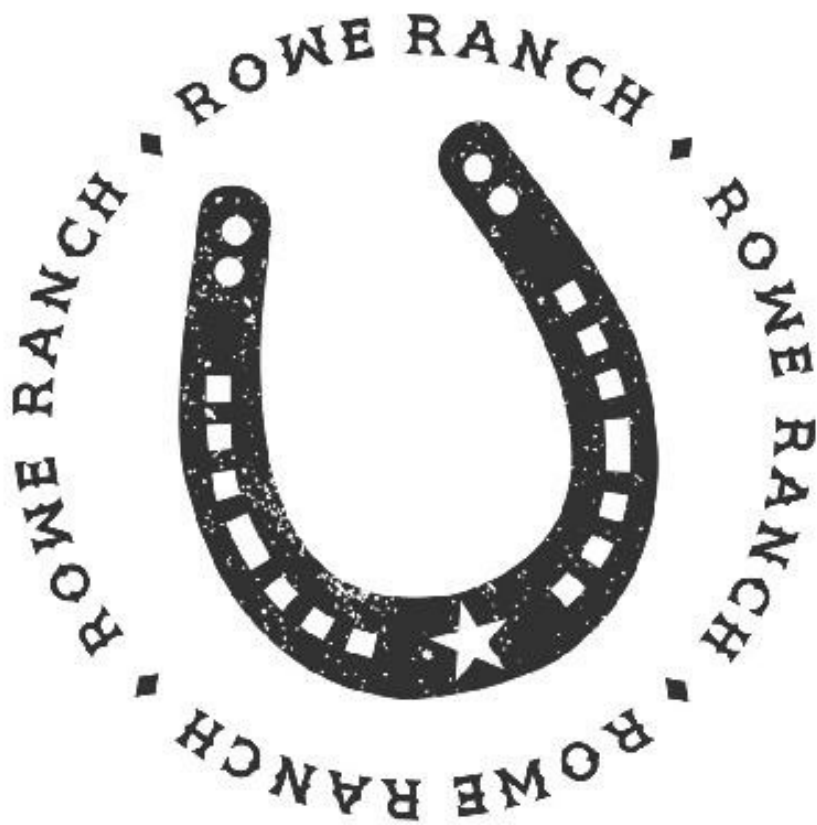


ROWE  
BROTHERS  
RANCH

# STRAY

DJ KRIMMER



*Stray*

ROWE BROTHERS' RANCH

BOOK ONE

DJ KRIMMER



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*To all the Ozzys out there — you are strong and you are seen. Never forget  
the strength that's inside you.*

*All my love*

*DJ*

“I survived, carried on, glad to be like a weed, a wild red poppy,  
rooted in life.”

— WILD POPPIES, MARILYN BUCK

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### Come Stalk Me

# *Content & Trigger Warnings*

I do my best to present any and all content in the gentlest of lights but please, take care and make sure to check in with yourself. Only you know you well enough to decide if you should proceed.

Remember to always put your mental health first and you matter.

## Possible Triggers:

Stray Contains:

- Scenes of Rape
- Scenes of Graphic Violence
- PTSD Flashbacks
- Anxiety & Depression
- Child Abandonment
- Death

## Content:

- Kidnap
- Sex Trafficking
- Abuse & Assault
- Sick Parent
- Explicit Language
- Explicit Sexual Situations

Ozzy  
~

## PROLOGUE

“Fuck!” I gasp loudly when the bucket of freezing water sloshes over my beaten, naked body, causing me to shiver in the cold night air.

“Get your filthy ass cleaned up.” The masked man growls as he throws a bar of soap at me from his place on the porch. It must be nice getting to wear a winter coat and face mask. Reaching down, I try to grab the bar, but it slips out of my hand. The man grips the heavy metal chain in his hand and jerks it, causing the sharp prong collar around my neck to bite into my undoubtedly already infected wounds. Letting out a scream in pain, I fall to my knees, grab the soap, and begin running it over my shivering body, washing away mud, blood, and god knows what else.

“Hurry up,” he barks. “And wash that disgusting ass of yours. I ain’t putting my pecker in there until you wash those nasty fucks out.” I finish rubbing the soap over my body before standing and bracing myself before he turns on the hose and blasts me with the icy water. My scream is silent while I spin to get fully rinsed off before he yanks me by the chain back into the dilapidated cabin.

“God dammit, Hugh!” the older man’s Australian accent growls as he smacks the one holding my chain upside the head. “Ain’t nobody gonna pay to fuck her with that nasty shit in her neck.” Really? Because it hasn’t stopped either of you or anyone else you’ve let in so far.

Hugh shrugs his broad-set shoulders. “Patrick, if the stupid cunt would stop running, she wouldn’t need the collar.” The older man turns to me.

“You ain’t broken in yet, brumby?” he chuckles as he smacks my cheek before letting out an exaggerated sigh. “Well, I guess I’m going to have to keep trying.” I move to back away, but Hugh tightens his grip on my chain as

the man towers over me.

