



# Roping Reba (Submissives of Rawhide Ranch #15)

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**Category:** Dark Erotica

**Description:** She swore she'd never look back. He never stopped waiting for her.

Reba spent years running, chasing after the next job, the next challenge, anything to keep from settling down. But when her latest job lands her at Rawhide Ranch, she comes face to face with the one man she's been avoiding. Johnny was the cowboy who shattered her trust. The one man she never stopped wanting.

He's got unfinished business with Reba, with the past, and with the wild horses he came to bring back to Serenity Stables. But the more time he spends with her, the more he realizes she's the one who's untamable. And he's not about to let her slip away again.

Out here, where loyalty runs deep and love is as wild as the land itself, Reba will have to make a decision. Does she keep running or finally take a chance on the only man who's ever made her want to stay?

**Total Pages (Source):** 18

# Page 1

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## CHAPTER 1

Reba

“Reeeba!”

My shoulders slumped as the voice of the one man I thoroughly hated rang through the arena, loud enough to set the horses shifting in their stalls. Though I was currently working at the community barn and arena up on Rawhide Ridge and wasn’t actually on the Ranch property itself, the last thing I’d expected when I’d accepted Mac’s offer to spend some time at Rawhide was to be face to face with Johnny... or as I liked to consider him, the devil himself

“Is that man calling to you?” a young girl training next to me asked as I secured the saddle on the horse I was working with.

“Yeah, just ignore it.”

“ Reba ! Don’t tell me you can’t hear me,” Johnny shouted again, but this time, the best sound in the world followed his bellow—the infectious laughter of a little boy who I adored more than anything. My chest softened even as my nerves tensed.

Jax.

I turned and held out my arms just in time for the boy to crash into me, giggling wildly.

“Ms. Reeceba!” he yelled as I scooped him up and spun him in a circle, relishing the moment despite the irritation still prickling my skin.

How in the world a man who had to have been created from the devil’s spawn could make a little boy as perfect as Jax, I’d never know.

“What’s up, little man?”

“Papa said you were mad at him again.”

“Your papa is usually wrong about everything, but this time he got it right.”

Jax giggled, and I turned to grab a helmet, blatantly ignoring the towering presence behind me. Johnny stepped in closer, his heat pressing into my back. My pulse betrayed me, quickening against my will.

“You can’t ignore me forever, sweetheart,” Johnny murmured, his voice a slow, teasing drawl. “Didn’t work before. Won’t work now.”

I turned, a helmet for Jax in my hand, and met his gaze head-on. My body lit up against my better judgment, that damn cocky smirk of his stirring something deep and unwelcome.

“Try me.”

His eyes darkened, but before he could push further, I turned my back to him and secured the helmet on Jax’s head. “Wanna ride my horse with me, little man?”

Jax nodded so I set him back on his feet and turned to get a helmet for myself since I was riding with my little buddy, ignoring Johnny in the process.

“As I said, you can’t ignore me forever. It didn’t work before, it won’t work now.”

“And as I said, try me.”

Johnny crowded me and my body immediately jumped to life. The physical reaction to him was one of the million things I hated about him.

“What are you doing here, Johnny?”

“Keeping you from stealing my boy.”

“I mean at Rawhide.”

“I’m up looking at some horses. Mac wants to expand the ranch’s breeding program. He emailed you, didn’t you get it?”

“He told me Rooster had contacted him about some wild horses that had been saved from stampeding over a cliff, and that Jagger then took them in. However, it appears Mac failed to mention you were the one coming up.”

“I volunteered,” he said with a wink that made me want to smack him. “Heard you were up here, so I figured it would be a great time to see each other.”

“Sorry, I’m busy.” I lifted Jax onto Black Beauty, making sure he was settled, before swinging up behind him.

Johnny folded his arms over his chest. “So that’s how it is?”

I shot him a smirk. “We’ll be back by dinner.”

Jax whooped with joy as we galloped out of the barn and into the open fields. The

rush of the ride pushed back the weight of Johnny's presence. But it never quite disappeared.

"Ms. Reba, you are the best," Jax's little voice shouted, his words interrupted by the bumps of my galloping girl and the wind surrounding us.

When we stopped down by the water, I hopped off and helped a laughing Jax down.

"You go so much faster than my papa."

"Let's not tell him that," I said with a wink, right before the annoying man came up over the ridge on a horse of his own.

"I told you not to steal my kid."

"Since when do I listen to you?"

"Yeah, Papa, since when?" Jax's mimic was accentuated by a hand on his hip.

I couldn't help but laugh. This kid always cracked me up. Johnny and Trina had him after a brief and difficult relationship. As far as I knew, even before Trina moved out of town, she barely saw either one of them. She's been long gone for a few years now, and I honestly thought Jax was better off with his dad and the guys from the ranch. Ranch life in New York is just like it is here—a family affair. It may be a family you choose or one you are born into, but either way, you had people around who were there for you from the start. I'd spent a lot of years at Mac's ranch when I didn't know where to go or what to do with my life and I would always be grateful for the time I spent there but it had been time to move on so that's what I'd done.

"Is she yours?" he asked, pointing to Black Beauty.

“No, she just retired, and I’m getting her ready for some ranch work around here.”

“Never in one place long are you, Reba?” Johnny sighed as we watched Jax stuff his face with the dark purple berries he found on a nearby bush.

“Not if I can help it.”

His voice dropped lower. “Scared to settle down?”

I exhaled sharply, the weight of the question hitting deeper than I cared to admit. “When I find what I want, I’ll stop.”

Johnny’s gaze sharpened. “And what is it you want?”

Before I could answer or lie, Jax ran up, hands full of berries. “Ms. Reba, try these!”

Saved by the kid. I met Jax halfway, avoiding Johnny’s intense stare. It was always like this. A game of cat and mouse, me dodging, him pushing. But he didn’t need to know what I wanted. Because he wasn’t the one I wanted to give it to me, at least not anymore. I tried to ignore him, focusing on Jax.

“I’ll ride back and grab us some lunch,” Johnny said, his voice tinged with something unreadable. “Stay here, and we’ll eat together.”

I rolled my eyes, but Jax cheered and then laughed as berries spewed out of his mouth and all over the place. That laugh... I’d do anything to keep hearing that laugh.

“Race you to the top of the hill?” I challenged.

He nodded like a madman and took off with me not far behind.

Johnny's laughter was almost as sweet as his son's, which was yet another thing that annoyed me about him. By the time I got to the top of the hill, I collapsed next to Jax, and we watched as Johnny rode back toward the Ranch.

"I'm not even hungry," Jax said, tearing at the grass and throwing it up in the air. "Ms. Reba, why are you always mad at my papa?"

"Oh, little man, that's grown up stuff."

"So. I can be a grownup. The guys tell me all the time I'm a man."

"I guess you are, aren't you? Take's a man to do man's work and that's what you've been up to, huh?"

"Yeah, that and school. Which stinks, it's boring, but the ranch has been boring lately too. Why don't you come visit anymore?"

"I have to go where my work takes me. Mac doesn't need much help with his horses because he has your papa and the guys."

"Maybe, but Papa needs help sometimes. Lady help."

Jax's little eyebrows rose and came back down as he concentrated more on the facial expression than what he was saying.

I chuckled. "What do you know about lady help?"

"Not much, but I hear Mr. Mac and Ms. Athena tell Papa all the time that he needs a lady. I just figured he needs help with something."

"Maybe he does, buddy, but I'm probably not the lady he needs to be helping him."

“Maybe Beauty can help?” he said, pointing at my horse, who was happy in her own world grazing on the grass.

“You know what? I think you’re right in a way. He can’t have my Beauty because she belongs to Mr. Hawkins’ ranch, but we can make sure he gets some nice lady horses. Deal?”

“Deal!”

I lay in the grass while Jax ran around, being the little boy I always knew him to be. When I’d been barrel racing and traveling the rodeo circuit, I’d seen him more. Johnny had still been bull riding and a bunch of the guys would compete. I hadn’t minded watching Jax when his grandmother couldn’t make the trip. He’d been a sweet baby and a hilarious kid as he grew up. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t miss him. But the closer I’d gotten to him, the more I wanted something I could never have, so distance was best. Distance gave me a peace of mind I didn’t have when Johnny was close.

A little while later, Johnny returned with a packed lunch from the Ranch. He tossed a sandwich at me before sitting on the grass beside Jax, who was already tearing into his meal. For a kid who wasn’t hungry, he certainly didn’t waste any time.

“Brought extra,” Johnny said, setting out some fruit and chips. “Figured you might still be living off coffee and stubbornness.”

I huffed. “I see you’re still as smug as ever.”

Jax munched happily between us, oblivious to the tension thrumming under the surface. “Papa makes the best sandwiches,” he said proudly. “He always puts extra cheese on it.”



“Glad to know you’ve got standards, buddy.” I smirked at Johnny before taking a bite, begrudgingly admitting to myself that it was good. Extra cheese was always good. It was just Johnny’s smirk telling me he knew it, that wasn’t good. It was annoying as hell. Especially when I was willing to bet the only part he had in making the sandwiches was to ask Chef Connor or one of his kitchen staff to prepare them for him.

For a few minutes, silence settled between us, surprisingly comfortable. Jax rambled about school and ranch life, filling in the gaps as Johnny and I exchanged wary glances. The past sat between us, heavy and unspoken, but for now, with Jax’s laughter echoing through the air, we let it be. There was something special about Jax. Since there weren’t many kids on Mac’s ranch, he spent a lot of time with adults. He knew how to handle himself when he needed to but watching him just be a kid and enjoy everything around him was special in ways nothing else was.

When the food was gone, Johnny stood, dusting himself off. “Time to head back?”

Jax groaned and looked up at me rather than his father. “Do we have to?”

“Afraid so, buddy. I can’t have anyone thinking I ran off with Black Beauty.”

Johnny raised a brow. “Wouldn’t be the first time you ran from something.”

I stiffened, but before I could snap back, Jax tugged my hand. “Can we race again?”

I forced a smile and nodded. Jax cheered, taking off toward Beauty and hollering. “I’m riding back with Ms. Reba!”

I followed, feeling Johnny’s gaze on my back the whole way. Whatever this was between us, it wasn’t over. He may be right. I ran because of the feeling that we had unsettled business. It made me uneasy, and I hated everything about that. Now faced

with the reality of needing to work beside him for the next week or so, my anxiety spiked. The only thing calming me was my horse and the kid who had his arms raised for me to boost him onto her back.

“Ready?”

“Yeah!”

I lifted him up before hoisting myself into the saddle, taking off back the way we came, leaving Johnny to clean up lunch and to trail behind us. I had work to get done this afternoon and if Jax wanted to hang out, I’d need to find a way to ditch Johnny. I hated the feeling of failure I had whenever he was around, so I texted Jagger and set up a time for Johnny to be there. By the time he rode in behind us, he was already late.

“Jagger’s waiting on you.”

“We weren’t supposed to meet until the morning.”

I held my phone up with a laugh as Jax chatted with some of the other kids in the barn. “Not anymore.”

“You are evil, Reba, you know that?” I laughed again as he turned to Jax. “Come on buddy, let’s cool down the horses and head to Jagger’s.”

“Aww, do I have to? Can’t I just stay with Ms. Reba?”

I smiled wide, knowing my plan was working perfectly. Johnny’s gaze narrowed in my direction.

“Sure, bud. I’ll see you at dinner.”

Jax jumped up and ran to give his dad a quick hug before turning to me. “Can I go play with the kids?”

“Yeah, I’ll come check on you once I have my horse in her stall.”

Back at the barn, I loosened Black Beauty’s saddle straps, my fingers working methodically to free her from the weight. Jax had run off to play, leaving me alone with Johnny. Again.

“That kid never misses a beat with you,” Johnny said, as he worked to cool down and put up his own horse.

“He’s pretty amazing.”

“Thanks.”

I shot him a look. “Not what I meant.”

He smirked, stepping closer. “I know. Just taking the credit anyway, it’s rare you give me a compliment.”

I rolled my eyes, focusing on Black Beauty. “So, these wild horses Jagger has. What’s the deal?”

Johnny ran a hand over his horse’s flank, his gaze assessing. “Rooster told Mac Jagger’s chosen four young mares from the thirteen mustangs they saved. The horses are tough, but trainable. Rooster thought they might suit Mac’s program. Figured you’d have insight.”

“You want my help?”

“I want your opinion, you’re one of the best.” He leaned against the stall, eyes warm with something unreadable. “And maybe a little more than just that.”

Heat flared in my chest. “Not happening.”

Johnny chuckled, stepping even closer. “We’ll see.”

His confidence and his damn charm all made me itch to either punch him or pull him in closer. I turned back to my horse, hoping Johnny didn’t see the flush rising to my cheeks. This man was going to be the death of me.

“You’ve never needed my help before.”

“That’s not true. I always need you.”

“Again, not what I meant.”

“Maybe I just want to spend time with you, like we used to back in the day.”

I raised my eyes to his. “Those days are over, Johnny. We are grown adults now, riddled by the bad decisions of our past.”

“It doesn’t need to be that way, you know.”

“Yeah, it does.”

Without another look in his direction, I finished up with Black Beauty and left the barn. He could deal with Jagger and the horses on his own. He didn’t need me. He knew it, Mac knew it and I knew it. Rather than dealing with him and our past, I sought out Jax and spent the rest of the afternoon watching him play with the other Rawhide Ridge kids. This was a much better plan than dealing with his annoying

father.

## Page 2

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### CHAPTER 2

Johnny

The sun hadn't even come up yet, but I knew if I wanted to get a leg up on Reba, I needed to be ready. I stumbled into the dining room of the B&B half asleep and reached for the coffee. I was actually surprised to see an entire spread of food laid out in covered chafing dishes on a buffet.

“What time did Robyn have to get up to make you breakfast?”

“In time for me to enjoy it. Late risers never flourish.” Reba's snappy voice always got my pulse racing, but this early in the day, I wanted to swat at her like a horsefly.

“I see you've woken up with a cheery disposition.”

She raised her coffee cup in my direction and went to clean up her empty plate.

“Don't run off. We have a meeting this morning.”

“We?”

“Yes, you, me, and Jagger.”

“Why would I have a meeting with you?”

“Because I need your help. We talked about this.”

“Picking horses? No, you don’t. You know how to do your job.”

“Is that a compliment?” I teased as I took a sip of hot, bitter coffee and cherished the burn I felt in my chest as it warmed me.

“No. It’s a fact I can’t argue with, no matter how hard I try.”

“Well, I’m taking that as a compliment. Whether you want it to be or not, you’re stuck with me.”

Reba finished her coffee and moved from the dining room to enter the kitchen. If she thought that would deter me, she thought wrong. I simply took my coffee and followed to where she was now sitting at the table in one corner of the kitchen, slumping down in a chair and glaring at me over her phone. Doom scrolling was her escape. She did it whenever she was mad at me, whenever she was bored with the conversation, and whenever she wanted to mentally check out. Most people thought it was annoying. I thought it was cute. I laughed to myself as I returned to the dining room, grabbed some food and ignored any of the small tables meant for guests to enjoy their breakfast in the dining room. Instead, I returned to the kitchen and sat down at the table with Reba. I knew I’d fucked up with her in the past, but the amount of work she made me do to just have a decent conversation was insane.

“Jax had a great time with you yesterday,” I said between bites of bacon and eggs.

“He’s a good kid.”

“Thanks.”

She rolled her eyes at me again, making my hand twitch. The day would come when I could punish her for all the sass she threw my way, but I still had a long way to go.

“He misses you, you know.”

Reba looked up at me, and I swear her eyes glassed over for a quick second before she stood. “I’ll meet you at Jagger and Moira’s.”

Before she could make her escape, the door swung open, and Jax came barreling in, all energy and excitement. “Ms. Reba!” he shouted, making a beeline for her. He crashed into her legs, hugging her tight. “Are you eating breakfast with us?”

Reba hesitated, her hand instinctively smoothing over his hair. “I was just about to head out, little man.”

Jax’s face fell for a second before he pulled on her sleeve. “Please? Just for a little bit? Papa says breakfast is the most important meal of the day.”

I smirked up at her. “Smart kid.”

Reba sighed in mock exasperation but let him pull her back to the table. “Fine. But only for a bit.”

Jax beamed and climbed into the chair beside her, happily chatting away as I handed him a bagel from my plate. “Did you see the new mares yet, Ms. Reba? Mr. Rooster said they are so pretty. I saw him yesterday, and he said Mr. Jagger says I can come over and play with his kids while Papa went there today. Did you know Mr. Jagger has twins? They aren’t identical though ‘cause George is a boy and Gloria’s a girl.”

Reba’s expression softened, and I caught the faintest hint of excitement in her eyes. “That’s sweet and I’m sure y’all will have fun playing. As for the horses, no, I haven’t seen them yet. But I’m looking forward to checking them out. You know I have a weakness for wild horses.”



Jax nodded, his mouth full of bagel. “Papa says they’re gonna need a lot of work, but I bet you could train them super-fast.”

Reba shot me a pointed look. “I guess we’ll see. Depends on if your dad gets in my way.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“I wish you could come back with us, Ms. Reba.”

Reba froze for the briefest moment before schooling her features. “You know I travel a lot to help horses.”

Jax pouted. “But why? Mac’s is the best place. And Papa’s there.”

I watched her carefully, waiting for her answer. She avoided my gaze, instead focusing only on Jax. “Because some people aren’t meant to stay in one place forever. As much as I love Serenity Stables, I like going to new places all the time and meeting new people. It’s fun to see how they run their ranches and to help their animals when I’m needed.”

Jax frowned but didn’t argue. I, on the other hand, had plenty to say about that. But I kept my mouth shut, for now.

When Jax was done, Reba pushed back from the table. “Alright, I really do have to go check on Black Beauty.”

Jax clung to her arm. “Promise you’re coming to Mr. Jagger’s today?”

She crouched down so they were eye level, a small smile tugging at her lips. “Promise. In fact, I’m going to head over as soon as I’m done in the barn, so I’ll see

you guys there.”

Jax grinned and threw his arms around her neck, hugging her tight. She held him close for a second longer than necessary, then stood, her gaze flicking to mine. Something unspoken passed between us before she turned and walked out the door. I exhaled slowly, watching her go. Jax wasn't the only one who wanted her to stick around.

“You almost ready, bud?”

“Yeah, but you still have to finish your food.”

I looked down at my plate. “I guess you're right.”

Jax reached for my phone and I didn't even stop him while he pulled up his favorite game and leaned back in his chair. He wasn't a kid who wasted away on screens. Ranch life didn't allow for it. I worked my way through the rest of my meal as I racked my brain for a way to break through to Reba. I'd known she was here before I came. We didn't need to break wild horses. I could have arranged to purchase some that were already trained. But Mac agreed when I brought it up. He'd always had a soft spot for Reba that I decided to take advantage of.

Reba and I'd been two peas in a pod when we were younger, then I'd fucked it all up. But year after year I regretted it more and more. This wasn't only a mission of training wild horses, I also needed to rope in Reba and bring her home. I just needed her to realize that sooner rather than later, because as much as I loved Rawhide Ranch, we had a ranch of our own to get back to.

I cleared my plate and cleaned up the crumbs Jax left behind before reaching for my phone. “Come on, buddy, let's go check on those girls.”

He smiled up at me, almost as if he knew I was talking about more than the wild horses at Jagger's place. Sometimes my kid was a little too smart for his own good.

The truck rumbled beneath us as we pulled onto the dirt road leading to Jagger's ranch. Jax sat in his seat, swinging his legs as he stared out the window. For a few minutes, we rode in comfortable silence, the early morning sun casting a golden glow over the land.

"So... are you gonna marry Ms. Reba?" Jax asked suddenly, his little voice filled with curiosity.

I nearly choked on the to-go coffee Robyn, the B&B's owner, had prepared for me. She'd handed Jax a matching thermos though smaller and filled with hot cocoa, instantly winning a place in his heart.. "That's a big question for so early in the morning, bud."

Jax shrugged. "You like her. She likes you. Seems like a good idea."

I glanced at him in the rearview mirror, shaking my head. "She's a little more stubborn than that, buddy. Besides, what makes you think she likes me? She's always so mean."

