



*Roped by the*

**DAD BOOD**

**REINA TORRES**

# ROPED BY THE DAD BOD

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BIG 'N BURLY

# REINA TORRES



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# BOSSSED BY THE DAD BOD



Doyle Crane is the man people look to for reassurance. He's a rock. The people who work for him. The people who live in town. His teenage daughter even laughs at his jokes... *once in a while*. He keeps himself busy, so he won't think about what he's missing. What's even worse is he's found her. New in town, making a new life for herself. What he wouldn't do to get his hands on her, but he's afraid he'll scare her away. She's just too sweet to be bossed around by the likes of him.

Shelby Akers is new in town and new to love, but that didn't stop her from falling for Doyle Crane the first day she met him. It wasn't love at first sight when he helped pull her car out of the mud or when he shook his head at how she was shivering in the rain, but it most certainly was when he took off his coat, wrapped it around her body and gave her a heated appraising look and muttered, "Someone needs to take care of you, Shelby."

Doyle knows he's too bossy to even think of getting close to Shelby. She needed a nice, easy-going guy who could be gentle with her, someone who wasn't him.

That all changed when her boss put her in danger.

He went from hands-off, seemingly unaffected Doyle to demanding, bossy-as-fu...dge, *hands-all-over* protector. Shelby couldn't be happier.

[READ THIS BOOK](#)

## CLAIMED BY THE DAD BOD



*She wanted to stand on her own two feet*

*He knew she needed to be swept off them every once in a while*

Everything Nathaniel Sterling had in his life he worked for. He had friends and employees who he cared about, but no one to come home to. He had a friend with benefits. No, scratch that. She wasn't all that friendly and lately the benefits... weren't all that great either.

Who would've guessed that he'd meet the love of his life over a box full of neon-bright condoms?

Evelyn Connors has had a string of bad luck since she moved away from Heaven, Oklahoma. Her latest job is for a horrible jerk of a boss, and she manages to white-knuckle her way through every shift. Who knew that a man would walk in one night and steal her breath with his kindness and the easy way they could talk to each other.

Eve had no idea that the spark she felt with Nathaniel would come back to burn her. The woman he came in with wasn't ready to let Nathaniel go and she didn't care who got in the way of her plan to claw him back.

Nathaniel knows who he wants. Eve.

He just needs to show her that forever can start with a moment, and he'll pull out all the stops to do it. Eve is going to find out that she's been claimed. And Nathaniel is playing for keeps.

[READ THIS BOOK](#)

# WATCHED BY THE DAD BOD



**Ronan and Poppy are next-door neighbors who can't help but watch each other when they think the other isn't looking. In this case, cupid isn't blind, but he's definitely got great aim.**

Ronan Duncan has been a Private Investigator for years, and he's nearly burnt out. These days the only person he wants to watch is Poppy Tanner, the woman who owns the coffee shop in the next building. He finds himself scheduling his work around her schedule just to keep an eye on her.

Poppy Tanner is tired of being watched. She went on two abysmal dates and now Grant won't take no for an answer, calling and leaving her gifts that make his obsession crystal clear. He wants her or he'll make sure that no one else can have her.

One night, the motion sensor Ronan set up to keep her safe blares an alarm and before he knows what's going on, he's leaping across their balconies to her apartment to save her life.

Now he wants forever, but how will Poppy react to having Ronan love and cherish her for the rest of their lives instead of being Watched by the Dad Bod?



## INKED BY THE DAD BOD



### **It's hard to predict what brings two people together.**

Lily and Vincent are two who find themselves drawn together with the inevitable pull of magnetism. Are they a pair of opposites drawn together in a perfect match, or are they too much alike to be together?

Vincent Kane never really considered himself a tattoo artist. He found himself drawn to the craft for its own merits. The artistry was a product of his mind, his building business to his hard work and determination.

After a few years as a partner in their current shop, Vincent finds himself disillusioned by his partner and inextricably drawn to his partner's apprentice. How will he straighten the tangle he's made of his life? Especially when he can't seem to keep his thoughts off of his partner's gorgeous apprentice.

Lily Weber found a position as an apprentice at Ink Envy, but she's worried that she's out of her element. Tattoo artist 'Hannibal' Baldwin is talented, but he also makes her skin crawl.

He doesn't seem to be as interested in helping her develop the skills of her hands as he wants to get his hands on her. If only he was like this partner, Vincent. Lily can't keep her mind off of the other artist who headlines the shop. He features in her dreams both night and day.

Life seems to throw them together over and over, but there's a tall and oh-so-handsy obstacle between them. What

will it take for Vincent and Lily to find that they can create more than art? They could create a lifetime of beauty... together?

Lily may find herself Inked by the Dad Bod.

# HIDDEN BY THE DAD BOD



Amos Kane

He was forced to retire early as a U.S. Marshal when he lost a witness and nearly his life. Since that time, he's been happy, well 'relatively' happy to hunker down in the woods by his lonesome.

No one needs to deal with his anger and disappointment.

A WITSEC marshal shows up and leaves a witness on his doorstep before speeding off to catch a suspect.

He wasn't even given the chance to say no and try as hard as he can to keep his distance, he finds himself drawn to her. Damn it.

April Reynolds

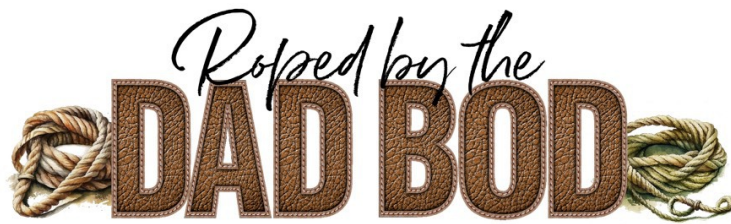
April's life was simple and easy until that morning. Going through the motions until she's a witness to a double murder.

Shoved into a car, a federal agent takes her into the woods and drops her off at a cabin owned by the grumpiest man she'd ever seen.

Too bad he was also the most attractive man she'd ever met. Shoot and double shoot.

April isn't used to hiding away from the world. She's a people person, but the cabin tucked away in the woods and its owner have their own charm. She's just not sure things will work out when she's Hidden by the Dad Bod

## ROPED BY THE DAD BOD



Grayson Brandt was a part of a local rodeo legacy. Not only did the Brandt Family Ranch host the largest rodeo in six states, but he hadn't lost a team roping competition since he'd started entering the competition as a young teen. Coming home from his last rodeo, a drunk driver plowed into his truck, ending his rodeo career, but thankfully not his life.

Since then, he's been healing up at the ranch, leaning on his younger brother to run the ranch, but his recovery has left him a bear. A bear that no one wants to deal with.

The few takers took the job as a housekeeper and light nurse work at the ranch house left within a day, two at the most.

That's when Grayson's brother meets Louise Corning. Louise's daughter had been taking riding lessons at the ranch, but they can't afford it anymore and Louise is looking for a job.

Grayson may be a surly, growly bear, but Louise is a widow and a mom determined to make things work for her daughter.

They might be in a battle of wills, but Grayson soon figures out that he might not need a housekeeper, but he certainly wants Louise and her daughter to stay on... as family.

How would Louise feel when she'd been Roped by the Dad Bod.

# CHAPTER ONE

---

**G**rayson Brandt stared at the front door of the ranch house and didn't move until he heard the truck in the driveway start up and race down the drive.

He wanted to say that he'd call her later and apologize, but he didn't even know her name. She'd stayed less than four hours as his housekeeper.

A new low record, not that he was proud of it.

On the contrary, he knew he needed help around the house while he fully recovered from the highway accident that had ended his career as a rodeo rider.

He needed the help, but some people just got on his nerves.

Well, six... now seven people.

They didn't understand that things had their places, and he wasn't an invalid. He was almost healed up enough to get around without a cane.

And while he liked having help with meals and such, he really didn't like people in his private space. He didn't like people touching his things.

Sure, he'd been a bachelor for his entire life. Married to the ranch as his brother liked to tease him. It was a full-time

job, seeing to all of the animals, the fences, the supplies. It wasn't for the faint of heart. And it didn't give him much time to court a woman.

Or even go on a date every now and then.

He'd taken the reins running the ranch after their parents passed on and left the living to his brother John. And live John had.

So much so that he was a rodeo champion of his own and married a rodeo queen. They were now taking over the day-to-day chores on the ranch and raising their own cowboys and cowgirls at a home on the other side of the ranch.

It was John who'd hired the first housekeeper. And the second, and third.

The rest had been Laney's doing. She'd tried to find tough as nails people to take him on. The last one could have qualified as a drill sergeant, but she'd crossed the line when she'd gotten out sheers and said it was time to trim his beard.

Oh, hell no.

He'd sent her packing.

There wasn't going to be anyone's hands on his beard except for him. He did a good enough job at it.

Having been responsible for his own grooming since he'd started growing a beard, he knew how he liked it.

The last thing he needed was someone trimming him up crooked or making him look like some fancified city man who smoked Cuban cigars and drank from crystal decanters.

He was a country man and he'd do things his way as long as he was able.

A broken leg may have slowed him down, but it hadn't put him in the ground... yet.

Until it did, he'd do things the right way.

His way.



Grayson heard his phone ring and reached for the cane he'd left leaning against the coffee table and found only air in his hand.

“What the ever lovin’ - Fuck!”

His cane was leaning against the counter, a few feet away.

Only too late, he'd remembered that he'd set his cane there as he'd argued with... what's-her-name and he'd hobbled over his armchair and lowered himself into it while he'd given her the verbal boot.

When she'd left, he'd sat there, forgetting to reclaim his cane and now, he might just be a little stuck.

Standing was one thing when he had the cane to lean on, but without it, he'd have to hope that he didn't tip over the armchair getting on his feet.

Or tip the chair over and they'd both be on the floor.

That would just make his day.

RING RING

“Oh, shut up.”

He was tempted to let it continue ringing, but then he heard the answering machine pick up.

It was an antiquated old thing, likely from over a decade before, but it worked and it was his, so there it was.

“Gray, it's John. I... I saw Mabel's truck flying toward town, so I'm guessing it didn't work out with her.”

“It's not like we were on a date, you yahoo,” he grumbled in the direction of the machine.

“Well, while I think Laney's going to be a bit upset, I think I've found you ‘the one.’”

“The one?” Grayson sighed and tapped his fingers on the worn armrests of his chair. “What now?”

“I don't know if you remember Jemma Corning. She started riding at the stable last year.”

Grayson's lips pursed and he felt his beard scratching against them as he thought. Picturing the girl was easy enough.

She had a natural seat in a saddle. Western and English, which was rare for a child who hadn't grown up riding. Things came easy for the child, and it wasn't all that easy to find a natural like her.

"Well, her mama's going to show up tomorrow to take care of you. So don't be a total grump or an ass and maybe, just maybe she'll prove you wrong."

"Prove me wrong, huh. Not fuckin' likely." He fisted the hand that would have been on his cane. If only he had the thing, he could throw it at the answering machine.

He'd give the woman a try.

He'd done that for all of the other... failures.

When he let her go, he'd go back to...

"To what?" he asked himself.

"Well," he huffed out a breath as he leaned on the arm of his chair and pushed himself up and out of it, sweating profusely as he did, "I need to get dinner on my table."

The machine hadn't beeped yet, and Laney's voice was heard through the tinny speaker.

"Don't even try to cook something by yourself, Grayson. I'll bring over a warmed casserole for you."

Then he heard the beep and realized that he was, yet again, alone.

"Just like I like it."

His words echoed back at him, and he glared at his reflection visible in the pane of glass beside the door.

"Yeah, right."

## CHAPTER TWO

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Louise Corning was in a bit of a bind. She hadn't told her daughter Jemma exactly what was going on. Mainly because Jemma shouldn't have to worry about things that weren't for little girls.

Okay, she wasn't so little. She was eleven going on eighteen most of the time, but that wasn't something that Louise wanted for her.

Then again, she hadn't expected her husband to die either, but pancreatic cancer didn't ask permission. It appeared suddenly and then it stole Greg's life a little over a year after that, draining their energy and finances along the way.

And since then, she'd done the best that she could.

It turns out that Louise's best wasn't anywhere near good enough and she'd finally had to come to the realization that she couldn't continue her daughter's riding lessons.

They'd paid it up until the end of the school year, meaning that Jemma had her lessons until the end of the month, which was next Saturday.

She thought that had been the end to her troubles.

Well, that would be too easy, wouldn't it?

Two days ago, she'd heard from their landlord. The house that they'd lived in since Jemma had been born was being sold.