“Remember, brumby,” His breath reeks of cigarettes, and I cry out as he grips my collar and squeezes it to cut off my air supply. “The harder you fight, the more fun I have. Now, bend over and stare out the window. I want you to see how close you are to your freedom while I fuck your cunt into submission.”

Ozzy  
~

FIVE YEARS LATER

“Oh, you’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” I mutter in annoyance as I pull down my oversized sunglasses to look around at... nothing. Nothing but land and sky as far as the eye can see. The culture shock is hitting me like a ton of bricks. It’s like I’m stepping into a whole other world. There’s a wooden home with a wraparound porch with barns on either side, and the entire place is overrun with wild animals. They are everywhere. Okay, I guess farm animals aren’t “wild,” I don’t think... but still.

Taking a deep breath, I put Gretchen, my Volkswagen Jetta, into drive as I creep down the long dirt drive.

“Shit!” I scream, slamming on my brakes as a small pig runs out in front of me. “What the fuck!” Throwing Gretchen into park, I whip open my door and get out of the old girl.

“Sorry about th—Oh my god...” The large man lets out a breath as he looks me up and down. “Can I?” he coughs to clear his throat as he smirks and waggles his brows. “Can I help you, angel?” Ah, this must be the infamous Carter. Before accepting this live-in nurse job, I was warned that the three sons of the man I’d be caring for were a handful- specifically, Carter and his apparent obsession with getting a little *too close* with the aids at the agency they had been using.

“Ozzy Davenport,” I say, noticing two other large men walking up behind him. *You got this, Oz. You knew there would be men here.* “I believe I’m here to take care of your father.” The other two men flank the one I’m still assuming is Carter. And the one on the left with longer brown hair huffs loudly.

“*You* are a nurse?” Same shit, no matter where I go. Never mind how qualified I am. All they see is the tattoos. I’m covered from the neck down, my straight hair split down the middle, half silver and half black. Plus, there are the visible piercings—my quarter-size black plugs, dimple piercings, and nostril ring. I cross my arms over my large chest and raise a dark brow at the man, daring him to continue.

“Yeah, for nearly a decade now.” His piercing blue eyes roll as he shakes his head.

“I’m going to throttle Indy for this,” he mutters to the still-grinning man. My eyes narrow as I feel a surge of protectiveness for the only friend I’ve had in the last five years.

“For what?” I ask sharply. “Finding you a nurse willing to help you since your brother here can’t keep his dick to himself?” The taller guy busts out laughing, and Carter’s smirk widens.

“So,” he purrs, getting close to me. Too close. “You’ve heard of me.” His hand goes out to touch me, but in an instant, I kick him behind his knee, causing him to fall to the ground into a pile of mud... or maybe it’s shit. Yep, definitely shit. His brothers start moving, but I press my foot down, the heel of my black stiletto dangerously close to Carter’s crotch, and they all freeze.

“Let’s get one thing straight,” I state slowly, looking at each of them. “You will talk to me like I have no sex parts, understand? To you, I am a shapeless robot. I am your great-great-grandma. Whatever you have to tell yourself to keep your piss-ant penis in fucking check. And if you can’t, and we have to have this discussion again,” I press into my heel, causing Carter to hiss. “I will pop those useless nuts like grape tomatoes. Am I making myself clear?” Raising my brow, I wait for him to give his answer. Carter nods furiously, and I give him a bright smile. “Perfect! See! Now we can be friends.” I beam while removing my foot and stepping back. The two standing men help Carter up, who is cupping his crotch like a protective mother would her baby.

“Jensen,” the long-haired man says to the tallest one. “Take Carter inside and get him some ice.” Snorting, I roll my eyes while Carter limps away.

“I barely touched him,” I mutter before turning and walking to get my luggage out of Gretchen.

“We have to ride horses,” the man grunts. “Any soreness or tenderness can make riding impossible.”

I clutch my hands to my chest and push out my bottom lip. “Oh my gosh,



I am so sorry.” I lay the mock sympathy on extra thick. “Maybe your brother will think twice before touching someone without their consent next time.”

“Get over yourself.” He snorts before snatching my bags from me. “He goes to touch your arm, and you knock him back and nearly impale his nuts? You won’t get along around here if that’s the attitude you’re giving out.”

“Well, fortunately, I’m not here to get along. I’m here to take care of your father.” He huffs out a laugh as we walk towards the front of the house.

“Right,” he says, opening the door and looking me over once more. “And how do you plan to do anything with those?” He gestures to my long, stiletto-shaped black and red nails.

“Lucky for you,” I state while trying to control my annoyance rapidly bubbling to the surface. “My nails and my job are none of your concern.”

He smirks, though the hard edge to his voice tells me he’s as annoyed with me as I am with him. “This is my house.” He glares down at me, and his jaw tenses behind his short beard. “I’m the one signing your paychecks. So your job performance, as well as your nails, are my concern. Now, if you’re done running that mouth, I’ll show you to your room.”