"She likes me," Jax said confidently. "And I think she likes you, too. She just doesn't know it yet."

I chuckled. "You think so, huh?"

Jax nodded, then turned serious. "If she likes me, then she has to like you. Why did she leave before?"

My grip on the steering wheel tightened. I didn't talk about the past much, especially

not with Jax. But the kid had a way of asking questions that hit straight to the heart of things.

“Because I messed up,” I admitted. “And she thought she didn’t belong at the ranch with us.”

Jax frowned. “That’s dumb. She belongs with us.”

I smiled at his certainty. If only it were that simple. “Yeah, bud. She does.”

The rest of the drive passed quietly, except for Jax humming along to the radio. By the time we pulled into Jagger’s driveway, the place was already coming alive. Horses neighed in the pastures, the twins were playing in the front yard and Moira waved from the side of the house.

Jax unbuckled himself before I had the truck fully stopped, bouncing with excitement. “I see Ms. Reba!”

Sure enough, Reba stood by the paddock, her hands resting on the top rail as she watched the wild horses. The wind tugged at her hair, and for a moment, she looked completely at peace. But as soon as she spotted us, that familiar guarded look slid over her face. I sighed, shaking my head as I climbed out of the truck. Winning her over wasn’t going to be easy. But I was all in now.

“Come on, bud,” I said, lifting Jax down. “Let’s go see what she thinks of these horses.”

“Morning, Johnny.” Jagger greeted me as I walked up and Jax climbed the bottom two rungs of the gate to get a better look. “How’s the Ranch been treating you?”

“It’s been amazing, Robyn is doing her best to spoil Jax at the B&B and Derek really

has created a wonderful place both on the Ranch and the Ridge. But I don't need to tell you that."

"No, you sure don't."

"So tell me about these horses."

"There isn't much to tell. Wild ones, really. Working with this many at a time is not normally something I get into, so when Rooster thought of you all when we caught them, I decided that was the best way to go. Between the two of us, we picked these four mares. They needed to be moved. The herd roamed free over Rooster's grandparents' ranch after they'd passed, but now that he wants to bring it back to life, the horses need a safe place to go. I suspect there might be more, but we'll deal with them when and if it happens."

"They are so pretty, aren't they, Ms. Reba?"

"That they are, buddy."

"Well, it's up to you if y'all are interested in them, but they will take some winning over."

"That's not new to me," I said, shooting a look at Reba, who solidly ignored my presence.

"Oh, don't I know that," Jagger said with a laugh. "Jax, you want to come up to the house for some cookies?"

"In the morning?" Jax's eyes went wide.

"Only if you promise not to tell Ms. Moira."

Jax jumped off the fence. “Race you to the house!”

Reba let out a laugh as she turned to watch Jax run back the way we’d come, only to stop just short of the house and plop down on the grass with the twins as if he’d completely forgotten cookies were at stake. Jagger ambled up behind him, making a big deal about how fast Jax was and how slow he had been as I stepped up next to Reba.

“So, what do you think?”

“Me? These are for you and Mac.”

“Yes, you.”

“They are going to take time, Johnny, are you willing to put in the work?”

For some reason, that question felt loaded in ways she may or may not have meant it to be.

### CHAPTER 3

Reba

The horses were gorgeous. Although if you asked me, every horse was. There was something special about caring for an animal that loved so hard, whose loyalty transcended everything else. Even wild horses were loyal to those around them. I always hated the term breaking a horse. I didn't break them. I taught them how having their own human can make life better for them. The horses here at Jagger's were young, wild, and amazing.

"Can I spend some time with them today?" Johnny asked.

"Of course."

"I don't know how much time you have on your hands, but from what Jagger says, it may be a few weeks before you could even load them up."

"I'm in no rush to go anywhere," I assured him.

"Jax and I can stay. I would need to figure out a way to get his school lessons in though. We are still homeschooling since we travel so much, but I didn't bring anything with me."

I looked over at Jax chasing Moira and Jagger's twins around the yard and my heart swelled. He was such an amazing kid. Granted, he was growing up in a world that required flexibility. Johnny's work at the ranch was complicated and even though

he'd retired from bull riding, he still traveled for the rodeos with some of the guys. Jax was always with him and for that, I adored them both.

"I can help with that," I said, turning to Johnny. "It's still spring and I'm sure we can pull up what he's been working on and what he still needs to get finished up."

"I think the hardest part is going to be pulling him away from the kids when it's time to go," Johnny said with a laugh as Jax tripped over his own feet and landed face first in the grass with the toddlers climbing all over him, all three laughing in glee. "He does like it here. We don't have many kids on our ranch. Just Mac and Athena's, but they still spend a lot of time in the city."

I nodded, refocusing on the horses. Memories of Serenity and hearing how much has changed made something ache deep inside me.

"I'm going to get started with them," I said as I unlatched the gate.

"I don't need to tell you to be careful but be careful. Jagger said on the phone they managed to get them here because the dark brown one was hurt and the others wouldn't leave her. They were able to get her leg cared for, but since she started feeling better, she's been just as standoffish as the others."

"I understand." I went to push the gate closed just as Johnny stuck his boot in the way. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm not letting you go in there alone."

"You will scare them off," I said as I pushed harder against the gate, secretly hoping the steel toes in his boots gave out.

"Me? You are the one always throwing around I-hate-life vibes."



“I don’t hate life.”

“Could have fooled me.”

Jagger hollered from where he was in the yard, “Moirra and I will watch Jax while you both are out there. I’m sure she will work up some lunch, so we will get him fed. No need to rush back.”

“Thanks, Jagger, we shouldn’t be too long today.”

The wind kicked up, stirring the scent of hay, horses, and the lingering trace of Johnny’s cologne. Damn him. Even standing a few feet away, he invaded my space like he had a right to be there. My irritation rose at the thought that Mac didn’t trust me to size up these girls on my own but had sent Johnny, knowing damn well how complicated our relationship was.

It had been Mac who’d found me crying like an idiot the morning after everything happened. He was the one who’d convinced me to move forward and not look back. Johnny had been a mess back then and, if I’m honest, I hadn’t been much better. But it felt like ever since, Mac would push us together any chance he had.

“I don’t need you babysitting me,” I said, still watching the horses, pretending like his presence didn’t send something warm and dangerous through my chest.

Johnny stepped up beside me. “Not babysitting. Supervising.”

I turned my head. “Same thing.”

His lips twitched, and for a moment, I thought he might actually smile, but he didn’t. Instead, he came even closer, mirroring my stance. His shoulder brushed mine, the brief contact sparking heat across my skin. I looked over at him, wondering if our

touch had the same effect on him as it did me. If it did, I had no idea how, because he looked as if nothing could affect him. Johnny was always the sweet and kind one, but he still acted as if everything rolled off his tough skin. Everything but Jax; you could always tell how much his son affected him and that was one of the many reasons I couldn't stay away from him.

"I don't like the idea of you in here alone. Make sure you don't come by without me," he said, voice low and even, but there was an edge to it, something protective that made my stomach twist.

I forced myself to focus on the horses instead of the way his voice curled around me like a lariat, threatening to pull me in. The dark brown mare that Jagger had mentioned lifted her head, ears flicking toward us. She was beautiful, proud, and untamed.

She was everything I wanted to be.

"I'll be fine," I said, straightening. "I've been working with horses longer than you've been wearing that smug expression. They trust me, so you should too."

Johnny chuckled, but it didn't sound entirely amused. "Smug expression? You wound me, darlin'."

I rolled my eyes. Of course that's all he would take from my comment. I took a step into the oncoming wind and the horses skittered a few steps away, their muscles tense, nostrils flaring as they tested the air. I stayed still, giving them time to adjust to my scent.

Johnny followed a second later, sneaking up beside me with the quiet grace of a man who'd spent his life working with animals. He didn't say anything, just stood there, waiting.

“You know, you don’t have to prove anything to me,” he murmured.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

His gaze was steady, unreadable. “It means you don’t have to do everything alone, Reba. You don’t always have to be the one holding the reins.”

The words struck something deep inside me, something I didn’t want to acknowledge. Because the truth was, I did hold the reins tight. Letting go meant getting hurt, and I’d learned my lesson the hard way. I looked back at the horses instead of answering, focusing on the dark mare. She was still watching me, head high, eyes sharp. I took a slow step forward, keeping my movements calm, measured. Johnny didn’t move. Just let me work, let me do what I was good at. That was the thing about him. He might push, but he never tried to take control where it wasn’t needed. And damn if that wasn’t the most infuriating and attractive thing about him. The mare snorted, shifting her weight, muscles twitching under her sleek coat. I dropped my gaze to something less threatening, allowing her to be the leader she was. After a long moment, she took a hesitant step closer, testing the air between us.

“There you go, sweetheart,” I whispered, extending my fingers just enough to let her catch my scent again.

Johnny was silent beside me, but I could feel his eyes on me, tracking my every movement. After a few more heartbeats, the mare stretched her nose forward, nostrils flaring as she took me in. The trust was barely there, but it was a start.

“You really are somethin’ else,” Johnny said, in a voice so quiet I almost didn’t hear it with the wind blowing around us.

I swallowed, fighting the ridiculous rush of heat that climbed my throat. “It’s just patience.”

He huffed out a breath. “Not just with the horse.”

I turned my head slightly, just enough to see him watching me with an expression I couldn't quite decipher. There was admiration there, sure, but something else too. Something heavier. For the first time in a long time, I felt dangerously close to letting my grip slip, just a little. I turned back to the mare, pushing the feeling down. Because letting go? That had never been safe. And with Johnny? It felt damn near impossible. I'd made that mistake once in my life. I wasn't ready to make it again.

I took another step forward, choosing the wild horse over the man next to me, and she scared off. I watched as she turned and ran toward the furthest point of their enclosure with the other three horses close behind her. It was clear they had an established pecking order. If I won her over, I might stand a chance with the others. If I didn't, there was no way we could tame any of them. I respected that about horses. They required trust before they would allow a human in their space. Some people worked with horses bred to help humans. I preferred the ones who needed it but didn't know it yet, and the gorgeous beast in front of me was one of those horses. One that needed me but hadn't yet acknowledged that need.

### CHAPTER 4

Johnny

Watching her was like watching the most complicated, beautiful thing in the world. Reba had been part of my life for longer than I could remember. We'd been wild, dumb kids running the rodeo circuit and then everything had gone to shit. But there were times like today when I couldn't pull my gaze from her. I was happy Jagger and Moira had Jax, because splitting my attention right now seemed impossible.

She held her hand out as the wind changed directions and the mare she was trying to win over took in her scent. The horse was taken by the light floral smell that hit her nose in the same way I was every time I was near Reba. She had a thing with horses that many admired. I followed her in because I couldn't watch her from afar, but I wasn't an idiot. She took the lead in here and I was only around in case she needed me. Her level of patience far exceeded mine and when the small herd ran off, she didn't look disappointed, only more motivated to win them over.

"It's okay," she said, turning in my direction. "They just need a little more space."

"For animals as large as they are, horses always amaze me at how skittish they are."

"They have no reason not to be. Everything in our world is foreign to them. These four have lived a life of freedom. They need to choose a life with human companionship and they know nothing about it."

I nodded, but my eyes stayed on her, not the horses. "So, how do you convince

them?”

Reba turned back to the mare, watching her with that quiet patience she always had. “I don’t. I show them there’s nothing to fear. That being close to me is safe.”

Her voice was soft but sure, and damn if that didn’t hit me harder than it should have. Because hell, that’s what I’d been trying to do with her for years, show her I wasn’t the same dumb kid who’d hurt her, that I’d changed, that being close to me wouldn’t bring her regret. The mare huffed and took another hesitant step toward her. Reba stood still, letting the horse close the distance on her own terms. I forced myself to do the same. I wanted to step in, to do something, but I knew better. This wasn’t my area of expertise, it was hers. The worst mistake I could make was to interfere. Honestly, I shouldn’t even be in here with her, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that if one of these horses so much as twitched the wrong way, I’d be between them and Reba in a heartbeat. She’d hate me for it, but I couldn’t let her get hurt. Not when there was a chance I could do something to stop it.

“You ever tire of waiting?”

She smirked, eyes still on the mare. “No. You rush them, you lose them. Some things take time.”

Some things. Not all things. I scrubbed a hand over my jaw and exhaled through my nose, trying to shake the frustration I had no right to feel. She wasn’t talking about us, but damn if it didn’t feel like she was.

The wind shifted again, and the mare flicked an ear. Another slow step, closer this time.

Reba barely breathed. Neither did I.

When the mare finally stretched her nose forward and sniffed Reba's outstretched hand, the corner of her mouth lifted slightly. Just a ghost of a smile, but I caught it. She was beautiful when she smiled. It was something I didn't get to see often. She had constructed walls around her when it came to me, and the only smile I ever got was when she was with Jax or someone else entirely. I watched like I always do and when the mare suddenly tensed and trotted away, Reba didn't react with disappointment, just a calmness that I'd always admired. She turned her head, her gaze meeting mine.

"They'll come around," she said, like she had no doubts.

My chest tightened. "Yeah," I murmured, my eyes still locked on hers. "They will."

Her expression flickered, like maybe she caught the double meaning in my words. Maybe she didn't. Either way, she looked away first, turning toward the herd as they settled on the far end of the pasture for the second time.

We tried again and again all morning and most of the early afternoon before Reba was finally ready to call it quits.

"We should give them a break. Try again later this afternoon when they're calmer. They have our scent now. We won't be strangers next time."

I exhaled slowly, nodding. "Sounds like a plan."

I stepped back, giving her space as she climbed over the fence rather than unlatching the gate this time. I followed right behind her, resisting the urge to offer a hand, knowing she wouldn't take it. But when she landed and brushed a stray piece of hair out of her face, her fingers trembling just a little from the adrenaline, I almost reached for her. Almost.

Instead, I shoved my hands into my pockets and forced a grin. “You always this stubborn?”

She shot me a look. “You always this annoying?”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “Guess we’ll find out, won’t we?”

Reba rolled her eyes but didn’t argue, just started toward the house. I followed, watching the sway of her hips, the tension in her shoulders. I didn’t know if I’d ever win her over. But like she said, some things take time. And for her, I’d wait as long as it took.

“Should we break Jax’s heart and pull him away from those little ones?”

“I’d rather not. They look like they are having a blast.”

“Yeah, Sometimes I feel bad we don’t live in a neighborhood full of kids that he can play with, but then I see him with the animals at the ranch and the guys and I feel like he needs that too. Parenting is complicated as fuck sometimes.”

“I can imagine.”

“Do you want to grab lunch over at the Ranch? I can see if Jagger and Moira want to watch Jax for a little longer.”

Her gaze lingered on me for a second, hesitation clear in her eyes. Then she gave a brief nod. “Fine. But only because I’m starving.”

I smirked but didn’t push my luck. Instead, I turned back toward the house. The front door was propped open, probably left by my kid knowing him. I pushed it open further and found him at an oversized wood table with the twins chomping down on



what looked like grilled-cheese sandwiches.

After asking Jagger if he and Moira would mind watching my boy, I made sure that was okay with Jax as well. “Hey, bud, want to stay here with Ms. Moira and Mr. Jagger for a little longer? I’m going to take Ms. Reba over to the Ranch for lunch.”

Jax didn’t even hesitate. “Yes!”

Moira laughed, shaking her head. “Go have some fun. We’ve got him covered.”

“Thanks, we won’t be long, but I hate to pull him away. We don’t have a lot of kids up at Mac’s.” I turned back to Reba. “Looks like it’s just us.”

Her lips pressed into a thin line as if she’d hoped Jax would join us, but she didn’t argue as we made our way to my truck. I opened the passenger door for her, but she ignored the gesture, climbing in on her own and reaching for the door to close it herself. Typical. I shook my head and walked around to the driver’s side. The ride to the Ranch was short, but the air inside the truck was thick with unspoken words. It was rare I had her alone and, honestly, I couldn’t remember any of those situations going well. I could feel Reba’s tension, see it in the way she kept her arms crossed, eyes on the passing landscape.

“So,” I started, keeping my voice casual, “what’s the plan after this?”

She turned to me, brows furrowing. “After what?”

“After the horses are ready to move.”

She shrugged, looking back out the window. “Don’t know yet. I’ll probably stay on here as long as they need help. Mac may want four, but that still leaves nine others.”

“You could come back to Mac’s ranch. Help me finish what we started here.”

Reba let out a humorless laugh. “We didn’t start anything, Johnny. You came to buy horses, I came to work with them. That’s it.”

“Mac and I could use your help, you know.”

“Oh really? My help? You all have a fully staffed ranch with multiple trainers who could work with them once you arrange transport. That’s not even including you and Mac. You don’t need me.”

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Always act like you aren’t needed anywhere. Reba, you are one of the best trainers in the business and you know it, but you deny it. Running all over the country working with different people just to leave and do it again. What are you running from?”

Her fingers curled into her jeans, jaw tightening. “You’re reading too much into it. I like to travel.”

I exhaled slowly, trying to keep my frustration in check. “I’m just saying you don’t have to bounce from one job to another forever. Mac’s place could be a good fit. A steady place to work and settle down.”

“And that’s what you think I need? Stability?”

“I think you need a place where you don’t feel the need to run.”

“Does Mac know you are sitting here offering me a job?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yeah.”

“No, but he wouldn’t have sent me here just for horses. You know Mac. He would have just called you and made arrangements for them to be brought to us. Instead, he sent me and Jax here to be with you.”

Her eyes flashed with something I couldn’t quite place, but before I could push further, she was already unbuckling her seatbelt and opening the door. “Let’s just eat, Johnny.”

I sighed as she slammed the door behind her and took off to the entrance.

Though it was rather late for lunch, the cafeteria was still offering a spread of sandwiches, chips, and fresh fruit along with several warm options to choose from for anyone who was hungry. Reba grabbed a tray, staying well ahead of me in the line making her selections as I filled mine.

The silence stretched between us as we ate, only the clinking of silverware and the conversations of those around us breaking the quiet. I needed to figure out how to get her to listen—really listen. I needed her to come back with me. I’d fucked things up with us in the past and I knew that, but it had been years and there was something about Reba that I just couldn’t shake. She was amazing with Jax and I always shrugged my feelings toward her off because of that. When Jax’s mom left us, I’d relied on Reba too much and felt guilty over it. But now Jax was older and the few times a year Reba came by the ranch just felt different. It’s been my home forever, but when she was with us, things just felt right.

Finally, I set my sandwich down and looked up at her. “Why won’t you consider it?”

“Because settling down somewhere isn’t in the cards for me.”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s not who I am.”

I leaned back in my chair, studying her. “This is not who you used to be.”

Her fingers tensed around her fork. “And you think I should change? Or that the changes I made in my life were wrong?”

“No,” I said carefully. “I think you might have already changed, and maybe every once in a while you miss being settled down.”

Her breath caught, but she masked it with a quick sip of her drink before looking at me with all the hatred in the world. “You see me a few times a year. You’ve been here for two days and you think you know everything about me? You’re right, Johnny, I have changed and for good reason. I like who I am and what my life is now.”

“I didn’t say there was anything wrong with it. This life isn’t what you used to want. So why now?”

She broke eye contact and stared off into the distance. If we weren’t sitting here with a room full of people, she would probably slap me, so I decided to go for broke. “That night after the rodeo?—”

Her fork clattered onto her plate. “Don’t.”

I clenched my jaw. “We never talked about it.”

“Because it wasn’t worth talking about,” she said, standing abruptly.

I stood too, frustration boiling over. “Maybe not to you.”

Her gaze snapped to mine, something raw flashing in those deep brown eyes before she turned away. “I’ll see you this afternoon with the horses.”

And just like that, she was gone, leaving me there with a half-eaten sandwich and a whole lot of unresolved history. I ran a hand through my hair, exhaling slowly. This wasn’t over. Not by a long shot.

### CHAPTER 5

Reba

Ten Years Ago

“Fuck, Reba, tell me we aren’t making a mistake.”

Johnny’s voice sent a chill through me as my legs wrapped around his waist and he hoisted me up against the wall of his trailer.