And while Mister Roundtree was a kind old man, she understood why he had to sell it. He was going to be in an assisted living center and needed money to pay for it.

That meant she had to find a place to move them within two months.

That was enough bad news, right?

Nope.

The universe decided to deal her another painful blow. The job she'd had for the last five years since she'd gone back to work? They were downsizing the company, and her job was one of the cuts they were making.

They would give her a severance check for a month, given that they felt bad for her. A widowed, single mother wasn't something they wanted on their conscience, her manager had explained.

That had almost been enough to drive her to her knees, but as she'd been sitting in the stands watching Jemma ride around the arena, she'd mumbled to herself. "*God will only give you what you can handle.*" Then, with a loud exhale, she looked up at the sky and laughed. "*Well, God... careful, I'm getting really close to the edge.*"

That's how she met Laney Brandt.

The woman had sat down beside her in the stands, and they'd talked while Jemma had her lesson with Laney's husband, John.

Not one to whine or complain, especially to people she didn't know, Louise found herself struggling not to cry as she explained the horrible chain of events in her life that had left her wondering how she was going to take care of her daughter during summer break, find a job, and a place to live, all at the same time.

One was hard enough, but all three seemed like an insurmountable problem on her own.

She'd been without Greg for a year, but it felt like an age. The only thing that had lifted Jemma's spirits were the horses, which is why she'd done her best to continue Jemma's lessons for as long as she could.

"I don't suppose you need someone to muck out the stalls in exchange for lessons?" Louise hated how she sounded.

She had no problem doing things for others, but asking for something?

It made her sick to her stomach.

Still, she'd asked because she wanted to try to give her daughter something to look forward to.

Laney Brandt had given thought to the idea. Louise was thankful for that kindness, but she wasn't under any assumption that Laney would be able to help them.

Everyone needed to make money, that fact was impossible to ignore.

"Maybe not mucking out the stalls, but I might have another idea."

Louise clasped her hands together, silently praying that there might be an answer to at least one of her troubles. That might be what she needed to turn their lives around. "Anything."

"Anything?" Laney's wincing smile didn't deter Louise in the least. "How are you with cooking and cleaning?"

"I do it all the time." She felt her heart pound against her ribs, hoping that there might be a lining to the storm cloud above her head. She didn't need it to be silver, just something other than dark would be a lifesaver.

"I don't know if you remember Grayson. He taught Jemma's class a few months ago."

Louise managed to keep her expression still.

She remembered Grayson quite a bit.

In fact, she'd wondered where he'd gone.

She admired the way he worked with the children in the class. Smiled at the way he taught them responsibility and how to care for their horses and tack. And she'd certainly noticed his figure.

She'd been told that everyone had a type. But she called that into question when she'd seen Grayson. He wasn't like Greg who'd been six foot six and skinny as a rail for the entire time she'd known him.

Grayson was built like a bear. Broad shoulders, big muscular arms, and full beard where Greg had barely needed a shave more than once a week or so.

And yet, Grayson had reminded her what it felt like to be a woman. The way her body had reacted to his told her that she was still... alive.

But there was no way she would ever attract his interest.

That didn't bother her in the least.

She was happy drinking in her fill of his barrel chest and thick denim-encased thighs.

Louise shook herself free of her thoughts and looked up at Laney, hoping that the other woman hadn't noticed anything wrong.

It all seemed fine. Laney was smiling at her, an easy smile that was filled with her sunny personality.

"Yes. I remember Grayson. Is he... Is he okay?"

Laney's expression changed then. The corners of her mouth drew down and her posture dropped just a little. "Grayson's truck was hit on the highway on the way back from the Tri-State Rodeo."

Louise felt sick. She covered her mouth with her hands as her heart struggled to understand. "How badly was he injured?"

Laney blew out a breath. "His leg was broken." She touched her hand to her own leg midway from her knee to her



hip and Louise had to swallow down the acrid taste of bile from the back of her tongue. “He’s on the mend now, but John’s taken over most of the day-to-day work on the ranch.”

Looking out across the arena, Louise nodded. “He’s really good with Jemma. I’m thankful for his help. I... I feel so bad for Grayson, though. You said he’s on the mend?”

Laney nodded. “He’s too stubborn not to be, but that’s kind of where I’m thinking we could use your help.”

“Oh? What do you need?” She wasn’t sure what she could do with the added load on her shoulders, but she’d do her best to try.

“Grayson needs some help around the ranch house. Basic cleaning stuff. Meals. Things like that.”

That sounded like quite the time commitment, but before she could explain her hesitation, Laney spoke again.

“It’s a live in position, Louise. You could stay there with Jemma while you’re helping Grayson. John can continue to teach Jemma here at the ranch this summer. And you’ll have a salary, because believe me, you’ll earn it.”

Louise couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

It was literally the best possible news she could hear.

Just moments before she was wondering how she’d manage to take care of her daughter without a place to live or a job for money and now she could do this job and give her daughter access to the lessons that brought her out of her shell after they’d lost her dad.

“When do I start?”

“How’s about tomorrow?”

Louise bowed her head for a moment to say, ‘Thank you,’ and then she met Laney’s gaze with her own. “Perfect. Tomorrow is perfect, thank you.”

Now, she had some kind of hope for the future.

She just had to prove herself to Grayson.

## CHAPTER THREE

---

The next day she showed up bright and early, ready to work. She'd already fed Jemma at home, having spent the night before packing up their things.

It wasn't much, but the boxes she'd packed would stay in the living room, just inside the door until she got permission to store them at the ranch.

It wasn't something she wanted to ask on the first day. She didn't want to sound like she was marching in and taking over.

And she certainly wasn't going to take Jemma over to the ranch house until she'd found out which room they'd be sleeping in from Grayson.

She had a feeling that he wasn't going to be all that excited to see her. It was the way that Laney talked about him. She was hesitant but hopeful, which Louise took to mean that there would be a challenge.

She was ready for it.

This wasn't just playing house. She needed a place for herself and her daughter to stay while she figured out where they would go before the next school year started.

Thankful that John was keeping Jemma with him at the stables and showing her the ropes of taking care of all the barn

animals on the property, Louise had driven across the ranch to the main house.

It looked like love had lived there for years. The whole house gave her a feeling like it would stand the test of time to mark the passage of the generations of Brandts who'd been born and raised there.

She'd looked online the night before while she'd taken a moment in the bathroom and read about the history of the family in Texas. It humbled her to see the many generations of Texans who'd called it home.

Standing in front of the house, she wondered what it would be like to have roots as solid as theirs.

Well, she'd wonder about that later. She had a job to do. She took a step forward, but before she could set foot on the porch, the front door opened, and Grayson Brandt stood there.

“You're Jemma's mom.”

She nodded and swallowed the lump in her throat. “Yes.”

“I'm pretty much an asshole these days. You sure you want to do this?”

“I'm here to cook and clean, Mister Brandt. That's all. If you think a sour attitude will change my mind, you would be wrong.”

He stood there and looked her over.

Louise didn't have any misconceptions about that look. She had a feeling that he looked at horses and cows the same way.

“Well, you better come on in before I shut the door.”

With an invitation like that, what could she do?

“Okay then.” With a smile, she set the alarm on her car and headed for the door.

She had to stop when she was standing right in front of Grayson. He was still standing in the doorway and didn't show any signs of moving.

Wondering what she'd missed, she looked up into his gaze and had to fight down the unfamiliar wave of heat that rose up inside of her.

“Something wrong, Mister Brandt?”

He lifted his chin toward her car in the drive. “No one here is going to take your things. You don't have to lock your car here.”

Goodness.

Her cheeks heated and she felt like a complete nincompoop.

“I... I'm sorry, Mister Brandt. It's just a knee-jerk reaction. Where we were living, the cars up and down the street were always-”

“No need to explain. Just know that your things are safe here.”

He moved away from the door, his cane alternating with his cowboy booted foot as he moved further into the house.

“Thank you,” she said to his back. “I won't do it again.”

He lifted a hand to brush away her assurance. “It's up to you, that's all I'm saying.”

Yeah.

Okay.

As he continued through the living room, she followed behind him, wondering which foot was going to be the one she was going to stuff into her mouth.

She wasn't off to a good start, offending the boss within the first two or three minutes?

Priceless.

The main room was bigger than the small cottage she'd shared with Jemma. In fact, she could fit the backyard in there too.

That was easy enough to see as she walked around the furnishings.

And the hallway that she stepped into looked like it went on for a block.

Okay, she was probably exaggerating, but that's what it looked like from where she stood.

Housecleaning.

Louise blew out what she hoped was a silent breath as she mentally calculated what she needed to do.

"You can relax. I'm not expecting you to clean every inch of the place. Right now I just need to keep everything from being overrun with dust bunnies.

"I'd keep it clean on my own if I didn't have a metal rod in my leg."

She slowed and lowered her gaze to his injured leg, and she could see the contrast of the heavy compression sleeve against his clothes more that she'd noticed before.

"I'm sorry you were hit."

He stopped short in the hallway, his back tense and stiff. "I don't need your *kind* words."

With the emphasis he'd put on that word, she had the feeling that he didn't need it because he was sorely lacking in that area himself at the moment.

But she wasn't about to say anything.

She'd seen Grayson teaching at the ranch's arena, and she'd seen his kindness to the children.

That was enough to tell her that his current... disposition wasn't the whole story.

He was in pain.

And she knew what it was like to be in pain. The thirty hours that she'd been in labor with Jemma had been enough to make her lose her temper. And Greg had been surly and downright mean close to the end of his life.

Pain, she could understand.

And pain wasn't going to get in the way of a job to help her raise her daughter.

"This," he almost grunted the word, "is your room."

"My room?" She turned her head to the side, canting her right ear toward him just in case she hadn't heard him quite right. "Jemma can sleep in there with me."

"Jemma can have the room at the end of the hall. You don't have to share. This house has half a dozen bedrooms."

Louise recoiled a little at that and she heard a gruff HA from Grayson.

"You don't have to clean them all. The ones that aren't used can be left as is."

She nodded, thankful for that revelation. "Okay. I see."

"There's a bathroom between the two bedrooms." He leaned against the wall and pointed his cane at the open doorway. "There."

"And your bedroom?"

He turned back toward her, and the look in his eyes made her run cold and hot at the same time. "Why do you need to know?"

She stammered as she leaned back and away from him. "No... no reason. Well, no, there is a reason." She had to calm her breathing and keep her gaze on his. "I can't clean your room unless I know where it is."

"You stay out of my room."

The pitch of his voice dropped down to where she almost didn't hear it, but there was no mistaking the foreboding look on his face.

"But I thought-"

"Don't think. Don't waste your time." He pushed away from the wall and moved down the hall past her and stopped at a door at the beginning of the hallway. "This, since you're so interested," he lifted his chin at the door before he pushed it in with his free hand, "is my bedroom. And I'm serious," his



eyes narrowed on her face, “don’t go inside. That’s why I sent the last one packing.”

He disappeared a moment later and the door slammed behind him.

“Okay,” she breathed. “That went about as well as when Greg tried to teach me how to drive a stick.”

She wondered if she’d make it longer than nightfall before he sent her, and Jemma, packing. Shaking her head, she left the house. She had hours and hours of work ahead of her to get them ready to move to the ranch the next day.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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Grayson leaned his forehead against the door and sighed.  
“I’m an ass.”

He hissed out the end of the word, sure that if Louise heard him, she’d gladly agree with him.

She’d shown up nice and early, and he’d been a total ass to her from word one.

Hell, she hadn’t even come in the door, and he was already biting her head off.

He’d been grumbling and grouching at people since he’d come home from the hospital. It wasn’t their fault that his rodeo career was over. He couldn’t even summon much hate for the man who’d crashed into his truck.

He’d been driving exhausted, his eyes bleary and his head foggy. If he’d plowed into a smaller vehicle, the people in that car wouldn’t have survived.

With the size of his truck, Grayson had survived the crash with what was on paper, a bad traffic accident, but the paper didn’t come close to explaining what it had done to him beyond the physical results.

Grayson didn't want to drive anywhere. Not that he could with the cast before, nor with the compression sleeve he had on now. He was basically captive on the ranch property.

Thanks to John, Grayson didn't even have to leave the house to go to the barn. All of that was taken care of by the hands who worked for them.

The whole thing grated on him.

Before the accident, he'd gone anywhere he liked. Walk to the barn, saddle up a horse, take off across Brandt land after chores were done.

He could see the sights that his ancestors had looked on with pride as sweat coursed over their skin. It was all there, stretched out before him, but now, it only seemed a reminder of what he'd been about to lose.

One moment between life and death and he'd come out somewhere in between. Locked away in a wooden box.