I glare but say nothing. The truth is, I uprooted my life to come here. If I leave here, I’ll have no job and no place to stay besides Gretchen. I try to take in the house while following him through the spacious, open living space. Everything is bright and airy, and windows are everywhere, allowing the bright sun to light up the area, but it’s the view that stops me in my tracks. It’s unlike anything my city girl ass has ever seen before. The ranch spreads out like a painting. The land seems to go on forever; there’s so much of it, and it’s all so breathtakingly beautiful it doesn’t seem real. As we continue around towards the staircase, I can’t help the small smile when I see horses running and cows grazing in the pasture. I’m living in a place that has cows in a pasture, and it’s not even a big deal.

Tearing myself away from the picturesque view that the massive windows perfectly frame, I notice how the home’s interior is just as beautiful. It’s like something out of a Country Living Magazine. The exposed dark wood beams cross the ceilings, and a gorgeous hardwood floor covers the primary and upper levels. It’s interesting that despite how filthy these men seem to be, the house is spotless. We walk up the steps and make a right at the top. He leads me down the hall with walls covered in family photos of kids at various stages of life, along with ribbons and medals. We stop at a dark wooden door, and he turns to me while twisting the handle.

“This will be your area.” He states, walking in while I follow behind him. The room is nice, spacious, and full of light like the rest of the house. The first part is like a small living area: an oversized loveseat, television, and bookcase with more knick-knacks than actual books. I walk further and have to steady myself with the wall. The bed is facing a wall-to-wall window looking out at the wood line and...

*“That’s it, Brumby! Run, run, run!”*

My knees buckle as memories of Patrick’s laugh turn my blood to ice, and my hearing becomes muffled. Where are the curtains? Can I be seen from up here? Who could be out there? Out there watching... waiting.

“Guess you ain’t used to the view.” His voice startles me so severely it causes me to fall backwards against the wall and have to force back a cry.

“You... alright?” He asks cautiously, and I try to tamp down the embarrassment as I right myself.

“I’m fine,” I say crisply, turning away from the window. “And no, I haven’t seen a view like that in a while.” I notice a door off to the side and point to it. “Closet?” I ask, trying to change the subject.

“No, there isn’t a closet here anymore.” He states, gesturing to the armoire and dresser. “We converted the old walk-in closet into a private bathroom. It ain’t much, but you don’t have to share it with any of us.” He shrugs before putting my bags next to my bed. “Mama just got your bedding washed last night, so it’s clean. I’m sure she’ll be around here soon to meet you.”

“Is she up often now?” I ask, trying to go into professional mode, mainly to distract myself from the massive window and the feeling of dread trying to wrap its dark arms around me. It’s funny, honestly, how two humans can take up the same space, and one can be drowning while the other has no idea.

“Uh yeah,” His eyes flicker from mine to the window and back. *Does he see something?* “She still needs a lot of help on the stairs, and you’ll often find her trying to do more than she should, but she’s been sticking with the exercises that Indy and the physical therapist gave her.” I give him a slight nod. Their mother, Dorothy, had been recently bedridden after a broken hip. My friend Indy, who got me this job, and her boyfriend, this man’s brother, came here last month to help since I couldn’t get here any faster. I had to wait to leave the state until after the hearing, until after I knew they’d been put away for good.

“Okay.” I let out a breath before staring up at him. It annoys me that this

man is still much taller than I am despite my massive heels. “Well, I’ll get changed, and then get ready to meet your dad.”

“What,” he huffs out a laugh. “That’s not your uniform?” He gestures to my leather leggings and black tank top with a red, long-sleeved fishnet top over it.

“No, I prefer nipple tassels and a g-string. That okay with you, bud?” I snap, getting a little pissed by the way he’s looking down his nose at me. He rolls his blue eyes before shaking his head and turning to leave.

“It’s Jackson. Not bud.”



My reflection stares back at me, and I have to say, I’m proud of how well I’m hiding the anxiety I’m feeling. “I am a strong person,” I whisper as I run my fingers through my hair to pull my hair up into a messy bun. “I’m resilient, I’m brave, and I’m beautiful.” I recite my therapist’s words while refusing to allow my eyes to trail over my tattooed body. I turn and slip the black long-sleeve shirt on before turning back around. “I’m a survivor. I am a fighter, and my past can’t hurt me anymore.” My voice cracks, and I glance towards the window again. It just had to be facing the fucking wood line.

Walking from the bathroom through the bedroom and into the sitting area, I grab my cotton leggings and slip them on. Sliding into my chucks before taking one more breath and opening the door.

“Oh!” I breathe out, surprising the older woman standing in my doorway.

“Oh, I’m sorry, sweetheart!” She gasps out softly. “I was bringing you some clean towels. I’m Dorothy.” I give her a friendly smile.

“Ozzy, I was just coming to introduce myself to you and your husband.”