“Not a mistake,” I quickly said between kisses. His mouth crashed against mine in desperate need as I ignored my racing heart. This was happening. It was really happening.

“God, I’ve wanted you for so fucking long,” he groaned as his hard cock pressed into me and all I could think was how badly I needed our jeans off.

It had been a shit show of a rodeo. No one in our circle placed, everyone lost money, so instead of celebrating, we all spent the night drinking our sorrows away. It was a mess. We were a mess, but it would be fine. These things happened. What didn’t happen was Johnny looking at me like he wanted to devour me. For years now we had traveled together with the team, worked the ranch together, and I spent most of that time pining after the friendly cowboy who seemed completely unattainable. He admired my work with horses, that was obvious, but the women he spent time with were more of the blonde-haired, big-boobed, buckle-bunny type. Not women like me.

Then tonight, something changed. Everyone left, and we were the only two remaining at the bar. He leaned over and it was done. The second his lips touched mine, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. When he pulled away, I thought for sure he would have a look of regret, but it was just the opposite. We stumbled out of the front of the bar and ran like two kids racing to a candy store back to the campgrounds. When I turned for my trailer, he grabbed me up and the next thing I knew, I was at his.

Johnny pulled me back from the wall and laid me down on the bed.

“Not a mistake,” I said to myself as he unbuttoned his shirt and it dropped to the floor. I bit my lower lip and nearly died when he dropped his jeans and I saw he had nothing on underneath. He was a specimen of utter perfection. Tan and toned, with a small sprinkling of hair on his chest. I took him in as he pumped his dick in his hand.

“I showed you mine. Now you show me yours.”

I sat up, untucking my disheveled shirt and pulling it over my head. He took in a quick breath as he stared at my black lace bra as if attempting to memorize what it looked like, or perhaps, what I looked like wearing it.

“Did you wear that for me?”

“No, for me. But if it makes you feel better to think it’s for you, then it is,” I said with a wink.

He pushed me back down on the bed and leaned over me, biting my right breast and pulling down the cup on the other. As he pinched and twisted my nipple, my hips pressed up into him. The pain and pleasure mixed in a way that always confused me. I loved a bit of both and somehow Johnny seemed to know.

“You like that, my Crazy Rider?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me what else you like.”

My mind was a scrambled mess. I couldn't concentrate on anything other than what I was feeling, so I reached between us and let my fingers graze over the soft skin covering his hard shaft.

“Very nice. Now tell me what you want me to do with it.”

“Fuck me, Johnny. Please.”

He stood back up and pulled me down the bed until he could reach the buttons of my jeans. In less time it took me to regret a thing, I was naked, staring up at him and he was getting to his knees on the side of the bed.

“I need to taste you. Come here.”

My body slid further toward him as he pulled my legs and placed them over his shoulders. The first lick was careful, tentative, and oh so fucking good.

“Don't tease me, please, Johnny.”

“Oh, I intend to tease you, Reba. I will always tease you.”

His mouth closed over my most delicate place and he sucked at my clit with no abandon. My hips jerked, but he held me still. My mind raced as my body lost control. He shifted from sucking to licking and sucking again. Never long enough for me to chase my climax. Always changing, just before I could reach it.



“Fuck,” I moaned as his finger dipped inside me.

“You’re so tight.”

That’s when it hit me. He would know. Of course he would. Why hadn’t I thought of it before? If I bled, then there would be no denying it. But he was drunk and so was I. The fleeting thought of him denying me because I was a virgin came and went just as he finally held still, licking my clit and thrusting his fingers inside me. One wasn’t a problem; soon after he placed a second with the first and the sweet pain of it knocked me over my breaking point.

“I’m going to come,” I said, gritting my teeth as I started to lose control.

Johnny’s hands came up over me as his mouth continued its work. The soft caress of my breast and the constant feel of his tongue were too much. My pleasure raced through my body at a record speed. It was like nothing I had brought on for myself. This was otherworldly. I closed my eyes and saw stars as wave after wave of my climax crashed into me and threw me even deeper in love with a man I could never have.

As everything slowed, my body loosened and Johnny crawled up onto the bed, pulling me to his chest. He ran his fingers through my hair as I sighed in absolute contentment.

“Are you okay?” his voice cracked as he checked on me.

“I’m perfect. You?”

A deep chuckle erupted from his chest. “Yes. I’m very good.”

I pushed myself up, unsure what to do exactly, but knowing I wanted to do something

for him. I straddled his thighs and reached for his cock between us. “Show me what you like.”

“I like you,” he said as he placed his hand around mine, “and I like this.”

The pressure he placed made me worried I’d hurt him I was squeezing him so tightly. He must have sensed my concern because when he looked up at me, he gave me a wink.

“You won’t hurt me. It’s good like this,” he said as I reveled in the feel of him within my grasp.

Not a mistake,” he said again and I nodded.

“You have a condom?”

“I do.”

He reached over into the top drawer of his nightstand and pulled one out. I ignored the jealousy that ran through me at the thought of other women in his bed. He went to hand it to me but I shook my head.

“You do it. Let me watch.”

He raised his eyebrows, taking me in, but did as I asked before reaching for me.

“Let me feel you.”

My heart skipped a beat at the idea of him wanting me, really wanting me, and not just being drunk. I shifted my stance and hovered over his hard cock as he held it for me to lower myself on. He was so thick I knew it would be painful, but I was ready.

Fuck, I was so ready.

I pressed down just a bit, and the thick head of his cock entered me. I grit my teeth and his hand came up to the side of my face.

“Let me get lube. Hold on.”

He helped me back to where I started and I watched him again as he pulled a bottle from his drawer and coated himself with it. What I didn’t expect was for him to press some inside me as well before throwing it to the side and reaching for me.

“There, that should be better.”

He lined his cock up again with my opening, and I knew I had no choice but to push forward. I braced myself on his chest as his hands shifted to my hips and I pressed myself down into him, letting out a gasp of pain that I couldn’t keep to myself.

“Fuck, Reba. Are you okay?”

I nodded quickly, and he pulled me forward, his lips pressing into mine. I didn’t move, but instead let him take what he needed from me. I could taste myself on his lips and it made everything even better in a way I’d never be able to explain. My body relaxed, and I took a chance at shifting my hips slightly.

“That’s a good girl, just like that. Fuck yourself on my cock.”

His words turned me to mush, and confidence ran through me. He had no idea I was lost and confused. His direction was to take what I wanted, so that’s what I’d do. I shifted myself up just as his hands found my breasts, pinching and pulling at my nipples. I closed my eyes and focused on that sweet pain and his cock throbbing inside me as I moved again and again. Enjoying the hell out of my clit pressing into

him and my center being filled in a way I had never felt before.

His grip on me got harder and his breathing turned erratic.

“Reba, if you don’t slow down, this is all going to come to a crashing halt before we even get started.” Something about the idea of him losing control because of me just egged me on further. I moved faster, giving in to the pleasure that now covered the pain. There was no pain, only good.

Right as my climax began to rise again, Johnny grabbed me around the waist and rolled us over, pressing me into the mattress with the weight of his body. He held my hands up above me as he thrust inside me so hard and deep it wasn’t even close to what I’d felt so far.

I cried out in pleasure. Losing control of everything that was happening terrified me, but for some reason I trusted him. I trusted this.

I wrapped my legs around him since they were the only parts of my body I could move. He looked down at me and I swear he saw things I didn’t even know were there. Then with no warning, my body crossed over into oblivion. My insides clenched as pleasure took over. Johnny still pumped in and out of me as I tried to close my eyes.

“Look at me, Reba. Let me watch you come.”

I opened them again, gazing up at him as his body shook. “Mine. Mine. Mine,” he chanted as we both crashed over into pure fucking ecstasy.

As the night went on, there wasn’t a moment without us touching. It was everything I had wanted and dreamed of, but the next morning, it all came crashing down. I hadn’t even opened my eyes yet when I heard him curse, my body tensing at the unwelcome

sound of his voice.

“Fucking hell, I thought it was all a dream.”

His voice was quiet but loud enough that I heard him. I was lying in bed next to him after all. I sat up, clutching the sheet to my breasts, covering up as much of myself as I could. I had two choices, pretend like I had no idea what happened or run. I chose the latter. Pulling the sheet with me, I got out of the bed.

“Hell, Reba, give me a minute,” he yelled, pulling a pillow over his junk before his eyes went wide. That’s when I saw what he saw and I burned with embarrassment. “What the fuck did I do?”

Johnny ran his hand over his face as I took two steps back, nearly falling over his boots.

“Shit.”

“You were a virgin, Reba? How?”

I just shook my head as tears welled in my eyes. Damn it. I hated crying when I was mad, but here I was about to make even more of a fool of myself.

“Stop talking, Johnny, just shut up.” I bent down and threw his jeans at him while scooping up my clothes and running into the bathroom.

You know those moments in the movies where the girl runs and the guy chases after her? That’s not real. What is real is pulling your clothes on in a bathroom too small to do so while wiping away the tears of mortification that you just fucked your best friend only to find out he regretted every minute of it. I opened the door to the bathroom to find him still in bed, this time muttering to himself, and I heard the one

word that sent me over the edge.

“Mistake.”

I didn't bother saying goodbye. I just walked out of the room and let the door slam behind me as I ran from the best thing that ever happened to me. However, in that moment, it had spun into the worst thing that ever happened to me.

### CHAPTER 6

Johnny

“That’s a good girl,” Reba murmured, taking slow, measured steps toward the mare.

The damn thing had been trouble since day one, jumpy, untrusting, and just plain mean when she wanted to be. But Reba was determined. She had the other three eating out of her palm, and this one was the last hurdle before we could call it a win.

Since the others were doing great, I planned to load them up and start our trek home by the end of the week. Jax was having the time of his life with the kids on Jagger’s ranch as well as those who lived on the Ridge, but I was itching to get back. The only problem was, I hadn’t made an inch of progress with Reba. And the more time I spent with her, the less I wanted it to end. Even if she was still pretending, she couldn’t stand me. I lived for the laughs I’d catch and she would try to hide, and the few moments I was able to bring a smile to her gorgeous face. I missed her so much it hurt. We had been great friends before I fucked everything up and we’d never been the same since.

“Come on, girl. You know you want a snack.”

Reba extended her hand with the carrot, her voice soft and coaxing. The mare hesitated, ears flicking back and forth, nostrils flaring. She was thinking about it.

I stayed still, keeping my distance, pretending I had a role in this when, really, I was just here in case things went south. And my gut told me they would. The feeling had

been sitting in my chest since I woke up. That same familiar pull of dread. I'd already called Mac to check in on things back home. Jax was happy and healthy, running wild, like always. Everything was fine. But it didn't feel fine. And standing here, a few feet away from an animal that could kill either of us if she got spooked, that feeling only grew stronger.

The mare stepped forward. Just one step. Then another.

"That's it," Reba whispered. "Good girl."

Her fingers stretched out inches from the horse's nose.

Then it all went to hell.

A loud crash echoed from the barn behind us. A metal bucket hitting the ground, maybe, or a door slamming shut. The mare startled violently, rearing back with a panicked snort. Reba barely had time to react before the mare lashed out. Her front hooves slammed down, one striking the dirt, the other grazing Reba's side. She crumpled with a sharp gasp, and I was moving before my brain could catch up.

"Shit—Reba!"

The mare spun, still spooked, and I didn't think, I just acted. My voice came out sharp and commanding. "Get!"

The horse bolted, tearing off toward the other side of the pasture, kicking up dirt as she went. But I didn't care about her anymore. Reba was on the ground, clutching her side, her face tight with pain. I was on my knees beside her in seconds, hands hovering because I didn't know where to touch, where she was hurt the worst.

"Talk to me, Reba."



She sucked in a shaky breath, her fingers pressing against her ribs. “I’m fine. Just give me a minute.”

“Bullshit.” My voice was rough. Too rough. I was seconds away from losing it. “That horse nearly took you out. You’re not fine.”

She tried to sit up, but the second she moved, pain flashed across her face, and she hissed.

That was it.

I slid an arm under her knees and the other behind her back before she could argue.

“Johnny, no?—”

“Too damn bad.” I lifted her easily, adjusting her in my arms as she sucked in another breath. “You can yell at me later.”

She scowled, but there was no real fight in it. She was hurting. I carried her out of the pasture, ignoring the way her fingers curled weakly into my shirt. I could feel the tension in her body, the stubborn way she held herself, like she didn’t want to show how bad it really was. I wasn’t having it. By the time I got her to the house and kicked open the door, she was breathing heavily, her forehead damp with sweat. Moira came running over as I set Reba on the couch carefully, kneeling in front of her. “Let me see.”

She hesitated, jaw tight, but then she peeled her shirt up slightly, revealing the angry red mark already forming on her ribs and some slightly broken skin.

I cursed under my breath. “Damn it, Reba.”

“It’s not that bad,” she muttered.

I shot her a look. “It could be broken.”

“It’s not.”

“You don’t know that.”

“What happened?” Moira’s voice cut into my panic.

“That damn mare scared off and nearly killed Reba.”

“I’ll get some ice.”

“She needs more than ice!” My voice was far too rough for Moira. She certainly didn’t deserve my anger. “I’m sorry.”

Moira gave me a soft smile and made her way to the kitchen.

Reba exhaled sharply, wincing. “Johnny?—”

“I apologized. But you scared the hell out of me,” I cut in, my voice low, raw.

Her expression faltered for a split second before she looked away.

I ran a hand through my hair, forcing a slow breath. “I’m taking you to the hospital. Someone should check you over.”

“Dr. Nelson, or one of the nurses at the infirmary, can check her over for you, Johnny. That way, you don’t have to go into town, just back over to the Ranch,” Moira said, carefully placing an ice pack on Reba’s side.

Reba sighed but didn't argue, which only made me worry more. I reached for my phone, but my eyes never left her. I knew one thing for damn sure, Reba might not be willing to settle down, but I wasn't leaving this Ranch without figuring out how to get through to her. Because losing her, even for a second, wasn't an option. It had damn near killed me.

Reba let her head fall back against the couch, exhaling as she pressed her fingers gently against the ice on her ribs. I wasn't convinced she wasn't seriously hurt, but she sure as hell wasn't going to admit it.

"I'm fine," she argued again, looking up at me, but her voice lacked its usual bite.

"You keep saying that, but you're still sitting there holding your side like you just took a beating in the arena."

She huffed but didn't have a comeback for that. I watched her carefully. Her jaw was clenched, her expression set, but I knew her well enough to see past it.

"I'll make sure the kids are okay out back. Do you want me to tell Jax what happened?" Moira asked quietly.

"No, I don't want to scare him," Reba said before I could answer.

"Very well, I'll keep him here until I hear back from you both."

I watched as Moira left to check on the kids before turning back to Reba. "You really scared me out there."

She blinked at me, her fingers tightening slightly around the ice pack.

"I knew that mare was a risk, but I still let you get too close. I should've?—"

“Stop.”

Her voice was soft but firm, cutting through my guilt like a blade.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Johnny. I knew what I was doing and you know that. Working with wild horses is a risk, and it’s one I was willing to take.”

I shook my head. “Still doesn’t mean I enjoyed seeing you go down like that.”

She looked away, focusing on the ice pack, and for a moment, silence stretched between us.

Then she sighed. “Guess you get to say, ‘I told you so’ now, huh?”

I frowned. “That’s not what this is about.”

“No? Seems like the perfect opportunity.”

I exhaled sharply. “I don’t want to be right, Reba. I want you safe.”

Her lips parted slightly, and for a second, I thought she was going to say something real, something honest. But then she shook her head, shifting on the couch with a wince.

“I just need to rest for a bit. I’ll be fine.”

“You need to take it easy for more than a bit,” I countered.

She narrowed her eyes. “Don’t start, Johnny.”

Too late.

“Reba, this isn’t some minor scrape. You might have a cracked rib. You will see an actual medical professional and follow their orders.”

“And what, let you do all the work? Not happening.”

I stared at her, biting back the frustration clawing its way up my throat. She was the most stubborn damn woman I’d ever met.

“You’re impossible,” I muttered.

“And yet, here you are.”

“Yeah, here I am. And I ain’t going anywhere, so you might as well get used to it.”

Her smirk faltered. Just slightly. She shifted again, adjusting the ice pack, and I could tell she was trying to ignore the weight of my words.

“Well,” she said after a beat, her tone lighter, deflecting, “If you’re sticking around, you might as well make yourself useful and check on the horses. Make sure that damn mare didn’t break out of the pasture.”

I held her gaze for a moment before nodding.

“Fine,” I said, standing. “But we are heading over to the Ranch as soon as I get back, so don’t even think about sneaking out there yourself.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t argue. I stepped toward the door, but before I left, I glanced back. She was still watching me, something unreadable in her eyes. Yeah. This wasn’t over. Not by a long shot.

### CHAPTER 7

Reba

Bruised, sore and defeated, I was sitting in the passenger seat of Johnny's pickup with Jax in the back and my ornery horses in the trailer. Yes, I was now claiming them as my own because when you get your ass kicked by a wild horse, you get to. At least in my mind, I did. Heading back to Mac's ranch hadn't been in my plans, but neither was Johnny's insistence that he wasn't leaving without me. Honestly, it was Jax who'd convinced me it was time to leave Rawhide Ranch. He was visibly upset when we came back from the infirmary over me getting hurt and he had that same stubborn streak as his father. Serenity Stables had been my home base for years and it was clear with a cracked rib I was going to need to take it easy for a while. After a few days of rest at Rawhide, Doc Nelson had finally given me approval to travel. That and a miraculous group of ranchers led by Derek, Jagger, and Rooster to help load my most difficult horse and a bunch of painkillers provided by Nurse MacIntosh at the infirmary, we were on the road.

I stared out the window as we pulled up to the massive sign announcing we were at Mac's ranch. The truck bumping over the dirt road hurt like hell, but the sight of dust kicking up around us and the rolling green pastures gave me a sense of comfort that I'd missed.

"We're home!" Jax exclaimed from the back seat.

"Yeah, buddy, we are."

Johnny's smile almost did me in. The look on his face every time Jax got excited about something was one of those things I hated to admit I lived for.

"Ms. Reba, you are staying with us, right?"

"No, buddy. I'll stay in the guest house."

"But who will take care of you?"

I gave him a comforting look and tried to stifle my laugh. "Me. I can take care of myself, bud. I'm not hurt that bad."

"But Papa said you were."

I shot a look over at Johnny, and he shrugged.

"The guest house is full. I had Heidi come by and clean up one of our extra rooms. The boy is right. You're staying with us."

As Johnny's truck rumbled up the long gravel driveway, I folded my arms and sank deeper into my seat, pretending like I wasn't irritated. The wide-open land stretched before us, leading up to the ranch house I knew too damn well. The porch light cast a familiar glow, the silhouette of one of the barns visible just beyond it. I'd always loved this place. Even when I didn't want to. But what I didn't love was Johnny's insistence that I stay here.

"I could stay in the bunkhouse if the guest house is full," I muttered, side-eyeing him as he downshifted and eased the truck to a stop.

Johnny cut the engine and turned to me, giving me that stubborn look of his. "You're still recovering, Reba. You need space to rest, and the bunkhouse is full of rowdy

hands who don't know how to be quiet."

"I'm fine, and I can handle a little noise."

"Uh-huh." He arched a brow. "That right? Because last I checked, fine people don't walk around slouched over holding their side."

I scowled, but before I could throw a retort back, Jax unbuckled his seatbelt and wedged himself between us, practically vibrating with excitement. "We're home!" he said, grinning up at me. "And now I get to help take care of you, Ms. Reba!"

Damn it, how was I supposed to argue with that?

"You don't have to take care of me, buddy. Like I said, I can take care of myself," I tried, but Jax wasn't hearing it.

Johnny, of course, looked smug as hell. "Told ya."

I rolled my eyes as Jax flung open his door and hopped out, taking off toward the house like he'd never been so happy to see a front porch in his life. He had been gone for a while, so I got it. A kid likes to have their own toys, familiar surroundings and he would never admit it but his regular school routine as well. I went to unbuckle myself, but before I could move, Johnny was already around to my side of the truck, opening my door with that infuriatingly patient expression.