He didn't like the way it made him feel or the breathless way he struggled to put that all behind him.

He certainly didn't want people staying with him where they could see how much he was struggling.

Then why didn't he tell Louise to step off the way he'd done the others?

That was the million-dollar question, wasn't it?

It wasn't like he'd suddenly remembered his manners.

He'd always had those. His father had taught both of his sons the right way to behave from an early age.

But knowing how to behave and doing it were two different things, and he'd managed to chase off everyone else.

Not Louise, though.

Not that he'd put much effort into it.

There was something about her that... softened him in some ways.

He remembered her daughter Jenna from her riding lessons.

She was a natural. Better yet, Jemma listened to instructions. It was likely that her calm demeanor in the saddle is why she got along with them the way she did.

Horses liked settled, earthy people and Jemma was just that.

Now that he'd met her mother, he was pretty sure that she'd come by that part of her nature from her mother.

Solid, salt of the earth people.

Being in the same room with Louise had loosened some of the strain around his heart. Seeing the way she looked in his house and the nervous hesitation in her voice when he'd ordered her to stay out of his room made him feel...

Well, it made him feel like more of an ass.

Staring out the window at the empty driveway gave him a bit of heartburn. Lifting his hand, he pushed the heel of it against his chest and felt the emptiness inside.

He grumbled at himself as he limped to his armchair and settled himself in it and used his phone to turn on the radio.

He didn't turn on his television unless he was going to watch something like rodeo coverage. The rest of the offerings did little to entertain him.

Music, though... He liked music.

Cowboy songs, bluegrass bands, and some country found its way into his playlists, but that was about all that he could stomach.

Just as a classic Brooks and Dunn song came over the speakers, he heard bootfalls on his porch.

There wasn't time to stand up and lock the door before his brother strolled in.

"Hey, Gray." John shrugged out of his coat and set it on a hook beside the door. "Looks like you're still alive. That's good to know."

When his brother dropped down onto the couch, leaned back, and stretched his arms across the back, Grayson shook his head.

“Go ahead, John. Come on in and have a seat.”

His brother laughed out loud and tipped his head back. “I’ve lived here, too.”

Grayson blew out a long breath and stretched his leg out, doing his best to ignore the twinge of pain he felt at the movement. “Is that why you’re here now? You’ve ticked off your beautiful wife and she’s finally come to her senses and kicked you out?”

John looked at him as if he’d kicked a puppy. “I came to see if you and Louise had gotten along. Now I’m wondering if she’ll be back tomorrow after she got a taste of your moods.”

Grayson slid a sidelong glance at this brother. “She’s stronger than you give her credit for.”

“Oh? So, she made an impression on you?”

“What are you getting at?”

John lifted his hands up in a vague gesture. “It’s just a question, Gray.” He shook his head. “Are you going to be this obnoxious when she moves in?”

Shifting on his chair, Grayson turned toward his brother and glared at him. “I know how to behave.”

John’s eyes widened a bit and his mouth dropped open.

“Shut up.” Grayson reached for the cane that he’d leaned against the side table. “Don’t make me beat you with this cane.”

“Ha! You’re feeling better. I can tell.”

Grayson narrowed his eyes at his brother. “You should be glad I can’t run after you yet.”

John sobered a bit and leaned forward, bracing his forearms on his knees. “Seriously, Gray. I need you not to scare her away.”

Grayson heard the somber tone of John's voice. It wasn't something he heard often. "What's going on?"

He could see John struggling with the answer.

"You don't have to tell me. I'm not planning on scaring her off. I don't have an interest in upsetting her. Especially with Jemma here. I'm an asshole, not a monster."

John's shoulders rose and fell as his lips pursed into a thin, colorless line. "Just promise me that you'll keep your temper in check. Louise and Jemma could use a few weeks in a welcoming home. Okay?"

Grayson shifted on the armchair again. "What's going on?"

For the first time in a long time, Grayson saw his brother look worried. Really and truly worried.

That's not to say that John didn't take things seriously. He had the same Brandt singular focus that had kept the family on top of the rodeo circuit for generations and made their ranch as big of a success as it had been.

"I should tell you... No. I think you should know..." He shook his head. "Have you ever wondered why you don't see Jemma's father around?"

"I hadn't thought about it." The words were true, but it didn't keep him from feeling a bit of an ass for not thinking about it. "What's going on?"

John swallowed and wrung his hands together. "He died, some kind of illness. I didn't ask for details, and really if you want to know more about that, you can ask Laney. I'm not the guy that Louise would tell all of that to. I just know from Laney that things are tough for Louise and her daughter. They need a place to collect themselves for a few weeks."

There were still pieces that Grayson didn't have. "The ranch is outside of town. Quite a bit. Will Louise be able to keep her job and he-" Grayson stopped when a pained look pulled at John's expression. "She lost her job?"

"Downsizing or restructuring... Something like that."

Something inside of Grayson twisted.

Hard.

“You could have said something before she came over.”

John looked a little contrite at that. “I wanted to talk to you face to face but I ended up taking some time with Jemma after her lesson.” He shrugged. “That’s a crap answer, but I couldn’t help it. She took a jump today!”

Grayson grinned at the news. “How was it?”

“She sailed Hawthorne right over the bar.”

“Yeah?”

They were both wrapped up in the celebration for a moment. It wasn’t hard to be distracted by Jemma. The girl was a natural and seeing her build up skills and confidence was exciting.

Still, his brother should have filled him in before Louise showed up at his house. “You get a pass... this time.”

The slightly ominous warning wasn’t lost on John, who laughed and held up his hands in surrender.

“I’m not joking, John. With her staying here at the ranch, can she get back to her own place when they leave?”

John hesitated for a moment. “They have to move soon anyway. Their landlord is selling their place. Staying here could be a huge help to her. If you have a problem with accepting help, could you just try to find a way to let her help around the house? Let her do something to help you. Laney and I are hoping you’ll give her a chance to catch her breath.”

Grayson leaned on the arm of his chair, and his mind whirled with thoughts. Most of them weren’t flattering. “I feel like an ass.”

“I know you’re a good guy, Grayson. You’re the best older brother I could have asked for.”

Grayson raised a brow at the comment, and John shrugged. “I know I haven’t always appreciated having an older brother.”

“We’ve certainly butted heads throughout the years, but we’ve always managed to stay family.”

“Well, I’ve mellowed over the years,” John added in.

“You’re a dad now. A good one and a good husband.”

“That means a lot coming from you, Gray.” John swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple working in his throat. “You know me better than most.”

“And you know me, but you’re worried that I’ll scare Louise away.”

“Can you blame me? You’ve been... a little off your feed since the accident.”

His backbone stiffening, Grayson gave his brother a hard look. “You don’t know what you’re saying. Literally.” Grayson chuckled a little and John blew out a breath and settled against the cushions for the first time. “But I get the stakes here, John. I’ll be careful with her. With them.”

“Okay.” John got up and crossed over to his brother and gave him a good smack on the shoulder. “Thanks, old man. Glad we’re on the same page.”

John moved on to the door and stopped when he had the door open before him. “I got the idiom right this time.”

Grayson nodded.

When John stepped out onto the porch, Grayson called out to him. “John!”

His brother spun around with a curious look on his face. “Hmm?”

“Your kids are lucky to have you as a father..”

“Yeah?” His smile brightened his face.

“Yeah,” Grayson nodded. “You’ve got that dad joke thing down.”

John rolled his eyes. “I’ll see you in the morning, asshole.”

Grayson nodded and John closed the door behind him.



## CHAPTER FIVE

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When Louise arrived the next morning, her daughter was still half asleep in the car. When they parked in the driveway of the ranch house, she had to nudge her awake so they could go inside. “Come on, sweet girl. I just need you to get up and go inside, you can sleep a little bit more while I make breakfast.”

Breakfast was the word that roused Jemma. Her daughter’s eyes fluttered open, and she yawned.

Even though Louise had been up for a few hours herself, she stifled her own yawn.

“Come on, Jemma. I bet it’s warm inside.”

“Mm-okay, Mama.” Jemma swung her legs out of the open doorway and Louise couldn’t ignore how cute her daughter looked in her cow printed PJs with her sock covered feet slipped into her hiking boots.

As Jemma walked past her, Louise pulled a wool beanie onto her daughter’s head.

With that taken care of, she darted ahead and unlocked the door. Laney had assured her that she could just use the key, as there wasn’t a security system in the old house.

She wouldn't have to worry about waking Grayson or having the police making a house call before she had the coffee going.

She opened the door just as Jemma stumbled through, her boots left behind on the mat. Her little girl found the couch face first and before Louise could cover her with a blanket, she was already fast asleep.

Louise smiled at the homey picture in front of her.

Jemma was a deep sleeper, like her father had been. Louise was an early riser who slept very lightly. A difference that hadn't been so bad until Jemma's dad passed away. Without that familiar buffer, Louise had to learn how to get her daughter up without a war starting in the household.

Leaving Jemma sleeping on the couch, Louise went outside and brought in the groceries that she'd picked up. It felt strange to add her purchases to the Brandt Ranch account at the grocery store in town, but the manager had called her by name and assured her that she wouldn't have a problem picking up supplies.

The one odd occurrence that happened at the end of her shopping trip that morning had been the strange looks from a couple of the older women who worked at the front of the store.

While she'd been unloading her cart onto the counter beside the cash register, she'd heard someone mention Grayson's name.

Louise hadn't turned her head to look, but there was a mirror-like shine to the light above the register and she'd lifted her gaze up enough to see the women talking and looking over at her with narrowed eyes.

Ah... small town speculation.

She hadn't had that happen much in her life. She'd been pretty unremarkable so far.

That was until she started buying groceries for the Brandt Ranch.

Now, she'd mused, she was a mystery woman.

A mystery woman buying lots of meat, eggs, cheese and vegetables.

Now, she was carrying them into the house from the car.

It was a mistake, she reasoned, as something in her back pinched on her third trip in from the trunk of her car. The idea had been to pick up enough for a couple of weeks, so she didn't have to leave much.

She didn't want Grayson to think she was trying to escape or something like that.

He'd already been a little cross with her when she'd gone to introduce herself, but she figured that he'd change his mind when he got used to her.

Either that or he'd tie her to a saddle and send the horse galloping away.

No, she shook her head, he wouldn't waste a horse like that.

The pantry and cabinets were easy enough to figure out. The person who'd set them up, or maintained them, had a really logical mindset.

The kitchen even had its junk drawer at the end of the counter, closest to the door. Just the place to drop odds and ends on the way out or in.

Perfect.

The things she'd decided not to purchase at the store she could still find in the kitchen and used some of the bread with the new eggs to prep some french toast while she got the bacon going along with the eggs.

She had planned to ask Grayson what he liked to eat the day before, but with their less than auspicious beginning, she didn't have the chance.

Today, she hoped that he liked what she made for breakfast and from there, she'd have a chance to move forward.

At least she knew that Jemma would be more than happy to dig into the breakfast she was making. The rest she'd figure out later.

She wondered if she should go and knock on Grayson's door, but she set aside that idea before she could seriously consider it. If he was asleep, the last thing she wanted to do was to surprise him by knocking on his door.

For a moment she smiled and thought about him as if he was a big grizzly bear sleeping in his cave during the winter.

The air certainly was chilly enough outside in the mornings to make the comparison possible. She could imagine him shuffling out of his room, his nose lifting in the air. The coffee pot sputtered and hissed, and she bit back a laugh, imagining the large bear leaning away from the machine, watching it wearily to see what else it would do.

Oh, her thoughts weren't mean or trying to paint Grayson in a bad light. She liked bears. As long as they were on the TV or in Facebook videos.

Bears had always fascinated her, even when her first experience with them was at Disneyland. The Country Bears Jamboree.

Louise sighed and shook her head. She'd read somewhere that it had been closed and she mourned its loss because she'd always meant to take Jemma to the amusement park and see her favorite bear, the one who blew over the mouth of a jar as his part in the band.

She hummed a tune as she turned one of the pieces of french toast over in the pan, tapping her feet as she turned the other piece over. The brown and gold of the toast made her smile.

She could almost taste it in her mouth.

Crispy, buttery deliciousness.

Louise hated to admit it, but she'd gotten out of the habit of cooking in the morning for breakfast. She'd never quite gotten the hang of waking Jemma up early enough that she

could cook breakfast and get them both ready and out of the front door.

It wasn't that she hadn't had the time to get into the habit, she just hadn't managed it.

In all honesty, she'd almost given up, as things in her life were suddenly spiraling out of control.