“Perfect!” Dorothy beams after handing me the basket of warm towels. They smell fresh, and I have to resist the urge to pull one to my face and inhale. I set the basket on the loveseat as Dorothy waves her hand for me to follow her. I notice her gait as she walks on her cane. She’s healing well from the break, but I will have to make sure she is resting as often as I can get her to. The last thing we want is for her to do too much and have a setback.

Dorothy taps on the door before opening it. She stops and turns back to

me, worry etching her weathered face. “Listen,” she says softly. “Morris is a good man, but he is an old rancher, and on top of that, the cancer... It’s taking everything from him, and he’s bitter.” I give her a reassuring smile as I pat her hand.

“Mrs. Ro—”

“Dorothy.” She states firmly, and I smile again.

“Dorothy, trust me when I say your husband can’t hurt me, alright? I promise you, it will be okay.” She nods, though I still see the apprehension front and center on her face. Dorothy opens the door completely, and we walk into the bedroom. Unlike mine, this one is smaller, with just a hospital bed and television. There is a small window, but the blinds cover it. It’s dimly lit, and the air is stale in here.

“Morris,” Dorothy says while turning up the lights. “This is Ozzy Davenport. She’s the nurse Indy sent.” I stare at the frail older man in the bed. His blue eyes narrow at me while he eyes me up and down.

“Ozzy? What is with all these weird ass names?” His tired, raspy voice huffs out.

“Well, if I came in here with a name like Mary Ann, you wouldn’t have the opportunity to criticize it. Now would you?” I raise a brow as he scoffs.

“Like I need a weird name to do that. My god, you have more tattoos than my son. And what’s that shit in your face?”

I give him a shrug and sigh dramatically. “Daddy issues,” I confess, hanging my head. “It’s a shame, really. I mean, if I had just been loved a little more, maybe I would’ve made something of myself, could’ve gone to college, landed a good job, and helped people. Yet here I am, covered in ‘shit.’” I smirk as I meet his narrowed eyes.

“I don’t like you.” He spits. “You going to be calling my hard-working boys in here every time you need to lift something? Jesus Christ, my cattle have taken shits bigger than you.”

“Might wanna stop feeding them so much then.” I shrug while looking toward his dresser, where all his medication bottles have been laid out. I pick one up, scanning over the label.

“Don’t be stealing my pills to get high now!” He barks before going into a coughing fit. Dorothy tries to help to calm him down.

“Now, why would I need your crummy pills when I brought a kilo of my own shit?” I wave my hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about me, old man. I’ll be flying high as soon as I crawl into bed tonight.”

Morris snarls his upper lip, but I notice a gleam in his eyes that wasn't there when I first walked in. He's got a fire underneath that gruff exterior. He likes to banter, and my guess is everyone around here has taken to babying and coddling him. Well, lucky for the old man, I can dish it out as well as I can take it.

"So," I look around the room. "Locked away in your tower, huh?" Morris rolls his eyes.

"Might come as a shock, but I'm dying. Can't really get out there and wrestle the cattle anymore." He mutters, and I lean against the wall.

"You could be downstairs in the living room," I suggest while noticing Dorothy's eyes soften. Morris shakes his tired head.

"I ain't making those boys walk by and see what I've become. Best I stay out of their way; they got a ranch to run."

"Wow," I say flatly. "How depressing. You want some cheese with that whine?" Dorothy snaps her gaze to mine, and I notice her tensing. She looks ready to yell at me when it happens. Morris lets out the softest of chuckles while staring at me.

"You're going to be a pain in my ass." He muses, and I smirk.

"Please, like you'd want it any other way."



"He hasn't so much as cracked a smile in nearly a year," Dorothy says, her voice full of appreciation and sadness. I give her a small smile as we make our way down the steps.

"Mama!" I hear Jackson's loud voice before turning to see him running up the steps. "Stop, you could hurt yourself! And what in the hell are you doing?" He snaps at me, and I feel the icy anxiety filling me up again. "You're a damn nurse! You should know better than to let her go downstairs unassisted!"

"Jackson Morris Rowe!" Dorothy snaps and smacks his arm before I have a chance to straighten out my chaotic thoughts. Fuck, his voice is almost terrifying when he's yelling. "She is helping me. I'm leaning on the banister, and she's next to me! Apologize immediately!"

“No,” I state firmly as I move around him. I need to get away from him before I have an anxiety attack. “I don’t do apologies. You say what you feel and leave it there. I’ll run into town for you now, Dorothy.” With that, I walk out of the house and towards Gretchen.

Once I’m seated and the door is closed. I lean my head against the steering wheel and allow the tears to roll. Not because Jackson hurt my feelings but from the panic trying to drown me. Today has been a lot so far, and I’m not used to being around men. Especially so many large ones. His voice, when he yelled, it rattled me to my core.

I pull myself up right and let out a blood-curdling scream while flailing my arms when I see Jackson at my driver’s door. Anger - *and probably some embarrassment* - wash over me while I step out of Gretchen and glare at him.