"You gonna let me help you out, or are you gonna be stubborn about it?"

"I can get out of a damn truck by myself."

"Didn't say you couldn't. Just said I figured you shouldn't." He held out a hand, waiting, daring me to refuse.



I wanted to. Oh, I wanted to. But my ribs still ached like hell, and my ankle was sore from where I'd hit the ground. The last thing I needed was to screw myself up worse just to prove a point. With a huff, I placed my hand in his, ignoring the warmth that shot up my arm at the contact. His grip was firm but careful, like he knew I'd rather eat dirt than admit I needed the help. The second my boots hit the dirt, I let go, but not before I caught the satisfied twitch of his lips. Smug bastard.

Jax was already up on the porch, calling back, "I'm gonna get Ms. Reba some extra pillows and a blanket! She needs to be comfortable!"

I shook my head, even as a small smile tugged at my lips. "You got a whole nurse on staff here, huh?"

Johnny chuckled. "Kid takes his job seriously."

His voice was softer when he said it, something unreadable in his tone. I ignored the way it made my stomach flip and instead turned toward the trailer.

"We should get the horses unloaded before your little nurse starts bossing me around."

Johnny nodded, and we walked to the back of the trailer, the sounds of shifting hooves meeting us as he unlatched the doors. The horses were restless from the last leg of our drive, ears flicking back and forth, muscles tense. They had been this way every time we unloaded them and loaded them back up. The only good thing we had going for us was they were pretty used to the routine by now. Traveling as much as Johnny and I had over the years we made plenty of friends all across the country who were willing to let us stay a night or two along the way. It made traveling with horses much easier, not as easy as traveling without any, but having a destination to work toward each day and a place to turn out our animals really brought us both peace of mind.

I stepped to the side and ran my palm down the brown mare's neck, murmuring softly. "Easy, girl. You're home now."

"Step back, Reba. I don't want you getting hurt again. I'll release them here and we can walk them to the far pasture in the morning."

Johnny moved with that steady, practiced ease of his, taking the lead rope of the first horse and guiding her down the ramp. He worked in a quiet rhythm, moving the horses one by one into the pasture closest to the house. I observed as they shook off the last of their nerves and settled in. Leaning against the fence, I exhaled slowly, watching the animals stretch their legs. It was always my favorite part, that moment they realized they were safe.

"You did good with them."

I glanced at him. "I always do."

His lips quirked, but he didn't argue. Instead, he reached up and tipped his hat back, his gaze lingering on me longer than I was comfortable with.

"C'mon," he finally said. "Let's get you inside before Jax builds a whole damn recovery station in my living room."

I wanted to protest, but I was too damn tired. And maybe, just maybe, a small part of me didn't mind the idea of staying here for a little while.

Jax was already waiting for us at the front door, practically bouncing on his heels as he swung it open. "C'mon, Ms. Reba! I gotta show you everything!"

I barely had time to brace myself before he grabbed my hand and tugged me inside. I cast a glance over my shoulder at Johnny, who was grinning like he'd won some kind

of battle.

“Your son is persistent,” I muttered as I let Jax drag me down the hallway.

“He gets it from the best.”

Jax led me through the house with the enthusiasm of a kid showing off a new toy. First was the cozy living room, where a massive couch faced the fireplace, the mantle lined with pictures, mostly of Jax, a few of Johnny and Mac when they were younger and in the service together. There was an old rodeo picture. Johnny, mid-ride, determination in his eyes, dirt kicking up beneath the hooves of a bull. I’d seen him like that a thousand times before, back when we were just kids chasing adrenaline and competition and right next to it was a picture of me and him, laughing at the camera without a care in the world. Then one that caught my eye more than the others. There I was with Jax on my hip, smiling as he squeezed my neck with his little arms. I remembered that moment like it was yesterday. Johnny was competing and his mom and I were looking after Jax. Johnny got thrown from a bull that night, which was terrible. But I’d almost forgotten about all that. My memories of that day were just the joys of spending time with Jax. He was an amazing kid still to this day.

“Daddy used to do rodeo,” Jax announced proudly.

I smirked. “Yeah, I know. I was usually there. You were probably too young to remember, though.”

Jax blinked up at me. “You were a rodeo person?”

Johnny’s voice came from behind us, low and amused. “She was one of the best rodeo stars there was, bud, and an outstanding babysitter to boot.”

I turned, watching as he set my bags down by the door, his gaze lingering on me in a

way that made my stomach flip.

Jax's eyes widened. "Whoa. You rodeo'd too?"

"I did." I nudged his shoulder. "Maybe I'll tell you some stories one day."

"I remember you babysitting me, Ms. Reba, but I didn't know you rodeo'd too."

The kid beamed like I'd just rocked his world.

"Yup, girls rodeo too."

"What did you do? Were you a barrel racer?"

His excitement was palpable, but it was late and I knew he'd get too worked up if hearing stories like that tonight. Apparently, so did Johnny.

"Alright, tour guide," Johnny said, ruffling Jax's hair as he passed. "Why don't you show her the rest while I get dinner going?"

Jax didn't need to be told twice. He dragged me to his room, showing me every toy, every drawing, every little thing he thought was important. It was endearing, really. The kid had a good heart. I'd spent time with him here, but never in the house. It had felt too intimate to come inside, so when I'd watched him, we spent the time running around the ranch and causing trouble, taking care of animals and even helping in the kitchens. Being back here now with him a few years older, and much wiser, made me miss it all even more.

By the time we made it back to the kitchen, Johnny had a cutting board out, working a knife through some vegetables with ease. The smell of something rich and hearty filled the air, and my stomach grumbled before I could stop it.

Johnny smirked. “Hope you’re hungry.”

I leaned against the counter, watching him. “You cook now?”

“I’ve always known how to cook.”

I snorted. “Bull. You lived off gas-station food and whatever Mac grilled back in the day.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “Things change. I’ve got a growing boy to take care of.”

That right there, those first two words, followed up by the love of his son, hit a little harder than they should have. Things change. Maybe they did. But some things, some people, were hard to forget. Jax chattered beside me while Johnny worked, and before long, he set a plate in front of me: steak, roasted potatoes, green beans. My kind of meal. Dinner was easy, filled with Jax’s stories, Johnny’s deep chuckles, and my reluctant amusement. It felt nice. Maybe a little too nice. A bit like this was how things were always meant to be.

After we finished, we tackled Jax’s bedtime routine together, which felt dangerously domestic in a way I wasn’t prepared for. I monitored him brushing his teeth while Johnny tidied up his room, and when Jax climbed into bed, he grabbed my hand before I could move away.

“You’re staying, right?”

My throat tightened.

“Just for a little while,” I whispered.

Jax yawned and settled deeper into his blankets, seemingly satisfied with that answer. Johnny flicked off the lamp, and we both stepped out into the hallway, closing the door behind us. Then it was just us. The house was quiet now, the only sound was the faint hum of the wind outside. Johnny didn't say a word as he led me toward the room where I'd be staying. He opened the door, stepping aside so I could enter first. I hesitated. Not because I didn't want to go in, but because Johnny was so damn close, and I could feel the heat of his body, smell the scent of leather and cedar and something uniquely him.

"Need help getting up onto the bed?" His voice was lower now, rougher.

"I can handle it. I'm going to take a quick shower and get some sleep. We all had a long day."

"Mm." He didn't look convinced, but he didn't argue. Instead, he just watched as I opened the bags he moved into the room for me. The mattress was firm, the blankets soft, and my body instantly protested the idea of a shower, hoping to just crawl into bed instead. Johnny lingered in the doorway, one hand braced against the frame. His gaze swept over me, slow and considering.

"You good?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Thanks."

He didn't move right away. He just stood there, watching me like he was thinking something he wouldn't say.

Then, finally, he exhaled and pushed off the doorframe.

"Get some rest, Reba." His voice was softer now, almost careful.

I didn't say anything as he stepped out and pulled the door partially shut behind him. But as I stood, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd just crossed some invisible line. And for the first time in a long time, I wasn't sure if I wanted to go back.

### CHAPTER 8

Johnny

“Why don’t you take these up to the guys for a mid-morning snack?” Reba said to Jax just as I was getting ready to head out to the horses. Time had passed and we had fallen into an easy rhythm around here. My ranch duties were lacking because I couldn’t seem to pull myself away from her but no one seemed to mind, for now. I had gotten up before the sunrise this morning and by the time I made it back, Reba was up with Jax having breakfast. He was starting on his reading for the day, and the desire to walk up and pull her into my arms to express my thanks was overwhelming. The longer she stayed with us, the stronger she grew, but the change in her was apparent to everyone around us. Reba was slowly but surely, hating me a little less every day.

“Can I, Papa?”

“Of course. Leave the cupcakes up at the bunkhouse in case the guys are still out doing chores.”

Jax beamed and ran for the backdoor with a basket full of baked goods.

“I didn’t know you bake.”

“It’s a new thing. Like you said, some things change.”

I knew what I’d said, and I knew when I’d said it. I also knew it had nothing to do



with cooking and everything to do with trying to win her back.

“I’m heading out. Want to join me?”

“You mean you’ll let me into the back pasture without a suit of armor?”

“Ha. Ha. Come on, the girls will be happy to see you. Especially Onex. She looks past me every time I walk out there looking for you. Working with her just proves she’s only tolerating me, but I’m kind of used to women acting that way.”

She smiled and finished drying the cupcake pan before heading to the backdoor and pulling her boots on. I loved seeing her move without pain, but whenever I did, a bit of fear set in that she would insist on leaving me soon.

We made our way out to the back pasture on four wheelers. My hope that my second one wouldn’t start and she would have to ride out with me died a quick death when the fickle machine fired right up for her.

“They have really settled in well,” she said as we approached the gate.

“They have. It will be a while before they can be saddled and ridden, but the trust is already building.”

Onex, the fearless leader of the bunch, looked up. Her eyes twitched and her nose wiggled toward the two of us before she made her way straight to Reba, who held her arms out welcoming her.

“Hey, pretty girl, how’s your little family?”

Reba stroked Onex’s strong neck, murmuring soft words as the mare pressed her nose against her shoulder. Reba had named the mare, correcting me when I first spelled it

with a “y” in place of the “e” while questioning her choice as the mare was brown and not black.

With Reba’s explanation that the name had nothing to do with the color of the mare’s coat but had been chosen because the name represented strength and leadership among their peers, I’d instantly stood corrected.

Onex had proven time and time again that she was both as the other horses hung back a few feet, watching, their ears flicking in our direction. They were still cautious, but every day, they warmed up more.

“She’s really taken to you,” I said, stepping up beside Reba.

“Of course she has. She’s got good taste,” she quipped, flashing me a small smile before turning her attention back to the horse.

Before I could come up with a comeback, the crunch of tires over gravel caught my attention. I turned toward the tree line just as Mac’s truck rolled up, kicking up dust in its wake. Reba must have heard it too, because she let out a quiet sigh, straightening up.

“You think he’s here to check on me or the horses?”

“Probably both,” I admitted, watching as Mac climbed out of the cab, his sharp eyes already sweeping over the pasture, taking everything in like he always did.

Mac shut the door and ambled toward us, hands in his pockets. “They’re looking good,” he said as he reached the gate, nodding toward the horses. “Didn’t think they’d settle this fast.”

“They still have a long way to go, but they’re getting there.”

“And you? You still thinkin’ about running off as soon as you’re back to a hundred percent?”

I stiffened at his bluntness, but Reba didn’t flinch. She crossed her arms and met his stare head-on. “Haven’t decided yet.”

Mac let out a slow breath and glanced at me. “She always this stubborn?”

“You have no idea.”

Mac grunted, shaking his head. “Well, you’re doin’ good work out here, both of you. I’d sure hate to see that wasted. You got a minute, Reba? I want to talk to you about something.”

Reba narrowed her eyes but headed in his direction. I couldn’t hear shit, but I could tell from her stance that she wasn’t a fan of what he had to say. Before long, she headed back in my direction.

“I’ll be around later to check on things. Try not to let her boss you around too much, Johnny,” Mac said before he turned back toward his truck.

I chuckled as he climbed back into his truck. Reba rolled her eyes but didn’t argue, which I took as a small victory.

As Mac’s truck disappeared down the dirt road, I turned back to her. “What did he have to say?”

“Nothing important.”

“Right, then, why did you look so annoyed?”

“I haven’t decided if I’m leaving yet because I don’t know where to go next. Mac wants me to stay, but I’m not sure if that’s the right move.”

“Why not?”

Her head tilted then shook so quickly her hat nearly fell off her head. “You know why.”

Onex stepped back as I stepped forward. Was I about to make the biggest mistake of my life? Maybe. But it felt like a now-or-never situation. I reached for Reba and pulled her body against mine as I tilted my head and covered her lips with mine. She gasped with shock, but then she leaned into me even more. Her arms came up around my neck and everything around us seemed to disappear. Every possibility of our future flashed through my mind until Onex, the ornery girl that she was, decided she wanted Reba’s attention and didn’t want to share it. She nudged my shoulder, breaking the moment, and at the same time Reba pushed at my chest until I let her go and she stepped away.

“What was that?”

“A kiss. Obviously.”

“Why? But, what would make you think that was okay?”

“Don’t you pretend that you weren’t into it.”

“I wasn’t!”

“Wanna bet?”

I reached for her again and pulled her to me. This time she made a half-assed attempt

to deny me, so I lifted her into my arms and held her to me.

“This is how it’s supposed to be, Reba. Stop fighting it.”

“Put me down!”

“Not until you forgive me.”

“Never!”

“Then this is how we will go on for the rest of our lives.”

I started walking toward the gate, ignoring the frustrated grunts of Onex.

“Johnny, I swear the second you let go, I’m going to kick you so hard in the nuts!”

“Well, that doesn’t make me want to let you go now, does it?”

“Ugh, you’re such an ass.”

“Maybe, but I’m your ass. You know it, so stop denying it.”

I reached the gate, but rather than opening it, I pressed Reba against it. Fuck, it felt amazing to have her in my arms.

“Forgive me, Reba. Please.”

“For what?” she spat back, as if I didn’t know.

“For making the biggest mistake of my life.”

“Fucking me? Yeah, I know it was a mistake. After promising me again and again that night it wasn’t, the first thing you said in the morning was ‘What a fucking mistake’. I remember it like it was yesterday.”

“You never let me explain!”

“Why would I? I could tell by the look on your face how disgusted you were.”

“I was not disgusted! God woman, you’re impossible.”

“It was a mistake because I didn’t know you were a virgin. If I had, I would have done things differently, not like some drunken buffoon.”

“You never wanted me sober.”

The hurt in her words and the way she tried to look away from me nearly broke me. “That’s not even a little true. Besides I’m not drunk now, and I want you more than ever.”

“Well, I’m not up for sale.”

“Please, Reba, let me in.”

I let my head fall forward until my forehead rested against hers. The tension in her body gave way just a little.

“It will hurt too much, Johnny. I lost everything that night. Our friendship, Jax, my rodeo family. I had to start over just to avoid you, and I did. Training horses is my life now and I’m proud of what I accomplished. I can’t risk it all again.”

“You won’t, not can’t, Reba.”

I let her down but kept her between me and the gate. “I fucked up. It was the worst mistake I ever made because I didn’t want to lose my best friend and I lost her anyway. I need you, Reba, and having you here with me and Jax the last few weeks just proves how badly I do. Give me a chance to make it up to you. Let me show you what you deserve from me. What you have always deserved to have.”

She reached between us and took off her hat. Holding it to her side before she ducked under my arm and stepped aside.

“I just don’t know how I can.”

I watched her open the gate and leave, my chest tightening as she slipped out and put distance between us. The way she clutched her hat, the stiffness in her shoulders—I knew she wasn’t running, not yet. But she was teetering on the edge of it. She took off toward the four wheelers so fast it looked as if she thought she could outrun what just happened. Like hell she could. I let out a slow breath, dragging a hand down my face before following her. She might not be ready to hear everything I had to say, but I wasn’t about to let her shut down and shove me away again. Not this time.

“Reba,” I called out. She didn’t stop.

I lengthened my stride, closing the gap between us until I was right behind her. “You can’t just walk away from this.”

“Watch me.”

I reached for her hand, but she pulled away. Her reaction stung more than it should’ve, but I didn’t let it show.

“You always this difficult?”

She shot me a glare. “You always this insufferable?”

A grin tugged at my lips despite the situation. “Only when I’m trying to get through to a woman who refuses to see what’s right in front of her.”

She jumped on the back of the four wheeler and to my dismay, the damn thing started up again. I followed her closely on mine and parked, following her up to the porch, as she stomped up the steps, shoving the door open with more force than necessary. I followed her inside, letting the screen door slam behind me. She tossed her hat onto the kitchen counter and turned to face me, her eyes flashing with frustration and something else. Something I wasn’t sure she was ready to admit.

“None of this changes anything,” she said, her voice quieter now, less sure as she waved between the two of us.

“The hell it doesn’t,” I countered, stepping closer. “You felt that, same as me.”

She swallowed hard, her throat working, but she didn’t move away this time. I reached up, tucking a stray piece of hair behind her ear, my fingers lingering along her jaw. She closed her eyes for the briefest second, and that tiny reaction sent a surge of hope through me.

“I need some space,” she muttered, stepping back.

I let her go, watching as she turned and disappeared down the hall. She was slipping through my fingers yet again.



### CHAPTER 9

Reba

The smell of burning wood filled the air, mingling with the rich aroma of grilled steaks and the sweet scent of roasted marshmallows. Laughter echoed around the open field as ranch hands, family, and friends gathered around the bonfire, swapping stories and passing around plates piled high with food. It had been years since I'd been to one of these, but nothing had changed except for me. Mac worked for Calvano Security and whenever they handled a rough case, a ton of the people from the firm usually come out to the ranch for the weekend. This was one of those times. I stood off to the side, nursing a cold beer, watching as Johnny moved effortlessly through the crowd. He was at home here, surrounded by his people, his family. And somehow, despite all my best efforts, I was becoming a part of it again.

"Ms. Reba!" Jax's excited voice broke through my thoughts. He ran up, his little face flushed from playing tag with a few of the ranch hands. "Come sit with us! Papa's telling stories about the rodeo!"

I hesitated, but before I could make up an excuse, Jax grabbed my hand and tugged me forward. Resistance was futile. I let him pull me toward the fire, where Johnny sat on an overturned log, an arm slung casually over his knee, the firelight flickering in his eyes.

"...so there I was, hanging on for dear life, knowing full well I was about to hit the dirt. The bull spun once, twice then bucked so hard my hat went flying into the stands. Next thing I know, I'm flat on my back, looking up at the prettiest girl I'd

ever seen.”

I stiffened as his gaze locked onto mine. My stomach flipped, heat rushing to my cheeks. Oh, hell no.

“The prettiest girl, huh?” Mac teased, smirking from across the fire. “Now that’s a story I haven’t heard.”

Johnny grinned, never taking his eyes off me. “That’s ‘cause it wasn’t just any girl. It was Reba. I was out cold until they pulled me off on a stretcher and that’s when I saw her. She was bitching at me, sure, but she was still the prettiest girl out there.”

A low whistle and a few laughs came from somewhere in the crowd. My stomach tightened.

Jax beamed, looking between us. “Was that when you fell in love with her, Papa?”

The group chuckled, but my breath caught in my throat. Johnny leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Something like that,” he said, his voice softer now, meant just for Jax. The conversation moved on, but I barely heard it. The weight of Johnny’s words settled over me, heavy and warm. I should’ve brushed it off, made some sarcastic comment to lighten the moment. But for once, I didn’t. Instead, I let myself feel it.

When I turned to walk away, Athena caught me by the arm. “Looks like you need another drink.”

I nodded and followed her to the makeshift bar. Mac and Athena had been married for years. She wasn’t a ranch person, Mac was. But they worked together and, as far as I knew, one thing led to another and now they were married. Both were semi-retired from their day jobs with a load of kids running after them. They were happy,

the kind of happy I wanted one day.

She handed me a beer with a smile. “You know these men are all pieces of shit, right?”

I laughed. “Yeah, I figured as much.”

