for a moment. He could just call Rawhide and leave a message for her. Or he could do something for himself for once in his life. He could take a chance without knowing whether it was going to pay off.

Fuck it.

For once he wasn’t going to plan everything out. He wasn’t going to think through every outcome and possibility. He was just going to go with his gut.

“Get ready, the real fun is about to begin,” someone whispered to her as they pressed something into her hand.

Phoebe glanced down at the bag in her hand. It held several tubes with strings hanging from them.

Uh-oh.

Tonight was outdoor movie night. And she was sitting among some of the other Littles on the Ranch. Most of these Littles were ones who lived or worked here. She'd been here for five days now, and she was having so much fun.

When she'd first arrived, she'd spent half a day in the Nursery before figuring out that her Little wasn't really that young. So she'd ended up in the preschool and that was where she'd settled in best. All day long, she got to paint pictures and practice doing her letters and play with her new friends.

Yet, no matter how welcoming people were or how much time she could spend in Little headspace here, it still felt like something was missing.

Or someone.

She couldn't help but think about Barren. Which was silly. She'd only met him for a few hours. There was no reason for his face to pop into her mind every time she wished she had a Daddy. He was probably back home living his best life. No doubt he'd forgotten all about her.

Tommy, one of the Littles who lived in the dorms, sat down next to her. "Did you get your glitter bombs?"

"Yes," she whispered back in his ear so he could hear her over the movie playing. It was cold out, so they were all sitting with blankets over them and had jackets, hats, and gloves on.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"One of Sadie's pranks."

Oh, that's who'd handed her the bag. Sadie was Master Derek's Little. She was sweet

and funny and kind. And she also loved pranks.

As the movie ended, Sadie stood up. “Littles! Bomb them!”

All of the Littles jumped up with whoops and cries. Glitter exploded everywhere. Some of it landed straight in Phoebe’s face. She sat there for a moment, feeling stunned.

Then she jumped to her feet with a giggle and opened her own bag, pulling out a bomb. She pulled the string and glitter exploded out of the homemade bomb. She didn’t really aim for anyone, but it was still fun to do.

In truth, the idea of pranking one of the Bigs kind of terrified her. She didn’t want to get punished or kicked off the Ranch for breaking a rule. Although she didn’t think that anyone would be escorted off the Ranch for a prank like this. Master Derek would have to get rid of all the Littles since she saw most of them running around and giggling as they blew glitter everywhere.

With a laugh, she let Tommy take her hand as they darted through the crowd.

What was happening right now? It was utter chaos. Barren just stood there, staring at the group of people in front of him. It was obvious that they’d been having a movie night as the large screen was still up, playing the credits.

Someone had turned on the outside lights so that the area was lit up. Enough for him to see that everything had gone horribly wrong. Littles were running everywhere. It was a cascade of glitter and giggles. He wasn’t even sure what or who to focus on. Well, he was really looking for one person.

Erika had met him at the front desk to check him in while Moses had whisked away his suitcase so he could come straight back here to find her.

“Barren, you’re back.” Derek walked up to him, holding on to the hand of his Little, Sadie. The pout on her face disappeared as she saw Barren.

“Barren! I didn’t know you were coming back here!”

“Yes, it was a last-minute decision.” His eyebrows rose as he ran his gaze over her. She was covered in glitter. From her hair to her face and chest, down to her shoes.

“That’s a lot of glitter to get off,” he commented.

“Hmm. I might need to hang her upside down and shake her,” Derek said.

“Daddy!” she cried.

Derek discreetly winked at him. “Seems like you arrived just in time. Everyone is rounding up the Littles. You might want to grab your Little before she tries to disappear to get out of punishment.”

“What? Who is your Little, Barren? Why don’t I know about this?” Sadie asked.

“You don’t need to know everything, angel,” Derek told her.

“I really don’t think that’s true,” Sadie said with another pout.

Barren gazed behind them to see that all the Littles were being wrangled by their Tops, Miss Price, and Nanny J.

“Excuse me, Barren. Time to take my naughty Little home.”

Barren nodded, wondering if Sadie was going to be able to sit tomorrow. He searched through all the Littles being corralled and led off.

There she was.

He spotted her and his heart nearly broke. She looked so alone. So scared and worried. The Phoebe he'd met was full of smiles and chatter. She didn't stand off to the side on her own with her arms wrapped around her.

Without hesitation, he strode toward her. Nobody ignored his girl or made her feel bad. And yes, he was just aware that he'd called her "his".

Was she going to get punished? Worry flooded her. She shouldn't have taken part in the prank. She was supposed to be on her best behavior so that people didn't get annoyed with her and not want her around. Had she learned nothing from her brothers all these years? From them telling her that she was too much and that she had to tone it down?

Idiot.

Now what was going to happen? Would she be spanked? She wasn't afraid of being spanked... or at least she didn't think she was. But she'd never been spanked before and she wasn't sure that she wanted someone like Master Derek or Nanny J to dish out her first spanking.

No? So who would you rather do it?

"Phoebe."

She stared at him for a long moment. Then she closed her eyes and opened them again. Nope. Her brain wasn't imagining him. He was still standing right there. Had she conjured him up by thinking about him so much?

"Hey, are you all right?" he asked in concern.



But she couldn't seem to answer him. She'd been putting it out into the universe that she wanted a Daddy and somehow she kept thinking of him at the same time... so maybe the universe had brought him to her.

Or maybe he's just here on vacation. So don't make a dick out of yourself.

"Phoebe? Are you feeling all right?"

"Barren!" she cried before she threw herself into his arms. "You're here!"

Yep.

That was a good start on not making a dick of herself. Realizing that she was hugging him like a long-lost friend, she took a step back... only to stare at him in horror. Because she'd forgotten the glitter. And now his white shirt and very nicely pressed tan slacks were covered in pink glitter.

With a gasp, she placed her hand over her mouth. "Oh no! You're like a giant disco ball. Or a mermaid. I've always wanted to be a mermaid." She winced. "I really hope that glitter washes out. Do you want me to wash your clothes? Here, I can do it." She reached for the buttons of his shirt.

He grasped hold of her hands, stilling them.

"Phoebe."

She glanced up at him. "Yes?"

"You don't need to wash my clothes. The glitter will come out. It's fine."

"Are you sure?"

“Hmm. Now, if you’d glitter bombed me, that might be another story.” He raised an eyebrow, giving her a stern look.

Guilt swirled in her stomach. “It was just a small prank. And I didn’t mean to get glitter on you.”

“Ahh, so if I had been here you wouldn’t have participated? Or wouldn’t have glitter bombed me?” he queried as his right brow arched.

“Well, I can’t say that exactly.” She gave him a small grin.

“Sassy girl,” he replied. “You’re going to get yourself into trouble if you participate in Sadie’s pranks.”

“I don’t think I had much choice. It was an all-for-one-one-for-all type of deal.”

“Ahh, so you were just doing it because that’s what all the other Littles were doing?”

“Exactly.” He got it. She couldn’t be blamed and punished for that, right?

He tapped her nose. “That’s not going to fly as an excuse, little girl. You always have a choice. You chose to participate, even knowing there would be consequences.”

Well. Rats.

Shit. She grew all tense and the small smile dropped off her face. What had he said? Was it the threat of consequences? He knew that she was new to this. Had she experienced punishment while here on the Ranch? If anyone had spanked her... okay, he had no right to feel jealous and getting angry was foolish.

She wasn’t his ... yet . He had this feeling in his gut that she was meant to be, though.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” he asked, fighting the urge to cup her face between his hands. Instead, he reached out and lightly touched her hand. Which was freezing. “Where are your gloves?”

“Oh, um. I don’t know. I had some on, but I took them off for glitter-gate,” she said, glancing around as though they were going to magically appear.

“You should always wear your gloves when it’s cold,” he scolded. “At least you’re wearing a jacket.”

“Nanny J told me that I had to,” she confessed. “No jacket–no movie.”

“You’ve been spending time in the Nursery?” he asked.

“Um, I tried the Nursery, but it wasn’t for me. I like it in the Butterflies room with Miss Price. Do you think everyone is going to be mad at me? They won’t kick me off the Ranch, will they?”

He’d like to see anyone try... he would take on anyone who upset her like that. But he also knew that wasn’t going to happen.

“Of course they won’t, little girl,” he soothed. “It was just a harmless prank. A bit of glitter never hurt anyone. There might be a few lines written, maybe some sore bottoms tomorrow, but no one is kicking you out.”

“I’ve never been punished before.”

“Really? Not even during your stay here?”

She shook her head. “I haven’t been naughty.”

Hmm. He found that hard to believe. The Phoebe he'd met was someone he'd thought would get into trouble on her first day. If not in her first hour. So maybe she'd been on her best behavior since she'd come here? Because it was all new and she was unsure? Or because she was scared of getting punished? He wondered if it was those things or something else.

"Ahh, here you are, Phoebe." Miss Price walked up to them, looking stern. "You'll need an escort back to your room. I can take you now before I go and help Nanny J deal with a number of naughty Littles."

He hated the way Phoebe lowered her gaze, her shoulders rising.

"Actually, Miss Price, I thought I could escort Phoebe back to her room." He met the gaze of the other woman calmly. She eyed him up, obviously torn. He knew that she just wanted to make sure that Phoebe was safe.

"I don't know. Does Phoebe know you?"

"Barren is my Knight in Pressed Pants," Phoebe told her. "He rescued me when my pickup broke down. I trust him."

"Do you want him to walk you to your room, Phoebe?" Miss Price asked. "Because you can say no. Your safety and happiness are important."

He noticed the way Phoebe straightened. The relief that filled her face. He got the feeling that she wasn't used to people caring about her like this. "You can say no, Phoebe," he told her. "Without any consequences."

Phoebe nodded, smiling. "But I would like you to walk back with me, Barren. Please."

Miss Price still stared at them both. “All right, Phoebe is a guest rather than a Ranch Little, but I still care about her as though she were one of my own. Take care of her.”

“Well, that was me warned,” he joked as Miss Price turned away.

“You were right about everyone here being welcoming and protective. I’ve never felt more safe to be myself,” she said as he grasped hold of her hand. It was still too cold.

“Are you being yourself?” he asked as he walked her toward the guest wing.

“I’m trying to,” she told him. “Sometimes, it’s scary.”

They entered the guest wing and he paused, turning to her. “I understand that. But you shouldn’t feel like you have to change to make anyone else happy. All right?”

“Yes, I know.”

“Have you met some friends or someone else?” he asked. Wow. That was subtle. He winced as he waited for her to reply.

“I’ve made some friends. Tommy, in the preschool is so much fun and all the other Littles have been so welcoming.”

“I’m glad, sweetheart.” But he hated that she sounded so shocked by that. As though she hadn’t anticipated that someone might want to be nice and welcoming to her.

“I don’t know what you mean by someone else, though?” she asked.

“I suppose I mean have you met anyone who you would like to be your Daddy.” He wasn’t even breathing as he asked that.

“No,” she said quietly. “I haven’t met anyone like that since I’ve been here.”

He wanted to question her further, but he wasn’t sure he should push her.

“That’s not... I mean, I came here because I wanted a safe space. You know?” she asked.

Right. She wasn’t looking for a Daddy and he should back the hell off. “I understand.”

Rats. Why had she said that? Basically she’d just told him that she didn’t want a Daddy when that wasn’t actually true. Well, it was true that wasn’t the reason she’d come to Rawhide Ranch. But just because she hadn’t been actively searching for a Daddy didn’t mean she didn’t want one. Although there was only one Daddy she wanted.

Oh crap. She couldn’t believe she was thinking that. She didn’t know him. She shouldn’t be imagining him as her Daddy. Over these five days she’d been keeping herself extra busy so she didn’t think about it.

But it hadn’t worked. Every night she’d climbed into bed and dreamed about him, wondering what he was doing, if he thought about her. It was so dumb. All he’d done was pay her a bit of attention and care and now she was dreaming of being his.

So no, she hadn’t even thought about trying to find another Daddy. Or being with anyone else like that. Heck, she’d barely met any Daddies. She’d spent her time hiding with the other Littles.

Urgh. Was that what she’d been doing? She’d been hiding?

“I didn’t mean... I mean if I did find someone... I just wasn’t searching for one... I

was just... urgh.”

“Hey, you don’t need to explain anything to me,” he reassured her. “You don’t owe me anything. Well, other than an explanation about why you haven’t been answering my calls or texts.”

“You called and texted me?” She gaped at him in shock.

“I did. You sound shocked.”

“I just didn’t think you would call me. I figured you would go back to your life and forget about me.”

“You would be very hard to forget about,” he told her.

She eyed him suspiciously. “Yeah, I’ve been told that before. But not in a good way.”

Barren scowled. “Who told you that in a bad way?”

Surprise filled her at that sharp demand. He looked so ferocious. “Why do you want to know who?”

“Because I will teach them a lesson. Nobody gets to put you down.”

“They don’t?” she asked breathlessly. He was speaking directly to the lost Little girl inside her. The one who just wanted to be accepted for who she was. And it was almost making her dizzy.

Who knew acceptance could be so damn sexy? Could be all that she really wanted. And she wanted more of it.

“Would you want a Little girl?” she asked. “If the right one came along?”



### CHAPTER 7

Would he want a Little girl if the right one came along? It took a moment for those words to make their way through his brain.

She dropped her gaze, her shoulders slumping. And that pulled him quickly out of his daze. What was he doing?

“Yes,” he told her huskily. “If the right Little girl came along I would love to be her Daddy.” Her surprised gaze rose to his and he gave her a firm look. She smiled up at him.

“Such a brave girl,” he murmured, reaching out to cup her cheek. When she didn’t move away, he sighed in relief. He’d probably pushed her enough and she needed her sleep.

“I’m really sorry you have glitter all over you,” she told him again.

“Stop apologizing. You said sorry already and you didn’t mean to do it.”

“Oh, sorry. Shoot. Sorry. Oh my gosh!” She shook her head. “Sometimes, it feels like I’ve been apologizing all my life. Ever since I was born, I’ve been apologizing for being alive, you know? I think it’s become a habit... to apologize whether I’m in the wrong or not.”

He didn’t like that. Was it her brothers who made her feel that way? “You will never apologize for being alive again,” he told her firmly. “I catch you doing that and there

is going to be hell to pay.” Her mouth dropped open in shock and he realized he had no real right to say that to her.

But he wasn’t taking it back. He would happily smack her butt until she realized that she should be celebrating her life, not apologizing for it.

“And if anyone makes you feel like you should be saying sorry for being here, you tell me, and I’ll make them feel sorry for even breathing the same air as you.”

She was silent and he waited for her reaction. No doubt she was regretting letting him walk her back to her room. Shit. Had he ruined things before they’d had a chance to even start? Maybe he should be the one apologizing?

As he opened his mouth, she suddenly threw herself against him. He let out a small grunt as he stepped back against the wall, but he didn’t let her go. He didn’t ever want to let her go.

“Hey now, what’s this for?” he asked. She tried to step back, and he tightened his hold on her without thought. He wasn’t ready to let her go. Thankfully, she just relaxed back into him.

God. She felt perfect in his arms. So much so that he didn’t want to let her go.

“Because you’re my Knight in Pressed Pants. Fighting off all the baddies for me.”

He didn’t know whether to laugh or shake his head. “Fighting baddies, huh?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Come on, let’s get you to bed. It’s late and Little girls need their sleep, or they have to have a nap during the day.”

“Not a nap,” she grumbled. “Naps suck.”

“They do?”

“Uh-huh,” she said as he led her down the hall to her room. “They’re so boring. So is sleep. Want to watch a movie with me?”

“You just watched a movie.”

“Well, yeah. But I could watch another one.”

“It’s too late for that, little girl.” He called her that so easily now. And she hadn’t protested, so he wasn’t about to stop.

“Do you think Master Derek will be upset at the prank?” she asked.

“I’m guessing Sadie was the instigator?”

Phoebe winced and nodded. “I think so. Do you think she’s in a lot of trouble?”

“I’m sure that she knew there would be consequences when she chose to pull this prank. Derek knows what Sadie needs. You don’t need to worry about her, he’ll always put her first. Besides, from what my friend has told me about this place, pranks are a fairly common occurrence and Sadie is often the one leading the prank brigade.”

He stopped in front of her door, feeling reluctant to leave her. So he took a chance and reached up to brush her hair back off her face.

Phoebe smiled up at him. “Are you sure you don’t want me to wash your clothes for you?”

“I’m sure, little girl. I have it under control.” Although he noticed that he’d left a small trail of glitter behind him. He’d need to tip housekeeping extra tomorrow.

“I probably shouldn’t have tried to remove your shirt outside, huh?” she asked, raising her thumb to her mouth to chew on the nail.

“I’m not complaining.” He drew her hand from her mouth. “No chewing on your nail.”

“I do it when I’m nervous. It’s a habit, I guess.”

He rubbed his finger over her rough nail. “It’s not a good one, little girl. You don’t know what germs might be on here. Not to mention you could chew your nail down too far. I think you might need something else to chew on.”

“Like what?” she asked.

“Let me do some research.”

“Why... why do you care, Barren?” she asked, staring up at him with wide eyes.

“Again, that’s probably something to talk about at a later date.”