She wasn't proud of the admission, but it was... what it was. Yet another failing.

The thought stole her breath, and she took a step away from the stove and leaned on the edge of the sink, closing her eyes before she started to cry.

What had led her to think that she could take care of Grayson Brandt when she couldn't even take care of her own life?

When Laney had suggested this job, she'd jumped at it.

She guessed that she could blame it on desperation, the same way that drowning swimmers grabbed onto anything thrown in their direction.

She dragged in a breath, hoping that it would be a boon to everyone involved, but suddenly she was wondering if she was going to pull Grayson down with her.

Louise shook herself, struggling to hold herself together.

With her momentary fascination with drowning, it was a good thing that the ranch wasn't near any large body of water.

From what she could see, the worst threat of drowning on the ranch was falling face first into a livestock trough.

Her job had nothing to do with those, so she was probably in luck.

Right?

A slight hissing sound turned her head and she saw the smoke coming up from the pan was a little darker than it should be.

Hissing a breath of her own, she picked up the spatula and lifted the two pieces of french toast out of the pan and set them on her plate.

She'd burned them, so she would eat them.

It was only fair, right?

## CHAPTER SIX

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Grayson woke up thinking he was dreaming. Bacon. He could smell bacon in the air. Bacon and coffee.

So seduced by the scents in the air, he almost fell out of bed onto his face. With his leg still wrapped in the compression sleeve, it was difficult to bend it enough to get it under him.

He managed not to hit the floor and then had to maneuver himself so that he could reach his cane. With that in his hand, he moved to the back of his bedroom door and lifted his robe from the hook and shrugged it on.

The time it took to put on the robe and walk down the hall gave him time to piece his thoughts together. And to remind himself that Louise needed this job and he better not be a raving asshole, no matter what his natural state happened to be.

He paused at the end of the hall before he stepped into the main area of the house.

Grayson could hear Louise humming under her voice, but he wasn't sure what song it was.

Maybe it was the ringing in his ears that kept him from deciphering the tune.

It wasn't something he was used to, but it seemed to happen when he was deep in thought, as if his thoughts were too loud for him to hear the world at large.

He just wasn't used to having it happen in the house.

Standing there, watching a woman at his stove.

It wasn't something he'd say out loud or he might be accused of being a... a chauvinist. Or some other archaic kind of guy.

There was truth enough that he was an old-fashioned kind of guy, but he didn't expect a woman to do all of the housework.

He'd done things for himself when John and Laney moved to their own place on the ranch. He wasn't averse to the work at all, but breaking his leg had changed things for a time.

He'd moved in temporarily with his brother's family, but that only lasted so long. The moment he could get up and hobble around without his surgeon threatening to tie him down or sedate him, he moved back to his own place.

He just couldn't do as much for himself as he had before.

That's why he'd apparently terrorized a number of people that Laney had hired to care for him.

He was determined to do better.

Partly because of John's request, but also because he knew that Louise didn't deserve his stupidity. She had it hard enough.

"Dang it."

He frowned and leaned closer in her direction, wondering what had gone wrong.

Louise moved back to the stove from the sink and quickly scooped up something from the pan on the stovetop and set them onto a plate.

Drawing in a deep breath through his nose, he scented the delicious smell of french toast. He hadn't had french toast for breakfast... or any other event for years and years.



The scent also told them that the two pieces had been burnt a little, but it didn't do a thing to make the smell any less tempting.

He didn't mind a few dark spots on food. He'd left more than enough on his food when he'd been the one doing most of the cooking in the house.

John, who'd lived with him for years, called them 'flavor spots.'

As two bachelors living with each other for years, they'd come up with many interesting ways to survive their less than expert skills at the stove and around the house.

The guys in the bunkhouse had better food than they did, but only because their skills were just passable.

The coffee pot sputtered again, and Louise moved to the side to grab up a potholder that he didn't recognize. She opened the door to the front of the stove and the scent of bacon suddenly drew in him.

"That smells amazing."

Louise jumped back and the cookie sheet in her hand clattered down onto the grate in the oven. "Oh, it's you."

"Sorry." He reached up a hand to scratch at the back of his neck. "I woke up to the smell of coffee and bacon and it's been so long since something that good was coming from this kitchen, I couldn't stay put in my room."

Louise was flustered.

The hand she had pressed to her chest was covering her heart and the other hand shook a little where it touched her cheek.

"You can go anywhere you want in the house, Mr. Brandt. I'm not complaining or upset, just a little... shocked. I was in my own thoughts a little too much." She shook her head as if she was trying to shake snow or a light rain from her hair. "Do you need help taking a seat at the table?"

He felt a muscle tick in his cheek, but just as soon as it happened, he moved his jaw, trying to help it relax.

“I’m fine.”

Grayson wasn’t sure that she’d even seen it. His beard sometimes hid some of his less than admirable expressions. It was one of the reasons why he’d left it there for the more than fifteen years that he’d kept it on his face.

Still, he dipped his chin down as he moved toward the kitchen table to take a seat. His instinct was for frustration to bubble up at the slightest provocation, but he was going to try to be better, or at least hide it as best he could.

“Thanks.”

For her.

Grayson pulled out a chair and managed to sit down without falling into it.

That pleased him. The last thing he wanted was for Louise to think he was an invalid.

That thought surprised him.

Not that he’d want anyone to think he was weak, but the idea that he’d see something akin to pity on Louise’s face rankled.

“I wasn’t sure when you were going to be up, but I wanted to get here in time to cook something for breakfast.”

“It smells good.”

He caught her smile just as she turned to face the stove. The tray went down on the countertop, and she quickly took out a small stack of plates from the cabinet above the counter.

“I should have shown you around yesterday.”

Louise turned halfway around and smiled at him before she turned back to do something at the counter. “That’s very sweet of you to say, but I found everything easily this morning. You pretty much have everything in the cabinets in the way that I’ve arranged mine.”

“Oh?”

He watched as she turned back to him at the table with a platter of sliced melon in one hand and the plates in the other.

Louise set the platter down first and then the plates in the center of the table.

After she set both down, she plucked a knife and fork from a basket on the table.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I brought my silverware caddy here with me. If you don’t like it, I can put it out in my car. It is a little kitschy, but it helps me keep things organized for the most part.”

He reached out and picked it up by the top handle, which made it look a little like a picnic basket. “It looks handy.”

He looked up at her and saw her smiling at him.

Something shifted inside of him, putting him a little off balance. He lowered the caddy and set it back on the table so he could brace his hand on the table.

That smile.

Her smile.

There was something about it, or about her, that settled inside of him and warmed him from the inside out.

To say it was unnerving was an understatement.

A smile.

He smiled a little at the absurdity of it all.

“How would you like your eggs?”

Her question cut through the strange haze of thoughts in his head, and he latched onto it like a life preserver tossed into the water.

“Anything is fine.”

She dropped her chin a little and gave him a look that had him rethinking his vague reply.

“Over easy?”

She smiled again, deeper and broader this time.

The effect it had on him was even more than the first time. His cheeks warmed at the sight and his heart beat a little faster.

“I can do that.” She turned back to the stove and tossed another comment over her shoulder. “See? That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

He shook his head as though she could see him, but she couldn’t.

Grayson knew he should say something, but he couldn’t think of anything to say that wouldn’t sound like he was an idiot.

It was at that moment that movement from the couch turned his head. Jemma sat up and the blanket that had been placed over her slipped down. “Hey, Mister Brandt!” She yawned, tipping her head back in a big, monster-sized stretch. “Did we wake you up?”

He gestured at the stove. “Breakfast did. Are you hungry?”

It was as if the word ‘hungry’ flipped a switch inside of Jemma.

Her nose lifted into the air, and she gasped, dropping her feet to the floor. “Is that pancakes?”

“Close.” Jemma almost deflated as he watched, and Louise laughed softly. “I made some french toast, silly goose. Now go and wash up so you can eat breakfast.”

Jemma dramatically dragged her feet across the floorboards for a few steps, making a fairly accurate imitation of a zombie shuffling away.

“You keep that up, young lady, and I’m going to eat these in front of you.”

Jemma spun around, almost laughing. “Ha! You’d never do that!”

Grayson chuckled. “Are you sure, Jemma? Your mom looks like she’s serious.”

Jemma moved past her mother and reached for the sink to wash her hands.

Louise handed her daughter a paper towel to wipe her hands on when she was done. “It’s true. It’s just an empty threat. I don’t use food as a punishment or reward.”

Grayson sat back in his chair with her words echoing in his ears. “I never raised a child, but I can see what you’re saying.” His lips relaxed enough to smile. “Looks like I learned something new today and I didn’t even have to leave my table!”

Louise and Jemma laughed with Louise’s slightly deeper tone, making everything warmer. Jemma’s easy laughter made him smile even more.

The muscles in his face protested the unfamiliar expression. Louise sat down in another chair at the table, and he found himself struggling not to watch her too closely.

Just the way she’d seemingly shrugged off their less than stellar meeting the day before made him respect her. She hadn’t taken him to task for his rude behavior, although he knew he’d have to apologize soon, she wasn’t pushing him to do what was right.

She wasn’t a shrinking violet in the least. She seemed to have a steel spine and while he knew he was a mess and ruffled after a hard night of sleep, she looked wide-awake and fresh.

He hadn’t done her any favors and sadly, he might have cheated himself out of this unexpected domestic moment.

And by the smell of those pieces of french toast, a tasty meal.

Louise placed a platter of french toast on the table and a bottle of maple syrup that made his mouth water just by looking at it.

Before he could reach for anything, Louise followed it with a platter of bacon that was cooked to perfection. “How did you know?”

Her brows raised. “Know what?”

“How I like my bacon.” He gestured at the plate. “That’s a beautiful thing you have there.”

“Ah.” Louise turned and brought the coffeepot over to the table and set it on a trivet. “Well, is there any other way to make bacon?” She smiled and he found himself smiling with her.

“I know, mom.”

Grayson turned to look at Jemma, who was perched on her chair with big eyes and a bigger grin. “What’s that?”

Jemma tipped her face down a little and Grayson wondered if he’d been too loud.

“Go ahead.” He put his hand on the tabletop. “Tell us.”

Jemma looked over at her mom first. Grayson saw Louise nod at her daughter.

“It’s just that mom puts bacon on our turkey for Thanksgiving. It doesn’t get crispy or anything like that, but it’s still super tasty.”

Grayson agreed. “Bacon on a turkey. That sounds like the best thing to put on a bird.”

Happy that Jemma hadn’t stayed bashful for long, he reached out and picked up a pair of pinchers and went after a few pieces of bacon. When he held the crispy strips above Jemma’s plate, he looked over at Louise and saw her looking back at him with a soft expression. “How much should I put on her plate?”

“That’s fine. Thank you.”

Grayson saw the careful way that Louise was watching him. He wondered what it would be like if she was comfortable with him. Would her choice of words change? Or her tone?

A mixture of both?

He put the bacon strips on the plate and saw the hungry gleam in Jemma’s eyes, he completely agreed with her. “You want some french toast?”

“Of course!” Jemma leaned a little closer. “My mom’s french toast is the best. It’s crispy and she puts cinnamon in the egg.”

“Cinnamon, huh?”

Jemma nodded, her lopsided pig tails shaking loose. “It’s suuuuper good.”

“Super, huh?”

Grayson turned back to serve the french toast and already saw a few pieces on his plate.

Louise gave him a knowing grin as she reached out and put a couple of pieces on her daughter’s plate. “I think you’ll like it.” She took a piece for her own and set the pinchers on the platter as she reached for the bottle of maple syrup and stood. “I’ve never had any complaints.”

She drizzled the syrup over Jemma’s toast and leaned in to place a kiss on the crown of her daughter’s head. “Remember to use your napkin.”

Jemma’s fork was already cutting into the pieces of toast. “Sure, mom.”

Grayson already had a piece of the french toast in his mouth without syrup. He saw Louise’s curious stare and managed to put on a little smile with his lips held closed.

She put syrup on the rest of his toast as he swallowed the bite he had in his mouth.

“It’s good. Really good.”

Louise smiled, her cheeks pinking with a blush. “I’m glad you think so.”

Oh, he did, and as he took a bite of the toast with syrup, he realized that things were so much better than good.

He was really warming up to the idea of having the both of them around.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

---

Things were going well.  
Almost too well.

At least, that's what her inside voice was telling her.

Her meeting with Grayson the day before had left her a little hesitant about working for him, but if it wasn't for her current situation, she might have been tempted to look for another job.

But realistically, what job came with a place to live? And that place to live? That meant everything. It meant she could have her daughter somewhere safe.