“I know I wasn’t around when you and Johnny were friends, but the stories I’ve heard aren’t too far off from Mac’s and my history. We were friends first, you know—inseparable. He was annoying as hell but hilarious, and I couldn’t pull myself away from him. We were partners at work and one day he decided he wanted something more. I made him suffer.” She laughed. “But damn, was it worth it.”

“I think you have a misunderstanding of what’s going on with me and Johnny.”

“I don’t think it’s me misunderstanding, Reba. It’s you.”

I shook my head and looked in his direction. Johnny had never been subtle about wanting to try for something more, but the past stung in ways I didn’t want to admit and certainly didn’t want to relive.

“Sometimes history can’t repeat itself.”

“Maybe, but sometimes it does, and it’s for the better. Johnny fucked up, that’s for sure, but he’s desperate for another chance with you. I can see it all over his face.”

I raised my gaze in her direction. “Do you know the whole story?”

“I know enough of it. Mac shared with me his side of it all and that’s why I can confidently say Johnny’s an idiot. Maybe I’m sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong, but that man is smitten with you, and so is his little boy.”

I looked over to Jax, who was precariously balancing a melted marshmallow over a graham cracker, and smiled. “I wish it was as easy to forgive Johnny as it is to love Jax.”

“Give it a try. Maybe he will surprise you.”

Later, after plates were scraped clean, and the fire burned low, Johnny found me near the fence, staring out at the pasture. My body hummed with excitement as he came close and I inhaled the scent of the bonfire overlapping his cologne.

“Didn’t think you’d stay this long,” he said, stepping up beside me.

I sighed, tilting my head up to the stars. “Me neither.”

“Are you feeling okay?”

“A bit sore, but that comes with the game. It’s been a long day.”

“I hate that you got hurt, but I love having you back here.” Johnny was quiet for a beat before adding, “You belong here, Reba. You always did.”

I swallowed hard, the warmth of the firelight no match for the heat in his gaze. Maybe, just maybe, he was right. “There is something special about this ranch. I travel a lot and I’ve seen a lot of ranch families, but Mac’s place has always felt a bit more like home.”

“It wouldn’t take much to get your RV and things down here. I can send some guys back to Rawhide.”

“I don’t know, Johnny, that’s a lot to commit to right now. It’s old as hell and it’s been sitting up at Rawhide since I parked it there before heading out to the B&B,

what if it gives them trouble? You know that hitch is a pain in the ass.”

“I get it.” He sighed deeply before turning out to gaze at the pasture. “Besides, I’d rather keep you at my place than your own.”

“You say things like that and I don’t know what to do with it.”

“You know what to do, Reba. You just need to come around to it. I’ll give you time, but I won’t give up.”

He turned to face me and hooked his finger through the belt loop on my jeans. My heart raced and I couldn’t stop the overwhelming feeling that something very wrong, or very right, was about to happen, again. Ever since he’d kissed me in the pasture, I couldn’t look at him the same way. It was getting harder and harder to deny what was between us, so when Johnny lifted his hat and tilted his head, I gave in. His lips were on mine, light as a feather, before he pulled away and walked back toward the fire.

My face burned with excitement. Maybe it was frustration I didn’t know. The only thing I did know was that I was in a world of trouble and the only person to blame was myself.

### CHAPTER 10

Johnny

The sound of Jax's cry sliced through the late afternoon air like a knife, and my heart damn near stopped. I was halfway across the pasture when I saw him on the ground near the fence, his little body curled in on itself, his hand clutching his knee. Reba was already there, dropping to her knees beside him, her face pale as she pushed his hair back.

"Jax, baby, talk to me," she pleaded, her voice thin with panic as I ran up.

I slid to a stop and dropped down beside them, scanning him over. "What happened?"

"He was climbing the fence," Reba said, her voice strained. "He slipped and landed wrong."

Jax sniffled, his big, watery eyes looking up at me. "I'm okay, Papa. It just hurts."

I exhaled slowly, forcing myself to stay calm for him. "Let me see, bud."

Carefully, I pried his little fingers away from his knee. His jeans were torn and I could tell it was already bleeding, but from the small bit I could see, I was certain nothing was broken considering he stretched it out for me to take a look. Still, the sight of his pain did something fierce to me. I scooped him up into my arms, holding him close as his little hands clung to my neck.

“You’re gonna be just fine,” I murmured against his hair. “Toughest cowboy I know.”

Jax let out a shaky breath, nodding. “It stings.”

“I know, buddy. We’ll get you out of these jeans and get you cleaned up.”

I glanced at Reba, expecting to see relief, but instead, she looked... rattled. More than rattled. Her hands were shaking as she stood, brushing the dirt off her jeans. It looked like she was mumbling to herself as she looked down at her shaky hands, then wiped them on the denim and looked up at me with a tight nod. I didn’t know what to make of it all, but I had Jax to handle first.

Back at the house, I got him changed into a pair of shorts then sat him on the counter in the kitchen while Reba gathered the first aid kit. Her movements were still stiff, her jaw tight.

“Reba,” I said softly, but she didn’t look at me. She just focused on cleaning up Jax’s knee, her fingers gentle but trembling.

Jax, oblivious to the tension, grinned up at her. “Ms. Reba, you take care of me real good.”

Reba froze. Just for a second. Then she gave him a wobbly smile. “That’s what I’m here for, kid.”

But the way she said it just didn’t sit right. Like she was trying to convince herself instead of Jax. I cleared my throat, trying to ease the thick tension in the air, but it did no good. I stepped aside as Reba bandaged him up, got him an ice pack, and kissed his forehead before stepping away.

“Hey, bud, why don’t you go pick out a movie? I’ll be there in a minute.”

Jax nodded enthusiastically as I helped him off the counter, limping a little, but determined. As soon as he was out of earshot, I turned back to Reba, who was already moving toward the door.

“Reba,” I said, a warning in my tone.

“I need air,” she muttered, but I wasn’t letting her go that easy.

“You’re running.”

“I’m not running.”

I crossed the kitchen, stepping into her space. “Then look at me.”

She hesitated before finally turning, and damn if the look in her eyes didn’t cut me deep.

“I need a minute. I’ll come back. Just give me some damn space for once.”

Her voice was low, but I still glanced over to Jax. I didn’t want him to see us argue. Small arguments and me giving her a hard time was one thing, but this felt different. Much more serious than anything we had experienced before. I gave her a nod and let her walk out the front door. Closing it softly behind her.

“Papa, isn’t Ms. Reba going to watch the movie?”

“Yeah, bud. She’ll be back soon. She just wants to clean up out back first.”

“I messed her day up, didn’t I?” his disappointed voice cut through me just as bad as



the fear in Reba's eyes.

"No, Jax, you didn't mess anything up."

"Do you think she'll let me work with her and the horses again tomorrow?"

"Probably. She loves having you with her, you know that."

"But not when I get hurt."

"We are ranch men, remember? We get hurt. That's just how it is. Reba knows that. She's seen me get bucked off a ton of bulls and now she's seen you get hurt for the first time. It won't be the last and she knows that. She just needs a minute to clean up and she will be back."

The movie started, and I caught myself staring at my phone, watching the minutes go by, hoping for a text or a call. Some inclination that she hadn't just run off and left us. She could, there was no question about that. The guest house had been empty for days, but she was still here. Truth was, she could even leave the ranch if she wanted. She could head back to Rawhide to get the rest of her things and head off to her next job. She didn't need us in the same way we needed her, and that reality was setting in.

About forty minutes later, the front door opened. Jax was so mesmerized by the movie he didn't even notice. She looked over at me as she passed through the living room. Her face was flushed, as if she had been crying and her hair had come loose from the braid it was in. I desperately wanted to go to her, but I didn't want to worry Jax.

When the movie finally finished, he headed off to his room to shower, and I went to check on Reba.

“Knock, knock?” I said as I pushed open her semi-closed door.

“Is the movie over?” she asked as I walked in and froze at the sight of her packing one of her suitcases.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting ready to leave.”

“When are you planning to do that?”

“In the morning, time to move on.”

“So just like that, you are going to give up?”

“Give up? Johnny, today just proved what I already knew. I don’t belong here. You and Jax, you’re better off without me. I’m getting in the way of your normal lives.”

I let out a sharp breath, dragging a hand through my hair. “You really believe that?”

She folded her arms tightly across her chest. “I can’t stand the thought of something happening to him and me not knowing what to do. I panicked, Johnny. I froze. That’s not what he needs.”

I stepped closer, keeping my voice firm but gentle. “You didn’t freeze. You were right there with him. You were scared, but that’s because you care.”

She shook her head, looking away. “I shouldn’t be this scared. I shouldn’t feel this much.”

I reached for her hand, threading my fingers through hers. “Why shouldn’t you?”

Because it makes it harder to leave? He would be devastated. So would I.”

Her breath caught, and I knew I’d hit a nerve.

I reached a hand out for her. “Reba, Jax loves you. You make him feel safe and you love him too. That’s not something you can fake.”

Tears welled in her eyes, and she tried to pull away, but I held firm. “Stay.”

She swallowed hard. “I don’t know how.”

I cupped her face, my thumb brushing away a tear. “Then let us show you.”

She let out a shaky breath, her eyes searching mine for something, maybe an escape, maybe a reason to stay. And then, finally, she nodded.

I pulled her into my arms, holding her tight. “Good. Because I don’t plan on letting you go. Now get ready for dinner. It will be time to eat soon.”

I walked out of her room and pulled the door closed behind me. My heart was racing in my chest and I was lightheaded. I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes. The thought of her leaving was like a knife cutting through me. I knew I wanted this, I wanted her, but hell, why did life always need to be so hard? Jax was my entire world and Reba was infiltrating every aspect of it without even realizing it. The idea of her staying was starting to be as scary as the idea of her leaving. What if she was scared off again? Parenting was hard, relationships were even harder. She needed to trust me and I felt like that was still so far off. I needed to be better, to do more somehow to show her I could be there for her no matter what. I’d figure out a way. I had no choice because it was starting to sink in that life without her wouldn’t be any life at all.

### CHAPTER 11

Reba

Dinner was quieter than normal. I ignored Johnny the best I could without raising suspicion from Jax. I'd agreed to stay, but the pull to leave was still there and Johnny seemed frustrated with everything that had happened. Luckily, Jax was young enough to ignore the tension between me and his father and focused on the pizza we made and telling me all about his adventures. I listened the best I could considering what happened today kept replaying in my head along with the dread of ever leaving him again. Jax, not Johnny. It would be easy to convince myself to leave Johnny, but every moment I spent with Jax, made it harder and harder to leave. Johnny knew that too and wielded it as the rusty sword it was.

I knew the guest house was empty. The people Mac had staying left days ago. He'd texted me and told me, but I'd ignored the text which was probably why he'd shown up. I couldn't even pull myself away from their house and stay somewhere else. How the hell was I ever going to leave all together? Earlier, I was convinced that was the only way forward. To run again felt right, but now sitting here with them, I hated the thought of it. Damn, I was such a mess lately.

"Ms. Reba, did you hear me?"

"I'm sorry, bud, can you say that again?"

"After dishes, can we read the rest of my book?"

“Of course, let’s help your papa clean up and then we will finish it up tonight.”

Not even an hour later, I was lying in Jax’s bed with him asleep in the crook of my arm as I read. It was so peaceful and perfect I didn’t even notice Johnny at the door watching us until he spoke.

“He’s out cold, you know.”

“Yeah, but I want to see what happens next.”

Johnny smiled and came into the room, pulling Jax’s little body from me and tucking him in properly before reaching for the book and placing it on the nightstand.

“Come with me, Reba. We need to talk.”

The way he reached a hand out for me, expecting me to follow, caused more conflict inside me. I wanted to go, I wanted to hear him out, but I was so scared of getting hurt.

“It’s okay. Really.”

At his reassurance, I placed my hand in his and he didn’t let go. Instead, he led me down the hallway and to the one door I hadn’t attempted to open. The door to his room. He swung it open and I saw a large wooden poster bed took up most of the room with bedding so dark blue it nearly looked black. In the corner was a desk and in the other two chairs and a sitting table.

“Have a drink with me,” he said, pulling me further into the room and gesturing to one of the chairs.

“What’s wrong with the living room?”

“I don’t want to wake up Jax.”

“He sleeps like a log.”

Johnny smirked. “Okay, maybe I just want a home-court advantage.”

“You have that already. I mean I’m staying at your house.”

“It’s not really my house anymore. It’s ours. You belong here and you know it. The way you move through every space with my son, making it more of a home than it has ever been, makes it almost more yours than mine and you can’t fight me on that. This is the one place I’ve wanted you in since you got here, so tonight this is where we’ll talk.”

As he spoke, he opened a bottle of dark red wine that I hadn’t even noticed when we’d first come in. I didn’t bother arguing with him this time because the truth was, he was right. It wasn’t intentional, but I had made this my home. It wasn’t hard, everything here just felt right.

I took a sip of the wine he handed me. “So, what do you want to talk about?”

“I messed things up again today. I don’t know what it is about you, Reba, but I’m always stepping in horseshit. I can’t seem to get it right and I really can’t afford to fuck this up. I don’t want you to leave and I don’t think you want to either.”

“I do. I can’t stay here forever.”

“If you want to leave so badly then why haven’t you moved into the guest house?”

“You know it’s empty?”

“Reba, I’m the foreman. I know everything that happens here.”

“I can leave in the morning if that’s what you want.”

“It’s not! Dammit, Reba, you’re so frustrating.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Watching Johnny lose his patience had always been one of my favorite things. It was rare when he got worked up, but I could certainly do it with ease.

“Then tell me what you want.”

“Honestly, I want to tie your ass to my bed and tease the fuck out of you until you are begging me for release. I want to wake up in the morning with you in my arms, and I want everything I did wrong over the years to go away.”

“Well, that won’t happen.”

“Which part?”

“You can’t change the past.”

“Maybe not, but I can explain things better. Reba, you meant the world to me, and when Trina left, I took advantage of you. I wanted something between us to happen for years, but I let my guilt and my need for you to help me with my son keep that from happening. I was convinced if I asked you out you’d just think I was looking for a mom for Jax so I never did it. Then one night you finally looked at me the way I had prayed you would and I made my move. Sloppy drunk? Yeah. But I had you and for the first time, everything felt right. When we woke up the next morning, I was swimming in liquor, my head was pounding and you were lying in my arms. Relief and sadness took over because I knew you would run on me. You weren’t ready to be

a mom, fuck I wasn't ready to be a dad but I was and I didn't want to tie you down. When you got up and I saw the blood, I realized what had happened. Knowing I took something so precious from you nearly killed me. I thought for sure I'd lose you and I did."

"You didn't take anything from me, Johnny, I gave something to you and you threw it in my face. You had no right to decide what I was ready for. I loved that kid more than anything. Losing you as a friend was hard, sure, but not seeing Jax for a year after that was worse. I stayed in touch with your mom just so I could hear how he was doing. I adored him and back then I adored you, but it all went to shit. I'd rather stay friends and keep him in my life than have to do all that again."

"I won't let us mess it up. You are the one for me, Reba, I know you are."

"You haven't even asked if I want this? If I want you."

"Because I know you do. If I hadn't fucked up, our lives would be different. You'd already be here with me and Jax. You'd be my wife and by my side for every milestone he hit. We would be the family we were always meant to be. I can't let you go again."

He stood and reached for my hands, pulling me into his arms. I wish I could blame it on the few sips of wine I'd had, but I couldn't. His words broke through something deep inside me, so when he pulled my arms up over his shoulders and lowered his lips to mine, I let him kiss me without a fight. When I pressed myself against him and felt his hard cock between us, I couldn't help but let out a little moan, and when he lifted me off my feet and carried me to his bed I didn't push him away as he covered my body with his.

"Tell me you want this, Reba. Please."



Fuck, I wanted this but to admit it seemed so hard. I looked up at the man who held a place in my heart. No matter how far I ran, he was always there and yet still I was so worried everything would go wrong.

“I’m scared.”

“I know you are. I know I never gave you a chance to feel safe with me, but I’ll do everything I can to prove to you that you are.”

I nodded, and he wiped a tear from my face that I didn’t even know was there. Leaning over, he kissed me again, softly this time and it broke me.

“I want this, Johnny, I want you and Jax and everything that comes along with it. Just don’t make me regret it.”

His smile was so big it made me laugh.

“Mine,” he said as he lowered his head and placed his lips on my neck. Kissing and sucking at that tender flesh that always made me weak. I closed my eyes and gave in to the sensations all around me. The soft feel of the comforter beneath me. The strength and weight of the man above me, the smell of his cologne and the taste of his lips sent me to a place that I desired more than anything else.

He moved slowly, undressing me carefully and taking me in. I was certainly thicker than I’d been when I was younger, and he seemed damn pleased with my curves. His fingers ran over my skin followed by feather-like kisses that felt amazing. I wasn’t a virgin anymore. I’d given that to him and moved on with my life. But never had I felt so cherished as I did in that moment.

Johnny pulled away and stood to undress. Watching him from where I was in his bed was so reminiscent of our past it felt as if fate had given us a do over, a way to make

things right again and that's what we did.

He pulled out condoms, a bottle of lube, and rope. Which made me laugh.

“What's that for?”

“Just in case you try to run on me again. Now, come here, my Crazy Rider.”

His fingers slid between my legs and circled my clit softly before delving deep inside me. He swirled his finger, thrusting it as my hips pressed forward, looking for more. He held me there, teasing me as he explored everything about me. When his mouth came over my breast and bit my nipple, I cried out in pleasure.

“Do you like that, Reba? A little pain with your pleasure.”

“Yes. Please.” I panted as my mind turned to mush and my body cried out for him.

“Will you come for me? Let me watch you. My biggest regret is not being able to remember what you looked like, as you are overwhelmed with arousal.”

His words, his movements, it was all too much. I'd give this man anything he asked for, and he already knew that. He nipped at my neck and my breasts as the excitement in me rose. My hips ground into him, pressing my clit against the palm of his hand as his fingers thrust deep inside me. I cried out before I even realized it. He played my body as if he had done so a million times before. I couldn't stop it even if I wanted to, and fuck, I didn't want to. I wanted everything he was giving me, everything he promised and when my body gave in and my mind cleared, Johnny was the only thing I could see and for that I was grateful.

### CHAPTER 12

Johnny

She was so fucking gorgeous. Everything I knew she would be. I wasn't lying when I told her I hated that I couldn't remember her coming for me.

When we'd awakened the next morning after that night years ago, there had been bits and pieces that flashed through my mind. I'd set us up for complete failure. We were drunk, more than normal even. If we hadn't been, I never would have taken the risk of being turned down. When she'd agreed, and gave in to our first kiss, my heart had soared but my mind argued. The liquor had worked to my advantage. I'd been able to ignore my conscience but that meant she'd been able to ignore hers as well.

Reba had been my everything back then. It killed me that I'd lost her. I'd been young and stupid but I'd known better when it came to her which made it all so much harder. Now with her lying in my arms and her body shaking with pleasure, I knew how much I had completely fucked us. If I had done things differently, this moment right here would be something I could have whenever I wanted. She wouldn't have missed years of Jax's life, she would be part of us and we would give her everything.

When the tension slid from her body, she opened her eyes and smiled at me.

"You are beautiful," I said, placing a kiss on the tip of her nose.

All she did was smile, and I got lost in the face of a woman I'd spent the better part of my life pining over.

“I want more,” she said with a wink as she carefully moved and reached across me for the condoms, holding them up in front of me. “Let’s use these for now.”

“I’ll make appointments for us to get tested in the morning because fuck if I don’t want to feel all of you gripping my dick.”

She laughed again and opened one, slowly rolling it over my already hard cock. She straddled my thighs as she reached for the lube, opening it and coating my cock with it while I tried to distract her by lightly circling her clit with my index finger.

“What do you think you are doing?”

“Playing.”

“With fire?”

“Maybe. Depends on what happens if I do this.” I slipped my fingers into her again and she cried out, leaning forward to brace herself on my chest.

“Fuck, Johnny. I’m still so sensitive. It’s too much.”

“No, it’s not. You said you want more. Now take it,” I said with a smile I knew she couldn’t deny.