“Oh. I understand.” She turned away from him and he hated the sadness in her voice. What was he doing?

Why not tell her how you feel?

“Do you know why I came back here?” he asked her.

She turned back, giving him a puzzled look. “Did you want another vacation?”

“I just took one, so no.”

“I don’t know. You missed the Ranch? Being able to be yourself here?”

“I did, but that’s not why I’m here. I got a call from the mechanic in Porter’s Corner.”

“I don’t understand. Why would the mechanic at Porter’s Corner call you?”

“Because he had my phone number from when your pickup was towed there. It must have ended up on the paperwork. He tried calling you, but your phone was always turned off.”

Phoebe winced. “Oops. Is Cherry all right? Is she all fixed?”

“Yes, it’s ready for you to collect. What did I say to you about charging your phone?” he said to her sternly.

“But that was just about having my phone charged before I drove anywhere,” she said hastily.

Drat. That was true. “All right, let me add that you’re to have your phone charged all the time.”

Her lower lip popped out on a pout. “But sometimes I just don’t want to talk to anyone or answer my texts. I’m on vacation.”

“I understand that, sweetheart. But in terms of safety, you still need to have your phone charged. Even if you decide to put some people on silent, there are still some calls and texts you have to take.”

She sighed, nodding sadly.

“Or you need to give your phone to someone you trust so that they can take care of your life admin for you so you can completely switch off.” He could do that.

“I wish,” she said. “That sounds like heaven. But I don’t have anyone in my life I can trust to do that and you’re right. I can’t just switch off or I miss important calls.”

The offer to be that person for her was on the tip of his tongue. But he forced it back. He didn’t want to come on too strong and that sort of trust would take time to build. It wasn’t something she could just hand over to him. Suggesting it now might just freak her out.

“Why didn’t you just call the Ranch, though?” she asked. “You knew where I was. You didn’t come out here just to tell me that, did you?”

“I could have,” he agreed. “But I didn’t.”

“I’m confused.”

“It’s simple, really.” He reached up and brushed a finger over her cheek. “I wanted an excuse to see you again. Because the truth is that I haven’t been able to get you out of my mind, and I wanted to know whether that feeling was mutual. That night when we went out to dinner when I walked you back to your room?”

She nodded.

“Well, I nearly kissed you. And then I spent these last few days regretting that I didn’t. So I want to know whether you’re as attracted to me as I am to you.”

### CHAPTER 8

Phoebe stared up at him in shock. Had he really just said that? That he couldn't stop thinking about her? That he was attracted to her? What could he possibly see in her?

He was gorgeous. Sexy. Smart. And he obviously had his ducks in a row.

Unlike her.

Her ducks were not all in a row. They were walking off at strange angles, one was riding a horse, another was twirling in a circle, and she was pretty sure that one of them was a touch drunk.

So why would he want her? Sometimes she didn't want to be around her, and she was stuck with herself. Should she tell him the main reason she didn't have her phone turned on?

No, no.

She wasn't ready to talk about it and he wouldn't be interested in her problems. They were silly problems, anyway. Some people had real issues, like not being able to put food on the table or pay the electric bill. She felt ridiculous for the way she was handling everything and yet she wasn't quite strong enough to come out of hiding yet.

"You're interested in me?" she repeated. Maybe she was dreaming. That was likely it. She was having delusions.

“I am,” he said firmly, shattering that thought. “I want you. I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I know you might not feel the same way. You barely know me and I’m likely old enough to be your father. Perhaps you’d prefer someone younger, less set in their ways, someone less bossy and take-charge. Taking care of others is what makes me happy. But I’m told that I can be rather interfering and controlling.”

Whoa. He’d just laid out a whole lot of stuff and she was struggling to process it all. Someone had told him he was too bossy and controlling simply because he liked taking care of them?

She would kill to have someone take care of her. Maybe he was a tad bossy. She’d certainly never had anyone order her to charge her phone or to wear a jacket and shoes while outside. But she assumed it was because he was a Daddy.

It could also be him. About his needs. Phoebe liked hearing about his needs. Because she wouldn’t want things to be one-sided between them. For it to be all about her.

It sounded like he needed to look after someone... while she needed someone to look after her. Win-win? Maybe. She wouldn’t lie. She was nervous. He barely knew her and once he did... he might decide he didn’t like her.

“What’s going on in your head, sweetheart?” he asked, cupping her cheek with his hand.

He was so nice and warm, and she couldn’t help but turn her head so she could nuzzle into his hand. “It gets loud in there,” she confessed to him.

“I bet it does, little girl,” he replied. “I can help quieten it, but only if you tell me what’s going on. What is it? What are you thinking about?”

“I want you too. I’d be mad not to want you. You’re gorgeous. I just worry that if you



get to know me that you won't like me. That you might find me too much. I can be, you know. I try to tone it down, but I'm not always successful."

"Hey," he murmured, rubbing a thumb over her lower lip. "You don't have to tone anything down. I just want you to be yourself."

"Nobody ever wants me to be myself," she warned him. "I'm a lot."

"I can handle a lot and I happen to think you'll be perfect no matter what."

She snorted. "That just goes to show that you definitely don't know me well."

"Then we'll get to know each other, and you can decide if you want someone who is bossy and sticks his nose into your business whether you want it or not."

"And you can decide if you want someone who is a bit too much," she said. "Too loud, too excitable, too immature, too much of everything."

"Good," he said. "But I will warn you now that is the last time you will put yourself down without consequences. If we're dating, then there will be rules. And not just for your Little. So you might want to prepare yourself for that."

"But you put yourself down."

"I don't see bossy and interfering as bad things. That's just something other people might think." He winked at her.

"What sort of rules are we talking about?" she asked.

"Well, you know some of them. No talking badly about yourself. Keeping yourself safe and healthy, which includes dressing for the weather and always having your

phone charged. But it also includes things like not skipping meals, telling me if you're not feeling well or are upset. Texting me if you're going somewhere and when you get there. Not walking around at night alone. Taking your vitamins and any medication. Following all doctors' orders. Eating regularly and healthily. Those are just a few things off the top of my head."

Phoebe knew that her mouth was open and that she was gaping at him. "Those are just a few things off the top of your head? You mean there's more?"

"Yes, there will definitely be more. I can have them ready for you by tomorrow."

"I might need you to write them down," she told him. "Because I don't think I can remember all of that. Let alone more."

"I can do that. I'll get you a notebook and write them in it."

Awesome. Uh-huh. "You're very organised, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes. I am."

"Does it annoy you when other people aren't organised?"

"Hmm. When I work with them, yes. In my social life, sometimes. It depends. If you need help with organisation, I am happy to help."

"Maybe," she said. That might be a recipe for disaster.

"Come on, you need to get to bed. Do you trust me to help put you to bed?"

"I, um, yes?"

“You don’t feel very sure.”

“I am,” she said hastily. “I’m just not sure what that means.”

“Let me show you?” he asked.

She took a deep breath and nodded. Barren unlocked the door and then opened it for her. She walked past him, feeling like she was in a daze. Was this really happening? Did Barren really want to be her... her boyfriend?

It sounded crazy. And perfect. She turned to him after he shut the door behind them. “You want to be my boyfriend?”

“Yes, sweetheart. Was I not clear?”

“No, yes, I was just making sure that I wasn’t dreaming.” She lightly slapped her cheeks with both hands.

“Hey, what are you doing?” He took hold of her hands, giving her a concerned look.

“Just making sure that I definitely wasn’t dreaming. Maybe I should pinch myself to be sure.”

“No slapping yourself. No pinching yourself. No hurting yourself. Understand me?”

“I wasn’t hurting myself; I was just making sure I was awake,” she protested.

“You are awake and if you’re ever unsure, ask me. I will prove to you that you’re awake. You don’t have to resort to hurting yourself.”

“How will you prove that?” She gave him a suspicious look.

“Hmm, I can think of a couple of ways. Maybe like this.” Barren drew her toward him and then, to her surprise, he cupped her cheeks and lowered his lips to hers.

Oh. Wow. The man could kiss.

Phoebe had never melted into a kiss like this. In fact, she’d never really been into kissing before. It had always been okay, but never life-changing like she’d read in books. But now she got it. She tried to kiss him back, but he took charge, and she was happy to let him lead.

When he drew back, she was smiling dreamily, gazing up at him in wonder.

“Wow.”

His eyebrows rose. “Wow?”

“Yeah, you can kiss. I’ve never really been interested in kissing until just this minute.”

“Just this minute, huh? Good to know that I’m doing a good job.”

“Not good,” she told him. “Spectacular, amazing, wonderful!”

He grinned. “You’re good for me, sweetheart.”

“I hope so.”

“I know so. Now, do you have some pajamas?” he asked, looking around. “I can see you haven’t unpacked yet.”

She glanced around with a wince at the clothes strewn on the floor and coming out of

her suitcase.

“I’m not really an unpacker.”

He just gave her a look. “Where are your pajamas?”

“ Welllll ...” She glanced around as though expecting them to jump out at her. That would be helpful. “Oh! Here they are!” She picked her pajamas. They were white silk with red hearts on them. The pants were long and wide while the top was a camisole.

“Adorable,” he told her.

She shivered as his heated gaze ran over her. “I, um, I’ll just... um...”

“Go get changed and brush your teeth, little girl,” he told her huskily. “Before I lose hold of my control.”

She gulped. Uh-huh. Sure. Only... maybe she wanted him to lose hold of his control?

“Go, little girl. Now.” The firmness in his tone had her turning away without argument.

Barren forced himself to stay where he was and take some deep breaths.

You cannot throw her on the bed and fuck her. That isn’t getting to know her. No matter how much you might want her.

To keep himself occupied, so he didn’t walk into that bathroom and join her in the shower, he started folding her clothes and putting them into drawers and the closet.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that.”

Turning, he saw her standing in the bathroom door, chewing on her thumbnail. Her wet hair was pulled back into a ponytail.

“Hey, don’t do that.” He stepped forward and drew her thumb out of her mouth.  
“There’s nothing wrong.”

“I’m messy.”

She looked so vulnerable dressed in her pajamas with her wet hair slicked back. “Do you hear me complaining? There’s something you should know about me. I actually like cleaning and organising and folding laundry.”

“That’s so weird,” she told him.

He grinned. “Maybe. It’s an affliction, for sure. And the only cure is more tidying and cleaning. So you’re going to have to indulge me, even though I maybe overstepped by touching all of your stuff without asking.”

She shrugged. “It’s just clothing. Feel free to tidy up after me as much as you like.”

“Thank you,” he told her solemnly. “Come on, let’s get you into bed.”

“I’m not really tired, though.”

“It’s well past the time that all Little girls should be in bed,” he told her sternly.

“Not me! I’m a night owl.”

“Are you?”

“Uh-huh.”

“What time would you normally go to bed?” he asked as he drew the covers back.

“Oh, I don’t know. Normally, I’d read a book for a while and then I’d just put it down when I was sleepy. Maybe two or three?”

“In the morning?” he asked, shocked.

She giggled. “Yes, silly.”

“And what time do you get up? Do you sleep in?” How did she get to her job on time if she was going to sleep so late? Although hadn’t she said that she was between jobs? She must be burning through her savings.

“Nah, I only need a couple of hours sleep and I’m good to go.”

She yawned as she said that which made him wonder if that was really the case.

“I’ve always been like this. My dad used to say my brain was just too busy to let me sleep.”

“Maybe I can help quieten it. Do you want me to braid your hair?”

“You can do that?” she asked as she climbed into bed.

“Yep. Do you have hair ties?”

“Uh-huh. I can get them.”

He shook his head and placed his hand on her shoulder. “Little girls don’t get out of bed without their Daddy’s permission.”

“They don’t?”

“No. They don’t.”

“But what about if their Daddy isn’t in the bedroom and they have to go to the toilet?”

“Then they should call out for help.”

“What if he’s not around?”

“Then the rule doesn’t apply, and you can get up and go to the bathroom. But I am here and you’re not to get out of bed without asking for my permission. Understand?”

“Um, yes.”

“I know I can come on strong. If I’m pushing too hard, then tell me. Say ‘red’ if you like. And we’ll stop and talk. The last thing I want is to scare you away.”

“I don’t see how you could ever scare me away.”

Well, he’d done it in the past. “Promise you’ll tell me.”

“I promise.”

“Good girl. I’m so proud of you for being so brave.” Sitting on the bed, he leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

Okay. What the hell? “What is that on your skin?” he demanded.

“Oh, it’s this new night cream I’m using on my skin. It’s so creamy and smooth. It’s



got lavender in it to help me sleep.”

Yeah. That might be what he was tasting right now. Obviously the lavender wasn’t actually doing its job, either since she didn’t sleep well.

“Wait here while I get the things for you.”

Unless she doesn’t want you in her bathroom.

He turned. “If that’s all right with you.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” she asked with a smile.

“Some women wouldn’t want a strange man in their bathroom,” he explained.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, you’re not that strange.”

Barren shook his head at her. “Sassy.” He walked into the bathroom, searching for her hairbrush and hair ties among the bottles of face cream, lotion, and bits of make-up that were scattered around. Ignoring the urge to tidy it all up, he returned to find her fidgeting on the bed.

“Are you all right, little girl?” he asked her, worried.

“I forgot to use the toilet! Can I go?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Yay!” she cried, jumping off the bed and racing into the bathroom.

She was so open with her thoughts and feelings. It was so refreshing after his life

with Krystal. There was a part of him that wasn't sure whether to believe in her reactions, though. It was hard for him to comprehend how anyone could be that bubbly and excited over such simple things.

He shook that thought off as she returned. Instead, he sat on the edge of the bed and grabbed a pillow, setting it on the floor in front of him.

"Come sit down and I'll do your hair."

She skipped over to him and plonked herself down in front of him.

Oh to be that young again. He started to carefully brush her hair.

"That's so nice," she said.

"It is?"

"Yeah, I didn't realize how relaxing it would be to have someone brush my hair. When my brothers would do it, they'd hack at it so hard that my scalp would sting for ages afterward. This is much nicer."

"That wasn't very kind of them."

She shrugged. "I guess they were annoyed about having to take care of me. My dad worked a lot, so they had to help take care of me and Joseph."

"They should have been more careful with you. You're precious." He finished off one braid and started on the other.

"I am?" she asked in a hushed voice.

“You are,” he replied firmly. “And you should expect to be treated like a princess.”

“Ooh, I like the sound of that. Because a princess gets whatever she wants.”

“I’m afraid that’s not the case.” He stood and moved around her so he could hold out his hands. She slid her hands into his and he lifted her to her feet.

“I think they do.”

He’d forgotten what this felt like. He’d had a relationship with a Little before Krystal, until she’d left the country. They hadn’t been in love, but he’d cared about her, enjoyed being with her. But with Phoebe he had the feeling that things could be very different. He’d already developed feelings for her in the short time he’d known her.

He lightly squeezed her hands. “Into bed, little girl.”

With a nod, she climbed into bed, and he drew the covers up, tucking her in. She rolled onto her side as he drew a chair over beside the bed.

“Now. Before you go to sleep we need to have a small chat about this glitter prank.”

“It wasn’t me! I didn’t do it.”

“You didn’t do it?” he repeated.

“Nope.”

“So you didn’t explode any glitter bombs.”

“ Welllll ,” she said.

“And before you answer, I should tell you that telling the truth is a big rule. So lying to me would result in a punishment.”

She sighed. “I was trying to say that I might have thrown a teensy bit of glitter, but you have to understand the peer pressure I was under.”

“Peer pressure?” he asked.

“Yes, I mean, if I’m given glitter and I don’t use it, then am I really a Little? It’s a whole Little thing. I don’t expect you to understand. But if you’re given glitter then it’s expected you will throw it... or glue it to something, I guess. But I didn’t have any glue and everyone else was throwing it around. Sooo that meant I had to as well. I don’t want to be a bad Little.”

“You could never be a bad Little,” he reassured her. “Being a bit sassy or naughty could never make you bad, understand?”

“Okay. I understand.”

“That’s my good girl. But you know there are consequences to every action, right?”

“I don’t like the word consequences,” she said. “It doesn’t sound very nice.”

“Well, that doesn’t mean that you don’t have any,” he told her solemnly. “What do you think Miss Price would make you do for taking part in the prank?”

“I think she might give me a cupcake!”

“Little girl,” he warned.

“I don’t know... timeout?”

“If you go into the preschool tomorrow that might be what you’re given to do. Unless you want to accept a punishment from me?”

“I can do that?”

“Hmm, you’re mine now so I will be giving you all of your punishments from now on. Unless you decide you no longer want that. However, you weren’t mine during this prank. So it’s up to you. Me or Miss Price or one of the other teachers, I guess.”

“Will you do it now?” she asked.

“In the morning.”

“Man, waiting sucks.”

“Sometimes it’s part of the punishment.”

“Well, that’s just evil,” she told him. “What would the punishment be if you gave it to me?”

He smiled. “It’s a mystery.”

“Nooo, I don’t like mysteries. Well, unless I’m reading one. A good murder mystery with a bit of romance thrown in is fun. The mystery of what punishment you’re getting isn’t fun.”

“What do you want to do, Little girl? I can take you to the Butterflies room after breakfast. Or you can be punished by me.”