“What the fuck is the matter with you?” I yell loudly. “You got some creepy ass stalker kink I wasn’t made aware of? Huh?” I don’t give him the chance to answer. My body is vibrating, my heart is pounding, and I feel a wave of nausea churning in my stomach. “I don’t like being touched! I don’t like being yelled at! And I sure as fuck don’t need your dumb ass sneaking up on me like some goddamn predator!” I’m panting at this point, and Jackson stares at me, bewildered.

“I...” He looks around as if he can’t believe what’s happening is real. “I came to apologize for yelling at you and to give you the list you forgot.”

“Oh,” My voice comes out tiny and full of embarrassment as I look away from his hardened face, take the paper, and walk away. Once I’m back in Gretchen, my eyes lock with Jackson’s again. His gaze is a familiar one, the one that I’ve seen on many people who are unsure how to handle me. Like I’m a wounded wolf backed into a corner. I hate that look and that I haven’t been here a day, and I’ve already brought it out of him. Jackson blinks before shaking his head and walking back to the house, probably to discuss the spectacle I just made. *Wonderful.*



Sitting in Gretchen, I exhale a long sigh while staring up at the house. The

trip to the store was a bust. Actually, that's probably an understatement. I figured it would be a rough trip. A tattooed woman with weird hair in a small town is sure to warrant some stares or whispers, but never did I expect someone to come up to me and ask if I was a prostitute. And then there was another person taking pictures of me with their phone. I don't know who, but I could hear the shutter noise on the camera app. Which if you're taking pictures of someone without their consent, why aren't you silencing your fucking phone?

Shaking off the annoyance from the trip, I walk into the house, and oh my god. I have no idea what that delicious smell is, but it travels from my nose straight to my stomach, making it growl in need. Walking into the kitchen, I smile at Dorothy as she pours something into multiple bowls.

"Chicken and dumplings?" She asks, offering me a bowl.

"I have no idea what that is, but if this is what smells so amazing, then god, yes." I smile as I sit next to Jensen and across from Jackson and Carter.

Carter chuckles. "How do you not know about chicken and dumplings?"

I shrug as I grab a roll from the middle of the table. "I don't know. I've lived in big cities my whole life. You ever had deep-dish pizza or Cincinnati chili? Not everyone grows up eating the same thing." I stick my tongue out at Carter before biting into the warm roll. God, this roll alone is the best thing I've ever eaten. "What?" I ask when all three men just stare at me.

"What the fuck was that?" Jackson asks, earning a smack from Dorothy.

"Not at the dinner table," she hisses.

"What is what?" I question, and Carter points to his tongue. Slowly, I stick my tongue back out and show them my piercing. "Just a tongue ring."

"My god," Carter breathes out, looking me up and down with a sly smirk across his angular face. "What on you isn't pierced?" I glare at him and am about to shoot back a snarky remark when Jackson punches him in the arm.

"Act your age." He grumbles before going back to his food. The rest of the meal is pretty quiet, at least on my end. Dorothy and the guys talk about the ranch and plans for some fair coming up in a few weeks, as well as winterizing the farm, not that I understand what on earth that means. They mention someone named Theo and that they are coming back here soon, and Jensen continuously mentions a girl named Niamh. I keep quiet, trying to absorb all the information and finish the food that I swear will cause me to go into a food coma. After having more than my fill, I thank Dorothy for the amazing meal before grabbing another bowl and heading upstairs to Morris.

“Meals in heels!” I grin, walking into his room. Morris snorts and looks away.

“Manners lost on you?” He grumbles, looking at his television. “You knock before entering. I could’ve been indecent.”

“First off,” I say, setting the bowl down. “Let’s not kid each other into believing either of us is anything but indecent, and second, I’m going to see your bits daily, so I’m not concerned in the least.”

Morris snorts to cover his amused laugh. He finds me funny, even if he is an asshole about it. “Can’t imagine how a charmer like you ain’t married.” Sliding his tray in front of him, I sit in the chair beside his bed.

“I’ve been married six times, actually. They all keep dying on me. Strangest thing.” Morris looks at his bowl of chicken and dumplings, then back at me.

“You’re a fucking nut job.” I grin brightly while leaning back in my seat.

“And you’re stuck with me until you kick the bucket.” I watch his face break out in an actual grin.

“Well, don’t be banking on a Christmas bonus. If I’m stuck with you, I’m gonna check out sooner.”



# Jackson

When people talk about the Rowe's, they know Jensen is the sweet but incredibly introverted and shy one; Carter is a ball of sexual energy; our eldest brother, Derek, is the one that nearly killed his best friend when he found out he was screwing his wife; Theo is the transplant sibling and the "lady killer," and I am the straight-laced, working grump. I have to be. It's not like I was given much of a choice. Derek ran off to California to become a fucking tattoo artist for celebrities, and the others needed someone to look up to besides Pops.