I pulled my fingers from inside her and lifted her slightly, lining her up with the head of my cock as she got herself balanced. With her hands on my chest, she slowly lowered herself onto my cock and it was utter ecstasy.

“Damn, Reba, you feel so good.”

She smiled down at me and rocked her hips forward as I pressed up inside of her. She

looked down at me as I gave her all of me. Although it didn't feel like giving anything up and, in that moment, I realized she'd always had me. My best friend, the woman who stepped in and cared for my son when I was lost and confused and the woman who I'd never let go again.

I reached between us and applied pressure to her clit. It was easier to figure out what she needed than I thought it would be. I'd listen to anything she'd ask, but the way her expressions changed and her body responded made it clear.

"I'm not going to last, Johnny, I just don't think I can."

"It's okay, Reba, let go. I've got you."

Her smile was genuine, and she never broke eye contact with me. As her hips shifted, I pressed deeper and deeper inside of her. Nothing was hurried or rushed; it was a moment of connection I'd never had with anyone else and it was one I would cherish for the rest of my life. She cried out her release just as I felt that burning tingle start to run through my body. She collapsed on top of me and I wrapped my arms around her just as that final pull shot me off into pure pleasure and I filled my girl with everything I had to give.

I held her for as long as I could before I had to handle the condom and get us both cleaned up. Pulling away from her made me feel like there was something more in that gap than just physical space. When I stepped out of the bathroom, I found her sitting on the edge of my bed, pulling her clothes back on.

"Where are you going?"

"Back to my room."

"Why?"

She looked up at me with a glint in her eye that made me uncomfortable. “Because, Johnny, I can’t stay here.”

I reached over and opened the dresser next to me and pulled on a pair of gym shorts before sitting down next to her. I ran my finger over her chin, making her face me. “You can and you will.”

“Remember when you said you made a mistake all those years ago? Maybe I’m the one who feels like we did this time. I don’t know what I was thinking, but this shouldn’t have happened.”

“Yes, it should have. That’s why it did. Reba, I wasn’t lying. You are it for me. I told you I’d do everything I could to get you to forgive me and the plan wasn’t to just fuck you and let you walk away again. I suck at communicating. That much is glaringly obvious, so I’ll just say it as it is. I don’t want you to leave. I never wanted you to leave last time. You are it for me, forever. But only if you’ll have me.”

She shook her head slightly. “Forever? What does that even mean?”

“Me, you, Jax and however many other babies you’ll give me. When you were younger, you always wanted a big family. I’ll give you that. Hell, Reba, I want to move you in here for good, marry you, convince you to stay, but as much as I kid, I won’t tie you down. It’s taken me longer than it took those wild horses to get your trust, but I don’t care. I’ll keep working for it.”

I leaned forward and placed my forehead against hers. Tears were running down her face but she was smiling. “I love you, Reba. You’re my crazy rider girl and the one who has always been there for me even when you weren’t. You left physically, but you’ve always been in my heart.”

She pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “And you said you’re bad at communicating.”

I couldn't help but laugh at that. "Just tell me what you need."

She reached up and placed her hand over my heart. "This."

"You have it."

"And maybe a little of this," she said, reaching for my cock. "Oh and some of that rope wouldn't hurt either."

"It's all yours, but I'm the one doing the tying, right? For some reason, I'm not sure I'd trust you with me tied up."

She laughed. "Yeah, you do the tying."

"Deal. Now take all those clothes back off and come here. I want to sleep with you in my arms."

"What about Jax?"

"He'll be fine. We'll get up before him in the morning and have a talk."

"Isn't it a little soon for that?"

"I don't think so. You're my forever and if anyone has noticed, it's my son. He's smitten with his Ms. Reba and I'm certain he will love it even more if he gets to call you mom one day."

"Mom."

"Yeah, sounds good, doesn't it? Kind of like it was always meant to be."

“Maybe it was.”

She leaned over me and reached for the length of rope on the nightstand. “Now, what are we going to do with this?”

“It depends. What would you like me to do with it?”

“I’ve heard of rope play, or Shibari, they call it. Is that what you do with this?”

“It is. I’ve been learning for some time now. One of the guys is into it, but I’ve only ever practiced on myself.”

“Really?”

“Yup, he taught me some different ties with his partner. It’s beautiful really and seems to come naturally to me.”

“Years of rope tying calves hasn’t hurt any I’m sure.”

“True, but it would require a lot of trust on your part. I have a pair of shears and a bunch more rope. There are simple things like chest harnesses I could put on you that you could just wear for me, or for you even. I’ve heard a lot of people like the pressure it provides.”

I reached for my phone and pulled up some pictures of Evan and his partner.

“Wow, you know how to do that?”

“I do.”

“You’re right, it’s kind of amazing.”



“Is that something you’d like to try?”

Her eyes widened as she nodded her head. “Yes, yes, I would.”

“So I would like to discuss a few things first. We should have a safe word, but not only a word, a motion too, in case you can’t speak. Have you heard about that before?”

“Sure. I say stop and you stop everything, right?”

“Yes, if you want ‘stop’ to be the word, but sometimes it’s fun to say stop, so many couples pick a different word, or they use numbers or a green-light system. And sometimes, you might not be able to speak so a motion, such as tapping my shoulder three times if it’s in reach would be act as a safe word as well.

“Sweetbreads.”

“Huh?”

“I want that to be my word. Do you get one too?”

I laughed. “Yep, sweetbreads works for me too. I don’t think we would accidentally say it while we were in a scene.”

“Probably not.”

“So if I have you tied up and you say it, I will immediately cut you free. Everything will stop, but we will also talk through it all after. I want to learn your limits by talking about them, but if we get close to something, I want to know that too.”

“Makes sense, and three taps works for a motion.”

“So, it works the same way. Let’s say I have you gagged—”

“Wait, what?”

I laughed at the look of shock on her face, “Only if you consent of course. Let’s say you agree to me gagging you and you want the scene to stop. With three taps, anywhere you can reach I will immediately stop everything and we will talk. Deal?”

“Deal.”

We spent the rest of the night talking through a million things different dynamics may encounter. At one point I pulled up a yes, no, maybe checklist and we went through that until we started to fall asleep. My little rider thought she liked pain so we’d explore that, but more importantly, the conversation brought us to a place of trust and learning that we just didn’t have before.

Reba was desperate to let go, give up control, and stop feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders. She’d gotten into rodeo because her older brother had been. When he retired, she’d just never gone home. She’d stayed with us and stayed in charge of everything. I could certainly understand that kind of pressure, and if there was a way I could alleviate some of it for her now, I would. This woman meant the world to me, and I never wanted her to forget that.

Morning came far too soon. I was barely awake when I felt Reba pulling away from me.

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t want Jax to find me here,” she said as she stumbled around the room, trying to gather her things in the dark.

“I get that, but isn’t it too early to be running off?”

She stood straight and stared daggers into me. “I’m not running.”

“Okay,” I said with a laugh, “Not running, got it.”

“I just want to get to my room and shower. Once I’m dressed for the day, I can think straight. We aren’t going to tell him, are we? Never mind, we’ll figure that out later. I need coffee. But what if we don’t tell him and he senses something is different between us? No, no, I can’t think about that right now.”

“Reba.”

“What?”

“Come here.”

“I told you I have to go.”

I sat up and reached for her, pulling her against me in the bed. “I know you are nervous. Just take a deep breath.”

Once I felt her settle into my arms, I placed a kiss on the side of her head. “Jax loves you. He will be over the moon that we are together. You know that.”

“Yeah, but what if something goes wrong and I have to leave again? That wouldn’t be fair to him.”

“First, nothing will happen and second, if it does, then we will work through it all. Other than my mother, you’ve been the most consistent woman in his life.”

“I’ve been gone for years, Johnny.”

“Not in his memory. We talked about his Ms. Reba all the time. You’re his favorite, so it wouldn’t be fair to keep this from him.”

She nodded, not fully convinced. “I still don’t want him catching me in here.”

“Fine, go shower. I’ll put some coffee on.”

Sometime later I was in the kitchen still in a pair of sweatpants I’d hastily pulled on and Reba surfaced fully dressed and ready for the day, reaching for the cup of coffee I held out to her. She took a sip and the sigh she let out went straight to my cock. I couldn’t help myself. I pulled her to me and covered her lips with mine only to hear the one sound that made me smile and her drop her cup of hot coffee, which managed to cover the entire oven and two cabinets.

“Yeah!” Jax’s little voice ricocheted through the house as he screamed his excitement at the sight in front of him. I kept laughing as I reached for a towel for the coffee and Reba was trying to wipe my kisses off her mouth as if Jax hadn’t just caught us making out.

“This is the best day ever!” Jax exclaimed, marching toward us, only to be stopped by Reba who didn’t want him to get cut on the broken coffee cup. “Ms. Reba, are you going to marry my papa now?”

Reba choked on what could only be her own spit as she shot me a dirty look. “Listen, buddy. Sometimes adults do things like kiss when they are just friends.”

“No, they don’t. Don’t lie to my boy,” I said with a smile. “Listen, bud, Ms. Reba and I are going to date for a while, okay? Then when she’s ready, I’ll ask her to marry me, but not one day before.”

Jax started jumping up and down as Reba took a swat at me, then covered her face with her hands as I pulled her in for a hug.

“At least we don’t have to hide now.”

“No, ma’am, we sure don’t. We’ve been caught by the authorities.”

We both laughed as Jax ran around the house as if he had just won the golden buckle at the rodeo and I turned to start breakfast. Up until this point, things had felt good. Normal really, but now everything we had was a whole new level of special.

### CHAPTER 13

Reba

Jax was staying the night at the big house with Mac and Athena's kids and I was tied to our bed. The last few months had been a wild ride of learning more about kink and BDSM than I ever thought I would need to know. There was a club in New York City that Johnny had taken me to. We found mentors there who helped us move even further down the road we had traveled on our own, and I was amazed by the ongoing support of the community. We never played there, but we took classes and met with the people who were helping us. It was wonderful really. What I wasn't amazed by was my current punishment that was being delivered by the man I loved. Orgasm denial. It was absolute hell, and I loved every bit of it.

"Tell me, Crazy Rider, why are you tied up and not allowed to come?"

"Because I was disrespectful."

"You were intentionally disrespectful. It wasn't an accident, it wasn't uncalled for, but it was disrespect all the same. You know it and I know it. You had planned for this didn't you?"

I couldn't help the smirk that came over me. "It's possible."

The sound of the vibrator made me cringe. I knew what was coming and fuck was I here for it. Johnny's rope skills had advanced at an alarming rate. Many nights I wandered around our room in nothing but rope and he loved it. Tonight, as he placed

the vibrator between my legs and promptly pulled it away, I hated it. I grit my teeth and closed my eyes, trying to think of anything but coming. Because if I did, then my backside would pay the price.

“God, you are so fucking gorgeous when you are trying to please me.”

I opened my eyes and looked up at him. “I want you to be pleased with me, Sir.”

The addition of an occasional honorific always made him happy. We hadn’t set anything formal in place, but I was learning what he liked as much as he was learning what I liked.

He lifted my ass and slipped the rope behind my back before working on a design that went around my thighs to hold the vibrator from hell in place.

“How long?”

“Excuse me?”

“How long, Sir?”

“At least twenty minutes. I want to watch you squirm,” he said as he secured the last knot and flipped on the vibrator.

This was far worse than the occasional, uneven pulses he would tease me with. This was constant pressure and vibration directly on my clit and I knew that I had to fight not to come unless I was ready for a proper beating and I wasn’t. Not yet anyway.

Johnny pulled a chair over to the end of the bed and sat down to watch the show. I pulled against my restraints, even though I didn’t want to. Every time I did, the vibrator pressed into me even more but in my rattled mind, I thought there was a way

to break free.

“You are evil,” I bit out, hearing the uncontrolled frustration in my voice.

“I am nothing of the sort. You asked for this. I’m just enjoying the show.”

He pulled his cock from his shorts and I bit my lip as he pumped his fist over it, teasing me even more.

“Do you want this?”

“You know I do. Why bother asking?”

My frustration was turning into anger and all he did was laugh. I was going to kick his ass when he let me free. I zoned off watching him, biting my lip in hopes that the pain would stop the edging but it didn’t. It just made it harder. I gasped when I almost lost control and his eyes went wide.

“Ah, ah, ah, not yet,” he said as he held up his phone, showing me the damn timer he’d set.

“Maybe we can negotiate?” I cried out."

“Mid scene? You know the rules against that. Do you need your safe word?”

I paused, thinking about what would happen and if I really needed it all to stop. “No.”

Johnny stood and came to my side of the bed, sitting next to me. “Not that I want to push you too far, but I do want to push you. Remember, at any time you can stop everything.”



“I know.”

“Good, then I have something special for you.”

I watched as he reached into the nightstand and pulled out a small black velvet bag. He reached inside and pulled out two clips with silicone-covered tips.

“These are for my girls,” he said, leaning over and covering my nipple with his mouth and sucking hard until it came to a point. “I can tighten them if we need to, but for now I want you to get used to the feel of it.”

I watched as best I could, ignoring the buzzing between my legs as he opened the clasp and placed it perfectly in place. Pain shot through me, causing my hips to buck and my chest to raise, only making the entire situation I was in worse.

“You are a sadist, you know that?”

“Yes, but you love it,” he said before pinching my other side and securing the second nipple clamp there. I was done for. There was no possibility of me being able to hold off now. The intensity of my situation was overwhelming, and I just cried out and let go. Waves rolled through my body as I came harder than I had in my entire life. The anger and frustration slid away as I came down and Johnny flipped off the vibrator.

“You deserve a spanking, but I need to feel you come around my cock first.”

I couldn’t move, I could barely hear him as he untied me and ran his hands over my arms and wrists to make sure nothing hurt. He placed a pile of pillows in the center of the bed and carefully placed me on them.

His fingers slid through my folds. “You are so wet, and so ready for me. Beautiful, just beautiful.”

I rested my head on the comforter and took in our combined scent left behind from nights of sleeping here next to him. It calmed me in the same way it always did. As I closed my eyes, I felt a gentle kiss on my back and Johnny's cock press slowly into me.

"Fuck, Reba. You feel so good."

His hands shifted to my hips, and I relaxed, giving in to whatever it was he saw fit. Giving in and letting go were some of the hardest things I'd had to learn. I wanted it, but it went against my instincts. Johnny's movements were steady, and I could feel the pleasure in my body quickly returning as the pace he set was just enough for me to zone in on that burning ember.

"I want you to come, Crazy Rider. I want to feel you clench my cock tightly inside you."

His hand moved over my ass and back around my hip before sliding around the front of me and his fingers grazed my clit.

"Fuck," I groaned as he worked at that small cluster of nerves while thrusting deep inside me. The sensations took over and before I knew it, I was at the edge of the cliff that I loved to jump off, so I let go just as I felt Johnny do the same. His body covered mine and his arms wrapped around me.

"And to think, you still get a spanking tonight."

I couldn't help but laugh and snuggle deeper into his arms as he pulled me to him and laid on his side.

"I love you," I whispered, taking the risk that I knew there was no real danger in. I had heard him say it a million times as I dozed off at night. He'd say it when he

thought I was asleep, or he thought I couldn't hear, but I never let him know I heard and I never responded.

"Finally."

"What?"

"I've been waiting for that."

"What do you mean, you've been waiting?"

"I know you've heard me, but I didn't want to rush you. I think I've always loved you, Reba, it just took me some time to realize that's what it was. I'm just happy you finally feel the same."

I laughed. "You act like we've been together for years rather than just a few months."

"I've spent most of my life missing you, so yeah, I guess it feels like years."

"So now that you know I love you, does that mean I don't get punished?"

"Oh no, my love. You are certainly getting spanked. Come here and let me show you how much you can enjoy it."

Johnny sat up and pulled me over onto his lap. At least it was going to be a bare-handed beating tonight and not a flogging. I'm not sure I could stand at the cross for one. My legs felt like mush. The sting of the first hit took me by surprise and I let out a scream.

"One."

“Wait, what about determining how many?”

“Tonight I choose. You misbehaved twice today. Two.”

I smiled at the dominance that shone through his nice-guy exterior. Johnny was the perfect balance of naughty and nice that I needed, and he knew how much I loved it.

“Three. Four.” His voice ran through our room and sent chills down my spine. “Five. Six.”

Those last two were further down, almost at the top of my thighs, “Seven.”

It was torture, not the pain, that felt amazing, but the fact that he wouldn’t just pick a rhythm and stick to it. His hand caressed my ass and just as I was starting to relax, thinking maybe he was done, he hit me again.

“Eight. Nine. Ten.”

The last one was harder than all of them. I was balancing between a sweet numbness and stinging pain and I loved it. He tickled me with his fingers, sliding between my ass cheeks and pressing on the tight spot he always teased me about.

“Someday soon.”

### CHAPTER 14

Reba

“I have a surprise for you.” Johnny said while lying in bed on a regular Thursday night.

“Oh yeah? What kind of surprise?”

“The kind that has my mom showing up tomorrow morning so we can fly back to Rawhide Ranch.”

“What? Why?”

His grin widened. “Because there is a whole side of the Ranch that we never got a chance to spend time at.”

“The Dungeon?”

“You got it.”

We had talked about it on and off over the last few weeks, but never in a million years did I think that he would actually take me. I mean, he even told me he was going to send one of the guys up to drive my truck and camper back.

“Wait, have you been planning this all along?”

“Maybe,” he said with a shit-eating grin on his face. “I mean it's something that I've wanted to do with you. I just had a feeling that unless I made all the arrangements and surprised you with the trip, we'd never make it.”

“That's true. I always feel like we have so much going on.”

“We do, but the time we spend together is equally important. You've wanted to experiment with some voyeurism and I figured that would be the perfect place. The time we spent at The Pendulum has been great but we would need to be members there and the process is long. We can start it when we get home now that we're done with the mentorship program. I called and talked to Derek at Rawhide. As long as we are guests at the ranch, we have access to the Dungeon. I also spoke with Drake who assured me I could even get some additional tips on the Shibari you so love. So that's where we are headed in the morning.”

The excitement of the flight and drive out to Rawhide made me anxious as hell. I loved staying there. The resort was amazing, but I had never ventured my way down to the Dungeon. The truth was I'd never really known if it was something I was ready for. But the more Johnny and I explored what we liked and didn't like about the world of BDSM, the more I'd thought about coming back.

The car pulled up to the expansive three-story building. We climbed the steps to the front porch and made our way into the lobby through a massive set of double doors. It was huge but cozy in a strange but familiar way. When I'd come here for work, the staff, the guest, the atmosphere had made this building feel more like an actual log-cabin house than a resort, but now that I had made a home with Johnny and Jax, this just felt like a really nice place to vacation.

“Fancy seeing you all back so soon,” Luna said as we approached the front desk. “I thought I saw your names on a reservation, but I was surprised since I heard you headed back to New York. How are you feeling, Reba?”

“Good as new,” I said, rubbing my side as the memories of my injury still felt a little too close.

“Good to hear. I’ve got you all set. You’re in room 106 and Moses will make sure all your bags are delivered there.”

“Thanks, Luna. It’s good to see you,” Johnny said before taking my hand and leading me away. “Are you hungry?”

“No, I’m good actually. I’d love to wander around a bit. It feels so different being here as a guest who’s on vacation and not someone who is up here to work.”

“They didn’t treat you as a guest before?”

“Of course they did, but my mind was set on other things. I never really got to take in the beauty of this place. Most of the time, I moved in and out through the employee tunnels and never spent much time topside within the resort. I’d even wondered why Mac had booked me into the B I wanted his dominance to take away my control because control for me fed into my anxiety and I really didn’t need that right now.

When we got closer, Johnny took a seat in a cushy-looking chair that was in perfect view of the two men. One was strapped to the cross, and the other was standing behind him, whispering something into his ear as Johnny motioned for me to sit on his knee.

I complied, feeling proud that I was his submissive. He rubbed small circles into my lower back as I sat straight and took in the sight in front of me. They were beautiful. The man who was behind the other took a step back and slowly ran one of the two floggers he had in his hands over the bound man’s shoulders and down his spine.