“And then I have to go to the preschool?”

“You don’t have to go if you don’t want to. Would you like to spend the day with me instead?”

She nodded. “If that’s okay.”

“Sweetheart, there is nothing I would like more.”

She sat up and threw her arms around him, practically landing in his lap.

“And I want you to punish me. Well, I don’t want you to. But, you know, lesser of two evils and all that.”

“Something I’ve always wanted to hear,” he told her with fake seriousness. “That I am the lesser of two evils.”

“That’s me. I always try to be positive and give out compliments.” She gave him a toothy grin as he snorted.

“You’re going to keep an old man on his toes, aren’t you?”

“You’re not old.” She frowned at him. “You’re just... marinated.”

“Marinated?” What did that mean?

“Yeah, you’ve been marinating for a bit longer than other people. But now you’ve found me. Aren’t you lucky?”

Marinating wasn’t quite the description he would use but he did consider himself lucky. “Very lucky. Now, go to sleep.”

“Are you gonna sit here until I go to sleep?” she asked him, yawning.

“Yes.”

“Then you’re going to get a sore butt. Because I really don’t think I can go to sleep this early.”

“We’ll see.” Reaching out, he lightly massaged her scalp. Her eyes slowly closed. Not tired, huh?

“Oh, that’s nice. But I still don’t think that a princess should have a bedtime.”

“Unfortunately, this princess does.” Damn, she looked adorable when she pouted. He had to be strong and not give into her.

No matter how much he wanted to.

“It also doesn’t mean you get to do anything you want. In fact, when you’re a princess, I think there are more rules.”

She gasped and opened her eyes to glare up at him. “What? Why?”

“Because you need them to keep you safe. A princess always has to be protected.”

“Well, I guess that’s true. We are very important people.”

“You certainly are. I will come get you in the morning for breakfast. Go to sleep, little girl.”

### CHAPTER 9

Phoebe was nervous. She didn't get nervous much. She'd much rather spend her time thinking about happy things. Like playing with her toys or dancing or pulling funny faces in the mirror. Which was exactly what she was doing right now to try and make herself laugh. She was used to having to cheer herself up.

But nerves kept bouncing around in her tummy. What if Barren spanked her? What if he'd changed his mind and wasn't coming to get her? Maybe he'd decided that she was too much work. That he wanted someone more mature. Someone who had their life together.

That wasn't Phoebe.

She couldn't really focus. She struggled to hide her feelings and emotions. Everything she felt, you knew about, which she knew could be a lot. Her feelings could be big. What if she'd inadvertently upset him?

Had she?

She stuck her tongue out at herself and then crossed her eyes. This wasn't working. "Oogie boogie woogie," she said as she stuck her fingers in her ears. Okay, that was a bit funny. A knock on the door startled her and she moved over to the door, opening it.

"Oogie boogie," she said as Barren gaped down at her.



“Um, are you all right, little girl?” he asked.

“Uh-huh.” Why was he asking her that?

Maybe because you’re pulling a face still. Oh shivers!

She pulled her tongue in and stopped wrinkling her nose up.

“You’re here!” She threw herself at him and he immediately wrapped his arms around her, pulling her up against his chest.

“Hey, what’s this?” he asked. “What’s the matter?”

“I’m just so glad you’re here.”

He carried her into the bedroom, and she wiggled, trying to get down.

“Stay still,” he commanded, slapping her bottom lightly.

“What was that for?” she asked. “I wasn’t naughty! I don’t need a spanking!”

“That wasn’t a spanking,” he informed her. “It was a slap to get your attention.”

“It wasn’t?”

“Oh, my poor girl, no. When you get a spanking, you’ll definitely know.”

“I will?”

“Yes, because you’ll be over my knee, your bottom will be bare, and it will hurt. Unless we’re talking about a fun spanking. That’s something different entirely.”

Yikes.

“Bare bottomed?”

“Only way to give a spanking. Unless we’re in public. I don’t think I would want anyone else seeing your bottom. So I’d likely spank you over your clothes then spank you properly when I had you in private.”

“You’d spank me in public? I don’t think you can do that.”

“Maybe out there in the world, but you’re forgetting where we are. No one would blink twice if I spanked you here.”

Right. Yikes.

He sat on the sofa with her on his lap, facing him. “Is your back all right?”

“I’m going to tell you right now that you better not say you’re too heavy for me to carry. You are not.”

Okay. She wouldn’t suggest that.

“Now, why were you worried that I wouldn’t be here this morning?” he asked, grasping hold of her chin to tilt her head back.

“I was just worried that maybe you’d changed your mind.”

His face softened. “Little girl, I’m not going to change my mind about this.”

“Well, you might once you get to know me.”

“And why would that happen? Is there something awful about you? Something you haven’t told me? Do you turn into a vampire at night?”

“No, silly, if I were a vampire I wouldn’t be able to walk around during the day.”

“Hmm. A werewolf then?”

“Noo! I’m not that hairy!” she protested.

“Good to know. Well, do you kick puppies?”

“What?” She gave him a horrified look. How could he think that? “No! I would never! I love puppies.”

“Whew. That’s good. That would have been a deal breaker. I know, do you steal candy from babies?”

“Hmm, well, I do like candy. I would only steal it if it was Gushers. Babies shouldn’t be eating that candy anyway.”

“Very true. But then, neither should Little girls.” He tapped her nose.

“That’s just mean. Little girls are mostly made of sugar. We need it to keep us going.”

“No, what you need is lots of good nutrition like protein and vegetables and fruit. And a tiny bit of sugar.”

“I’m not sure I like where this is going, Daddy.”

He looked startled, then he smiled. “You called me Daddy.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Did you not want me to?”

“No, no. I do. I very much do.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes. It felt... amazing. Thank you for trusting me with you.”

“You’re welcome, Daddy.”

“I’m sure you don’t. Have I mentioned lately how much I like you calling me Daddy?”

“Not in the last five seconds, no. Very slack of you if I’m honest.”

“I do apologize. I very much like hearing you call me Daddy.” He leaned forward and kissed her lightly. “Good morning, sweetheart.”

“Good morning,” she replied when he drew back.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked.

“Yep. Like a log. Although I don’t see how logs sleep.”

“Why were you pulling a face when I opened the door?” he asked.

“Sorry about that!” she said quickly. “I wasn’t pulling a face at you.”

“No? Then why?” he asked.

“I pull faces in the mirror sometimes to cheer myself up,” she explained. “I just

forgot to stop pulling a face when I opened the door, that's all."

Barren cupped her face between his hands. "I'm sorry you were feeling sad, little girl."

"Not sad, just worried you weren't going to turn up," she told him.

"We need to spend time to get to know one another. But there is something you need to know about me right now. If I say I'm going to do something, I do it. I said I was going to be here this morning, so nothing apart from a complete disaster was going to keep me away. And yes, I could decide this relationship isn't going to work, but so could you once you get to know me."

She couldn't see that being very likely. He was her Knight in Pressed Pants.

"That's not going to happen, you're perfect."

"Far from it. Listen to me, Phoebe. Are you listening?" he asked firmly.

"Yes."

"I really want to get to know you. I like you calling me Daddy, that you trust me enough to let me take that role in your life. But we don't know each other that well, so at any time you can tell me to slow down, all right?"

"And you'll do the same?"

"Yes. We just need to communicate with each other. That's very important. I was in a marriage with someone who kept a lot of secrets and when I discovered how much she had been hiding from me, I felt like an idiot. And like I didn't know who she was. It felt like everything in my life had been a lie and I didn't like that feeling. So just be

honest with me and I will be honest with you. All right? And asking to slow things down isn't saying that you want to step away. Or that you don't like what the other person is doing. I want you to be comfortable with me. Because the last thing I ever want is to get into another relationship with someone who is deceiving me."

"I don't ever want to deceive you."

"Good. Neither do I. And I don't like the idea of you being worried or upset. Okay? So tell me next time. I'll make funny faces in the mirror with you."

She giggled at that idea.

Just as her stomach started to grumble.

"Oh my gosh! Tummy, stop being so rude. Daddy and I are having a conversation."

"We can have a conversation over breakfast. You're certain you don't want to go to preschool this morning?"

"Nope. I want to stay with you. If that's okay," she added hastily.

"Better than okay. I was going to make you write your lines before breakfast, but with the way your tummy is rumbling I think we better get some food into it."

"Lines?" she cried.

"Yes, lines," he repeated firmly. "As your punishment."

"But maybe we should just forget about doing those lines altogether. I'm certain I've learned my lesson, Daddy. But urch, did the glitter come out of your clothes, okay? I can pay for dry cleaning."

“The glitter will come out just fine,” he reassured her. “Let’s go. Where are your shoes?”

She glanced down at her bare feet. “Do I have to wear shoes?”

“Yes, you can’t walk around in bare feet. What if you stand on something? And your feet could get cold.”

“It’s just that my feet don’t feel like being caged today. They want to be free!”

He walked over to her closet and drew out a pair of slippers. “How about these?”

“Perfect!”

Damn. He’d forgotten how nice it was to hold a woman’s hand. To hold a Little’s hand. She skipped alongside him toward the cafe in her cute white slippers with red hearts all over them.

They went with the rest of her outfit perfectly. Today she wore a red pleated skirt with thick white tights underneath that ended at her ankles. Her sweater was white and fluffy with red heart patches on the elbows.

“You look cute today, as usual. You like hearts and the color red?”

“Red and white are my favorite colors and I love hearts. I think that there should be more love in the world, you know? And fluffy sweaters. There should definitely be more fluffy sweaters. Everyone would feel happier and smile more if they wore a fluffy sweater. It’s impossible to frown while you have one on.”

“Good to know.”

They sat at their table, and she took the menu, looking over it. “Are there pancakes?”

“There sure are.”

“Yay! I’ll have them.”

“Haven’t you had breakfast here before?” he asked curiously.

“No. I wake up too late and I barely have time to get ready before someone arrives to take me to the Butterflies room.”

“Are they coming to get you this morning?” he asked.

“Oh no, Erika called me this morning to check if I was going and I told her that you were picking me up.”

“Good.” A server walked up with a smile, and he ordered her pancakes as well as a side of fruit salad.

“Is the fruit salad for you, Daddy?” she asked as she wiggled in her chair.

“No, it’s for you, little girl.”

“But I have pancakes! That’s enough!”

“You need something healthy to eat as well. So you haven’t been eating breakfast?” he asked.

“Nope. That’s okay, though. I don’t usually.”

“That’s going to have to change. Breakfast is very important.”



“So I’ve been told,” she said solemnly.

“Do you drink coffee?” he asked as their server returned with his coffee and her apple juice.

“Nope. I’ve never drunk it. It always tasted funny to me, and my brothers claimed that I didn’t need any more energy.” She shifted around again on her seat.

“Are you all right, little girl?” he asked. “Do you need to go potty?”

She gasped, her cheeks growing red as she glanced around. “Daddy!”

“What? It’s a fact of life that all Littles need to go potty at some stage. And you look like you’re doing a potty dance.”

“I’m not! It’s just that these chairs are kind of uncomfortable.”

She glanced over longingly at a Little boy who was sitting in a high chair at the table with his Daddy. What that would be like?

“Then we might need to change your seat.” Barren held up his hand and then spoke quietly to the server who came over.

What was he asking him?

When the server returned with an adult-sized high chair, she knew that he’d caught her look of longing. She should have known. There wasn’t much he missed. Barren stood and thanked the server before pulling the top tray out and turning to her.

“Let’s get you into this high chair.”

“I’m not a baby,” she warned him. Did he want a baby? Oh no, maybe he did, and he was about to be really disappointed.

“That’s fine with me. But it’s not just babies who use high chairs. Toddlers do too.”

Well, she guessed that was true. Phoebe bit her lip and glanced around but no one was staring at them.

“If you don’t like something, little girl, then all you need to do is tell me.”

“What if I don’t like spankings?” she asked.

“Hmm, I have a good imagination. I can come up with different sorts of punishments.”

“What if I don’t like punishments?” she asked.

“Pretty sure you’re not supposed to like them,” he pointed out.

Darn it. That was far too logical.

“Okay, Daddy. I wanna try.”

“Such a brave girl,” he told her, helping her up into the chair and then putting the tray in place.

“Hmm, I think we’re going to need to get you a bib.”

A bib?

“Yes, we might need to do a bit of shopping.”

“At the shop here?” She wriggled in excitement.

“Have you been to the shop?”

“I haven’t had a chance yet, but I heard it has lots of fun stuff.”

“We’ll do that after breakfast. We also need to get your car.”

“Oh yeah.” Bummer. That meant she’d have to adult.

“Perhaps someone will bring it here for us,” he said, eyeing her as he sat back down in his chair.

It felt a bit strange to be in a high chair, but also a lot of fun. She could swing her feet back and forth and she felt so... free.

“I don’t want to put anyone out. And I have to pay the bill.”

“I’m sure that can be done online.”

Except she needed to pay in cash. Because her cards were all connected to her family. Why didn’t she have her own credit card? Could she transfer the money without it being traced? Maybe. It wasn’t like her brothers were hacking geniuses or anything.

“I suppose.”

“Let me call Zeus and see if he has someone who can help him drop it off.”

“Okie dokie, Daddy.”

Their food arrived and she practically licked her lips in anticipation. But the server

put it all on the table and not on her tray.

“Daddy,” she said when they were alone again. “Can you put my food up here, please?”

“What lovely manners, but no.”

“No?” She gasped in horror. “Why not?”

“Because Daddy has to feed his Little girl,” he told her. “You can’t feed yourself.”

She couldn’t? Well, she could. But if he wanted to feed her, she certainly wasn’t going to turn him down.

He held up a piece of strawberry to her. She wrinkled her nose. Not because she didn’t like strawberries, she did. But she wanted some pancake with whipped cream on it.

“Pancake, Daddy?”

“You can have some pancake after you eat the strawberry,” he told her.

“Please?” She gave him puppy eyes and slid her lower lip out.

This look should be irresistible.

“Be a good girl for Daddy,” he told her. “You don’t want to get some extra lines added to your punishment, do you?”

Ahh, no. She did not. She was kind of hoping that he’d forgotten about that. So because she was a good girl, she ate the strawberry. And it was pretty delicious.

“Well done, little girl.”

She soaked up his praise, squirming happily as he gave her some pancake with cream.  
Yum. Yum. Yum.

“Whoops. You got a bit of cream right here.” He used his finger to wipe it off the corner of her mouth.

Then, to her shock, he sucked it off his finger.

Wow.

Hot.

Then he fed her a piece of banana, which she barely noticed since she was too busy staring at him. His lips quirked. He knew exactly what he was doing to her. The rat.

He fed her some more pancake and she hummed happily.

“Good, little girl?”

“Sooo good, Daddy. Aren’t you going to eat, though?” She stared down at his egg-white and spinach scramble with turkey sausage.

Hmm. Looked far too healthy for her liking.

“I’ll eat once my baby is taken care of,” he told her.

His baby? Wow. She liked the sound of that. But what really made her flush with pleasure was the way he took care of her.

“Okay, Daddy. But don’t let it get cold. It might taste yucky.”

“Daddy will be fine,” he reassured her.

“Good morning.”

Phoebe jumped with a start.

“I’m sorry, little one,” Master Derek said. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s okay,” she said cheerfully. “You’re a good sneaker, though.”

“Helps me to keep on top of things around here,” he replied with a smile. “Just wanted to check in and make sure you’re both all right. Erika said you didn’t need an escort to preschool this morning.”

“No, I’m looking after Phoebe today,” Barren said firmly as he fed her another strawberry. “And hopefully every other day she’s here.”

Double wow. She wanted that too. She was only booked in for a couple more days, but it wasn’t like she was in a rush to leave. She didn’t have anywhere she had to be.

“And that’s what you want, Phoebe?” Master Derek asked her.

“Yes, Master Derek. I do.”

“Hmm, I guess it’s good that you two met on that road, then, huh? Almost like fate had something in mind for you both. Just let Erika know if you want to stay longer at Rawhide.”

“Fate?” she asked Barren before he fed her another mouthful of pancake.

“Master Derek seemed to think that fate would send me someone when I was ready. I thought he was talking nonsense, until I found a Little girl stranded on the side of the road.”

“Oh yeah? She must be someone special,” she teased.

“She is. She’s got the sweetest smile and the most gorgeous eyes. Can’t believe she agreed to get to know me better, that she trusts me to be her Daddy while she’s here.”

Only while she was here? She hadn’t realized there was a time limit on this. What kind of an idiot was she? Here she was hearing wedding bells while he thought this was a fling.

Why did she always do that? She threw herself into things without thinking everything through. Every time.

She’d wanted to learn the violin, bought herself one, then realized she hated the sound of the violin. At least when she tried it.

There was the time she’d decided she wanted to make jewelry. She’d gone out and bought all of the equipment before she’d discovered that she had no patience for all the fiddly pieces and that everything just kept falling apart.

Idiot.

“And I’m hoping for longer.”

What?

She blinked, staring at him. “What?”