She knew that Jemma loved the ranch. When she was taking lessons on Saturdays, she talked about the ranch every afternoon when she got home from school. And right before bed at night.

It was going to be something special for Jemma to be on the property for a few months during the summer.

John sent a hand to collect Jemma after breakfast. He'd brought over one of the horses she'd ridden in her lessons and Jemma had swung herself up in the saddle to go to the barn and help curry the horses.



Jemma had explained to her that it meant she'd help groom the horses and give them some of their feed.

She'd held back a comment about how difficult it was to get Jemma to pick up her things around her bed. It wasn't the time to bring it up. Not in front of a ranch hand and Grayson.

Whatever they wanted her to do at the barn, Jemma was excited to do it.

What a change.

That gave Louise a chance to familiarize herself with the house and start her chores.

Her cell phone rang, and she pulled it out of her pocket and managed to flip it open using one hand so she could still wipe the shelf in the refrigerator.

"Hello?"

"Louise, hi! This is Laney!"

"Laney, hello. What's going on?"

Laney's laughter was light and easy. "You sound like you're elbow-deep in something serious."

Louise drew back and looked out the kitchen windows. "Are you outside and watching me?"

"Oh? I was that close, hmm?"

Louise continued to scrub the shelf, unwilling to leave the door open longer than she needed to. "I'm cleaning the refrigerator. Looking to see what kinds of supplies I'll need to cook."

"You got right down to business! I bet... You know, I have no idea how Gray is taking it."

"Everything's great." Louise meant it. So far, so good. Breakfast had been fun. Surprisingly so. "I just wanted to get a good look at what I need to pick up. I'm not all that eager to take the drive into town often."

"Oh, I know. It's a bit of a trip to make."

Louise tucked the phone between her ear and her shoulder so she could move around some of the bottles in the back of the refrigerator.

“Yeah. I picked up a bunch of things this morning at the store. I got a few strange looks from other customers when the manager said he’d put it on the ranch account. I hope I’m not making things weird for any of you.”

“From the customers, huh?” Laney’s voice was a little hesitant and soft. “Women customers?”

It took Louise a moment to think about it while she drew a bottle of pickles to the front that looked like they’d been hidden back there for a good long time.

“You know, I think they were.”

“Ah...” Laney giggled. “I got some of the same looks when John took me down to add me to the ranch account. Apparently, the town was wondering when the Brandt boys would settle down. They kept their eyes on me when I first saddled up with the family. Now they probably think you’re moving in with Grayson.”

“But I am... I mean, I did move in with Grayson- Oh. Like that. Oh, I guess I should have clarified that I’m the housekeeper.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Laney laughed a little more, “they’ll think whatever they want no matter what. You could have produced a written employment letter and they’d just come up with something in their heads and go with it.”

“I’ve always heard it was like that in a small town, but I didn’t think I’d end up in this situation.”

“What kind of situation is that?”

“Uh...” Louise tensed up a little in her back. “Laney? Mister Brandt-”

“Call me Grayson, Louise.”

She closed her eyes and winced. “Grayson’s here. I’ll talk to you later.”

Laney's laughter deepened into chuckles. "Don't let him grump at you. He's just a big ol' teddy bear."

Louise managed not to burst out laughing. "Okay. I'm going to go. Bye."

She pulled out the bottle of pickles as she folded her phone closed and dropped it into her jeans pocket.

Louise closed the refrigerator door and met his gaze with her own, determined not to be cowed by his mood, no matter what.

"Can I help you with something, Mister- I mean, can I help you with something, Grayson?"

Saying his name to him gave her a little thrill. A little shiver ran down her spine.

When Jemma had taken lessons from him, he'd been Mister Brandt, but Louise had slipped when she was talking to Laney and called him by his first name.

Now, it was really old-fashioned to hesitate calling him by his name, but she was working for the man and not just getting to know him. That's why she had meant to call him by the more... removed version of his name, but she'd made the blunder of calling him by his first name on the phone.

She was worried that he'd told her to call him by his first name because she'd already done it, not because he wanted her to.

And yes, even though he'd been nice that morning, she really didn't want to mess anything up. Not so soon after the start.

He was just looking at her, which was a bit unnerving.

"I'm sorry," she breathed. "I didn't mean to call you Grayson, but I was on the phone--"

"With Laney," he interjected. "And that makes sense. Laney never had a problem calling me Grayson. Or Gray."

She smiled, but she knew it was hesitant and probably a little brittle.

Nerves. She chalked it up to nerves.

Not because he'd gotten dressed and was wearing a dark burgundy shirt that made her fingers itch to touch it. It looked so soft and warm.

"I never expected you to call me Mister anything."

Her shoulders rose a little. "I guess because I'm working here, I felt like I should be more formal."

He smiled, and her eyes widened.

"What?"

"We don't really do formal around here, unless you count bolo ties and our good cowboy boots. Maybe even a shirt with snap buttons made out of mother-of-pearl."

She was left staring at him. "Really?"

"Well, fancy dressing is more John's thing. I like a pair of comfortable boots, a clean flannel shirt, and some jeans."

Louise couldn't help smiling at him, an expression she wasn't sure how much she'd use after being on the receiving end of his surly behavior.

"That sounds about right."

"So you go ahead and call me Mister Brandt if you want. Or you can call me Grayson. Whatever makes you more comfortable."

He was being... almost too easy to talk to. She didn't think he was a complete jerk, but she certainly hadn't expected this kind of change in his demeanor overnight.

She was somehow tempted to ask him if he'd been visited by three ghosts the night before.

Tempted, but that didn't mean that she was going to needle him like that.

She'd just be happy that he was in a good mood and leave it there.

Now wasn't the time to push for anything.

Louise was still incredibly grateful for the opportunity to work and live on the ranch. The last thing she was going to do was threaten it by speaking out of turn.

“Okay.” She nodded her head. “I’ll think about and see which one I feel comfortable with.”

Nodding, he looked down at the floor, tapping his cane on the hardwood. “Okay. I’m going to go and put my leg up for a bit.”

She watched him turn away, and while she was trying to keep things on an even keel, she couldn’t help herself from calling out to him.

“Grayson?”

His feet stopped and he turned slowly until he could see her over his shoulder. “Yeah?”

She wanted to hide her face in her hands, but she was too old- too mature for that kind of silliness.

“Are you sure I can’t help you?”

Something crossed his face, like a shadow or a dark emotion. “I don’t need it. I just... don’t.”

Her heart squeezed tight in her chest as his words brought back older, more painful memories than she’d ever admit.

“Okay.” She licked at her lips, needing the familiar movement to ease the tension in her body. “Sorry. I know what you said before.”

Grayson turned so all she could see was his back. It wasn’t meant to be rude. At least she didn’t think so.

He moved further away from her, and she turned away from him, too.

Blowing out a silent breath, she worried that she’d taken the progress that they’d made and tossed it in the compost heap.

*Why?*

Well, that was the problem.

She didn't know.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

---

A week later, Grayson found himself in his bathroom before breakfast. It wasn't just about washing his hands. He was trimming his beard.

Nothing drastic, just making sure that everything was... in line. Cleaning up any scraggly bits.

And he didn't just throw on a robe over his sleep shirt, he'd wrapped up his leg and compression sleeve and sat on the shower chair to scrub himself clean to within an inch of his life before dressing and joining the rest of his...

He stopped in his doorway and listened to the easy banter in the main room.

He was just about to say family.

He chuckled silently.

Family.

Maybe if he hadn't had his head focused on the ranch for his entire adult life, he would have a family.

But Louise and Jemma weren't his.

And if things went to Laney's plan, they'd be moving on at the end of summer. He'd be back to roaming around the house by himself and Louise and her daughter would be back in town

during the week with Jemma coming for lessons on the weekend.

His throat tightened at the thought.

Grayson had originally cringed at the thought of two people walking by his bedroom door again and again.

He was used to quiet in the house.

Quiet suited him.

That, and it wasn't a problem if he got up in the middle of the night and went to the kitchen half-naked.

Well hell, he could walk to the kitchen stark naked if he wanted to.

Grayson shook his head with a rueful smile on his lips. When was the last time he'd gone even half-naked around the house when he was alone?

Never.

He sighed at his own ridiculousness and heard the conversation in the main room come to a halt.

"Grayson?"

Hearing Louise call out his name from the other room had a few unexpected reactions.

First, he liked the way his name sounded in her voice.

She'd been hesitant to call him by his first name at the beginning, but once he'd encouraged her to do it, it had quickly become the norm.

And that brought up his second problem.

How *much* he liked hearing it.

It gave him a certain amount of satisfaction that she hadn't been cowed by him. That it took a day or two for her to stop lowering her voice to nearly a whisper when she said it made him feel relieved.

He was an ass, but he didn't want her to worry about being in his house. This time for her and for Jemma was too important.



He planted his cane and stepped out into the room. “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

Jemma jumped up from her chair and pulled his chair out and away from the table. “I’ve got your chair for you.”

Grayson’s cheeks heated up with an uncomfortable flush. “I uh...” He looked up and saw Louise watching him. She didn’t look worried. She looked... amused.

He smiled at her and then looked down at Jemma. Louise’s sweet daughter beamed up at him. “Don’t worry, I won’t let you fall!”

He shook his head. “I wasn’t worried about that, Jem. You’re a good girl.”

Her eyes blinked in surprise. “Cool! Hey, Mom!”

Grayson leaned back to try and escape the unexpectedly loud boom of Jemma’s voice.

Louise looked like she was holding back laughter. “Yes, sweetie? I think the horses heard you at the barn.”

“Oops!” Jemma covered her mouth with one hand. “Sorry,” her voice was noticeably softer, “I get loud when I’m excited.”

He moved between the chair and the table and sat down when he felt the chair touch the backs of his legs. “Thanks, Jem.”

She sat down beside him and lifted a platter for him. “I like that. Jem.”

He picked up a few of the pancakes and set them on his plate. “I like it, too.”

“Mom?” Jemma turned to her mom. “What about you?”

“Jem’s a great name,” she nodded. “It reminds me of a book I read before.”

That brightened the smile in Jemma’s eyes. “Oh, yeah?” She turned toward him. “What about you, Mister Brandt? Did you read that book too?”

He looked across the table at Louise. “Mockingbird?”

She smiled. “The very same.”

Jemma touched his arm. “Was Jem a cool girl in the book?”

He grimaced a little. “Well, Jem was a boy in the book.”

“A boy?” Jemma sat back in her chair, a little pout on her lips.

“Why don’t we see if we can get the book at the library and read it,” Louise suggested. “Maybe you’ll like the name in spite of it belonging to a boy.”

Jemma thought through her mother’s words before she nodded. “Okay. I can do that. When can we go to the library?”

“I have the book in my office, I think.” Grayson liked the smile on both of their faces. “I think I have all of my books from my school years in there. I’m a big reader. Always have been.”

Jemma brightened again. “Me and Mom, too! That’s so cool!”

“Yes,” Louise poured him a coffee and one for herself. “Yes. It’s super cool.”

She went back to cutting up her pancake, but Grayson wasn’t ready to dive in just yet.

“You said you get loud when you’re excited.”

“Huh?” Jemma paused with her fork up in front of her mouth. “Oh, yeah.”

She put the big bite of food in her mouth.

“I do.”

Grayson looked over at Louise seated on the other side of the table and noticed that she was hiding her smile behind her glass of orange juice.

Jemma swallowed it down a few seconds later and Grayson worried that she might end up choking on her next bite.

“I was just wondering why you don’t get loud at the arena.”

Jemma lowered her fork to her plate and tilted her head to the side. He swore he could see the gears turning in her head.

When her head tipped back into its normal upright position, he imagined a light bulb over her head flaring to life.

“It’s something my mom said.”

Grayson turned to look at Louise, but she was looking at her daughter, her brow furrowed over the bridge of her nose.

He’d thought to ask Louise what she’d said to her daughter, but given the look on her face, she didn’t remember it at the moment.

Instead, he turned back to look at Jemma. “What did your mom say?”

Jemma let go of her fork and cupped both of her hands around her mouth after she turned toward his seat. “My mom,” she was whispering, but he could clearly hear her words, “said that horses are like sweet babies. We should be quiet and calm around them.”

“Sweet babies.” He repeated the words and turned to Louise. “I’ve never heard it said that way before.”

Louise’s cheeks were pink with a blush, and he had to flatten his hands on the tabletop to keep himself from reaching out across the table to touch her cheek and see if it was as warm as it looked.

“Why would you say it like that?”

She hesitated, her teeth biting into the corner of her lower lip.