Our father is a hard man to get a pat on the back from. He's an amazing man, but he's complicated. I remember, at twelve years old, I successfully delivered a calf that was sideways. It was the first time that ever happened to me, and after we knew the calf was okay, I got told to wash up and get back to brushing the horses. Like I said, he's hard to get praise from. Derek and I grew up fine without it, but Carter and Theo thrive off praise, and Jensen needs routine, or he starts having panic attacks. So, my mission is to stay here and make sure shit runs smoothly and my siblings get their quota of back pats, regardless of my feelings on the matter.

Running the ranch is a constant, merciless job. There are no breaks and no room for mistakes. There is no time off, no vacations, nothing. You stop working; you stop making money. You get lazy, and accidents happen. Accidents here can cost you money, products, animals, and even your life. There was an accident a few months back when our brother Derek was visiting. A single mistake led to Derek flipping his tractor, nearly killing him. So, like I said, no mistakes. I run a tight ship. There are strict orders that must

be given and followed. And right now, I have a very curvy woman swinging her sinful hips down the driveway, and she is most definitely reading like an accident waiting to happen.

Ozzy Davenport is sexy as fuck. It would be stupid to deny it. The second I saw her, I felt an instant, infuriating attraction. She's a little less than a foot shorter than my six foot three height. Her hair is jet black on one side with silver on the other, and she is, from what I can see, covered in tattoos. She's also got dimple piercings, and last night at supper, I found out her tongue is also pierced. She's unlike anyone I've ever met. No one in our town looks like her. She wears intense eye makeup and heels that are dangerously high. It's completely impractical, but still... I can't stop appreciating it. Despite how much she pisses me off. And son, does this woman piss me the fuck off.

Last night, after our "moment," she had gone into town to the market and apparently forgotten her wallet and had to return, stating she would go back later on. She had supper with us, and then she was upstairs between her room and Pops. But now, six in the morning, this girl is wearing a white tank top and those damn leather pants that hug her ass in a way that makes my mouth water and my cock twitch. She's the kind of distraction that causes accidents. The last thing I need is to think about my father's nurse in a way that makes my cock twitch.

Perfect, she is here because Carter couldn't keep it in his pants, and now here I am.

"Where is the closest city?" Her question startles me. Shaking my head, I drop the hay bale and hold back a groan so she doesn't realize that these hundred-and-twenty-pound bales are killing me today. I don't know why it matters. I shouldn't be trying to impress her, yet here we are because, again, my cock is taking the goddamn lead here.

"Thought you went to town yesterday," I pant while taking my hat off to wipe at the sweat. "Your sense of direction is so bad you can't remember how to get back there?"

"That wasn't a city." She states, and I give her a smirk.

"Aww, come on now, Tink. Are you telling me country life is already too much?"

"Tink?"

"Yeah, you kind of remind me of that bitchy ass fairy from the cartoon. You even put your hands on your hips like her." I chuckle while pointing at her posture. She huffs and turns away.

“Fine, I’ll use my GPS; there has to be a city somewhere that I can drive to.”

“About two hours away.” I shrug, watching her entire body deflate. I chuckle while shaking my head. “Tink, you best just get used to buying online if you need something the town doesn’t have.”

Her dark brows crease, and her lips purse as she avoids my eyes. I can’t explain why, but I feel on edge suddenly. Something in my gut tells me there is more to this story. “You don’t want to go to town?” I ask and notice she doesn’t move or speak, except for the corner of her eye, it’s twitching ever so slightly. “Did something happen yesterday?” I ask calmly as I tighten my death grip on my working gloves.

Her rich brown eyes snap to me, and I watch her back away slightly as her face goes stony. “Pfft... Get over yourself,” she rolls her eyes as she walks towards her car. “Did something happen yesterday?” She mocks me—terribly—while shaking her head. “Yeah, Jackson, your scary townspeople hurt my fragile little feelings. You going to go and kick their ass for me, superman?”

I glare at her retreating figure. I hate her, goddamn it. She has been here twenty-four goddamn hours, and I’m ready to send her and her perky ass the fuck off this ranch. Indy is going to get a talking-to for sending this one. I can promise that.

“No, I was going to say if you didn’t want them to stare at your ass, maybe don’t walk around covered in metal and tattoos. You obviously enjoy the attention, so don’t feign being offended because they are giving you what you’re asking for.” She stops from getting into that busted car of hers and glares at me before slamming the door and storming back to me.

“You ever say that to me again, and I’ll quit. Not only will I quit, but I’ll make sure you can’t even get a janitor in here to care for your father, you feel me?” She pokes my chest with the tip of her pointed fingernails. “I have never done anything to deserve the deck I’ve been dealt. My tattoos are my camouflage, and if you and your pearl-clutching town can’t stand it, stop looking. I’m here to take care of your father, not be aesthetically pleasing to any of you narrow-minded assholes!”

I hear the waiver in her voice, though her eyes stay dry, but the look on her face is what gives me an uncomfortable pang in my chest.