Reaching out, he took hold of her hand. “At the risk of making you run away from me, I am not a young guy. I don’t want to mess around with umming and aahing. I don’t want to play hard to get or any of that shit. I don’t want to waste either of our time. If I want something or someone, then I intend to have them. I tried to walk away. I thought it was ridiculous to feel an instant connection like we did. And look at me. I’m back here with you in less than a week.”

Her mouth was open as she gaped down at him.

“I get that you’re younger and maybe this is too much too fast. But honesty is important to me. And so is laying out my expectations so there are no misconceptions. I should have said this last night, maybe. However, if you were going to tell me to get lost, I wanted a bit more time with you. My expectation is that if we both enjoy ourselves during this time at Rawhide, if you like having me as your Daddy, if you want me... then our relationship won’t stop when the vacation is over. And we will do what is necessary to keep our relationship going. Which would likely necessitate one or both of us moving. So... have I totally made you want to run away screaming?”

What was he thinking? He’d told himself to wait. To give her more of a chance to get used to him and his pushy ways. But he wanted more.

Jesus.

Why couldn’t he have kept his mouth shut? She was far younger than him. Just because he knew his own mind and didn’t want to waste time because he was getting older with every second that passed didn’t mean that she wanted to move at lightning speed.

Barren opened his mouth to try and take it back or at least make it sound like he wasn’t a complete nut case for wanting to move so fast, for thinking about the future



already.

“I like knowing your expectations,” she told him.

“You do? You don’t think it’s too much? That I’m pressuring you?”

“No, I think... I mean, when you said while we were here, I thought you just wanted a... wanted a short-term fling or something and my heart felt like it might break. I know it’s very early to say this, but it doesn’t feel like we just met. It feels like we’ve known each other for years. My brothers would tell me that I’m being an idiot, but how can this be wrong when it feels so right?”

“I’m glad you feel that way, sweetheart. But I do want your promise that if your feelings change, you will tell me. Don’t hide your feelings from me or go behind my back and cheat on me.”

Her eyes widened. “Cheat on you? I would never!”

“I know, sweetheart. Or I wouldn’t want to be with you. My wife cheated on me and it hurt because I thought everything was fine. I never realized she was miserable, that she was turning to someone else behind my back.”

He still felt like a fool. The idiot who hadn’t been aware that his wife no longer loved him. That she was finding affection with another man. God. He felt ill when he thought about the fact that he’d been coming home to her, climbing into bed with her each night, when she’d been with another man. But worse than losing her, was feeling like a fool.

And that’s when he’d realized that he obviously didn’t love her anymore either. But he would never have cheated on her. That was a line that shouldn’t be crossed.

“I’m so sorry,” she told him. “That’s awful. I would never do that to someone. Especially not someone I was supposed to love.”

“I wouldn’t be attracted to you if I thought that you were that sort of person,” he reassured her. “I like how open you are.”

“You don’t know everything about me, though,” she told him, looking concerned.

“And you don’t know everything about me. That’s what this time together is for. And I don’t have to know everything at once. As long as anything you tell me isn’t a lie.”

“I can do that. I don’t like lies either. I don’t see the point of them. Sometimes I can be a bit too open, though. Then it can get annoying. And my brothers say that I have to be careful not to let anyone take advantage of my naivety.”

“Well, I finally agree with them about something. I didn’t think that was going to happen.”

### CHAPTER 10

He agreed with them?

“You think I’m naive?” she asked, feeling a bit hurt. The last thing she’d thought was that he’d judge her the way her brothers did.

“That’s not what I mean,” he told her. “I don’t think you’re naive. At least, not in a bad way. I do think that you’re very trusting. You should have been more reserved and cautious when a stranger came to help you.”

“And instead I hugged you... is that what you mean?”

“Yes, sweetheart. That’s what I mean. Luckily for you, I wasn’t an asshole or someone who would hurt you. But that doesn’t mean I want to change you.”

“You don’t?” she asked. Because it kind of sounded like he did. And all she had ever wanted in life was to find someone who accepted her just the way she was. Her dad had tried. Uncle Timmy had come close. But still, she’d held back a bit with them. She’d kept her Little safe by only letting her fully out in her bedroom.

Sure, she generally dressed how she wanted and perhaps her Little was just part of her personality. She couldn’t keep her completely suppressed. But when it came to things like playing with her toy ponies or painting and drawing, or sucking on her thumb, which she did when she was really upset, she kept those things private.

“Why would I want to change perfection?” he asked.

Phoebe could feel herself blushing. Was he for real right now? How could he call her perfect? “I’m a mess.”

“I don’t think so. And you’ll stop that right now. What did I say about putting yourself down?” he demanded in a low voice.

Uh-oh. Her heart started to race. She had a feeling that she was in trouble here.

He raised his eyebrows and gave her a stern look. Grabbing the napkin, he wiped her fingers and mouth before doing the same for himself.

“You said that it was a rule that I wasn’t allowed to put myself down,” she said. “But I was just telling the truth about myself. I am a mess. I have no idea what I’m doing half the time. I flit from thing to thing. I don’t always like to think about serious things. I mean, sometimes I do when I’m adulting. But sometimes, I just want to forget that the world can be a horrible place. I want to believe the best in people, but like you said I can’t do that because it’s not reality. Because I could get into trouble. So I’m a mess!”

“No, little girl, you’re not a mess,” he growled at her. “But you are in trouble.”

Standing, he pulled out the tray and helped her down. Then he took hold of her hand. “Let’s go see if there is a free room where we can have a bit of a chat.”

Double uh-oh. She definitely did not like the sound of that.

Fifteen minutes later, he led her into a room she’d never been before. The playroom.

Barren had made certain that the room was free for their use first. Thank god he hadn’t told anyone the reason he wanted a private room.

Although she wondered if they'd seen something on her face because she'd gotten a couple of knowing looks.

Yikes.

The playroom was the sort of place she really wanted to spend time in... if she wasn't in trouble. In one corner was a large crib and changing table with storage. She wouldn't need the changing table. But the crib actually intrigued her more than she thought it would.

She tried not to look at it for too long, but when she turned she saw Barren watching her closely. Triple uh-oh. Although was it an uh-oh or was it a yay? She really wasn't sure.

“Would you like to try the crib later?” he asked her.

She shook her head immediately without thought.

Urgh.

What was she doing? Was she being honest with herself? With him? She just didn't know. Being in a crib wasn't something she'd thought she would want, and it seemed to be difficult to admit to.

However, that didn't mean if she wasn't pushed slightly that it wasn't something she wouldn't like to try.

“Are you lying to me, little girl?” he asked in a deep voice.

Quadruple uh-oh.

Oh, dear, soon she was going to be in double figures of uh-oh. “I don’t mean to,” she whispered, chewing on her thumbnail. “I’m so sorry, I don’t mean to.”

“Hey, hey. Don’t look so worried. There’s nothing to be scared about.” He reached out and took hold of her hand, drawing it away from her mouth. Then he tugged her against him, holding her tight to his chest.

She slumped into him. “How did you know this is what I needed?” she asked.

“Well, I’d like to claim to be able to read your mind, but I was mostly acting on instinct and frankly, it was also what I wanted.”

“Oh, you wanted a hug, too?” she asked.

“Yes, sweetheart. I really wanted a hug from you. I never want you to feel upset or scared and not feel like you can reach for me. You can always ask for a hug or just throw yourself into my arms. I will catch you.”

“Even if you’re angry with me?” she asked in a small voice.

“You thought I was angry at you?” he asked.

She nodded. “You weren’t?” To her surprise, he picked her up and carried her over to a large chair. Which actually sat next to another chair that faced the corner.

She didn’t want to think about what these two chairs were used for. There was a closet close by and it was probably best that she didn’t find out what was kept in it. He sat on the chair with her on his lap, facing him, her legs straddling his thighs.

Barren grasped hold of her chin, tilting her head back so she had to look at him. “I want to make it very clear that I wasn’t angry at you. I was upset that you might be

lying to me. I realize now though, that perhaps you just couldn't tell me what you needed? Is that right?"

She nodded. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lie. Really. I just... I've never thought about sleeping in a crib and it makes me nervous, and I didn't know if it was something you wanted." She sucked in a breath. "Sorry, I can't believe I'm so indecisive and nervous. This isn't me."

"It's because this is new. And you're still unsure of me, which is understandable. Letting go can be hard unless you fully trust someone and it's all right that you don't. If I push you too hard, tell me to stop or say 'red'. But, otherwise, I am going to push a bit to see where your limits are."

"Okay," she said.

"Good girl. Do you trust me enough to stop when you say red?"

"Yes, Daddy. Of course I trust you to do that." Phoebe couldn't do this with him if she didn't.

"That's my precious girl. We can have this room all day if we want, so there is plenty of time to play with everything and take a nap."

She was excited about that. She'd managed to take in the rest of the room briefly when she'd walked in, so she knew there were lots of things she'd like to play with.

"All right, Daddy. I'd like that."

"That's my good girl. You're being so brave that it blows my mind. I just don't ever want you to be scared of me. Okay?"

“I wasn’t really scared of you, just scared of disappointing you.”

“Oh, my baby, I doubt that is even possible.”

“Can I play now, Daddy?”

“I know you’re dying to have a play, but there’s a couple of things we have to deal with first, isn’t there?”

She raised her thumb to her mouth, and he tugged that gently away.

“Firstly, there’s lines for throwing glitter around last night. Twenty-five lines saying that glitter is for crafting, not bombing people.”

Phoebe sighed heavily, but she was aware she was likely getting off lightly. It was the second part of this conversation that she was not looking forward to.

“Okay, Daddy.”

“The bigger thing we need to discuss is the fact that you broke a rule. A big rule. Putting yourself down is not something I will ever put up with. I would never allow anyone else to say something bad about you, so why would I let you say it?”

“Even if it’s really the truth?”

“It is not the truth. You are not a mess. The thing I agreed with your brothers about wasn’t that you were naïve or that you needed to change. I think you are amazing just the way you are. A bit of self-preservation is needed, but as long as you have someone watching out for you, then you can be yourself. You just have to be safe. That’s all. And I want to help keep you safe so you can be you.”



She couldn't help but sniffle. "No one ever wants all of me."

"Oh, my baby, I do." He brushed her hair off her face before leaning down to kiss her forehead, her nose, her cheeks and then finally her lips. "I want you. All of you. Please don't hold back out of fear or worry. I can handle all of you. What's more, I want to."

Another sniffle and he drew her close to his chest and held her until she'd calmed down.

"You don't know what those words mean to me. I've never had full acceptance."

"Then let me show you what it feels like."

She nodded and he pulled her back, giving her a serious look. "That does mean that sometimes you're going to end up punished. Because there are rules and a lot of them are there for your safety, something I take very seriously. Understand? So when you break them, you get a sore butt. Or some other sort of consequence."

"I understand," she said.

"Then you know that after your lines you're going to get a spanking for saying bad things about my girl."

Quintuple uh-oh.

As Phoebe wrote her lines, Barren drew out his phone. With her permission, he'd asked to see the paperwork she would have filled out before coming to the Ranch. On it were her limits, likes, and dislikes.

He skimmed over them. There wasn't much there that he hadn't figured out. Her

limits included having the cane used on her as well as being humiliated. She also didn't want to be tied up when being disciplined.

She hadn't ticked diaper play as an interest which was fine with him. But he did think she might enjoy the crib and perhaps a pacifier. He'd like to get her something to use instead of chewing on her nail.

Barren researched some ideas. He'd need to take her to the shop here and see if they had anything. Oh, and he had to make a call to the mechanic. Bringing up the number, he got his voicemail and left a message.

"Finished, Daddy!" she cried.

"Really? That was quick, little girl," he said as he rose to go over to where she sat in the corner. He'd found some paper and a hardcover book so she could use that to write on. He took the paper and started counting the lines.

"You don't need to count them, Daddy! There's twenty-five."

"Hmm, but in some of these lines you're missing words. You need to re-do them. Lines seventeen, twenty-one and twenty-three."

She sighed. "Are you sure that I have to re-do them? Couldn't you just let me off because of good behavior?"

He snorted. "I wish I could. But no. Re-do them."

"Gosh, you're very strict, Daddy."

"I can be stricter if I need to be," he said in a stern voice as his phone beeped with a message.

“No, no, I got this.”

As she redid the lines, he checked his phone and saw a message from Zeus that they’d drop her vehicle off tomorrow. That was good.

“Now I’m finished, Daddy!” she cried, holding up the piece of paper.

“Bring it over here, little girl.”

She jumped up and skipped over, plopping herself down in his lap which made him smile. It seemed that when she was happy, she just let herself do what felt good. And what felt good to her definitely felt good to him.

He checked the lines. “What a good girl you are. All done.”

“Yay!” she clapped her hands and bounced on his lap.

“Whoa, careful there, little girl. We don’t want to cause any injuries.”

“Oops, sorry, Daddy. Spaghetti and meatballs okay?”

“And we also don’t want to call anything spaghetti and meatballs,” he added.

She giggled and he had to smile again before he set the piece of paper to one side. Then he stood her on her feet, turning her around to face him. He held her hips as he stared up at her.

“Now, we have another punishment to take care of.”

That lower lip slid out.

He swore that she was testing his control with that pout, but he wasn't going to bend. He only wanted to do what was best for her, and if he let her break the rules without consequence now, it wouldn't end well. She might start to think he would never back up what he said with action.

“Right, little girl. You're going over my lap. I'm only going to spank you with my hand this time. But if you break this same rule again, you might find yourself getting spanked with my belt or a paddle.”

Her eyes widened. “A paddle? The belt?”

“That's right. What's your safe word?”

“Red,” she replied.

“Good. You'll use it if you need to but I'm going to keep a close eye on you. Take off your slippers and tights, then over my lap.”

Slowly, she put her slippers to one side, followed by her tights before he helped position her. He drew up her pleated skirt and discovered she wore white panties with a big red love heart across the satin.

“I love how cute your clothes are.” He rubbed her bottom with gentle strokes before tugging her panties down. She was tense and he knew he had to get her to relax slightly. “Your ass is gorgeous. So beautiful. A work of art.”

She giggled, relaxing. “No, it isn't!”

“Um, yes it is. No contradicting your elders.”

“Daddy!”

“Yes?”

“You can’t say no contradicting your elders!”

“Why not?” he asked, lightly running his fingers over her thighs.

“Stop! Stop! That tickles!”

“Does it?” he asked with fake disbelief. “Goodness. I didn’t realize. And why can’t I say that?”

“Because you are always gonna be older than me! Then you could use it anytime.”

“Hmm, I didn’t think of that, you’re right. I could use it anytime I like.”

“Daddy! Nooo,” she cried.

“Don’t say no to me, I’m older than you. Yes, this works perfectly.”

“Daddy!” she protested.

That’s when he struck, smacking his hand down onto her ass. She let out a cry of protest, but he didn’t stop. He wanted to give her several spanks so she could get an idea of what to expect. Of how hard he spanked.

After several smacks to her gorgeous ass, he stopped and rubbed the pink skin.

“Daddy!”

“Yes, little girl?”

“That hurt.”

“It’s supposed to hurt.”

“Gosh, I’m so glad that’s over,” she said emphatically. “I don’t think I’m going to be able to sit tomorrow.”

Hmm. Was she being genuine or was she pretending it hurt really badly so he wouldn’t spank her more?

“Little girl?”

“Yes, Daddy? Can I get off your lap now?”

“No, I’m afraid you have to stay right where you are.”

She turned her head to look back up at him. “Why?”

“Because that was only four spanks, my baby,” he told her.

“Yes! Four spanks is a lot! It hurt.”

“It was barely a warm-up.”

“It was a spanking!”

“It was not a spanking,” he countered. “I only stopped so I could check in with you. This is your first spanking with a Daddy Dom, and I wanted to make sure that you didn’t need to stop.”

“I do need to stop!”

“So you’re in too much pain to continue? You feel that being spanked isn’t a punishment you would like?” he asked.

“Oh.”

He waited for a moment while she thought about it. “I guess I’m not in that much pain, and I don’t want to rule out spankings.”

“They’re not a hard limit?”

“No, Daddy. At least, not at the moment. After my spanking I might change my mind.”

“What do you say if you want me to stop?” he asked.

“Red,” she said.

“Good girl. If it becomes too much, too painful, too overwhelming I expect you to say red. Understand?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

He started to spank her again before she could begin to worry. He spanked until her bottom went from pink to red and she started sobbing. Then he stopped so he could rub her lower back soothingly as she cried.

Carefully, he lifted her up so she was straddling him on the chair. He hadn’t spanked her too hard or long, not wanting to scare her or push her too much. But it had been a decent spanking, and she needed some tender care. Pulling her close, he rubbed her back as she sobbed against his chest.

“That’s it, little girl. Just let go. I have you. Daddy has you and he’s not going to let you go.”



### CHAPTER 11

It was like he knew every word to say. Every word that would wrap itself around her heart and hold her warmly. Her bottom throbbed as she sat there on his lap, but that wasn't really the reason she was crying. She wasn't sure what it was. More like she... she was just letting go of a whole lot of emotion.

“Hey, are you all right? Are you in a lot of pain?” There was a worried note to his voice, and she knew that she had to get herself together and put his fears at ease.

Sitting back slightly, she wiped at her face with her arm.

“Wait a minute. Let me grab some tissues.” He reached over and grabbed some tissues that were sitting on a small table next to the chair.