“What you said was right,” he tried to reassure her. “It’s just I’ve never heard it said just like that.”

Louise’s hand raised to her cheeks, covering them as if she didn’t like the heat in her skin. “It’s something I thought of when we were driving here for her first lesson. I had one lesson when I was her age.”

Grayson saw Jemma lean forward against the edge of the table, watching her mother with open curiosity.

“Why one, Mom?”

“It was supposed to be more, but Grandma Irene said her heart couldn’t take it.”

“What did Grandma have to do with it?”

“It’s nothing, really.”

Grayson set his fork down and leaned forward a bit on his own, too. “I’d like to know, if that’s all right.”

Louise’s face paled a little and he regretted that he’d encouraged her to tell the story.

“You don’t have to,” he added. “I was just curious.”

“Me, too!” Jemma winced and lowered her voice again. “It’s hard to think that grandma took you to lessons. She didn’t like animals. She didn’t even want me to get a hamster.”

Louise nodded and her expression softened.

“She didn’t like animals. You’re right. She hated them in all sizes, but my father promised me riding lessons, but he was working that day. So, grandma took me to the stables. She must have crossed herself a dozen times before I even got up in the saddle.

“The young woman giving the lessons was very sweet and tried to help grandma relax.”

Jemma laughed and promptly hid her smile behind both of her hands. “Yeah, right.”

“I think there were just three or four of us there for the introductory lesson, and-”

“What’s introductory?”

Louise smiled at her daughter. “It means the first of many. At least,” she looked at Grayson and he froze, “that’s what I’d say without a dictionary.”

Jemma turned to look at him. “Cool, right?”

He grinned back at her. “Cool?”

Jemma shrugged. “I’ve been watching old TV shows from the 80s. Everything was cool back then.”

“Ah.” He found himself smiling enough that the corners of his eyes were pressing together. “Well, if you want, we can go find the dictionary in my office after breakfast and you could look up the word.”

“Cool!” Jemma picked up her fork for another bite of the pancake. Just a heartbeat shy of her mouth, she turned back to Louise. “So what happened with grandma?”

Grayson swore he saw Louise grimace. Maybe she was hoping they wouldn’t get back to the story.

He was glad she was wrong.

“We all got up on the horses using the rails as a step to get up into the saddle. The next step was just getting the horses to walk around the arena.

“Easy. Nothing more strenuous than that. We weren’t up in the saddle for more than twenty minutes or so, because we were going to get back off and head to the barn to learn how to groom the horses. I was the last one still in the saddle, waiting for the teacher to come around and show me how to get down.

“A car drove by the barn, sending up a huge cloud of dust. Just as they were about to drive out of sight, someone in the car shouted and then the others joined in. The sound spooked the horse, and she took off.”

Grayson’s stomach twisted in his gut. He’d seen the same thing happen a time or two in other places. He’d seen children with worse injuries than his after a horse had been spooked.

“Wow,” Jemma stared wide-eyed at her mother. “What happened then?”

Louise’s shoulders lifted just before her lips. Smiling, she looked at her daughter and shook her head. “I couldn’t tell you much about it. I think I was in a kind of panic at the time.

“All I really remember was that if my mother, grandma, hadn’t fainted, I might still be riding that horse into the sunset.

“The stable owner got a hold of the horse’s reins and stopped it. He said that after the people in the car yelled my mother started to yell. He was surprised and said he was pretty impressed that I didn’t let go of the reins.”

“I’m impressed that you held on.”

Grayson didn’t realize that he had been the one who spoke until Louise looked at him, a sheepish grin on her lips.

“Really?”

He shrugged and nodded. “Yeah. A runaway horse? Your first lesson! You could have been ki-”

“Hurt,” she finished for him, her eyes begging him not to say what he’d been about to. “I could have been, but I wasn’t.”

“How, mom?” Jemma didn’t miss a beat.

“How...?”

“How did you stay in the saddle?”

Louise hesitated. Her skin seemed almost green for a moment.

Jemma turned her big eyes to Grayson and he reached out a hand, setting it on her shoulder. He didn’t want her to be afraid. “Maybe we should leave this story until later.”

Jemma turned back to her mom. “Why, mom? Everything turned out okay, right?”

Louise nodded and managed a smile.

He knew it was probably crazy, but for a moment he thought that maybe her smile was for him, too.

“Everything turned out fine.” She agreed.

“Okay.” Jemma nodded and the gesture was like an exclamation point, putting an end to the pause. “So what happened?”

Grayson was sure he saw a look of resignation on Louise’s face.

“Well, once they got my mom calm enough not to start shouting and scaring the horses again, the man who owned the

stables sat me down on a picnic bench or something like it, and he asked me how I managed to stay in the saddle and not fall off when the horse started to run.”

Grayson relaxed when he saw Louise’s smile almost turn into a laugh.

“I gave him a look, barely managing to keep myself from passing out from relief and told him. ‘I held on because I didn’t know there was another option?’”

Grayson felt the knot in his gut release itself. “Thank God you held on! That could have been-”

“But it wasn’t.” She gave him a subtle nod and then she darted a glance at her daughter, who was grinning as she chewed her pancakes. “That’s why when Jemma asked to take lessons, I looked for the best place and found Brandt Ranch. I knew that she’d get the best instruction here.” She turned a thoughtful look out through the window in the side door. “I think that’s why I told Jemma about being quiet around horses. I don’t really think about that moment in my life very often.”

“I don’t blame you.” He let the conversation die there to give Louise a chance to relax. He understood why she’d been a little reticent about telling it in front of Jemma.

He didn’t have to worry about filling the quiet as Jemma jumped in with a new topic a moment later.

Grayson was really beginning to enjoy the not-so-quiet around the house.

## CHAPTER NINE

---

Louise was seated in a chair a little later, reading a book that she'd brought with her to the ranch. Absorbed in the words and the world written on the pages, she didn't hear Grayson walk into the room until he spoke up standing right behind her.

"That must be a great book."

She gasped in a breath, almost jumping up from her chair.

"Sorry. I'm sorry, Louise." Grayson took a step to the side, putting some space between them, and Louise couldn't help the strange feeling that came over her. She felt a little colder with him stepping away. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

She slipped her pointer finger between the pages to hold her place as she settled into the chair again. "You didn't really frighten me," she explained, "just a little shock. I didn't hear you come in."

His own eyes widened as he sat down in the armchair beside the sofa. "Then you must have been really involved in the book and I'm even more sorry. I know what it's like to be completely in a book and get yanked out of it."

His tone was softer than it had been on the first day when she'd come to his house. His expression had softened as well.



She didn't make a big deal about it thinking that he might not like the obvious stated. Instead, she looked at him, smiling. "Do you need anything? Hungry? Thirsty?"

"No. No, thanks. I just wanted to come out here and see what you're up to."

"I've done all of the daily chores." She winced after blurting out the words. "Sorry. I didn't mean to hurl the words at you."

"And I didn't feel like they were hurled."

They smiled at each other, falling into an easy quiet.

Louise looked at the clock on the wall. Laney had come by after breakfast to take Jemma to the barn and it was likely one of the ranch hands or John who would bring her daughter back for dinner.

Dinner.

She turned slightly and saw that Grayson was sitting quietly in the armchair, his head tipped back, his eyes closed and as she watched, his chest rose and fell with each breath.

Goodness. It was her first chance to just look at him.

They'd been there for just about a week, but that's how long it had taken to get caught up with the chores and cleaning around the house.

At first, Grayson had told her over and over again that she didn't have to clean the whole place.

But, again and again, she'd just cleaned things.

It wasn't that she was all that eager to do it, but she didn't want to sit around and even worse than that. She didn't want him to think she was just twiddling her thumbs.

After a full week of cleaning, she could run her fingers over any surface and not pick up dust.

It felt good.

It felt...

Like home.

The unbidden and uneasy thought stole her breath.

She didn't have a home.

Not one of her own.

This place and this situation were for the summer.

A few months of peace and quiet, saving money to start over with her daughter. The first real new beginning since...

Louise got up from the couch as quietly as she could, smiling to herself when Grayson didn't move a muscle.

He must be asleep.

Louise opened her book and set it down where she'd been sitting, open and face down on the cushion. She was careful not to crack the spine, but she didn't have a bookmark with her.

Leaving it there, she moved to the other end of the couch and picked up a blanket that she'd freshly washed.

Grayson had told her she could leave it alone, but she'd waited until he'd gone into his room to add it to the laundry. Now, she moved a little closer to him, carefully watching his face to see if he'd wake up.

But he didn't.

Instead, he breathed in and out in easy intervals.

When she was standing by the armchair, she took a moment to look her fill.

Grayson Brandt was a handsome man. Tall, and big all over, he reminded her of Grizzly Adams or Ron Pearlman in *Magnificent Seven*. Yes, she did have a thing for guys in the Old West or on the Frontier. Big, vibrant men who looked like they could pull a wagon if the horses needed a break.

She rolled her eyes at her wistful thoughts, blinking back a sudden onslaught of stinging tears.

Grayson wasn't anything like...

No, she wasn't going to compare the two that way. She wasn't going to put their names side by side.

Her husband had been in her life for so many years and they'd been such a good team alone and as parents.

They'd seen each other through problems and troubles, always standing beside each other.

When she'd lost him, she might have just curled up and cried herself into oblivion, but she had Jemma. And Jemma needed her more than she needed herself.

That's how she kept going.

And now, Jemma was thriving.

Laney and John were texting her photos of her little girl looking like a real cowgirl and doing some jumps on one of the horses.

It was like seeing a sunflower open and turn to the sun.

Jemma was blossoming just like that.

And herself?

Louise shook her head.

She was standing there, watching a man sleep.

A man who was too handsome for her own good.

It was easier, she realized, when he'd been a jerk and rude. When he was a bear to deal with, she knew she could do the job and keep herself separate from Scrooge Brandt.

Now?

He'd given her daughter a nickname, one that Louise was sure would stick.

He'd even gone into his office and brought out an old, dog-eared copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Grayson had brought it into the kitchen after Jemma left for the barn and he'd asked if it would be okay to lend it to her daughter.

Being a booklover herself, Louise had barely been able to keep herself from tearing up over the offer.

And now she was hoping that they'd find more that they shared in what they liked.

Not that she wanted a deeper connection with him. She just wanted to make their time together easier on all of them.

Leaning over Grayson, she draped the blanket over him. The well-worn blanket went from his chest, all the way down to over his knees.

She carefully avoided touching his leg for fear that she'd cause him pain and wake him up.

Still, he kept breathing slowly and deeply as she took a few stolen moments to watch over him.

Crazy as it seemed, the grumpy gus at the head of the house seemed to be softening a bit. And what she saw, she liked.

A lot.

He hummed in his sleep before mumbling something under his breath.

Louise squinted a little as she canted her head to the side, listening in.

He said something else, but she couldn't quite hear enough vowels or consonants to make out the words.

Worried that putting the blanket over him had been a mistake, she leaned in even closer so she might hear his words.

But he didn't speak again.

Worried more about his comfort rather than anything else, Louise opened her mouth.

"Grayson? I-"

He came awake with a soft, indrawn gasp and his hand took hold of her arm, just above her elbow. "Lou?"

He might have said her whole name, but the second half was lost in a bit of a sleepy slur of sound.

"What... what's going on?"

To say she was startled was an understatement.

His hand on her arm didn't hurt. His fingers didn't bite into her skin or pinch.

No, Grayson's hand on her arm was warm.

Warm and heavy, but not in a bad way.

Heavy like when a man leaned over her in bed, covering her body with-

"Are you okay, Louise?"

She managed a smile even though her face was red with heat. "Me? Oh... I'm good."

Louise tried to move back, but his hold on her arm didn't allow for her to put any more distance between them.

"You need somethin'?"

His voice was thick, his eyes heavily lidded.

And if her mind was working, he'd just looked at her lips.

Oh god.

"Lou?"

She breathed in, struggling to keep her heart from pounding in her chest. It wasn't easy because the weight of his hand was drawing her closer.

The only thing keeping her focused was the knowledge that she couldn't lean into him because she'd hurt his leg.

The last thing she wanted to do was cause him pain.

"I just put a blanket on you. You looked cold."

His eyes opened a little wider and she felt the weight of his gaze on her face. "I'm not cold."

"Because," she measured out her words, "you have a blanket now."

Grayson's chin tipped down and he looked at his chest and legs. "Oh."

He let go of her arm and she backed up, lifting her right hand to warm the spot where he'd just uncovered her skin.

Louise knew her hand wasn't enough to fill the emptiness.

That realization drove her back another couple of steps.