“He’s warming him up,” Johnny whispered, not wanting to disturb their scene or the

others around us watching.

“They are beautiful.”

The man at the cross shivered as the second flogger was added to the mix, both running up and down his back, arms and legs until suddenly, without warning, his Top shifted back on his heels and swung the flogger with precision I didn't even know was possible.

The man at the cross cried out in what sounded more like surprised pleasure than pain.

“Does it hurt?”

“It can. But some, like you, my Crazy Rider, like the pain.”

A shiver ran through my body this time as Johnny's fingers slid between my waistband and my shirt, skimming over my heated skin.

“Sir?”

“Yes?”

“Will we get a chance to try that while we are here?”

“If that's something you'd like. I brought our floggers.”

I turned to him without permission and immediately turned back. “Sir, when did we get floggers?”

Johnny's deep chuckle moved through me. “It was on your list, so I've been training.



I ordered them months ago.”

“Training on who?”

“Well, that’s where it gets complicated.” My body tensed, always thinking the worst but what he said next was not what I was expecting. “You know that old teddy bear Jax left in the barn?”

“You’ve been flogging your son’s teddy bear?” I couldn’t help the laugh that escaped me.

“I watched a video, and they said that was a great way to practice, so that’s what I’ve been doing.”

“Permission to look at you and speak freely, Sir?”

“Permission granted.”

I turned in my spot. “So hold up, when are you flogging teddy bears? Are you doing this with the guys? Because I certainly haven’t seen that bear in our house.”

Johnny laughed loud enough this time to garner the attention of some of the onlookers. “No, I don’t do it with the guys. I mean, Evan may have shown me a few things, but I wanted to be ready for the weekend. Now watch the guys before you miss their entire scene.”

I turned back, my mind reeling with thoughts of Johnny flogging a teddy bear, when eventually the scene in front of me consumed all my thoughts and those of the poor little teddy were long gone.

I watched as the Top in the scene moved gracefully as he wielded both floggers. They

were thick leather and honestly were probably soft as could be when they weren't being swung at someone's bottom. The man on the cross had his head leaning against his right arm that was stretched above him. I couldn't see his face, due to the way he was restrained but by the lack of strength left in his body I could only assume he was thoroughly ravaged. His Top still didn't stop. Again and again the hits came, until finally the man let the floggers fall to his sides and stepped forward again. His body covered that of his partner. I couldn't hear what was being said but the two of them were mesmerizing. The Top ran his hands and floggers over the other and the connection between the two of them was so intense I could feel it from only a few feet away.

Johnny's arms wrapped around my waist and he pulled me to him, holding me in his arms as if I were nothing more than a child.

"Amazing isn't it? The love that radiates between the two of them?"

"It really is." I pulled my gaze away from the men and looked up at Johnny. "Thank you for this. We only just got here, but I can already tell this is a weekend I will never forget."

His lips covered mine, and I got lost in everything that was Johnny. Finally, he pulled away and I watched the two men finish cooling down and end their scene in each other's arms.

"Let's head to our room. I have something I'd like to do before we go to the lounge tonight."

The way his eyebrows rose in my direction, I wasn't the slightest bit surprised as he started stripping out of his clothes the second we made it to our suite.

"What do you think you are doing?" I asked with a laugh as I tried to take in our

amazing room. There was a beautiful king-size poster bed in the center of the room and only a few steps from the bed were glass doors that opened to a hot tub and a gorgeous view of the mountains.

“Trying to woo you with my charming ways,” he said as he jumped naked onto the bed with an arm outstretched.

“That is just so unbelievably sexy,” I said with a laugh.

“Come on, take your clothes off.”

“Fine, but only to get into that hot tub,” I said, opening the doors and stripping out of my clothes, leaving him to come find me.

I pressed the button to get the jets started and slid into the warm water as soon as I lost the last of my clothes.

“I think we need one of these for home.”

“Pretty sure we couldn’t enjoy it like this.” He sunk down and reached for me. “In fact, I’m one hundred percent certain Jax would find a way to spend every day in it if he could.”

“Good point. Maybe we don’t need one, we could just come and vacation here every few months.”

“Now that’s a plan I can get behind.”

Johnny pressed his lips to mine as I straddled his hips and wrapped my arms around his neck. I could feel him hard beneath me and I knew I was pushing it, but I just couldn’t help myself. I pulled back just enough to move my mouth to his neck. Biting

was a thing on his list but I still hadn't done it. Until now. My teeth closed over his warm skin and I closed my mouth, harder than I had planned, but damn it felt amazing. Now I knew why he liked biting my breasts so much.

Johnny's hips thrust up, and he growled, pulling me off him and picking me up, sitting me on the side of the hot tub. "Want to play rough, do you?"

Before I could do anything he took a huge bite out of my inner thigh. My hips moved forward and he took advantage of my position sliding a finger deep inside me before moving to my clit, sucking away as if I were his own personal lollipop.

I moaned louder than before without a care of who could hear me. I know Johnny mentioned the rooms were soundproof, but the reality was we were outside and anyone could walk by on this gorgeous afternoon and hear me moaning like a cat in heat.

"Fuck, you taste good."

"Fuck me, please, Sir."

Johnny straightened. The way he moved between my partner and my Sir was amazing.

"Stand up, Crazy Rider and lean over that chair."

My eyes went wide. We were really doing this. He was about to fuck me right out here on the deck. I did as he said while he went back in the room. I heard him rustling around in our bags and when he returned, he had covered himself in a condom.

His hands reached me before anything else. I loved how he always ran them over my ass, up my back and around to my breasts. The feel of his hands on me was literally

the best thing in the world.

I felt the cold lubricant he pressed inside me before lining himself up and thrusting into me.

“Fuck yeah,” I let out as I gripped the back of the chair, waiting for more.

“Do you like that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very good.”

He gripped my hips, pulling out almost completely, then slammed into me again. The movement shifted me forward, and he pulled me back to him before slowing everything down. His fingers shifted to between my folds and he circled my clit as he began the slow and steady pace he knew I loved. There were times for fast and hard but, right now, I just wanted to come and for me that was slow, steady and reliable. Which was everything Johnny could be if he wanted to.

Before long, I was lost in the movements, my pulse raced and my mind cleared as pleasure overcame me. I cried out my release and continued to scream as Johnny pumped into me, taking what he needed to reach a climax just as sweet as mine.

If this type of sexual freedom was a thing around here, I was a fan. And to think, we still hadn't even seen the Dungeon.

### CHAPTER 15

Johnny

I sat in a chair in the lounge that overlooked the play area of the Dungeon at Rawhide Ranch with my beautiful submissive on her knees beside me. When'd I'd first come here hoping to win her back, I'd never thought we would return with a dynamic like we had now. It was something that always interested me but I'd never been serious enough with a partner to put the time into finding a mentor, learning and experimenting with someone. Now as Reba knelt next to me and I stroked her hair, I realized it had never happened before because it hadn't been meant to happen with anyone else. It was only meant to happen with her.

“Are you good, Crazy Rider?”

“Yes, sir,” she said, looking up at me with all the admiration in the world. We had been here for about an hour and she watched every interaction with a level of attention even I admired.

“Would you like to go downstairs?”

“Yes, sir.”

I stood and held my hand out to help her stand. We made our way down to the main floor of the Dungeon and found a place on one of the couches. I sat, pulling her into my arms. The short skirt and bralette she had on left her soft skin easy to access, and I took advantage. As we watched a couple on the spanking bench, I ran my hands over

Reba's body, loving the feel of her in my arms and against my chest.

"I love you, you know that, right?"

"Yes, sir."

The couple in front of us were nearly finished with their scene. All around the room, others were working together to pull pleasure and pain from each other. My girl was in her glory. From the corner of my eye, I could see someone setting up a table of knives. Reba liked the pain a good spanking or bite would give her, but I had no idea what she would think of watching a knife scene.

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"Can we... can we move closer to them?" she asked, nodding her head in the direction of the couple I was watching.

"Of course."

We made our way through the room, passed couples who were mid-scene, finishing or just starting. Some made their way into private rooms while others preferred to be exhibitionists. Since we were here for my little voyeur to watch, that worked for me. We stopped a few feet away from the black-padded table that a woman was strapped down on. Next to her, the man who was clearly her Top for the night arranged a series of knives. Some were wooden, but looked as if they still had a sharp tip, others were various forms of metal, many of which looked like they had been crafted for beauty, not pain.

"Are you ready, little one?" the man asked as Reba knelt beside me again. Tonight

that seemed where she was most comfortable, and I certainly wasn't going to argue with it. I allowed her to hold my leg as I placed a hand on her shoulders and we watched.

The submissive nodded her head and vocalized her approval to begin. The man reached for one of the blunter wooden knives and ran it carefully over her skin, the flat side down, almost as if he were warming her up for an impact scene. She closed her eyes and moaned as the knife made its way over her torso. He didn't cut, didn't push too hard, but still it worked. I felt Reba's grip on my leg tighten as he reached for a metal knife, holding it to his side. We watched as their scene progressed, knives changed, pressure changed and not once did he cut his partner. It was all about sensations and adrenaline and I have to admit, even my heart was racing at certain times.

When they were nearly finished, I reached for Reba, I needed her. There was no skirting the truth of it.

"Come with me." I reached for her hand and led her out of the Dungeon completely.

Once we got outside I pressed her up against the wall inside the elevator, unable to contain myself. "I need you."

Her body pressed into mine. "Then take me, Sir."

I barely remember making our way back to our room. It was like I'd blacked out on my mission to get the love of my life under me, and Reba wasn't arguing one bit. She ran to the bed but I had other ideas.

I reached for the bag I'd brought that was filled with her favorite vibes, ropes, and toys. "Come here, Crazy Rider. I'm going to make you work for it tonight."



Her eyes lit up as she crawled off the bed, and then to my surprise she crawled to where I was standing in front of the fireplace and looked up at me waiting for my next command.

“Give me your arms.”

Reba held them out in front of her. I reached for my rope and secured her wrists together. I wanted to tease my little one, and the only way to do that was when I had her tied up. Because when I didn't, she pushed me to my limit, fighting for what she wanted. Impatient little sub that she was.

“Lean forward, my love. Get on your elbows and your knees so I can see that ass of yours clearly.”

I held up a vibrating plug that I had been wanting to try with her for the longest time. I had been training her, stretching her regularly to prepare her for this, and tonight was the night. Her eyes went wide as I reached for the lube and, even after all this time, I loved the shock she still showed me.

I allowed the lube to drip down her as I coated her entrance and the plug with more.

“Take a deep breath, Reba, and relax, letting it out slowly as I press forward.” She did as I said and let out a small cry as I pressed it inside her. “That's a good girl. You make me so proud and look at how beautiful you are.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

I helped her back to her knees and reached for the clamps, always keeping a hand on her so she knew I was there. “Are you okay, my love?”

“Yes, sir, I am more than okay.”

I smiled down at her before getting on my knees in front of her. I pulled down her bra, exposing her breasts before lowering my head and pulling her nipple into my mouth while pinching her other side to ready her for the clamps I knew she loved so much. After securing everything in place, I helped her stand.

“Do you remember what we talked about on the way here?” I asked as I reached for the riding crop with a red leather heart at the end of it.

“Yes, sir.”

“Very good then, come and stand in front of me.”

I slid off my boots and pulled my shirt off before taking a seat in a chair. Reba followed, standing only a foot or so away from me, looking gorgeous as ever with her tiny skirt just barely covering her plug and her nipples clamped and waiting. For some reason tonight, her half-dressed and pulled apart worked for me more than the idea of her completely naked. I didn't question it, only took advantage of the situation.

I ran the riding crop up and down the inside of her thighs, only glancing over her sex as I went. She twitched and twisted her hands, which were still bound by her ropes.

“Wider.”

I smiled as she moved her feet apart even more, before pulling the end of the crop up to my nose to take in her scent.

“You smell amazing, and already ready for me. Are you, Reba? Are you ready for what will come next?”

“Yes, sir. I am ready, I need this.”

I pulled the crop back and with a quick motion slapped her most delicate folds. She cried out as I repeated the movement again and again.

“More. Please, Sir. I need more.”

“Come closer.”

She moved to me and I reached out, pulling her over me so I could better reach her clit. I rubbed and pressed in the ways I knew she loved. She closed her eyes letting go into the pleasure and at the right time, and in our now very cramped space, I slapped her clit with the end of the crop.

“Fuck!” Reba cried out and I abandoned the crop all together. I untied her hands as she tried to remain standing and undid my pants, pulling her onto my cock.

“Hell, Reba, that plug makes things feel so much different.”

She rocked her hips forward, clenching my cock as she went and, in that moment, I knew there was no reason to hold off. The woman in my arms was mine, we could do this a million more times if we wanted to and tonight just might be one of those nights that we shoot for the stars.

### CHAPTER 16

Johnny

“Are you ready, buddy?”

“Mama is going to be so excited!” Jax bounced on the balls of his feet, his small fists clenched in front of him, his whole body practically vibrating with excitement.

I grinned, adjusting the collar of my shirt as I crouched down in front of him. “I think she might be on to us.” I ruffled his hair, partly to distract myself from the nerves gnawing at my gut.

Jax shook his head, completely sure of himself. “No way. Mama knows not to snoop. I told her.”

I chuckled, realizing that in his determination to keep the secret, he might’ve actually led Reba straight to the truth.

A few months ago, he’d started calling her Mama, and she’d cried like a baby when it happened. He had been devastated, thinking he’d done something wrong, but she’d pulled him into her arms, kissed the top of his head, and reassured him they were happy tears. From that day forward, she was Mama, but I knew she’d been his mama long before he ever spoke the word. Probably even before I was willing to admit it. My mom had brought over a ton of old rodeo photos one night and we’d laughed over the memories of Jax taking his first steps in the dirt and his love for fried food that occurred way before it would be recommended by a pediatrician. Reba had been his

mama even back then. None of us had realized it but, now, I was finally about to make it official.

I exhaled, glancing over at the pasture where Onex and the other horses grazed under the soft glow of the evening sun. It was the perfect spot. The place where Reba and I had spent countless hours together, rebuilding everything that had once been shattered. The ranch was huge and had a ton of picture-perfect spots, but this was the only place that felt right to ask her to be mine forever.

Jax tugged on my sleeve. “Come on, Papa! We have to get everything ready before she comes out here!”

I smirked at his urgency but nodded, pushing up from my crouch. “Alright, alright. Let’s get to work.”

We had it all planned out. I’d spent the last few weeks training Onex for this exact moment. She’d carry the ring box in a small leather pouch attached to her halter, walking straight to Reba the moment she stepped into the pasture. Then, as soon as Reba reached for it, I’d drop to one knee and hopefully get her to say yes before she had time to overthink it and before Onex lost interest and took off. It was a simple plan. Foolproof, really. At least, that’s what I thought.

Jax and I hurried to the barn, gathering everything we needed. I slipped the ring box into the pouch on Onex’s halter, patting her strong neck as I whispered, “Don’t let me down, girl.” She snorted, tossing her head like she knew exactly what was happening.

“She’s ready, Papa. Are you?”

“Guess we’ll find out soon enough.”

Just as I was about to step back and take one final look at everything, the sound of

boots crunching against the gravel made me freeze.

Jax gasped. “Oh, no.”

I turned just in time to see Reba striding toward us, hands on her hips, brows furrowed. “What are you two up to, it’s nearly time for supper.”

Shit.

Jax frantically waved his hands behind his back, trying to signal something, but it was no use. Reba’s sharp eyes were already scanning the scene, her focus landing right on Onex’s halter and the suspiciously out-of-place leather pouch.

“What’s this?” she asked, stepping closer.

“Uh—uh—it’s a snack pouch!”

I pinched the bridge of my nose with a laugh. Dammit, Jax.

Reba’s lips twitched. “A snack pouch?”

“Yep!” Jax nodded so fast I thought his little head might pop off. “For Onex! She, uh... gets hungry, you know that.”

Reba raised an eyebrow and reached for the pouch before I could stop her. Onex, being the loyal but unbothered accomplice that she was, stood perfectly still as Reba tugged the pouch loose and?—

“Oh my God,” she breathed.

Silence. I didn’t move. Jax didn’t move. Even Onex seemed to hold her breath. Reba

stared down at the small velvet box in her palm, then looked up at me, her mouth slightly open in shock.

Jax exhaled dramatically. “Mama, you ruined the surprise!”

Reba blinked, looking from Jax to me, then back to the ring box. “I, wait, what surprise?”

I sighed, running a hand through my hair before finally taking the damn box from her fingers. So much for foolproof. Might as well roll with it now. I took a step closer, flipping the box open to reveal the ring inside. A simple but elegant diamond that I knew would look perfect on her finger. Her breath hitched.

“Reba,” I started, my voice steadier than I expected. “We had this whole thing planned out. Jax and I were gonna surprise you, but you always did have a way of throwing me off my game.”

She let out a soft laugh. I reached for her free hand, lacing my fingers through hers.

“I’ve loved you since the first time you chewed me out at that damn rodeo. And I’ve spent every day since trying to figure out how to be the man you deserve.”

She bit her lip, her eyes shimmering.

“I know I screwed up once, but I also know that you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and to Jax. I don’t want another damn day to pass without making it official.”

I dropped to one knee, my heart hammering as Jax leaned into me, looking up at her.

“Reba, will you marry me?”

“And be my mama?” Jax said as soon as I finished my question.

For a second, she just stared at us both, her fingers tightening around mine. Then, in true Reba fashion, she let out a breathless laugh.

“You two were really gonna make the horse propose, huh?”

I chuckled, shaking my head as I looked up at her. “Maybe, but none of that matters now. All that matters is that you say yes.”

She exhaled, blinking rapidly as a few stray tears slipped free. Then she dropped to her knees in front of us, wrapped her arms so tightly around me and my boy, I nearly lost my balance. Jax pulled away laughing then whooped in the background, clapping his hands as she reached for my face cupping it in her hands and kissed me so fiercely my heart soared. When she finally pulled back, she rested her forehead against mine.

“Yeah, cowboy. I’ll marry you and our boy.”

Relief crashed over me like a damn tidal wave.

Jax barreled into us, wrapping his arms around both of our necks. “We’re gonna be a real family now!”

I hugged them both tightly, pressing a kiss to the top of Reba’s head before slipping the ring onto her finger.

“Yeah, buddy,” I murmured.

Reba reached for Jax. “We are already a real family.”

He gave her a huge hug as Onex huffed beside us, shaking out her mane as if to say



finally. I sat there, tangled up with the two people who meant everything to me and I knew there was nowhere else in the world I'd rather be. Mac's ranch had been home for a long time but this was a different type of home. Jax and Reba were home and it didn't matter where we were or where we were going, we'd always have each other.

### CHAPTER 17

Reba

The sky was shades of pink and gold, the last remnants of the sun dipping below the horizon as I leaned against the fence, watching Johnny work with Onex in the pasture. All the horses we'd brought home from Rawhide were supposed to move to the barn with the others, but my love for them made Johnny's desire to keep them close. Each had their own name and personality now.

Onex had begun training and the others weren't far behind. They were magnificent creatures and everything they did took my breath away. I had worked with hundreds of horses in my career but there was something about how they'd brought Johnny and I together that made them so special. It had been months since our wedding, but every time I looked at him, my heart still did that foolish little dance in my chest, and today was no exception.

As he led Onex through the pasture on her lead, the desire to jump the fence and have him do the same to me was overwhelming. His dominance had become something I loved. The way he stepped in and led our life in certain aspects had become a joy. We worked well together. What mattered most to me he let me handle, and he took care of the rest. I couldn't ask for more in a partner.

Jax was fast asleep inside, exhausted from an afternoon of racing Fiona, his new favorite mare over the fields, and for the first time all day, Johnny and I had a few stolen moments to ourselves. He caught my eye as he ran a hand down Onex's strong neck, a slow, knowing grin spreading across his face.

“Caught you staring, Crazy Rider,” he teased, walking toward me with that calm confidence that never failed to make me crazy.

“Just admiring the view.”

Johnny chuckled as he leaned against the fence beside me, brushing his fingers over my hand. “You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“I don’t know. What are you thinking?”