That seemed like a strategic placement. She wondered how many Littles had been spanked in his chair.

Probably best not to know.

He leaned her back and then used the tissues to wipe her face. That was better, even if her nose was still stuffed up.

Then he grabbed some more tissues and held them to her nose. “Blow.”

Oh good. She blew her nose into the tissue, and he finished cleaning her up before throwing the tissue away. Then he clasped her face between his hands, watching her

worriedly.

“What’s going on, Little girl?” he asked. “Was it too much? You should have safeworded.”

“No, no.” She shook her head. “That wasn’t it.”

“What is it, then?”

“I just... I just . . .”

Drat.

Get yourself together.

She felt so scattered.

“You know how you get a bottle of soda and you shake it and shake it?”

He nodded, looking confused and she couldn’t blame him for that. She felt confused and she was the one trying to explain how she felt.

“And then you undo the cap and it all explodes out? I feel like my cap was just loosened.”

Did he get it?

“I think I understand.”

“You do?”

“Yes, little girl. You’ve been holding your emotions in, and they’ve been bubbling, searching for a way out. The spanking gave you the excuse to let go and let everything out and now it’s hard to rein your emotions back in.”

“Wow. You said that so much better than I ever could.”

He smiled slightly as he wiped his thumb under her eye. Drat. Some stray tears were still working their way down her cheek.

“What were you holding so tightly to your chest, sweetheart?” he asked. “Is it something you can tell me? Sometimes it’s good to talk about these things.”

She breathed out a deep sigh. “Lots of stuff, I think. My dad dying. My brothers being so disapproving of the way I am, of the life I want to lead. Them wanting me to tone myself down so I fit in better. The guilt I feel over my mom’s death.”

“That’s a lot to carry around on your shoulders,” he told her, cupping the side of her face. “You should know that your mom’s death wasn’t your fault, but it also seems to me like perhaps you should talk to someone about that guilt. It’s not healthy for you to deal with. Losing a parent is so hard. Will you think about talking to a therapist? I don’t like that you’re living with these feelings and bottling them up.”

“Maybe,” she said. “I don’t know if they’d approve of me, either.”

“Firstly, screw anyone who doesn’t approve of you because you are amazing. And you will tell me if anyone makes you feel less, understand? You do not have to tone yourself down to fit in with anyone. You’re perfect how you are.”

“What will you do if someone does do that?” she asked, shocked by how fierce he looked and sounded.

“I will ruin them.”

Whoa.

Those words went straight through her body, heating her from the inside out. Seemed like she enjoyed his protectiveness.

“Why?”

“Because you’re mine, little girl.”

Yep. She liked his possessiveness too. “Thank you,” she told him.

His eyebrows rose. “I wasn’t expecting you to thank me.”

“No? What were you expecting?”

“I suppose I was expecting you to react how my ex would have. Which isn’t fair now that I take a moment to think about it, because you are nothing like her.”

Well, that was a relief. From what she’d learned of his ex, she didn’t want to be like her. “How would she have reacted?”

“Probably by laughing at me or getting mad. Maybe some ridicule. It’s hard to know which way she would go.”

“She didn’t deserve you,” she told him. “Because you’re amazing and if anyone tries to tell you differently, you tell me. I’ll deal with them.” She punched her fist into the palm of her other hand.

He smiled at her, looking indulgent. But he didn’t realize that she meant every word.

“Did the spanking help, then?” he asked.

Phoebe eyed him suspiciously. “I guess so. But don’t get any crazy ideas about spanking me more often.”

“Then you might want to behave yourself, little girl,” he told her.

She wrinkled her nose. “I dunno, sounds kind of boring.”

“You’re going to keep an old man on his toes, aren’t you?” he murmured.

“Daddy, you’re not that old. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“Sassy.” He started tickling her and she giggled as she tried to escape him.

Finally, he stopped and hugged her tight again.

“Such a good girl. Precious girl. My girl.”

She slumped against him. Yep, he always seemed to know exactly what to say.

“Do you want to do some playing, little girl?” Barren asked her.

Her whole face lit up. As though he was offering her the crown jewels or unlimited candy. Part of him hated that. Hated that she had never had the opportunity to play and be herself in a safe environment. But there was also a part of him that liked that he was the first Daddy she’d ever had.

Did that make him an asshole? Maybe. But he couldn’t help the way he felt.

“Yes, please!”

“Let’s get your clothes back on you.” He stood her on her feet and grabbed her tights off the floor, helping her back into them and then he stood and crouched so he could help her put her slippers back on.

“Thanks, Daddy.”

“You’re welcome, little girl. Such lovely manners. Before you start playing, I just have one thing to tell you.”

She was fidgeting, moving her weight from foot to foot. “What is it, Daddy? What is it? The town is waiting for me.” She gestured toward the playmat on the floor which had roads and buildings printed on it. There were some toy cars set to one side.

Ahh, so that’s what she was dying to play with?

“It’s about your car. Zeus contacted me and said that he’ll have it dropped off tomorrow.”

“Yay!” She danced around. “Now, Daddy?”

“Go for it, my baby.”

She skipped over to the cars and sat on the floor before grimacing and moving onto her knees.

“Sore bottom, little girl?” he asked.

Phoebe sent him a quelling look. “Yes, Daddy. You spank too hard.”

“I disagree. I think I spank just hard enough.”

A huff of breath escaped her as she picked up a car and drove it along the road, making noises.

Oh, that was so cute.

“Vrooomm-Vrooomm. Crash! Oh no!” she cried. “There’s been an accident, Daddy!”

“Oh dear. Was someone speeding?”

“Yes. Look, they smashed into this truck. Oh, they’re gonna be in big trouble when they get home.”

“I hope they’re all right,” he commented as he came and sat with her.

“Yep. They said they’re all right, just some bruises. That was very close. I think their Daddy will spank them when they get home, though.”

“Perhaps. I’m sure he’ll make sure they’re not injured first. And probably hold them tight for a long time. But I know that my girl wouldn’t be speeding like that.”

Although he did remember she’d mentioned how happy she was not to get any speeding tickets on the way here. Which made him wonder how often she got them.

“Of course not, Daddy. I’m a very good driver.”

“That’s good to hear, because my girl needs to follow all the rules when it comes to driving and keeping herself safe.”

“All right, Daddy! Enough of the chit-chat, I have to go make our cup of tea. Would you like some cake? Cookies? Ooh, there might even be cupcakes.”

He watched as she jumped up and raced over to the table that could be set up for a tea party. She was like a kid in a candy store, flitting around, excited by everything she saw. And it was adorable.

“Oh, Snickerdoodle would love this tea party!” she cried. “I feel so bad that he’s back in the room. I should have brought him.”

Her lower lip started to tremble, and he hated the look of sadness on her face. Getting to his feet, he walked over and cupped her face between his hands.

“Don’t get upset, we can bring Snickerdoodle back another day.”

“Really?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“We can come back to this room another day?”

“Yes, little girl. If you are enjoying yourself, I’ll bring you here as much as you want.”

“Wow. But I’m only supposed to be staying a few more days and what about your work? Don’t you have to get back to it?”

“Don’t worry about any of that stuff right now. If you want to stay longer, we’ll work it out. All right? But I don’t want you thinking about that stuff right now. This is a time to have fun and play and explore.”

She gave him a wide smile. “You’re such a good Daddy.”

“I’m glad you think so because I want to be the best Daddy I can be for you.”



“Well, you’re off to an excellent start. Except for the consequences stuff. You can always forget that part in the future.”

“Hmm, good to know, but I feel like I wouldn’t be a very good Daddy if I didn’t follow through on my word. Imagine if I promised you ice cream and then didn’t get it for you?”

She gasped and pretended to stumble backward. “That would be terrible, Daddy!”

“Exactly. So consequences will stay.”

“And ice cream, right?”

“There will always be ice cream,” he reassured her.

“Whew. Just had to make sure, Daddy.”

“Would you like more tea, Daddy?” she asked, holding up the tea pot.

Barren nodded solemnly as he perched his large body on a rather small wooden chair. Sure, he could have sat on the floor, but that wouldn’t have looked nearly as funny. And this was a tea party! All of the other guests were sitting on their chairs. Well, Mr. Unicorn kept trying to slip off, but he was a very naughty unicorn.

“Mr. Unicorn! Stop moving,” she grumbled as she finished pouring Barren’s tea.

With a sigh, she put her tea kettle down and then grabbed Mr. Unicorn, setting him on his chair.

“Look at Mrs. Bear and Miss Bunny,” she scolded. “They are sitting in their chairs nicely and so is Daddy. So why can’t you? I’m starting to regret inviting you.”

“He has been quite naughty,” Daddy agreed.

“I know. Unicorns are often naughty. They think they’re special because everyone loves unicorns. I still love unicorns, but I do think that Mr. Unicorn might need to learn how to behave himself.”

“I understand where you’re coming from,” Daddy said as he took a sip of tea. “Now, it’s nearly time for lunch and a nap, little girl. So we need to tidy this up before lunch gets here.”

“Sure, sure, Daddy.” She was a bit busy right now with Mr. Unicorn. He just wouldn’t stay up and it was frustrating.

Besides, she was still full from breakfast and who had time for a nap?

“Little girl, are you listening to me?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Then why aren’t you tidying up?” he asked sternly.

She glanced over to find him standing with his arms crossed over his chest.

Hmm. Uh-oh. “I’m not hungry, Daddy.”

“No skipping meals,” he stated. “Another rule.”

“I hope you’re writing these down, Daddy,” she stated.

“I’m going to look for a book in the store after your nap.”

“I really don’t need a nap, Daddy!”

“Are you sure about that?” he asked.

“Uh-huh. I’m not tired at all!”

“We’ll see. Start tidying all of this up or you can spend ten minutes in the corner and then you can tidy it up.”

“Ten minutes! That’s a lifetime!”

His lips quirked. “Not quite. Start tidying.”

Tidying up sucked. But she thought that corner time would likely suck more.

### CHAPTER 12

“There we go! All nice and clean.” Barren finished cleaning her face and hands with the wet cloth. “Cute as a button.”

Phoebe smiled up at him. “Thanks, Daddy.”

“You’re welcome, little girl.” He tidied up their lunch and carried the tray to set it outside the door. Phoebe jumped up and opened the door for him. “Thank you. Now, let’s get you ready for your nap. I haven’t got any pajamas for you, although there might be something in here we could use.”

He hated not having everything she might need.

Phoebe wrinkled her nose and shook her head. “I’m good, Daddy.”

“I know you’re good, little girl. But that doesn’t mean you’re not having a nap. And whether you have one with a hot bottom or not is up to you.”

“My bottom is already hot!” she told him.

“It can be hotter.”

Phoebe sighed. “All right, Daddy. I will try to nap. I really don’t think I’ll fall asleep, though.”

“You said that last night too.”

“I was just tired. It was all the glitter. Glittering makes me tired.”

“I don’t know that glittering is a word.”

“Oh, it is, Daddy. It totally is.”

He crouched to remove her slippers, skirt, and tights. Then he stood and drew off her sweater, leaving her just in a T-shirt.

“Come on, you need to go potty first. You haven’t been all morning.” In fact, she hadn’t drunk much at lunch or breakfast. He needed to get some water into her.

“I don’t think I’ve got to pee, though,” she complained as he led her into the bathroom.

He placed her in front of the toilet, then drew her panties down before helping her sit. Then he stood and waited.

She stared up at him, her face growing red. “Daddy! Are you going to stay in here?”

“I was going to. Too soon?”

“Way too soon, Daddy. Like a hundred years too soon.”

“In a hundred years I’ll be well and truly dead,” he told her.

“Uh-huh. Me too. And then I won’t be able to die from embarrassment from you listening to me pee.”

Die from embarrassment. His girl could be a tad dramatic. “I’ll go and get the crib ready. Call out when you’ve finished peeing.”

“Uh-huh, I’ll do that, Daddy.”

He drew the covers back on the crib and grabbed Miss Bunny for her to cuddle. He thought about getting Snickerdoodle, but he didn’t want to leave her for that long. And she seemed to like Miss Bunny. Then he grabbed a sippy cup from the cupboard and filled it up with a bottle of water left over from their lunch.

“Daddy? Finished!” she called out.

“Good girl, have you washed your hands?” he asked as he entered the bathroom.

“Of course, Daddy.”

“Well done.” He took hold of her hand and led her into the other room and to the chair instead of the crib. Suddenly, she started tugging at his hand and he stopped, turning to her.

She was staring down at the chair. “I didn’t do anything wrong, Daddy!”

“What do you mean... of course you didn’t... oh wait!” He was an idiot. “I’m not punishing you, little girl. I wanted to give you some water.” He walked over and grabbed the sippy cup of water.

“Oh. Silly me. Of course you wouldn’t spank me. I’ve been so well-behaved.”

“Well, not sure I’d go that far,” he told her as he sat on the chair and drew her onto his lap, lying her back against his arm. Perhaps he should have chosen the baby bottle. But she drank down some water happily.

Damn.

He never thought he would be this lucky. He held the cup for her as she continued to drink. When she turned her mouth away, tugging at his hand, he sat it down again. She'd drunk about a third of it. She could drink the rest afterward.

Standing, he held her cradled in his arms, against his chest as he carried her to the crib and laid her down. He gave her Miss Bunny before tucking her in. "Are you all right with Miss Bunny?"

"Yes, Daddy. I do miss Snickerdoodle, though."

"We can go get him before we go to the shop later if you like."

"Oh, yes, please, Daddy," she said as he moved around the room, pulling the curtains and turning off the lights. A small nightlight came on so they weren't completely in darkness. Walking back to the crib, he sat facing her.

"I won't sleep, Daddy," she warned.

"Roll over, my baby. I'll rub your back and see if that helps."

She shuffled over so she faced away from him and he rubbed her back until he heard a soft snore escape her. With a smile, he stood and raised the side of the cot.

Just as he'd thought, she'd gotten off to sleep quickly.

Lucky for her, Daddy knew just what she needed even when she didn't.

"I'm so excited!" Phoebe skipped back and forth in her slippers as she swung Snickerdoodle around with one hand. Her other hand was firmly encased in Barren's large hand as he led her toward the store.

She'd finished a nap, something she hadn't thought was going to be possible. She was usually far too busy to sleep during the day. But she'd woken up in the crib, with all four sides raised! Barren had been there immediately to help her out and he'd taken her straight to the bathroom. Which was a smart move on his behalf because she'd been busting. But now they were heading into Rawhide Ranch's shop, and she was so excited!

"Now, listen to the rules, please," Barren said firmly as he came to a stop and turned her to face him.

"Rules?" she cried.

"Yes, rules."

"I don't see how there can be more rules, Daddy. I think if you come up with any more rules my head might explode."

"I think you can handle it," he told her solemnly. "While we are in the shop, you are to stay within eyesight of me at all times. No running off to look at something or wandering away. Understand?"

She sighed. "Well, okay, Daddy."

"And if Daddy tells you to do something, you have to do it straight away. I don't want any arguments or pouting."

"But pouting is so fun."

"Little girl," he said in a warning voice.

"Yes, Daddy. No pouting. I understand."



His girl was a demon to shop with. She flitted around from thing to thing, picking it up and then discarding it.

She never went out of his eyesight, though.

“Oh, Daddy this is just the cutest!” she cried, running her hand over a white, fluffy scarf with matching hat.

They would look good on her and he picked them up to put them in the basket.

“You don’t have to buy them for me, though.” She reached in to take them out of the basket.

“New rule,” he said.

“Oh no, Daddy! Not another one.”

“Yes, another one. If something goes into the basket, it doesn’t come out unless I take it out.”

“All right, Daddy.”

He realized he’d made a mistake after that as she stopped reacting with excitement at everything she saw. Finally, he drew her to a halt after they’d walked past a red onesie with white hearts on it that he just knew she had to love.

“Right. We need a chat.”

Her eyes widened in alarm, and she pushed her hand behind her to cover her butt. “I didn’t do it! It wasn’t me! I’m innocent, I tell you!”

“Little girl, what are you talking about? Innocent of what?”

“Um, of whatever you were about to punish me for.”

“I wasn’t going to punish you,” he told her.

“But you said chat. Chat is the code word for I’m gonna spank you.”

He shook his head. “Sweetheart, no. Sometimes a chat is just a chat.”

“Drat. Gonna have to update my internal book of Daddy code.”

“You have an internal book of Daddy code?” he asked.

“Yep. It only had one word. Chat means you’re gonna get spanked. Now chat can have a dual meaning.”

“I’m sorry,” he said solemnly. “That seems very confusing.”

“Oh, it is. You have no idea how confusing you Daddies can be.”

“Have other Daddies been confusing you?” he demanded.

Rein it in. You sound jealous.

“Um, no, just you, I guess.”

Right. He smothered his jealousy. “I just wanted to talk to you about why you aren’t looking at anything.”

“Um. What do you mean?”

“Before you were all excited about everything. Now you keep telling me you don’t want or need things. Is it because I’m getting these things for you?”

“It doesn’t feel right to spend your money, Daddy.”

“I don’t want you worrying about money,” he told her.

Maybe you should tell her that you have plenty of money. That you could likely buy everything in this shop four times over and still not put a dent in your bank balance.