She'd taken things too far, which was strange enough. It had been a while since a simple touch had done so much to stir up her... emotions?

Chemistry?

Both?

"Louise?"

She swallowed hard at the knot in her throat. "I... I need to go and... I need to-"

Her mind was a mess.

Her heart pounding and stuttering in her chest.

It was chemistry, she reasoned.

That's what it had to be.

It wasn't emotional. No. That...

It couldn't be that.

It was pure chemistry.

A spark.

Lightning in a bottle.

And she couldn't allow it to flash over.

She was there, in Grayson's house, to take care of it.

To take care of him.

It wasn't the same as playing house.

That was something she'd had once. Something real.

This... wasn't.

This was heat. Chemistry. A yearning that just proved that she was alive.

Yes.

That's all.

That's all it was.

That's all it was going to be.

"I need to take care of some things."

Before the last word had cleared her lips, she was on the move, heading into the hall and into her temporary bedroom.

It wasn't until she fell face first onto the bed, grabbing up a pillow in her hands, that she felt like she could get a hold of her feelings.

Wrapping her arms around the pillow, she pulled it to her chest and hugged it tight. Tight enough to work an ache into her muscles.

And that helped her to focus again.

It helped to remind her who and what she was in this house.

She was the housekeeper.

She wasn't his.

And he, sadly, wasn't hers.

## CHAPTER TEN

---

A week later, Louise was beginning to feel a little anxious.  
A little trapped.

It wasn't anything that Grayson was doing on purpose. She was sure of that.

He was just doing what came naturally to him, and that's what was upsetting her.

Grayson had lent Jemma his copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but instead of just putting it in her hands, he'd been there, encouraging her to read it.

When there was a difficult word, he'd helped her daughter tackle it as much as she had.

Together, they'd developed into a bit of a team and instead of wanting to turn on the TV that streamed shows over Wi-Fi, Jemma could sit on the sofa and read aloud with Grayson beside her in case she needed a hand.

Louise spent the time that she wasn't needed to answer a question, tucked into Grayson's armchair with a skein of yarn, working stitches for a plain afghan that she vaguely remembered from her childhood.

It was all too perfect for her heart to handle.



Her daughter wasn't just biding her time during the summer months, she was thriving.

Her eyes were bright, and it felt like her smile had doubled in size, stretching from ear to ear.

"Why does everyone make up stories about Boo?" Jemma was tucked up against Grayson's side, looking up at his face.

Louise watched carefully, too, wondering what he was about to say.

"I think that sometimes people see what they want to see and believe what they want to believe."

Jemma's brow furrowed above her nose. "But no one sees Boo. So what is it that they think they see?"

"Hmm..." Grayson paused, his gaze lifting up toward the rafters.

Beside him, Jemma seemed to copy his thoughtful post.

"I think a lot of people see their own fears in other people. It's easier to deal with things if you look at it from outside of the problem. When you're inside, it's all around you. It's hard to... catch your breath without choking on it."

Louise's hands paused. Her fingers lost their sure hold on the crochet hook and the little metal tool slipped from her fingers and fell between her thigh and the arm of the armchair.

She wanted to dig her hand into the space and fish it out, but she felt like she might startle Grayson or Jemma and the last thing she wanted to do was break the spell that they all seemed to be under.

"I've felt like that."

Louise froze then, her breath locked in her chest as she listened.

"Yeah?" Grayson leaned in an inch or two toward Jemma, but his focus was listening. It was easily seen on his face and she felt it in her heart.

He was really sweet with Jemma and that went deep into her soul. Not just as a mother, but as a woman.

Jemma nodded, but she lowered her gaze and leaned against his shoulder. “People at school were really nice when my dad died. Everyone came up to tell me how sorry they were. It almost felt like... like I was the one making them feel better.

“I don’t think they knew how tired I was every day. People just kept telling me how sorry they were for me. And I... I felt like it was happening over and over.”

Louise was stunned at her daughter’s words, but what cut down to her soul was the way that Grayson pulled Jemma into a hug, holding her tight as she began to cry.

Dropping the yarn that she’d held in her hands, Louise pushed herself out of the armchair and moved over to the sofa.

She carefully sat down next to Jemma, and it wasn’t more than a moment or two before Grayson noticed she was there and turned Jemma around toward her.

Louise pulled her daughter into her embrace, murmuring soothing words to Jemma as her little girl tucked herself into a little ball and squeezed her arms around Louise’s neck.

“Oh, sweetheart. I had no idea.”

Jemma nodded against her neck and Louise felt Jemma’s hand start to pat her against her back.

It was the same thing, Louise realized. Her daughter trying to comfort her instead of accepting the comfort for her.

“I’m okay, sweetie. You don’t need to take care of me. I can take care of you. Okay?”

Jemma leaned back, lifting her face so that they could look into each other’s eyes. Sniffling, Jemma gave her a watery smile. “I know. I know, mom. You’re always there for me, but I can be there for you, too. We both lost daddy.”

Tears flowed freely for both of them, and Louise leaned back against the sofa cushions as they hugged each other tightly.

It felt so strange to her.

Both of them consoling the other.

As a mother, she'd felt that it was her responsibility to be there for her daughter.

Now, they were there for each other.

It felt good.

But she was also sad that her daughter seemed to have matured beyond her years.

"You know you can always talk to me about things, right?"

Jemma nodded, her tears wetting the front of Louise's blouse. "I don't want to make you sad."

"Nothing makes me sadder than knowing that you're hurting, Jemma. We can be there for each other and help each other."

"I know." Jemma's sniffles eased a little and Louise felt her daughter shift in her embrace.

"And now we have Gray."

Gray?

Louise looked over at Grayson and saw his face.

He was stunned.

Shocked.

And in a way, he looked like he was melting.

Jemma's hand was holding onto Gray's shirt sleeve.

Against his thick arm, her daughter's hand looked smaller than it should.

Jemma's fingers gripped the plaid flannel fabric and held tight, reminding Louise of what it used to look like when Jemma would hold on to her teddy as a little girl.

When she fell asleep holding onto the super-soft plush fabric, there was nothing that could pry her hand from its comforting surface.

Louise could feel Jemma falling asleep.

All of the sadness and tears, the emotional turmoil was weighing on all three of them, and Louise knew that she'd have to get Jemma into bed soon, or they'd have to sleep out there on the sofa.

She just wasn't strong enough to carry her growing daughter down the hall to her room.

Almost as if Grayson had read her mind, he looked at her with a soft smile. "If I could, I'd carry her for you, but--"

"I know." She smiled at him. "You've done so much tonight," she explained. "I don't know how I'll be able to thank you."

Louise felt a heavy warmth on her arm and felt Grayson's fingers gently squeeze her forearm.

"You don't have to, Lou... Jemma and you both deserve to be happy. If I can help. I want to."

She nodded at him and managed a wavering smile in his direction. "You've done so much, already." She shifted on the sofa, moving toward the edge before she sat up fully. "Let me get her to bed."

Somehow, she got to her feet. Jemma was getting bigger by the day, so she felt her knees almost buckle before she managed to stand up tall.

Louise only made it a few steps away when Jemma lifted her head and looked back over her shoulder.

"Gray?"

Louise grinned at the new nickname.

"Yeah, Jem?"

"Can we keep reading tomorrow night?"

She didn't see Grayson's reaction, but she felt that question deep in her own chest.

She also felt hope rising up inside of her, racing with joy.

When she heard his answer, his voice was deeper, louder than she expected.

Then she felt a little additional weight on her shoulder and a soft shake.

Leaning her head to one side, she saw Grayson's finger rumpling Jemma's hair.

"Of course we can, Jem. Of course we can."

Jemma sagged against her shoulder. "Okay, mom. I'm ready to go to sleep."

"All right, sweetheart. Let's get you tucked in."



He didn't go into Jemma's room to watch Louise put her to bed, but he walked halfway down the hall and leaned against the wall, massaging his thigh over the sleeve.

When he'd been injured, he felt the loss of his competitive career as if he'd lost the leg instead of having it broken.

Not being able to compete at rodeos in the future felt like he'd lost some of his purpose.

He'd always been eager to get to the next rodeo.

Take the next ride.

It wasn't about the buckles or the prize money so much as the adrenaline that coursed through his veins when he swung up into the saddle.

After his injury, he felt like that was lost to him forever.

He felt like it made him less than a man.

Less than he'd been for his whole life.

And now?

Standing there in the hallway, unable to carry that precious child into her bedroom and tuck her in without risking his recovery, made him feel like half a man.

He heard Louise whispering to her daughter, the two offering their nightly prayers together. He listened and he heard heart.

He heard love.

Love that he wanted to be a part of.

Just a few minutes before, he'd held Jemma as she'd cried and mourned her father.

And then he'd handed her to her mother and had the honor of watching the truest form of love expressed between a mother and child.

It was just that simple and that amazing.

Grayson leaned against the wall, feeling weary and the exhaustion set into his bones.

He was getting old.

Too old to be left standing on the outskirts of the kind of love he'd been witness to.

That wasn't really the issue upsetting him.

It wasn't just witnessing it and not being a part of it. It was not being a part of their family.

Yes, it had been a couple of weeks with Louise and Jemma living in his home, but he was a man used to making decisions in seconds.

Riding.

Roping.

Both activities came down to microseconds. Take one second too long to make a decision and you could find yourself breathing in dirt.

Or you could find yourself under the hooves of an angry animal more than happy to gore you or stomp you to death.

Wanting to be a part of their family was pure instinct and need, but it was still disconcerting as fuck.

Grayson had family throughout his life.

He'd loved his parents and a few grandparents who had lived long enough to make a life-long impression on his heart and soul.

And he still had John in his life and John's growing family, but none of those relationships had been his choice.

They were family that he'd been born into or chosen by others.

Louise.

Jemma.

He wanted them to be a part of his life.

Live in his home.

And that scared him.

It frightened him in a way that only one moment had up until he'd met the two ladies down the hall.

The accident had brought him face to face with death, but meeting Louise and spending time with her and her daughter had given him a taste of a life that he'd never imagined could be possible.

The light in the room dimmed and Grayson stayed there, watching the doorway for a long moment, until Louise stepped out into the hall.

She didn't have any idea that he was watching her.

He could tell that by the way she lifted up a hand to pull the tie from her hair.

The soft waves that he'd only seen a time or two in the last few weeks came down, swishing just above her shoulders.

He didn't want to admit how much his fingers ached to free that tie from her hair.

Grayson wanted to run his finger through her hair, comb it back from her face and someday wrap her hair around his fingers and tug her head back so his lips could touch her neck.

He'd always believed that he was like a lot of men. He wasn't a breast man, nor an ass man. He liked all of a woman's parts.

But there was something about Louise's neck.

It might be the loose ends of her hair that tickled the sides of her neck.

Lord knows he liked watching her across the room as she cleaned dishes in the sink. The soft light coming from the fixture above the sink cast its glow over her.

It lit the soft planes of her skin against the dark waves of her hair.

And thank fuck for the blanket that he left in the living room. He'd pulled that over himself more than a few times when he'd gotten ridiculously hard from just the sight of her neck.

He knew what her scent was like. They moved around each other almost effortlessly in the kitchen and living areas of the house.

It was during those times that he'd leaned in to catch a breath of her scent.

Soft, clean and gentle.

Her scent haunted him at night.

Grayson often woke up in the middle of the night from a dream where he held her tightly in his embrace, his face buried into the side of her neck, her body bare and breathtaking wrapped around his larger form.

And the sounds she made when he was throbbing deep inside of her.

“Ohhh.”

Fuck.

Just like that.

The soft light in the room from Jemma's nightlight, lit her from behind and he could see the hand she held against her neck.

He couldn't see if her face was tense or tight from pain, but he could hear the ache in her tone.

“You want me to help with that?”



“Oh!” Louise’s eyes opened and met his gaze from a few feet away. “Sorry, I didn’t think you were out here.”

“I wanted to wait for you.”

“Really?”

He thought he heard a smile in her voice, but his eyes were fixed on her neck. She was rubbing the back of her neck.

“I might not be all that quick on my feet, but I’ve got strong hands.”

She leaned back, her eyes widening. “I’m sorry, what?”

Grayson knew he should probably back off of the offer, but if he was being truthful to himself, he really wanted to touch her.

Nothing intimate, he knew.

But he had a feeling that he could relieve some of the pain in her neck and get a chance to breathe in her scent.

It might just be some kind of personal punishment on his part, but he was willing, *no*, more than willing to suffer for the opportunity to touch her again.

“Your neck. You look like it’s hurting you.”