He turned his body toward me, his other hand coming up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “I’m thinking I love this life we’ve built. And I’m thinking I wouldn’t mind adding to it.”

My heart skipped a beat. I knew exactly what he meant, and yet, the words still sent a thrill through me. “More kids? Are we ready?”

Johnny released Onex and climbed over the fence to meet me. When he stepped forward, his fingers skimmed down my arm before he intertwined them with mine. “I mean I love being Jax’s dad. And I love being your husband. But I keep thinking about what it’d be like to have another little one running around here. A baby that’s a little bit me and a little bit you.”

I sucked in a breath, my chest tightening with emotions I hadn’t expected to feel so strongly. I had always been content with Jax. He was my son in every way that mattered, but the thought of carrying Johnny’s child, of having a baby together, made my heart ache in the best way possible. I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t something I’d considered. We had just moved so fast with everything that we never really talked about it. I guess I kind of assumed if it was meant to be, we’d discuss it and move forward, but I was perfectly happy with just the three of us as well.

“You really want that?” I asked, my voice softer than I intended.

Johnny let out a small laugh, almost as if the thought of me questioning it was ridiculous. “Hell yeah, I want that. I’ve never wanted anything more. But I need to know what you want, Reba.”

Could I do this? Could I take this next step with him? The answer came before I even finished the thought.

“Yes,” I whispered. “I want that too.”

The relief in Johnny’s eyes was instant, but it was quickly replaced by something else, something darker, something familiar. Desire.

“Then let’s get started,” he murmured, his voice a low growl as he reached for me.

A giggle bubbled up from my throat as he grabbed my waist and lifted me effortlessly. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pressing against him as his lips found mine. The kiss was slow, deep, filled with the kind of promise that sent heat pooling low in my belly.

“Johnny,” I murmured against his lips, threading my fingers through his hair. “We should probably take this inside.”

He groaned, nipping at my lower lip before pulling back just enough to look into my eyes. “Fine. But only because I don’t want the horses to judge me.”

Laughing, he placed me back on my feet and I took his hand, letting him lead me back toward the house. The balance of mom and dad time with parenting had become tricky. It took us a bit to figure it all out, especially when it came to how much we wanted to explore the kinkier side of our relationship, but we made it work. Jax was a

heavy sleeper, a side effect from being a bona fide farm kid, and we took full advantage of all his acquired aunts and uncles who lived on the ranch.

By the time we made it inside, the door barely clicked shut before Johnny spun me around and pressed me against it. His hands roamed my sides, memorizing, claiming.

“Do you have any idea how much I love you?” he murmured, his lips ghosting over my jaw, down my throat.

“I think I’ve got a pretty good idea.”

He pulled back just enough to cup my face, his expression turning serious. “I mean it, Reba. You’ve changed my whole damn life. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

He began pulling at my clothes, making me laugh a bit louder than I should with our son sleeping so close. Johnny put his hand over my mouth, looking at me wide-eyed while we both froze in place listening to see if today would be the first time we woke up Jax. Even though he slept well, the fear of being caught was always there.

“Race you to the bedroom?” he asked with a glint in his eye.

I didn’t bother answering. I just ducked under his arm and took off, throwing my clothes at him as I went. I loved him. There was no doubt about that but I still loved a solid competition and I loved winning even more. By the time he made it to the bedroom, he was stumbling over himself, carrying my clothes.

“Not fair!”

“You didn’t state it wasn’t a stripping run.”

He threw my clothes at me while I finished undressing and he did the same. The fun

that stretched between us wasn't something I'd ever expected. Sure I had relationships before but Johnny was more than just my husband, he was my best friend. When you live on a ranch and you're responsible for not only the wellbeing of staff but also animals, it didn't leave a lot of room to play around. We did the work because we enjoyed it, but other than Johnny, I've never met a foreman who was so easygoing. After years of the work, many of them felt hardened to the job and it leaked into their personal life. Johnny wasn't like that though. He was all about daily enjoyment and I loved that he set that example for our son.

I reached into the nightstand and pulled out some rope, throwing it in his direction. "Tie me up? Sir?"

A slow smile came over him. "Of course."

We had made a few upgrades to our bed, hooks that hid away without a problem, restraints that I concealed under the mattress and a whole box of toys that slid underneath. I let my gaze run up to the hooks he'd recently installed in the ceiling. We hadn't used them yet and, damn, I was excited to try them. I knew he could suspend me there, but even just standing on the bed with my arms above my head would stretch my body in ways I was looking forward to.

"Up there?" he asked, pointing to where my gaze had settled.

"Please, Sir."

Johnny stepped forward and helped me up onto the bed. "Tell me your safe word, Reba."

"Sweetbreads."

"Very good."

“And what happens if you need it?”

“I use it, Sir, and you cut me down.”

“Correct.”

“Do you get in trouble for using your safe word?”

“No, sir. You prefer it.”

He nodded as he continued to work the rope around my body. I loved the pressure of it, the burn it often left if he allowed it. The only thing better had to be the chains we were just getting started with. I'd asked to be left in them long enough to bruise and I loved looking at them for the days that followed. Bruising was something Johnny and I'd had to negotiate. They made him uncomfortable because he was always concerned he had gone too far, but I loved them and he loved me. So for that reason alone he would allow them.

“Are you ready, my love?”

“Yes.” I nodded my head as he reached up and looped the rope over my head, carefully raising my arms in the process. I leaned forward to him, enjoying the stretch and pull against the rope.

“Tell me your thoughts,” he said with a smile.

“I'm happy. I'd like a kiss, and I love the stretch.”

“Very good.”

He didn't lean in to kiss me, but instead ran his hands down my body and took to his

knees in the center of the bed.

“Sir?” I asked only to be silenced by the feel of his mouth on me. Johnny fulfilled my request but that wasn’t the kind of kiss I’d been considering. This one was so much better. I moaned as he spread my legs further and swirled a finger deep inside me as he sucked and nipped at my clit. Pleasure shot through me faster than ever and I pressed my hips into him as he squeezed my ass and slapped me.

“Now, now, no rushing things. You will come when I say so and not any sooner. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

My voice came out whinier than I’d planned and he chuckled, vibrating the place on my inner thigh he was kissing. The feeling made me insane, I wanted more and I didn’t know how I would ever hold off my climax. With Johnny I had become insatiable, and now thinking that we would be trying for a child, my uncontrollable desire was even more than ever before. He teased and stroked me slowly, in ways that felt as if I’d never get the chance to come. I wanted, no, I needed my release so I could focus on something, anything that would make sense because, in that moment, my mind was a complete mess. I pulled on my ropes and twisted, loving the burn they provided, but needing more.

“Impatient tonight, aren’t you?”

I whined again, this time sounding like my ornery mare who had no patience at all with my man. Clearly, Onex and I had a lot more in common than I’d realized.

Finally, he lifted my legs and placed them over his shoulders. The pull of the ropes increased and he squeezed my ass as his mouth covered me. I let my head fall back and closed my eyes, focusing on every sensation that ran through me. I had no idea



how much time went on. It felt like forever, but for all I knew it could have been less than a minute when I finally heard his voice.

“Okay, my Crazy Rider, let go.”

Lights exploded behind my closed eyes and my body shook as my climax slammed into me. I was grateful he had a hold of me and I was tied up because there was no way I’d be able to stay standing. He played me like a trained instrument as he sucked, licked and nipped, fucking me with his fingers and growling out his satisfaction as I came for him. Emotion swelled in my chest as everything started to slow and the world came back to me. I was crying but I didn’t know why. The intensity of my release took so much from me I hadn’t even realized that he’d released me from my suspension and was whispering how much he loved me as he undid my ties.

“I love you, Reba. I will spend forever proving how much you mean to me. Promise me you’ll never leave.”

“Never.” My voice came out shaky as I regained my senses. When Johnny was sufficiently pleased that no harm had come to me, he ran his hand between my breasts and over my lower belly.

“Are you ready to have a child with me?”

I looked up at him, smiling like a fool. “More than anything else in this world.”

He arranged himself over me and dipped his finger inside me, using my cum to coat his cock before lining himself up at my entrance.

“I’ve waited for this for so long.” he said as he slid inside me and moaned. “So good, Reba. You feel so fucking amazing.”

I wrapped my legs around him and placed my hands on either side of his face. “Give me everything.”

His eyes went wide as he increased his speed, thrusting into me in a way he never had before. I slid my fingers between us, pressing on my clit to provide only a bit more friction. I could tell by the determination in his face that this wouldn’t take him long. That was fine by me but my greedy body wanted to come again and I would make that happen.

“Fuck, Reba,” he groaned as he pumped into me, rolling his hips to ensure I felt all of him when suddenly his body tensed and he grit his teeth, growling as he emptied himself into me. I circled my clit as my own pleasure rose and then as his thrusts began to slow my climax hit and my body clenched around his cock causing him to curse and laugh at the feel of it all.

When we both came down from our high he rolled to his back taking me with him. “Again.”

I could barely hold myself up, he was still nestled deep inside me and as I looked down at him, I couldn’t help but feel him swelling inside me again.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. More, Reba, I need to give you more.”

I pressed myself up, stabilizing my position with my hands on either side of his head. Just as I began to slowly roll my hips, he caught my nipple in his mouth. Biting at first, causing that pleasurable pain to rush through me and then he grabbed me again, sucking on me in ways only he knew that I loved. I watched as he moaned in happiness, rocking my hips slowly but surely against him, pressing my clit into him thinking there was no way I’d be able to pull another climax to the surface when my

body proved me wrong.

Johnny alternated sides, loving on my breasts then pulling my face to his, dipping his tongue into my mouth. The taste of my cunt on his lips and the feel of him pinching and twisting my nipples created a space in my mind where I chose to lose myself. To my utter shock I was about to come. I didn't care that I didn't have permission. I didn't care that my Sir hadn't instructed me what to do. There were moments in our life and in our bedroom where he was my Dominant and I was his Submissive and others when we were just husband and wife. Right now I was fucking my husband and that was good enough for me. Johnny reached for my ass, squeezing me hard as he pressed up inside me. My body shook over him as I cried out my release while he did the same and then it was over. I fell onto him and he caught me without a second thought. Holding me tight until, surprisingly, he rolled me over to my back and placed a pillow under my ass. His hand slipped between us, cupping my sex.

"What are you doing?" I asked carefully hoping not to offend him, but with a need to understand his thoughts.

"I don't want any to fall out."

"Any cum?"

"Correct. Now sit still while I hold everything in you and tell you how much I love you." I laughed as his other hand came up over my womb. "Come on little guys, it's baby time."

He smiled, and I leaned in placing a kiss on his lips. "You know there is a lot that goes into this right? It's more than just your little guys. I need to be ovulating as well."

"You are, or at least you should be. You are about two weeks away from your next

period.”

“You’ve been tracking my cycles?”

“Yup. You also always cry more and want more sex. Oh, and you think the feed stinks, but only mid cycle, so it’s pretty clear.”

I laughed so hard I almost cried. “You’re crazy, you know that, right?”

“Crazy, sure. But we are making a baby tonight, and then the next nine months will be some of the most amazing of our lives.”

“Okay, Dr. Johnny. Whatever you say.”

“Hey, don’t think negatively. We need a perfect setup for our little girl.”

“I’m having a girl?”

“Yes, Jax needs a sister. Although a brother wouldn’t be bad either. Maybe we will luck out like Jagger and Moira and have twins.”

With his hand still cupping me, he went on and on about the ten children we would have, even going as far as trying to get me to pick out names. He wasn’t a fan of my massive reduction from ten to five kids on account that I was the one who needed to push them all out but we would figure that out in the future. After all, we had forever with each other because neither of us were going anywhere.

As Johnny held me close, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that the best was yet to come.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 2:47 am*

Reba

“Jax, run out and get Papa for me, okay?”

His little face screwed up into a look of concern. “You okay, Mama?”

I nodded. “Yup, I just think your little sister wants today to be her birthday.”

He turned, running out of the house while I leaned over the counter and breathed through yet another contraction. They had been a thing all day, but we decided to just lie low and not tell Jax until absolutely necessary. Considering I was standing in a puddle of water that was still dripping down my leg, we were out of time. I closed my eyes and focused on the end goal.

“Happy, healthy baby. Happy, healthy baby,” I chanted as Johnny came running in through the side door with Jax close on his heels.

“This is it?”

“Yeah, this is really it.”

He came up behind me and rubbed my back before reaching around to place his hands over my lower belly. “You doing okay, Mama?”

“I think so. But it’s time to call for some help.”

“Got it. Jax can head up to the big house. Athena and Mac can watch him.”

“I want to stay here. I need to meet my sister.”

“Come here, bud,” Johnny said, lifting him up onto the counter next to us. Still none the wiser that we were now both standing in a puddle of water. “Mama’s going to have a lot of hard work to do here. It’s going to be a long time before your sister is here but I promise you that I’ll call up to Miss Athena as soon as she’s here okay?”

Jax leaned into me. “You’ll be okay, right, Mama?”

“Yeah, buddy. Ladies have babies all the time, you know that.”

Another contraction gripped me and I tried my hardest not to let on how much pain I was in as Johnny lifted Jax back to the floor, suddenly realizing how far along I was.

“Shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, bud. Head up to Athena’s alright? Let her know that Mama’s having the baby, okay?”

“Okay.”

He slowly made his way out of the house. “I feel bad making him leave.”

“Babe, all you need to do right now is focus on our baby girl. When did your water break?”

“Right before I sent Jax out to you. Oh fuck.” Another contraction hit me, just as the last had subsided. “I need to lie down. Can you call the midwife?”

Johnny reached for me, as I crouched down holding on to the counter for leverage. I

moaned as the pain overtook me, losing focus on everything but the weird, mismatched handle on the drawer in front of me. It had never bothered me before. In fact, I'd never even asked why it didn't match the others but right now it made me insane.

"I want... this fixed... when the baby is here," I panted out, nodding my head in the direction of the knob in question.

He laughed which made me want to punch him in the nuts but he agreed, "Of course, baby. Anything you want."

"Help me up."

Johnny reached his hands under my arms pulling me back to my feet.

"I want to get to our room before another one hits. I'm all wet and I don't like it."

"Okay, let's go."

I wobbled my way to our room, stopping once in the hallway when another contraction hit. By the time we made it there, I thought I'd run a marathon. Johnny ran into the bathroom to grab a towel for me to sit on and propped me up in bed before reaching for his phone to call the midwife.

"Hey, Ivy, yeah it's time... close... real close. Her water broke a little bit ago. Okay. Thanks."

I listened to his side of the conversation, grateful we had a midwife at the ranch right now. She was dating one of the guys and we'd hit it off as soon as she found out I was pregnant. I had still been in my first trimester, puking my brains out behind the barn when she'd found me. With the hospital being an hour away without traffic I loved the idea of never leaving the comfort of home.

“Okay, she’s on her way. You doing okay?”

I nodded and tried to rearrange myself so that I was on my side and was failing miserably.

“Reba, let me help you.”

“I can do it myself.” My voice was a little more forceful than I wanted it to be and karma chose that moment to pay me back for being a bitch by slugging me with one of the worst contractions yet. I gripped Johnny’s hand as he rubbed my back and I cried out in pain.

“This childbirth shit is for the birds.”

He laughed and crawled into bed behind me. “Yeah, but just think how amazing it will be when Jax is holding his little sister.”

Tears sprung to my eyes and he wiped them away. “That will be really great.”

After what felt like seconds, but was probably minutes, pain ripped through my body, sharp and unrelenting. I gritted my teeth, gripping Johnny’s hand so tight I swore I might have broken it this time and I didn’t even feel bad about it.

“You’re doing so good, sweetheart,” Johnny murmured, his voice calm but thick with emotion. He wiped the sweat from my forehead, his other hand steady on my lower belly as another contraction rolled through me.

I let out a shaky breath, my head falling against his chest. “I swear to God, Johnny, if you tell me to breathe one more time?—”

Johnny chuckled, even as his body tensed behind me. “I wouldn’t dare.”



I groaned as another wave of pain hit, and Johnny held me tighter, grounding me. The house was quiet except for the sound of my ragged breathing and the occasional encouraging words he whispered in my ear. Ivy was on her way, but the contractions were coming faster, stronger. Panic bubbled beneath the surface, but Johnny's presence kept me from drowning in it.

"You got this," he murmured, pressing a kiss to my damp temple. "I'm right here."

I dug my fingers into his arm, breathing hard through the contraction. "You better be. You're the reason I'm in this mess."

Johnny smirked. "I'll take full responsibility just as long as you don't hold this against me forever."

I shot him a glare. "No promises."

Just then, the sound of a car pulling up outside sent a wave of relief through me.

"Ivy's here."

Johnny nodded, his hold on me unwavering as another contraction hit. He kissed the side of my head, whispering, "Almost there, baby. Just a little longer."

As the door opened and Ivy rushed in, I clung to Johnny, knowing that no matter what happened next, I wasn't doing this alone. Ivy came up beside me, her hands gentle but firm as she assessed the situation. "Alright, Reba, you're progressing fast. This baby is coming soon. When did contractions start?"

"Earlier today. We wanted to just take our time with everything but it seems like she doesn't want to wait anymore."

"That's okay," Ivy said, placing her bag on the table in the corner and pulling out

some gloves. “I want to check you before your next contraction so we can get an idea of how close you are okay?”

I nodded, It wasn’t like I had much choice at this point. Johnny helped me lift my leg since I couldn’t bear the thought of rolling back onto my back and Ivy made quick work of checking how far along I was.

I let out a shaky breath, trying to focus. “How soon?”

Ivy gave me a reassuring smile. “It won’t be long now. With the next contraction, I want you to start pushing.”

“Already?”

She nodded as Johnny’s grip on me tightened, his thumb rubbing slow circles against my belly. “You got this, baby. I know you do.”

The next contraction hit like a freight train, and I bore down, a sharp cry ripping from my throat. Johnny murmured encouragement, his presence the only thing keeping me from unraveling.

“Good, Reba. Again,” Ivy coached as she held my leg and I tried to do my best to follow her instructions. I sucked in a breath and pushed again, my whole body trembling with effort. Tears pricked my eyes from the intensity, from the sheer overwhelming reality of what was happening.

“I can’t,” I gasped, exhaustion weighing me down.

Johnny cupped my face, forcing me to look at him. His eyes burned with love, determination. “Yes, you can, Reba. You’re almost there.”

I nodded, drawing from his strength, and for the next half hour I pushed with

everything I had. Suddenly a piercing cry filled the room, and my entire world shifted. I collapsed against Johnny as Ivy lifted a tiny, wailing bundle into the air. “Reba, Johnny, meet your daughter.”

Tears slipped down my cheeks as Ivy placed the baby on my chest. I stared down at her, completely in awe. She was perfect—tiny fingers curling, her cries strong and fierce. Johnny’s arms wrapped around both of us, his breath warm against my hair as he let out a choked laugh.

“She’s beautiful,” he whispered, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “Just like her mama.”

I ran a trembling finger over her soft cheek, overwhelmed by love. “Hi, baby girl,” I murmured. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

Johnny leaned in, his voice thick with emotion. “We love you so much.”

“Call Athena, I want Jax to be here,” I said through tears of happiness as he just nodded and reached for his phone.

Ivy worked quickly with me to handle the afterbirth, wrap up our daughter and get me presentable so that by the time Jax ran home the entire way from the big house we were ready for him. I heard him before I saw him as he was yelling through the entire house singing the happy birthday song.

When he got to our bedroom door, he stopped dead in his tracks. “She’s here,” he whispered.

I nodded and Johnny got up off the bed to go to him. I watched as he knelt down in front of our son, “Are you ready to meet her?”

Jax nodded and took Johnny’s hand. Never in my life had I seen my boy be cautious

but in that moment he was taking everything in. Johnny lifted him onto our bed next to me and he leaned over carefully.

“Hello, Caroline, I’m your big brother. It’s nice to meet you.”

I looked up at Johnny, my heart swelling as our daughter’s cries quieted between us. In that moment, nothing else mattered. We were a family, right where we were meant to be. It may have taken us longer than some to realize how badly we needed each other but I wouldn’t have it any other way.

The End