“Ozzy,”

“Fuck you, Jackson.” She sneers. “I don’t require speaking to you until

payday.” She states before storming to her car and driving off, leaving a cloud of dirt behind as she speeds off.

“What did you do?” I hear Mama groaning from behind me.

“I have no idea... I just said she’s covered in tattoos, so people are going to stare at her.”

“Son, leave that girl alone. Your father actually seems to be willing to put up with her... I think. I don’t know. All they seem to do is trade insults, but he’s laughing, so please be nice to Ozzy.” She turns to walk back in but stops and looks back at me. “Also, the weatherman is calling for some massive storms at the end of the week, so you boys are gonna need to prep the barns for the animals, and on Friday, we’ll have to get the horses and cattle inside.”

“Is it *really* looking bad?” I groan. The last time we got this warning, nothing came of it, and we lost three days of work.

“Would I be telling you if it wasn’t?” Sighing, I take one last look up the drive before turning to go back to work.



“I think she’s funny,” Jensen says as he helps Carter and I shovel out the stalls.

“That girl will eat you alive, Jen.” Carter laughs, and I shake my head.

“Says the man that about had his nuts impaled by her shoe yesterday.”

“Y’all are just jealous because she doesn’t hate me.” Jensen grins, and I shove him away.

“That’s because your ass ain’t said five words to her!”

“Exactly! I know to keep my mouth shut!” He had me there. I’d give him that. “Speak of the devil.” He mutters while motioning with his head. I look in the direction he’s gesturing and see Ozzy stumbling through the yard to get to us in the stable.

“Why does she insist on those stupid shoes?” I mutter as Jensen gasps.

“Jackson,” he hisses. “I think she’s got titty piercings.” My eyes snap to her blessed chest and ho-ly shit. Those are pierced fucking nipples underneath that tight white t-shirt.

After pulling her heel out of the ground, Ozzy staggers into the stable,

and her slender nose instantly wrinkles at the smell. It's not a pleasant smell, I guess, but growing up here, I've become nose blind to it.

"I need one of you..." She stops as she glares at me and Carter. "Jensen, I need your help."

"Uh uh!" I shake my head and pull him back by the back of his shirt, shoving him into the stall. "My ranch, my rules. They're working. I already told you, we ain't paying you to come down here and pull us from our job."

"You done?" she asks, unimpressed. "Because if you are, I would like to tell you that your *mother* asked me to come down here and have one of you help her since *you* aren't answering your cell phone."

"Fuck," I groan while taking off my gloves. "Is she okay?"

"No, she fell, and I left her bleeding out on the floor." She deadpans while I run off. I will yell at her for that comment later, but right now, I need to get to Mom.

Running up the yard and through the house's back door, I come out of the kitchen and find her in the living room, trying to calm down Leroy, our meaner-than-shit goat. Leroy recently figured out how to open doors, and since then, he likes to break into our house and start head-butting anyone and anything until you feed him popcorn.

"Leroy!" I holler as he fakes a jump towards Mom. "I swear to god I'm gonna turn you into a stew if you don't stop with this shit." I reach up and grab my pops old rope hanging on the hook. I hear heels clicking and watch as Ozzy waltzes in and heads to the refrigerator.

"Do ya mind?" I mutter, gesturing to Leroy, who is side-eyeing me. "I'm in the middle of something here."

"You're taking too long. What is it you country people say? Shit or get off the pot?" She says while pulling food out and placing it on the counter.

"I'd like to see you try! You ever been head-butted by a testosterone-driven Billy? Because I assure you if you had, you'd be much less nonchalant." Her gaze falls to my rope, and I notice her stiffening.

"What are you doing?" She breathes out, and I can hear the nervousness in her voice. Why is she nervous about the rope?

"I'm gonna tie him and toss him back outside like always," I state, but she shakes her head before grabbing an apple off the counter and walking around me. She looks at Leroy before letting out a whistle.

"Come here, handsome," her voice is low and alluring. Fuck, talk about weird feelings. Am I jealous of how she's sweet-talking a fucking goat?

“Ozzy, no.” I hiss as she crouches down, biting a piece of apple off the core and holding it out to Leroy. The goat spits at her, and she huffs.

“Well, that’s rude. Usually, I charge an hourly rate for that kind of play.” My *mother* muffles a laugh at the comment, and I watch in horror as Leroy charges Ozzy, head down and horns out. Ozzy doesn’t move, doesn’t flinch. Leroy stops in front of her, just shy of hitting her stomach.

“You done now?” she asks in the same low, soft voice. Leroy stares Ozzy right in the eyes before slowly walking over and taking the apple out of her hand. Leroy has *never* been hand-fed. He was abused by an ex-ranch hand a couple of years ago when he was a kid. Since then, despite what we’ve tried, he just wants to be left alone and is aggressive to almost anyone he comes in contact with. I’ve been told to put him down several times, but I can’t bring myself to do it. As a rancher, these animals are my responsibility, and it’s my fault he was hurt, not his. He doesn’t deserve to die just because I trusted the wrong person. Pops has a different view on it, but this isn’t his decision anymore.