She shrugged and lowered her hand, but the gesture looked like it hurt as well. “Jemma’s growing like a weed. I bet she’s going to grow out of her pants in a month or so.” She sighed. “We’ll have to look for a place where we can buy some clothes to get her through the growth spurt.”

Louise hesitated, and he wondered what she’d been about to say.

There were things they didn’t talk about.

He’d tried to talk about her plans after the summer, but Louise had been closed-lipped about it. Grayson wasn’t sure if he understood her reticence to hold things back from him.

He’d have no problem listening to her or offering his help.

Maybe she just didn’t understand that.

Yet.

“Why don’t we sit down, and I’ll see if I can help you with that pain in your neck.”

Louise looked at him in a quizzical way and just when he was sure she would turn him down and excuse herself, she started to laugh.

Her easy-going laughter had him laughing along with her.

He shook his head. “How do you do it?”

She had her hands covering her mouth. “Do what?”

“Laugh like this.” He gestured at her. “You amaze me, Lou. You can laugh at the drop of a hat and in that moment, I think you’ve gone over the edge.”

“But...” She grinned at him. “I hope there’s a but in there.”

He’d love to talk about her butt, or touch it, but this wasn’t the time. Instead, he gestured for her to move closer to him.

“You start to laugh and suddenly the whole mood in the room changes. Things are lighter. Easier. More relaxed.”

Before he could stop himself, he lifted a hand and trailed his knuckles gently across her cheek.

“Things are more... you.”

“Me?” She waved him off and started to walk toward the main room, slowing to let him walk beside her.

He was almost sure she had no idea that she was doing it. She was just amazing. She had empathy and kindness as a part of her genetic makeup.

If opposites attract, then Louise was his exact opposite.

Crazy?

Absolutely.

But he was quickly finding out that crazy was likely just what he needed.

Because he wanted her. And the whole amazing package that she came with.

“So, what do you think, Lou? Straight to bed? Or will you let me try to get rid of some of your pain?”

He saw the hesitation in her expression, but a moment later, her shoulders dropped, and her smile eased a little. “I can’t pass up a massage, can I?”

“It’s all up to you, Lou. But I think I can help.”

“Okay.” She nodded at him, smiling. “Sounds good to me.”

Grayson gestured toward the main room and followed her. “Let’s find a comfortable place for you to sit.”

“I think that’ll be half the fun,” she stopped and turned to look at him with another devastating smile, “just having some quiet time with you.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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**F**or days after, Louise would find herself stopping what she was doing and drifting off into her own thoughts, her hands rubbing over her shoulders or trailing her fingers across the back of her neck.

It was crazy, really.

It was just... a massage.

He was being kind.

He had been there to help her when she was struggling with her emotions as well as the pain in her back and shoulders.

That's all it was.

At least, that's what she told herself.

Her mind understood that.

Her body?

Her body ached for more.

Her emotions were distracting her during her work. Not enough that she wasn't getting everything done, but in those moments where she'd had free time and read her books.

She was now daydreaming about Grayson. About the warmth in his hands. The slightly raspy touch of his calluses against her skin. The way he seemed to know exactly where to press and how hard it was to touch her.

Those feelings?

Those thoughts?

They were still with her days later.

And she wasn't sure she'd ever forget his touch.

As she stood at the sink, she watched John's truck move down the drive. There was something exciting happening down at the barn, he'd explained. And Jemma, eager to help and spend time around the horses, jumped at the chance to go.

While Jemma was changing for the barn, John had checked in with Louise and let her know that they'd be paying Jemma for her work at the barn.

When Louise had tried to talk him out of it, she didn't get far.

It was only when he gave a look that she recognized as a 'Brandt' thing, that she realized it was futile to argue with either of the Brandt brothers.

Jemma had no idea about the arrangement. That's all that she asked of John.

Jemma was helping at the barn because she truly enjoyed it. She was growing leaps and bounds, not just in her confidence, but in her personality.

Louise realized that her daughter had been too reserved for too long.

As the dust down the road began to settle, she sighed and shook her head.

Was that her own problem?

Had she been too quiet, too hesitant in her own life?

Too busy surviving to really and truly live?

A wind blew across the ground outside. She could see it in the dust that it stirred up going across the window and the bend and sway of some of the young trees that had been planted down the driveway.

It was likely hot outside. Summer, she laughingly reminded herself, got hot. And that wind, right at that moment, might feel pretty good.

Leaning one hand on the edge of the sink, she lifted her other and touched the back of her neck. It was cool inside the house, but outside the temperature against the back of her neck might be warm enough to feel like his hands were on her again.

Slowly, she moved the palm of her hand across the nape of her neck and felt strands of her hair catch in between her fingers.

The gentle pull of her hair made her smile. Tight-lipped and tender, she wondered if it might just happen again.

It was dangerous.

It was dangerous because she wanted it like she wanted her next breath.

It had been so long since she'd felt someone touch her with that kind of gentle strength that she ached for it again.

Sitting on the ottoman in front of the sofa, tucked carefully between his legs she'd been only too conscious of her surroundings.

The inside of his thigh against her hip, the pressure she'd felt as he leaned into the massage.

And every once in a while, the warm heat of his breath on her neck.

The memory was keen, causing her body to react as if she was there with him again. She couldn't stop the way her breasts grew heavier with want, or the way her nipples tightened into tender points. She certainly couldn't tell herself not to ache between her legs or grow wet with need.

Not when every night that she was alone she woke up, staring at the ceiling until she gave into temptation and let her hands move over her skin.

One hand playing over her sensitive breasts and the other slipping into her shorts until her fingers curled in the growing heat between her folds and ending with her fingers pinched around her clit as she turned her face into her pillow to hide the ragged rasp of her release as it was pushed from her throat.

And every night, he was there. Not just in her imagination, but on the other side of the wall.

It was also in her daydreams, her wandering mind.

If he was seated on the sofa, his leg propped up on the table, she'd think of how she might get herself to fit on his lap.

Was there room for her knees on either side of his hips?

Would she be able to feel him inside of her without causing him pain?

Would he even want her to be on his lap?

Hunger to suck her breast into his mouth, tongue her painfully tight nipples and make her beg to-

“Lou?”

Her chin dropped to her chest as when she opened her eyes just a hint, she could see the tight points of her nipples poking against the thin fabric of her tank top.

The thin cotton bra underneath it did nothing to hold them back. If she turned around, he'd likely see her needy state.

“Louise? You okay?”

“Fine.” She answered him too quickly. A little too forcefully. “I'm,” Louise shook herself at the thought and struggled to relax her tone and her body, “I'm fine. Sorry. I was just dozing off, I guess.”

“I think you're working too hard if you're falling asleep on your feet. Come on over to the couch and sit down.”

She was ready to shrug off his suggestion until his hand touched her shoulder.

It was a simple, innocent touch, but the need in her body roared to the forefront of her mind.

And other parts of her body.

She kept trying to tell herself that her physical reaction to him was just that. She'd been alone so long that her body was leaping at any chance to feel those kinds of sensations again.

Her mind was eager to jump to those conclusions, but her body told another story entirely.

It hungered for him.

It was his body that her own wanted, but it was the man he was on the inside that made her laugh and smile more than not.

He listened to her, and he asked her questions and let her lay her head on his shoulder when she needed his support.

Yes, she wanted his body and the pleasure she knew they could bring each other, but she wanted the man too.

There he was, right behind her, but she was too scared to turn around and let him see the want in her eyes.

What if he didn't feel the same way?

What if-

"Louise? Honey, you're worrying me."

Before she could steel herself, she felt his hand on her hip.

The soft tap of sound, she reasoned, was him laying his cane against the cabinet to her side.

When she drew in her next breath, she felt his arm brush up against her side and looking down she saw his hand take hold of the edge of the sink.

"Did I do something wrong?"

Did he... what?

"No," she shook her head, "nothing wrong. I'm just-"

"Just what, Louise?"



She froze in place, the heat of his breath fanned against her neck.

“It... It’s nothing bad, I promise.”

“Good.” The hand on her hip gave her a little squeeze and that tender touch sent her mind into a needy spiral, her body adding its own eagerness into the mix. “I want to be responsible for the good stuff.”

The good stuff.

Her mind instantly brought up an image of what they must look like.

His large body pressed up against hers, trapping her between himself and the sink.

A quick check of her height told her that she wasn’t tall enough to bend over the sink, but-

“Louise. Tell me...” He moved closer, bringing the top of his good thigh against the back of hers and that hard length she felt against her? Well, there was no way to miss what that was. “Am I crazy, honey? Am I the only one here feeling this... this thing between us?”

“If I am, just say so and I’ll stop. I’ll even beg your damn forgiveness, because I don’t want you to go away until you absolutely have to.”

The hand on her hip turned slightly until his hand slid just under the hem of her tank top.

She could feel his thumb against her belly.

She knew she had to give him an answer. The last thing she wanted was for him to pull away. To regret the heat and comfort he was offering to her.

“Gray?” Her voice shook and her nipples tightened even more. “Gray?”

“Tell me, honey. Tell me what you want, because I know what I want. I hope to heaven that they’re the same thing.”

Louise tried to use her words. She wanted to answer him with something akin to intelligent thought, but her body had

other ideas.

Arching her back, she felt his hard length press against her lower back.

He wanted her. She could feel it.

She heard his soft exhale as he rocked his cock against her through his jeans and her shorts.

“Is that it, Lou? You want me like I want you?” The hand he had against her belly slowly skimmed up and over her ribs, coming to rest with the side of a finger under her breast.

A soft whimper escaped her lips.

“Tell me, Lou.” She felt his finger sweep over the bottom curve of her breast. “Tell me if you want me as much as I want you.”

Words failed her.

She wanted to say it. She wanted to give him the answer he wanted, but it felt like her heart was in her throat, keeping her from uttering a word.

So she turned around.

Careful about his healing leg, she managed to turn so she could look him in the eye and hopefully he'd see in her own gaze what her answer was.

But Grayson waited for her.

His arousal didn't dim. She felt it even more pressed against the soft curve of her belly. The hand that had touched her breasts so gently was on her lower back.

His gaze moved over her face as if he was committing it to memory.

“Cat got your tongue, Honey? Or don't you want me to touch you like this?”

His hand slid lower on her back, encouraging her to rock into him and feel his unmistakable need for her.

Again, her voice failed her, but she had a feeling that she could prove it to him some other way.

Louise lifted her hands and set them on his powerful shoulders.

He was so thick in his chest and arms, and, she thought with a smile, his thighs too.

Her hands smoothed over his shoulders and then over the hard planes of his pecks. Lower they went until she felt the softer sides of his body, her hands going lower still until she leaned forward and gently grabbed a hold of his butt.

It was so beyond what she was comfortable with she felt her cheeks heat with the rush of blood, but she wasn't done there.

Leaning in, she pressed her lips against his.

The first kiss seemed to surprise them both, but the second and the third traded back and forth between the two of them as they silently debated who might be the one in charge.

Then it seemed that Grayson had won. His tongue slipping between her lips to tangle with her own. The scratch of his beard against her skin wasn't all that bad.

In fact, its texture left a broad path of sensation where it touched.

For a moment, because a moment was all that she could spare, she imagined what it might be like to feel his beard against the sensitive skin of her inner thighs.

She moaned into his mouth and Grayson doubled his efforts, his tongue mating with hers as their teeth clashed from time to time.

It was nearing the point that they might need a little more privacy.

Louise didn't expect anyone to come up the driveway. Jemma would be down at the barn for a few more hours, but there was always a possibility that someone might see.

“Where?”

He opened his eyes to meet her gaze. “Where?”

“Uh.” She nipped her teeth against her lower lip before she spoke again. “Do you want to come to my room?”

The words were foreign on her tongue.

When she’d been intimate with her husband, things had just worked.

This was different.

There was a kind of desperation that she felt to have his man inside of her.

The nerves in her body, especially the ones that led to the more pleasurable spots on her skin, were already buzzing with need.

“If you mean to take me into your room so you can have your way with me, Honey? Go right on ahead.”

He grinned at her.

“Just don’t think that I won’t want to get my hands and mouth all over your body.”

His words sent waves of pleasure throughout her whole body.

“Then you should come with me.”

She reached down and put his cane in his hand before she moved and before she’d made it more than a step away, he had her hand in his.

# JUST IN CASE... PLEASE READ

My last several books seem to be cursed!

The placeholder file is send out instead of the complete book!

So, just in case... I'm adding this page to the placeholder file so if you only receive a book that seems incomplete, I've got your back!

[VISIT THIS PAGE](#) to get your copy of the full book to read while I'm wrangling to get the full file to show in your Kindle/Kindle app!

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