He opened his mouth to do just that, but something held him back. Or should it be some one held him back? Because all he could see was Krystal telling him that she’d only been with him for his money. It wasn’t that he thought that was the reason that Phoebe was interested in him.

Far from it.

She had no idea he had money. And did she need to know yet? It wasn’t like she’d spoken about her finances. This was early days, and those conversations could come later. Still, he didn’t want her to worry about that.

“This isn’t something for Little girls to worry about, understand?” he said. “Money is an adult worry.”

“But even Littles have to worry about money.”

“Did you come to Rawhide so you could worry about adult things or so you could escape for a while and indulge your Little?”

“Well, yeah, I didn’t want to think about Big stuff for a while.”

“Then you won’t. Understand? You’re going to trust me to have this handled.”

“I’m not taking advantage of you?” she asked worriedly.

“Little girl, no. You could never.” Reaching up, he cupped her face between his hands. “You’re my best girl. Now, how about we get you that onesie back there?”

“Oh, yes, please, Daddy!”

Twenty minutes later, she gaped at the pile of things on the counter. Wow. Daddy had bought her half the store it seemed.

“You have some nice treasures here,” the woman behind the cashier desk told her. “I’m Becky, by the way.”

“I sure do, Becky!” Phoebe said excitedly. Then she pointed at a bright item that was attached to a black piece of leather. It was long and rounded at the bottom. “What’s that, Daddy?”

“It’s something that you can chew on instead of gnawing on your thumbnail,” he explained.

“You can also suck on it like a pacifier,” Becky told her as she packed it away in a bag.

“You put the leather part around your neck and wear it like a necklace,” Barren added.

“Oh. That’s a good idea.” She caught sight of a blue notebook with something written across the top. “Rules for Littles. Daddy!”

“You said you wanted all your rules written down.”

“This book is very helpful,” Becky said as she packed it away. “It even has pages for you to write down any transgressions and punishments if you want. Helpful when a Little is sick and can’t be punished straight away.”

Goodness. Wasn’t that helpful?

Not.

“Come on, little girl. Let’s go put your new things away.”

She sighed. “All right, Daddy! Let’s go.”

### CHAPTER 13

Phoebe glanced over as Barren's phone rang. He'd been getting a lot of phone calls lately. And having to go onto his laptop more and more to get some work done. She was starting to feel bad because she was the one keeping him from his work.

They'd been at Rawhide together for five days now and it had been magical. Every day, he took care of her. He chose her clothes, dressed her, took her to breakfast and fed her. He decided what they were going to do for the day, but it was always something she enjoyed. Like coming to the playroom or going outside to the play area, having a picnic while watching the horses. That last one had been her favorite.

Phoebe never wanted to leave.

But was she being selfish keeping him here when he was obviously busy. Just because she was hiding from the world didn't mean he could or wanted to do the same.

He ended his call with a sigh, and she stood up from where she'd been trying to talk Snickerdoodle and Mr. Unicorn into a truce. They had been butting heads ever since they met.

Unicorns and horses. They either loved each other or it was war.

"Daddy?" she said quietly.

But he didn't hear her. She cleared her throat and moved closer. "Um, Daddy?"

He glanced up at her like he'd never seen her before. Then he shook his head. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. Did you need me? I shouldn't be working, but I have a very needy client at the moment. Well, he wants something that I can't give him right this minute. Sorry. What was up? Have Mr. Unicorn and Snickerdoodle been behaving? Or do I need to put them into timeout again?"

"Welll , they're close to needing timeout, but I'll give them a bit longer to start behaving themselves." She gave the two toys a stern look. "But that wasn't why I wanted to talk to you."

He set his laptop to the side and held out his hand. She took it eagerly and he drew her onto his lap.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"I don't mean to interrupt your work?—"

"No, you're not interrupting my work. My work is interrupting our time together." Frustration filled his face. "Truthfully, I'm thinking about cutting back."

"You are?" she asked. "Will you be able to do that?"

"I have to get a few things wrapped up, but hopefully. Now, what was it?"

"Well, I was just going to say that I don't want to keep you from your work. It seems important and like you have a lot going on, and I feel guilty that you're stuck here with me."

"Listen to me, little girl," he said in a low, deep voice. "I am not 'stuck' anywhere. I am right where I want to be. Yes, I have a lot going on, but you are not second to my work. It should be second to you. I should've left my laptop in the room."

“No, no, I’m not saying this to make you feel guilty for working. I’m saying... well, I’m not sure. Maybe that if you need to go back to your home... your job... that you should.”

He tensed and she could sense him withdrawing from her.

“And away from you?”

“What? No! I don’t want you to leave me. I was hoping I could come too.”

He stared at her.

“I mean, not move in with you. I could just come with you. Maybe I could stay close by. I’d have to drive Cherry so it would take me a few days to get to Connecticut, but... it was just an idea. Probably a silly one. I’m so sorry.” Phoebe attempted to climb off his lap, but he placed his hands on her thighs to still her.

“Stay right where you are,” he said firmly.

She froze. Was he going to break things off with her?

“I think that is the best idea I’ve ever heard.”

He... what?

“You do?”

“Yes, well, not the part where you drive there or that you live in a hotel or something.”

She hadn’t actually figured out the accommodation part since a hotel might not be



manageable. “Ahh, then what part did you like?”

“The part where you come and stay with me so you’re close by when I come home from work. I’ll try to cut back my hours which will be easier if I can work from the office for a few hours a day. That’s a brilliant idea, Phoebe.”

Well. Sometimes she had them.

“It doesn’t feel like it’s too soon. I mean, I’m not moving in, just staying,” she said hastily.

“Sweetheart, stop worrying,” he murmured. “I think it’s a great idea. I want you close by, where I can keep an eye on you. But can you manage that? You said you’re between jobs, but what about your family? Are they expecting you back soon? You won’t need much money since you can stay with me, however, do you have bills to pay?”

“I, um, I’m fine. I don’t need to be anywhere for a while, and I can call my brothers and let them know I’m going to stay away for a while.” She wouldn’t call them. But she could if she had to.

“Perfect. Just like you.” He wrapped his hand around the back of her neck and kissed her.

Long and hard and deep.

Her body stirred. She was all too aware that they hadn’t moved that step further and slept together. Although they had slept in the same bed together the last few nights. A whimper of need escaped her as he drew his mouth away.

“I’ll get my assistant to book us plane tickets.”

“Plane tickets? But I have to drive Cherry.”

“Sweetheart, I’m not going to let you drive Cherry across the country by yourself. We’ll put her on a car transporter.”

She bit her lip. Was getting on a plane a good idea? If she didn’t use her credit card, surely no one could trace her, right?

She’d managed to catch Zeus, the mechanic, when he’d dropped off Cherry. While Barren had been busy checking Cherry over, she’d given him enough cash to pay for the repairs and some extra for the hassle of driving it to Rawhide for her.

“Or we could go on a road trip, I guess,” he said.

“Road trip!” she cried, pumping her fists into the air.

### CHAPTER 14

“Sweetheart, we need to get going,” Barren told her as she gave Erika another hug.

“Sorry, Daddy! I’m just going to miss everyone here so much. They all have such kind auras.”

“We’ll miss you too!” said Sadie. She was standing with Master Derek and had a sad smile on her face. “Come back anytime!”

“I’m sure we’ll be back,” Barren told her as Phoebe turned and launched herself at him. He braced himself, catching her against him and holding her tight.

“Bye!” she said, waving as he led her outside.

“Are you all right, sweetheart?” he asked her as he opened the passenger door before helping her in.

“I will be,” she sniffled. “I just h-hate goodbyes!”

“But it’s not goodbye forever,” he told her. “I’ll bring you back. I promise.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

He did up her seatbelt, then handed her Snickerdoodle, who had been waiting for her.

She grabbed her necklace, pulling the teal part into her mouth to chew on it.

“Good girl. I’ve put a bottle of water in the cup holder for you. I expect it to be all gone before our first stop or else Daddy will have to take you into the backseat and give you a baby bottle, okay?”

Barren loved the way she blushed at those words, while squirming in happiness. He’d actually bought her a baby bottle at the store and had been using it more regularly. He found giving her a bottle of warm milk at night really did help relax her and get her off to sleep.

He’d also discovered that if he didn’t watch her water intake that she’d go hours without drinking.

“I’ll try, Daddy.”

After shutting the door, he headed around the truck, climbed into the driver’s seat, buckled himself in, and started Cherry.

Damn, her engine really did purr. She was a gorgeous truck.

“You said your dad bought you this pickup?” he asked her as he drove down the driveway, passing the security guard at the gates.

“Uh-huh. When I saw her, I fell in love with her. Red and white are obviously my favorite colors. The white leather seats and the red exterior just seemed perfect. My dad bought all of my brothers a car when they turned twenty-one, so he bought me Cherry. Of course, my brothers didn’t think I could handle her.” She patted the dashboard. “They were wrong. Dad was the one who taught me to drive so he had confidence in me.” She was silent for a long moment.

He'd noticed that she would often do that. Just pause and stare off into the distance. He let her have those moments, knowing that she was still grieving.

“I still miss him so much,” she said.

“Of course you do. You’ll always miss him, sweetheart. Because he was a good man and a great father. What’s important is that he loved you and he’d want you to be happy.”

“I know he would. He’d like you.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Even though I’m so much older than you are?”

“Hmm, yeah, he might not have liked that. He’d probably have given you one of his Dad-looks, told you that if you hurt his princess that he’d rip your intestines out and strangle you with them. Things like that.”

“As he should. He had a precious girl to protect. I’d do the same if I had a daughter.”

“Did you ever want kids?”

“Hmm, I used to. But my ex didn’t want them and now... I’m not so sure. What about you?”

What would he say if she said she wanted them? Was he ready to adapt his life for a child?

Whoa. Getting ahead of yourself there. But he couldn’t deny that he was imagining her in his life.

Permanently.

“I don’t know, either. I hadn’t thought about it much if I’m honest because I never found someone I thought I would want a relationship with long-term. I’m happy

either way.”

Reaching over, he squeezed her hand.

“We need to stop soon, though, Daddy.”

“Why is that? Do you need to go potty? How is your booster seat? Comfortable?”

“It really is. I didn’t think I would like it, but I’m so much higher now.”

They’d had a booster seat in the store at Rawhide Ranch that could be used to raise her up.

“I don’t need to go potty, though,” she told him.

“Then why do we have to stop?” he asked. They had a tank full of gas and he was going to drive as far as he could today before she grew tired. This trip would take them a couple of days.

“Snacks of course! You can’t have a road trip without snacks. I’m pretty sure it’s illegal.”

“Illegal? Really?”

“Uh-huh. I think they might throw you in jail.”

“That does sound serious,” he said. “What sort of snacks do you think we need?”

“Hmm, I like Gushers, Swedish Fish, Twizzlers, Snickers, and chips.”

“What sort of chips?” he asked.

“All of them.”

“Right, well, you’re not going to get all of that. But we’ll stop and you can choose one snack.”

“One snack, Daddy? Are you serious?”

“Very serious,” he said firmly. “One or none. It’s your choice.”

“I don’t think that’s even a choice, Daddy. I don’t think I can survive on just one snack.”

“I think you can do it.”

“This is gonna be a great road trip, Daddy!” she cried. “The bestest ever.”

“Glad you think so, my baby. I’m just happy to be on a road trip with you.”

“Aww, Daddy, you’re the sweetest.”

“Into the corner. Now.”

She stomped her foot before looking down at it in shock. Oopsie. She hadn’t actually meant to do that.

“Did you just stomp your foot?” he asked, arms crossing over his chest.

“It wasn’t me! It was my foot! It’s out of control. Just this morning, it kicked me.”

They were on the last leg of their road trip. Tomorrow, they’d arrive at his house, and she was feeling a bit nervous. Which might be part of the reason she was acting up.

“Stomping your foot isn’t going to help your situation,” he told her. “Daddy told you to wait for him while I went and checked us in, didn’t I?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“And what did you do?”

“I got out of Cherry. But, Daddy, you don’t understand. There was a puppy.”

“A puppy who you didn’t know. He could have been dangerous.”

“Daddy, it was a puppy. Puppies aren’t dangerous.”

“I know it looked cute, sweetheart. But just because something looks nice doesn’t mean it is nice. And you didn’t know the person with the puppy.”

“Daddy, she was a really sweet person.”

“Which you didn’t know when you approached her and asked to pet her puppy. She could have been a kidnapper. She could have stolen you, trafficked you, and then I would never have found you.”

Okay. Phoebe stared at Barren at a loss for words. Which wasn’t entirely normal for her.

“Daddy, she had to be in her seventies. I don’t think she would be a very good kidnapper.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “She could have been a front lady. The real kidnapper could have been sitting in a van down the road. You are too trusting.”



“Don’t you think you’re the opposite of too trusting. You’re untrusting. Is that the right word? Anyway, it doesn’t matter because she was just a nice lady walking her puppy and I got puppy cuddles. I thought you would be happy for me, Daddy.”

“Happy that you got out of the pickup which was directly against what I told you to do? Because that is the biggest issue. You disobeyed me.”

Shoot. She couldn’t exactly argue that. “Am I in big trouble, Daddy?” she asked.

“You are. Into the corner while I get everything we need inside.”

Phoebe sighed sadly and shuffled her way into the corner. This sucked. She hated timeout.

The door opened and closed, and she hummed quietly to herself until he returned. Then she felt him move up behind her.

“Is it over, Daddy?” she asked, perking up. That was a short timeout.

“No, it’s not. But there are a few changes needed.” He drew down her skirt. It was a longer, flowing skirt that reached her knees and was a bright red. She wore a pair of tights underneath for warmth. Those went down to her ankles too.

Her panties soon followed.

Uh-oh.

“Shuffle your feet back and then spread them wider. That’s it. Now, lean forward so I can see that naughty bottom.”

He’d never made her do this before and she was certain that she did not like it. She

felt very exposed.

“That’s better. Now, reach back and part your bottom cheeks.”

“Daddy!” she cried, turning to look at him.

He was sitting in a chair that he’d pulled into the middle of the room. That wasn’t a good sign. Was he going to sit there and stare at her? His eyebrows rose as he gave her a stern look. She gulped. Double uh-oh.

“That’s not your safe word,” he said.

“Um, no, it’s not.” She wasn’t so uncomfortable that she needed to use it.

“Then what should you be doing?” he asked.

Yikes. Turning back around, she reached back and parted her bottom cheeks. She could feel how red her face had grown as she spread them wide. How much could he see? Likely everything.

Phoebe wasn’t sure how long she stayed in that position. But she was growing tired when he told her that she could let go and straighten.

Then he helped her turn before crouching in front of her to remove her shoes and clothes from around her feet.

“I’m sorry, Daddy.” She wrapped herself around him once he stood. “I shouldn’t have disobeyed you.”

Barren kissed the top of her head. “I know you think I’m overbearing, but I just want to keep you safe.”

“I know. I just have a weakness for puppies and kitties and cute things. It’s an affliction, really.”

He snorted. “An affliction, huh? Sounds terrible.”

“Oh, it really is.”

“But it isn’t your love of cute things that resulted in you ending up in timeout or getting your bottom spanked, is it? It’s because you disobeyed Daddy.”

“I didn’t get my bottom spanked,” she pointed out.

“Oh, my baby. You thought the punishment was over? I’m afraid not.”

“Noo, Daddy,” she protested as he led her over to the chair and sat on it.

“Yes, little girl,” he countered as he drew her down so she lay over his lap.

“I don’t want a spanking,” she grumbled.

“Well, you’re getting one. I’m going to start with my hand and finish with the naughty-girl paddle.”

She tensed. “What naughty-girl paddle?”

He shuffled her on his lap so he could reach over to grab something that he must have placed on the bed. Then he held the item in front of her face so she could see it. It looked far too big to her and was round and made of black leather. Along one side in pink stitching were the words, Naughty Girl.

That was just rude.

“Where did you get that?” she asked.

“At the shop at Rawhide Ranch.”

She hadn’t seen him buy that!

“That seems premeditated,” she muttered.

“A Daddy always has to think ahead,” he told her before moving the paddle away.

“Paddling wasn’t on your hard limits, but you can always change that or use your safe word.”

Drat.

She could. But she was also kind of curious. “I’m okay, Daddy,” she told him as he rubbed her bottom.

“That’s my brave girl.”

The spanking started without warning, and even though she’d been expecting it, well, it was still kind of a shock. She started kicking her feet, trying to wriggle off his lap. But he held her tight, his hand delivering punishing blow after punishing blow.

Finally, her body gave in to the pain, letting it flow through her. She slumped on his lap, her bottom on fire, sobs escaping her mouth. Tears dripped down her cheeks as he stopped spanking her to rub her back.

“How are you doing, little one?” he asked.

“I’m o-okay, Daddy.”

“I hate making you cry. But sometimes I think you need this, don’t you? An excuse to let go and cry.”

Well, she didn’t think she wanted to admit to that, but yes. She supposed she did.

He moved and then something cool was laid over her bottom.

“Time for the paddle. Just five since it’s your first time.”

Five? That sounded awful. When the first one landed, she screeched and he paused.

“Shh, little girl. We don’t want our neighbors calling the police.”

Well, she’d like to see him take a paddling without crying out. Another smack of the paddle, but thankfully, she muffled her cry this time. But wow! That hurt! It burned and stung, and she wasn’t sure how she could take any more.

Number three landed and she sobbed. She was a mess by now, she couldn’t even see because her eyes were blurry with tears. The paddle landed twice more, and she was done.

Barren helped her up, then carried her to the bed. He lay on his back with her sprawled on top of his chest. Then he rubbed her back until she calmed down before reaching over to grab some tissues so he could wipe her face.

“How are you doing?” he asked as he arranged them on their sides, facing each other. He brushed the hair off her face, leaning in to kiss her forehead.

“My butt hurts.”

“It’s supposed to hurt.”

“That sucks, Daddy.”

“I know. But I want you to remember this the next time you think about disobeying Daddy, all right? You could have waited until Daddy returned and asked him if you could go pat the puppy. Then I could have taken you.”

She sighed long and loud. “I’m not sure now is the time for Daddy-logic. I’m wallowing. I have a sore bottom. I just want cuddles and chocolate.”

He laughed. “I can do the cuddles but not the chocolate.”

“There should always be chocolate after a spanking!”

“I’m sorry. No chocolate. But what about a kiss?”

“Hmm. Let me think about that.”

He tickled her until she squealed.

“Okay, okay, I want a kiss!” she cried.

Barren cupped the side of her face and kissed her. It started off light and teasing, then became more heated.

Hot and heavy.

She squirmed on the bed, her need for him growing. He’d teased her. Kissed her. Touched her. But they hadn’t gone any further and it was starting to kill her.

“What about orgasms?” she whispered. “Are they allowed after a punishment?”

“No. Not usually.”

“That’s so sad.”

“My poor baby. Do you need to come?” he asked.

“I’ve needed to come for ages. You’re driving me insane. Looking all sexy all the time and I just want more of you. Please. I don’t have to have the orgasm, but I could give you one.”

She shuffled closer, pressing kisses to his neck and tugging down his shirt so she could kiss the top of his chest.

“Sweetheart, you don’t know how much I want that.”

“Then let me, please?”

“If I let you do that, then there is no way I can resist touching you. And I shouldn’t give you pleasure after a punishment.”

“Just this once?” she asked.

He shook his head and stood, pointing down at her. “No.”

That was it. She was going to die from a lack of pleasure.

It was official.

### CHAPTER 15

Barren walked into the bathroom and pressed himself against her back as she finished her nighttime routine. He kissed along her shoulder. He loved the spot where her neck and shoulder met.

“Barren?”

“You are so beautiful. So sweet. So mine.”

She was wearing a white silky nightgown which was tight over her breasts then loose around her stomach and thighs.

Reaching around her, he drew one breast free and cupped it, staring at her in the mirror. Her eyes widened, her breathing growing faster.

“Are you... I thought there was no pleasure after a punishment.”

“It’s been a few hours. I think you’ve been properly punished. Don’t you?” he asked.

“Uh-huh, uh-huh.” She nodded frantically and he had to grin.

His poor girl.

“My baby. So beautiful, aren’t you?” He lowered the other side of her gown so both of her breasts were free. Cupping them, he ran his thumbs over the tight nipples.



“Ohhh.”

“I love how open you are with your feelings and reactions,” he told her. “Never hide yourself from me, understand?”

“I won’t,” she moaned as he lightly tugged at her nipples, playing with them. “Please, Barren.”

“Please what?” he asked as he moved one hand down her stomach and between her legs, cupping her mound.

“Please touch me there,” she begged.

“Are you wet? If I push my finger inside you, will I find you all warm and ready for me?”

“Yes! Yes!” she cried.

“Let’s check. Push your legs apart.”

Her eyes were wide, her mouth open as she panted heavily. But she moved her legs apart and he pressed her panties to one side so he could run a finger down her slit. He rubbed his finger against her clit, flicking it back and forth.

“Oh. Ohhh,” she cried.

He slid his finger lower, pushing it deep inside her. She clenched down on him.

Fuck.

He couldn’t wait to be inside her. His cock was so hard it was painful.

Be patient. Control.

He moved his finger out, then added another one, pushing it back inside her.

“Ohhh. That feels so good.”

“It sure does,” he said. “God, sweetheart, I can feel how wet and warm you are.”

He drew his fingers free, and she let out a noise of protest, but he spun her around and then kneeled on the floor in front of her.

“What... what are you doing?” she asked.

“I have to taste you.” He sucked on the fingers that had been in her pussy.

“Oh, dear lord, that shouldn’t be hot. But it is.”

He removed his fingers from his mouth before reaching under her gown to pull down her panties.

“Are you going to... are you sure?” she asked as he lifted one of her legs and placed it over his shoulder.

“Yes, I’m totally sure.”

Then he ran his tongue along her slit.

He was in heaven.

Phoebe was pretty sure she was in heaven.

Barren used his tongue to play with her clit before sliding it down toward her entrance.

Oh god. She'd never known anything could feel so good.

Then he drew away and she let out a noise of protest.

"Shh, sweetheart," he said, lifting her into his arms. "I just want to put you somewhere more comfortable."

He carried her into the bedroom and sat her on the bed. Then he removed her nightgown before gently guiding her onto her back. Her hips were at the edge of the bed, her legs hanging off.

He stood over her for a moment, dressed just in a pair of black pajama pants. She took him in for a long moment. He had a smooth, firm stomach, wide shoulders, and muscular biceps. There was a light smattering of salt-and-pepper hair on his chest that she honestly loved.

"You are so sexy," she told him.

For a moment, he looked startled. As though anyone calling him sexy was surprising. But then he smiled and yep, her heart skipped a beat at the sight.

"I love it when you smile," she told him.

"I love it too," he said. "For the longest time, I didn't think I would smile again. I didn't have anything to smile about. But now I have you and you make me smile every day." He moved so he was crouching over her. Leaning down, he kissed her lightly. "I want you to make me smile every day for the rest of our lives."

Her heart skipped and she sucked in a deep breath. “Really?”

“Oh, yes. I am not getting younger, and I know what I want. You in my life forever. I love you, Phoebe Jones.”

She sniffled and for a moment he was worried that she was going to pull back. That he was moving too fast. But then she wrapped her arms around his neck. “I love you too!”

“Thank god,” he muttered before he kissed her, sliding his tongue into her mouth.

Oh lord. It was too much. She kissed him back, trying to show how much she...

Then he moved down her body, kissing his way between her breasts before rising up so he could suck on one nipple then the other. She moaned, arching up toward him as she ran her hands over his shoulders.

“Sweetheart, I want you to put your hands above your head for me and keep them there.”

“Why?” she cried. “I want to touch you.”

“Later, sweetheart. Right now, I want to concentrate on you.” He slid down to kneel on the floor before pushing her legs apart.

And then his mouth was on her pussy and all thought fled from her mind. There was only pleasure. She raised her hands above her head, twisting them into the blanket beneath her as he played with her, teased her.

It was pure torture.

Phoebe could feel herself reach that peak. It would only take a bit more. But he drew back and she moaned.

“Please!”

“Shh, sweetheart. I’m going to let you come, but I don’t want everyone around us to hear you. You taste so good, though, that I’m not ready to stop.”

He returned his mouth to her pussy, this time, though, he pushed two fingers deep inside her.

“Ohh, ohh,” she cried. “More, please!”

This time, he didn’t pull back, he kept playing with her until she crashed over the edge, her entire body arching up as she slammed a hand over her mouth to hold back her cry of pleasure.

Soft licks of his tongue brought her gently back down to reality and then he drew back, standing. His cock was pressing against his pajama pants, and she had to know what he tasted like. Sitting up, she reached for the top of his pants.

“Please, can I taste you?” she asked.

He groaned. “Christ, sweetheart. You don’t know what you’re asking me.”

“I don’t?” she asked, giving him an innocent look as she stared up at him. “Don’t you want me to suck you off?”

“I do. But I want to come inside you more. And I’m not a young man, he’s not going to spring back to life.”

“Just a small taste,” she begged.

“It is so hard to deny you anything,” he told her as he cupped her chin.

She grinned up at him. “So don’t.”

“Sassy brat. All right, a small taste.” He removed his pajama bottoms and boxers, and she took hold of the base of his cock before lowering her mouth to the head.

He moaned as she took him deep into her mouth, sucking strongly.

“Fuck, sweetheart. That feels so good.”

Yay! She wasn’t sure if she’d be any good at this since it had been a long time since she’d tried. She drew her mouth back, then lowered it, humming in pleasure.

“Holy crap. You sure know how to test a man’s control.”

He was so much bigger than she’d imagined. Thick and delicious. As she slid her mouth back up his cock, she ran her tongue along the length of him, then over the tip.

Barren moaned. “I can’t take much more.” He stepped away and she let go of him with a noise of protest. But then he was lifting her, placing her further up the bed on her back before climbing over her.

“You’re still okay with no protection?” he asked.

They had both been tested recently and she was on birth control. She nodded.

“Thank god, because I didn’t want to have to go out at this time of night, searching for condoms,” he muttered.

She giggled before he kissed her. Her giggles turned into moans of need.

And then he was pushing his way inside her. Oh god. That felt amazing.

“More! More!” she cried.

“Easy, sweetheart,” he warned. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t. Please, Barren!”

She wrapped her arms and legs around him as he slid deeper inside her. He paused to kiss her before he started moving.

In and out. Slowly. Then faster and faster. Her breathing sped up. She needed more.

“Harder, please!”

“You are killing me here, sweetheart. I’m trying to be so good.”

“Don’t be good. Be bad. Come over to the dark side. It’s fun over here. Well, apart from the occasional sore bottom.”

“Occasional?” he murmured. “I might argue that it’s a bit more often than that.”

“No arguing,” she replied. “Not while you’re inside me.”

“Definitely not while I’m inside you,” he agreed, driving himself deep once more.

“Damn it. So good.”

To her amazement, she could feel herself growing more and more aroused. “I’m going to come again.” She wasn’t sure she’d ever come twice in one night.

Then he slid out of her.

“Nooo!”

“Roll over onto your hands and knees,” he ordered.

She moved quickly and he shuffled in behind her, driving his cock deep inside her again.

“God. Amazing.”

As he fucked her, he reached around with his hand to play with her clit. “That’s it, sweetheart. I can feel you getting close. Come with me. Come nice and hard around my cock.”

Phoebe let out a cry as she felt herself coming again. She clenched down around his dick as he drove himself into her before he let out his own moan of release.

Twenty minutes later, they were in bed after he’d cleaned them both up. She curled up against his chest, her arm over his flat stomach.

Barren ran his fingers through her hair. “You feel far too good for my peace of mind. I’m going to want to be inside you every minute of every day.”

“That sounds perfect to me.”



### CHAPTER 16

Phoebe's phone buzzed and she glanced down at it, smiling as she saw it was Barren.

KiPP: Have you drunk the water I left you?

She glanced over at the bottle of water on the coffee table. Oops.

LG: Nearly, Daddy.

KiPP: Drink it up, little girl. And don't forget that the driver will be there to pick you up at eleven-thirty.

KiPP: And that I love you.

LG: Love you too, Daddy.

KiPP stood for Knight in Pressed Pants. While LG was obviously Little girl. He was always doing this. Texting her during the day to make sure that she'd eaten or was drinking water. Or that she wasn't lonely or cold or scared.

He really was the best Daddy in the world.

An hour later, the doorbell ringing startled her, and she glanced at the clock. Wow. This morning had gone fast! Was that the driver Barren was sending for her? For some reason, he didn't want her driving to his office building to meet him for lunch. Seemed like such a waste to send a driver out here for her. But he'd gotten out his

“Daddy voice” and she’d decided to give him this.

She’d been living here with Barren for a week now and she was ready to get out of the house for a bit. The only people she’d met were Sally, Barren’s cleaner and Melly, his assistant. Barren had also taken her out for dinner a couple of times, but she was getting cabin fever.

She couldn’t believe how beautiful his house was. Or how big and grand. She’d spent the first few days getting constantly lost. Barren had joked about putting a tracker on her. Although, when she’d caught him looking at GPS trackers later that evening, she’d started wondering how much of a joke it was.

He lived in a gorgeous two-story house out in the country. They were surrounded by green fields, white fences, red barns, and horses. So many horses. She was in heaven. Barren didn’t own any horses. He said he didn’t have the time to take care of them. But he leased out his land to other people and their horses.

Each morning, she and Snickerdoodle sat on the porch to drink their apple juice and watch the horses. It was heaven. Everything was perfect.

Or it would be... if she didn’t have one thing marring her peace.

Something that she still hadn’t told Barren.

You have to do it.

She grabbed her heart-shaped handbag and opened the door. To her surprise, there was a woman standing on the other side holding a large basket in her hands.

“Hello,” she said. “Are you my driver? You’re early.”

“What? No.” The smile slipped off the older woman’s face and she sneered for a moment. “Would a driver wear Chanel?”

“Hmm. Maybe?”

“I’m from next door. I was riding my horse the other day and thought I saw you sitting on the front porch.”

She must have been riding very close to the house. Phoebe eyed her with interest. A nosy neighbor, huh?

“I thought I would bring you a basket of goodies to say welcome.”

“Oh, well, thanks.” That was nice, if a bit odd.

“I’m Freida.” The woman who had a tight, black fitted dress with a gold belt around her small waist held out the basket of goods. It was filled with high-end hand cream, candles, and room sprays.

“Oh perfect! I just ran out of that hand cream. Thanks!”

“Um, you’re welcome.” Freida held out her hand for Phoebe to shake. “Nice to meet you...”

“Oh, I’m Phoebe.” She set the basket down on the hall table and turned to shake the other woman’s hand enthusiastically. Hmm. Freida had an odd aura. Kind of dark.

Careful, Phoebe.

Freida frantically pulled her hand back, nearly tripping over on her high heels.

“Nice to meet you too, Freida.”

“So, you’re living with Barren? Are you his niece or something?” Freida said bluntly.

Definitely digging for information.

“Hmm. Something,” she replied.

“Sorry?” Freida asked.

“Don’t be,” Phoebe told her.

Freida looked confused but rallied. “I thought I could come in for a cup of coffee.”

“I’m afraid I don’t drink coffee. I don’t want to stunt my growth.”

“Stunt your growth? Oh, are you still in high school, dear? Shouldn’t you be there now?” Freida gave her a condescending look.

Well, two could play at this game.

“Oh no. I graduated school a while ago. I don’t think they’d let me go back now. Should you not be at work?”

Freida laughed. “I don’t work, dear. I married well several years ago, then I divorced him. Now, I get to spend my days riding my horses, shopping, and visiting with friends. I guess you’re planning on doing the same, hmm? Barren is deliciously wealthy, after all. Although, you might find it hard to get him to propose to you. He’s still in love with his wife, after all.”

“You know Krystal?” Phoebe asked curiously.

“Yes. What a tragic love story. They were married for so long and Barren will always be in love with her. Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t hurt you, did I? It’s just the truth. But I’m sure he will take good care of you. Just don’t expect love and marriage. I’m only telling you this to be kind.”

Uh-huh. Sure, she was.

“Oh, you’re not hurting me. After all, if I’m only with him for his money then why would I care that he could never love me? Now, sorry, but I’m busy. Bye.”

She shut the door on the other woman’s protests. Then she stared down at her shaking hands, taking a deep breath in and letting it out slowly.

Okay. That wasn’t fun. What a... a... bitch! Yep, she’d thought it. And she wasn’t taking it back. She’d need to tell Barren about this at lunch.

Oh! Lunch! She glanced at her heart-shaped watch just as the doorbell rang again. This time, she checked who it was first. A man stood on the doorstep, wearing dark clothing.

“Hello,” she said cheerfully as she grabbed her handbag again.

“Miss Jones, I’m here to take you into the city.”

“Yes, please.” She shut the door behind her. It would lock automatically. She skipped down the stairs, something that Barren would scold her for if he’d seen her and climbed into the back of the car.

“Everything all right, miss?” the driver asked after climbing into the driver’s seat.

“Great, thanks. And call me Phoebe.”

“I’m James.”

“Sweet. Let’s go, James.”

She needed a hug from Barren.

“Hello. Can I help you?” A woman around Phoebe’s age gave her a small smile as she ran her gaze over her. She was sitting at the main reception desk and made it clear with the look on her face that she didn’t approve of Phoebe’s outfit at all.

Hmm. She thought she was looking extra cute today. She had on a red pinafore dress with a long-sleeved white shirt underneath that had ruffles at her wrists. She also wore white tights and cherry-red boots with a flat heel since Barren didn’t seem to like when she wore higher heels. Her dark hair was up in high pony tail with a red scrunchie around it.

Cute, but not too openly Little. Even though Barren said that he wanted her to be herself, she still didn’t want to embarrass him. Oh, and she’d also remembered a jacket. Mainly because Barren had reminded her three times this morning to bring one. He worried far too much.

“I’m here to see Barren,” she said cheerfully. “Can you let him know I’m here, please.”

“You’re here to see Mr. Rose?” she asked skeptically.

“Yep. We’re having lunch.”

“Oh. Right. Just let me call his assistant.”

“Sure thing. I’ll wait.”

She turned away and sat in a chair. Strange, was the other woman texting Melly? She had her phone out and was texting away furiously.

Hmm. She sure was taking her time letting Melly know she was here.

And her aura was a bit murky. Phoebe wasn't too sure that the woman was doing what she said she would.

"Is Melly busy?" she asked after about five minutes.

"Oh, um, I'll check," the woman said.

Hmm.

The receptionist picked up her phone and spoke into it briefly.

Melly walked into reception a few minutes later. It was hard to work out Melly's age. She had white hair that was in a short bob. Her skin was smooth and pretty much wrinkle free. Her clothes were always kind of edgy and dramatic and she wore a bright pink lipstick.

Phoebe loved her look. And she really liked the other woman. Her aura was sharp but with a softness around the edges.

"Phoebe! Don't sit in here. Come with me." Melly shot the other woman behind the desk a look. "Linda, from now on Phoebe is to be sent straight through. She's very important."

"Ooh. I am?" Phoebe said as she jumped up and moved over to Melly.

Melly smiled at her. "You are. Come through. Barren is still in a meeting that's

running overtime.”

“That’s all right. I don’t mind waiting for him.”

To her surprise, Barren walked into the reception area before they could head back.

“Sorry, sweetheart. I’ve been caught up with some demanding clients. I’m going to try and wrap things up quickly.”

Poor Barren. He seemed kind of stressed. “It’s all right. I can go away and come back if you want.”

“No, I don’t want. What I want is a hug.” He held out his arms.

Oh goody. She hadn’t been sure if he would want to be openly affectionate with her in his workplace.

He hugged her tight, kissing her briefly. “Do you mind waiting with Melly?”

“Nope. I’m happy to wait.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

He disappeared with a wink, and she followed Melly back to her desk in a daze.

“I’m going to make a cup of coffee; can I get you something?” Melly asked.

“No thanks. I’m good.” She sat in a chair in the small waiting area by Melly’s desk. She was reading a magazine when someone appeared in front of her. Putting the magazine down, she glanced up to see a very angry woman glaring down at her. She had her gorgeous blonde hair piled up on her head and wore a pair of tight jeans with



a silky black shirt.

“Wow. Your hair is beautiful.”

The woman appeared startled for a moment. Her aura was kind of off. A bit jagged and dark.

“How do you get it so shiny? I need to do something with my hair. It’s a bit dull and boring at the moment. I was thinking of a cut, but maybe I need some new product. What do you use?”

“What? Why would I want to tell you how to care for your hair?” the woman asked.

“I don’t know. Seems like it would be a nice thing to do.”

“Why would I want to be nice to you when you’ve stolen my husband!”

Uh-oh.

“I haven’t stolen your husband,” Phoebe said quietly.

“Krystal,” Melly said sharply, returning and placing her cup on the desk. “What are you doing here? How did you get in? Did Linda let you in?”

“I’m entitled to be here. I’m Barren’s wife, not her.”

Melly picked up her phone as Phoebe stood. “I don’t want any trouble.”

“Then you shouldn’t have stolen my husband, you gold-digging whore! That’s why you’re with him, right? For his money. I know your type. Poor little damsel in distress, huh? What? Did you do your research on rich older men who had been

recently divorced? How did you throw yourself into his path? Did you fall over in front of him? Pretend to be hurt? Or did you have a flat tire right when he drove by?"

Dear lord. Did people actually do that?

"Krystal! What are you doing here?" Barren walked into the small waiting area.

Relief filled Phoebe.

"I've come to save you from a big mistake." Her voice changed, becoming sweeter and lower as she turned to Barren. "Oh, Barren, this girl isn't with you because she loves you. She's with you for your money."

"Krystal, you can't come in and make baseless accusations against Phoebe. You and I are no longer together and frankly, you're embarrassing yourself."

"I'm not the one embarrassing myself, you are. She admitted it all to Freida."

What?

Barren frowned and glanced over at Phoebe. He wasn't buying this, was he?

He's known Krystal for twenty years... maybe he does still love her. He's only known you a few weeks.

Phoebe felt her nerves fluttering in her stomach. She sensed some movement from the corner of her eye, but she couldn't look away from Barren. She couldn't figure out what he was thinking.

"Admitted what?" Barren demanded.

“To being with you for your money! She told Frieda that it doesn’t matter if you don’t love her because she’s only with you for your money! She’s going to suck you dry. She doesn’t want or love you. She’s a gold-digger.”

“Who the hell do you think you are to call my sister a gold digger.”

Um.

What the hell were they all doing here?

### CHAPTER 17

Barren couldn't believe this. His entire day had been a mess. Paul Lancaster had turned up to their meeting with all of his brothers. He was demanding that Barren find them a buyer for their multi-million-dollar corporation. One that they'd wanted to sell since their father died.

But as he kept telling him, his father had left equal shares to all of his eight children. So if they wanted to sell the entire thing, they needed everyone to agree. Honestly, it seemed that they were still arguing amongst themselves about selling.

He was about to tell them all to get lost when Melly had called him to tell him that Krystal was here and abusing Phoebe. Well, he wasn't having that. He hadn't expected his clients to follow him out... or for them to say...

"Sister?" he repeated, glancing from Phoebe to Paul Lancaster and his brothers.

Zane Lancaster stepped forward, scowling at Krystal. "Why would our sister need his money when she is likely worth twenty times what he is."

"Seems this bitch didn't do her homework," Joseph sung, grinning.

Wait. Hadn't she said that he had a brother called Joseph? And one called Paul?

Holy. Shit.

This didn't make sense, though.

“Sister? Phoebe isn’t your sister. Your sister’s name is Persephone Lancaster.”

“Worse name ever,” Phoebe said grimly. “I changed it to Phoebe years ago. Well, not legally. And I was using my mom’s maiden name because?”

“She’s been hiding from us,” Zane said. “And doing quite a good job.”

“Who would have thought you’d all turn up here.”

“What... what’s going on here?” Krystal asked.

Right. He had something to do.

“Krystal, get out,” he said tiredly. “And you’re not welcome back.”

“But... but... you love me! I wanted to talk to you about a reconciliation. And I don’t understand... she told Freida she’s only with you for your money!”

“That’s not what I said!” Phoebe cried.

He hated that this was happening publicly, but Krystal had brought this on herself.

“Krystal, we’re not reconciling and frankly, I did love you, but I don’t anymore. I mourned the loss of our relationship for a long time, but what I realized was that it wasn’t you I was missing in my life. It was the idea of us. I wasn’t happy and neither were you. That’s no way for either of us to live.”

“But you’re happy now? With her?” Krystal gestured to Phoebe.

Barren held out his arm and thankfully, Phoebe flew into his embrace. Leaning down, he kissed her head, grateful that Krystal hadn’t sent her running. Although she did

have a bit of explaining to do. She knew how he felt about secrets and lies. And it seemed she'd kept something very big from him.

Someone wasn't going to be sitting comfortably tomorrow. Even if he was sure that she had her reasons.

"I do. I love Phoebe. She's my world. I'm sorry if that hurts you to hear, but you moved on a long time ago, Krystal. You were the one who chose to break our marriage. Although I can see now that it was the best thing for both of us. Go back to Rand."

"But... but he broke things off with me. He found a younger girlfriend."

"Then be by yourself for a while. Find out who you are. Maybe think about who you have become."

"I don't need this!" Krystal screeched as she stomped out of the room. "And I don't need you! This is it! You will never hear from me again."

Frankly, that would be a relief if it was true.

"Well, I think I need to go speak to Linda," Melly said, leaving them all alone.

"Are you all right?" he asked Phoebe, drawing her away from his chest so he could study her.

"Y-yes. But I need you to know that those things I said to Freida, it wasn't... I wasn't... I was just going along with what she said. She was being so condescending and rude and I?—"

He stopped her with a kiss, pulling her closer again. "Shh, baby," he whispered in her

ear. "I know what Freida is like. It's okay. You can tell me all about it. Right after you explain how you're actually Persephone Lancaster."

Sooo, this was awkward. She wrapped her hands around the glass of water that Barren had poured for her as she stared at her brothers.

"You ran from us," Darin said.

"Not cool, Phoebe," Tony added.

"Totally irresponsible," Paul scolded as he paced up and down the room. "We've been searching for you."

"We even hired a private investigator." Eric scowled.

"Really? But I left a note."

"You left a note saying that you needed time to think and that you'd be in touch!" Paul yelled. "It's been weeks."

"I'm going to warn you once, you will not yell at Phoebe," Barren said in a low, dark voice. "You will not upset her. I know how much you've hurt her in the past and that ends now."

"Or what?" Paul dared asked.

"I will ruin you all. And don't think that because you have more money than I do that I can't do it. Being her brothers won't save you. In fact, that makes things worse. You all are supposed to protect and care for her. Yet, all you've done all her life is put her down."

“We have not!” Tony said hotly. “We tried to protect her.”

“Protect her?” Barren repeated. “By telling her to tone herself down? To be someone else? You wanted her to change when she’s perfect the way she is.”

Wow. Just wow. Most of her brothers looked uncomfortable at his words.

“Phoebe has always been different,” Darin said.

“We just don’t want her to be hurt by what other people say or do,” Zane added.

Right. “Because I’m the one in the wrong? Not them?” she asked tightly.

Clay gave her a shocked look. “You’re not wrong, Phoebe. But it’s just... people can be mean, and we didn’t want you to get hurt.”

“It hurt more to have all of you constantly telling me that I’m wrong and that I had to change. That I’m too much. I know you all blame me for Mama’s death?—”

“What?”

“No, we don’t!”

“Who said that!”

They all joined in, their voices growing so loud that she was overwhelmed. Tears dripped down her face.

“Stop! All of you, shut up!” Barren lifted her out of the chair, then sat and settled her on his lap, holding her tight. “You’re all right, little girl. I have you. No one is going to hurt you. I’m here to take care of you.”



There was shocked silence.

“You don’t need to protect her from us,” Eric said tightly.

“Actually, I do,” Barren replied. “Because it’s our family who has the power to hurt us the most. All Phoebe ever wanted was your love and acceptance. Yet, you constantly put her down and made her feel less. Maybe you thought you were helping her, but did you ever think about how she felt? When I met her, she thought she had to behave a certain way so that people wouldn’t get sick of her. That she couldn’t be herself. But she doesn’t need to be anyone but Phoebe.”

What had she done to deserve him? She had no idea, but she was never letting him go.

“We’re sorry, Phoebe,” Joseph finally said. “We’ve been shit brothers.”

“Joseph!” Paul snapped.

“We have been,” Tony added, looking upset. “I know we thought we were helping but look at her. We were just harming her, and she thinks we blame her for Mama dying? Phoebe, nothing could be further from the truth.”

“When Mama died, we were so sad, but also so happy to have you,” Eric told her.

“I heard you talking once about how you missed Mama and wished I hadn’t been born,” she said.

“Oh, Phoebe,” Eric said. She glanced up to see him staring down at her, stricken. “We might have said that in our grief, but we didn’t mean it and we didn’t mean for you to hear it. We love you.”

“Really?” She glanced around at them all as they nodded.

Joseph approached her first and she slid off Barren’s lap to hug him. They all moved in after him, one after the other, until only Paul was left.

She didn’t expect him to hug her or apologize. He’d always been stubborn. Stern.

But, to her surprise, his eyes grew wet as he drew her close. “Sorry, little sister. I think we’ve failed you horribly.”

“You haven’t. I promise. I still love you all.”

“Good. Because we love you.” When he stepped back, he drew her back with him.

Away from Barren.

“But I’m not sure I approve of whatever is going on between the two of you.”

“He seems a bit old for you, Phoebes,” Darin said as he leaned back in his chair and glared at Barren.

“Yep. What are your intentions with our sister?” Joseph asked.

“Where did you two meet?” Paul asked.

“Okay, enough!” She moved away from Paul and sat in Barren’s lap once more. He didn’t seem too upset by her brothers’ antics, more amused. “I love Barren, and he loves me and all of you have no say in who I date. I know you think I’m naive and that I’m going to be taken advantage of, but Barren didn’t even know who I was! He’s not after me for my money.”

“I think we should have some say in who you date,” Eric muttered.

“Nope. Butt out.”

“I don’t know,” Clay drawled. “I think we should make up for being shit brothers by getting very involved in what you do from now on.”

She groaned. God give her strength.

“No one is getting involved in our relationship,” Barren said firmly. “It is no one’s business but our own. I take care of Phoebe now. She’s mine. And I will protect her. From her own family, if necessary.”

“We would never harm her,” Paul protested.

“Not on purpose, anyway,” Darin added, looking at her with sorrow.

“I would like to know about why you’ve been using a different last name and hiding from your brothers?” Barren asked.

She groaned. “After Dad died I was in a bit of a state. As you know, I went to stay with my uncle for a while, and when I came home, all Paul could talk about was selling the business.”

“None of us want to run it, Phoebe,” Paul told her, sitting in a chair. He looked tired as he ran his hand through his hair. “We all talked about it and agreed.”

“Except for me,” she said. “It feels like if we sell it we’re selling the last bit we had of Dad.”

“Aw, Phoebs, is that how you feel?” Joseph asked.

She nodded.

“You should have told me,” Joseph told her. “I thought we told each other things.”

“We do.” She’d always been closest to him. “I just... you were all so united and I felt pressured to agree and I needed some time to think. And none of you would give it to me. I couldn’t go anywhere without one of you calling me or tracking me down to get me to agree. It was too much. So I ran. I’m sorry, I know it wasn’t mature of me. I should have at least told you, Joe. But I couldn’t breathe from the pressure. It was so hard to live in that house without Dad. I needed time and you weren’t giving it to me.”

They all looked at her with shock and sorrow.

“Jesus, Phoebe, we’re sorry,” Darin said.

“Wish you’d told us, kid,” Tony added.

The others all made murmurs of agreement.

“Maybe this is something we can all talk about as a family while we’re here,” Clay suggested.

“How long are you here for?” she asked

“We were leaving tonight,” Paul said. “But maybe we can talk about it now.”

“Tomorrow,” Barren said firmly. “I’ll have Melly book you a hotel. But, right now, Phoebe has had enough, and she needs some time to herself.”

She felt bad as her brothers left, but she didn’t protest. Because Barren was right. She

needed some space to work through everything. When they were gone, she turned in his lap to face him, giving him a guilty look. “Am I in trouble, Daddy?”

“Yes,” he told her.

He reached over for a glass of water and held it to her mouth so she could sip from it. She was surprisingly thirsty. Then he set it down.

“You’re in trouble for not telling me about all of this so I could have helped.”

“What about for what I said to Freida?”

He shook his head. “I don’t care about that. I wish you had texted me what happened straight away, and I would prefer you didn’t open the door to her from now on. But, no, I’m not upset about that. What upsets me is that you were worrying about all of this stuff with your brothers, that you were using a different last name and didn’t tell me.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I just wanted to be someone else for a while, you know? To forget about it all. I know I was burying my head in the sand, and I had made up my mind to tell you today. I just needed a break from the world for a while.”

“I get that.” He drew her close. “I’m here for you. I’ll be here for you no matter what. But from now on, you’re to tell me everything. Understand?”

“Yes, Daddy.” She wrapped her arms around him. “I promise to tell you everything.”

“My baby. God, I love you. I’m sorry you had to deal with Krystal.”

“I would deal with a hundred Krystals if it meant I got to be with you. Fate sent you to me for a reason and I don’t ever intend to let you go.”

“Good, little girl. Because you won’t ever be allowed to. You’re mine, Phoebe. And you always will be.”

### EPILOGUE

“I’m so excited to be back here!” Phoebe cried, clapping her hands. She was sitting in a proper car seat for adult Littles. It had straps that secured her in so she wasn’t really able to do a happy dance.

Daddy was a bit overprotective when it came to her safety, but she wasn’t complaining. He always took such good care of her.

“I’m sorry it’s taken us so long to get back to Rawhide Ranch,” he told her.

“Don’t be sorry, Daddy! We’re here now and for a whole two weeks. I’m going to see all my friends and I can play on the playground. And do some crafting. Snickerdoodle is really happy to be back too.” She held her horse close. “Do you think everyone will remember me?”

She grabbed her necklace, pulling the chewable part into her mouth. It had had to be replaced fairly regularly when she’d first moved in with Barren. But she didn’t need to use it as much anymore.

“Of course they will, little girl. Who could forget you?”

They pulled up in front of the front steps and a feeling of rightness, of peace, filled her.

The last few months had been busy for them both. Things were mending between her and her brothers, although she still held quite a bit of hurt. She’d started to talk to a

therapist about everything and that was really helping.

She'd agreed to selling her Dad's business and Barren had managed to find a buyer. Once that was all settled, Barren had decided he wanted to retire early, so he'd been working toward managing that. It had taken a while for him to fully retire, but now that he had, they had much more time to spend together.

Which was rather unfortunate for her bottom, since the more he focused on her, the more punishments she seemed to earn.

"You're happy to be back then?" he asked her. "No regrets in choosing this spot to honeymoon?"

She glanced down at the large diamond on her finger, around at Rawhide Ranch, then over to her Daddy.

"No, Daddy. No regrets whatsoever."