I watch in awe as Leroy not only allows it but leans into Ozzy’s touch as she slowly stands and leads him out the door. Once outside, she chucks the apple out into the yard, and Leroy charges after it.

She turns back around and shrugs, “What?”

I turn to Mom, who is just as shocked as I am. “What?” I repeat, “What the hell was that? Are you a goat whisperer or something?” She rolls her eyes, returns to the kitchen, and starts making a sandwich.

“No, that’s the first time I’ve actually seen a goat in real life. I’m from Chicago originally. I’ve never seen farm animals.”

Mom lets out a breath. “Could’ve fooled us. I fully expected to be cleaning up blood and goat droppings.”

“How did you know that would work?” I ask, hanging the rope back on the wall while noting how her body stiffens, and her gaze looks at the rope as warily as Leroy looked at me.

“I didn’t.” She states firmly while finishing the sandwich before cutting it into fourths. “He was obviously scared and felt cornered. I think he was looking for someone to make him feel safe. My guess is he’s been neglected.” She eyes the rope again, and now I realize what’s happening.

“Leroy was abused as a kid by an ex-employee,” I sigh, the shame of failing that goddamn goat fills me. “The guy used to drag him around by a chain around the ne—” Ozzy slams the knife she had been using to cut the

sandwich down and glares up at me.

“No one,” she says through gritted teeth. Her cheeks begin to go splotchy and... oh my god, why are her eyes glassy? “Human or animal deserves to be yanked around by a fucking chain.” She sneers as if she’s mad at *me*. Like I’m the one who abused him.

“What?” I look from her to my equally confused Mama. “Ozzy, no one is yanking a human around by a chain. Are you seriously upset over the rope? How else do you figure I’m supposed to handle an angry animal?”

“I did it,” she huffs before shaking her head. “No one deserves to be hurt like that.”

Mom places a hand on Ozzy, causing her to jump back and flinch. *What the fuck is wrong with her?* “Ozzy, sweetheart, we aren’t like that. You best believe that man had more than a talking to by Jackson and the boys. We don’t see them as products. Our animals are living, breathing creatures. We had a bad egg, and unfortunately, we found out too late for Leroy.”

“It’s not too late,” Ozzy mutters as she grabs the sandwich. “He has his walls up because he doesn’t want to be hurt again. It’s understandable, but that doesn’t mean he’s worthless or undeserving of patience and love.” She storms off up the stairs, taking the food up to Pops.

“What the fuck was that,” I mutter, and my Mom sighs.

“That is a soul that’s been shattered.” I snap my gaze from the stairs to my mother and raise a brow.

“How so?” She shrugs her slim shoulders.

“I saw it when I first saw her yesterday. But just now... someone hurt that girl. They left her broken, and she’s had to put herself back together.” My face softens as I look back at the rope on the wall.

*“No one, human or animal, deserves to be yanked around by a fucking chain.”*

What in the fuck happened to you, Tink?

## Ozzy

“That damn goat has always been a pain in the ass,” Morris mutters as he looks away from the sandwich I placed on the tray in front of him. I slip my heels off before propping my feet on the edge of his bed.

“I like him.” I shrug while stealing a chip off his plate. Morris lets out a dry chuckle.

“Of course you do. You’re just as much a pain in the ass as him.” I slap my hand over my chest and push my lip out.

“Morris!” I squeak out. “Don’t flirt with me like that. You’re a married man.” He rolls his eyes before moving his tray back.

“What happened to you?” His question takes me by surprise. Raising a brow, I give him a playful smirk.

“Lack of attentive parents, a failing public school system, a hard time not giving in to peer pressure...” He waves his hand dismissively.

“You know what I’m talking about,” his shaky hand goes to his neck, and I feel my stomach twist. “You don’t have to tell me.” He says in a soft tone that I’m not comfortable with. I feel the tightness in my throat as I stare at his television. Morris, sensing my discomfort, grunts while staring at me.

“You’d be halfway decent looking without that god-awful face paint on.” I crack up at his comment while crossing my arms and turning to look at him.

“You’d be halfway decent looking if not for that giant stick up your ass.” He snickers, resting his head back against his pillow. “So, is it hereditary?” I ask quietly.

“What’s that?”

“The stick up the ass. Because Jackson,” I blow a puff of air out



dramatically. “That man is as stiff as they come.”

“Ah, yes, Jackson. My reliable, by-the-book son. Very black and white. He has a code, and he follows it to a tee. He’s a good man, but yeah, definitely a stick wedged firmly up there.”

“Can’t believe none of your kids are married or have kids,” I mutter while shoving the tray closer to him with my tattooed foot.

“Derek, my oldest boy, was married, but it ended terribly.” Morris shakes his head, and I watch him take a chip and eat it. “That girl broke his heart. The other boys were there when the fight happened, and I think it scared Jackson and Carter. Carter became the casual man he is now, and Jackson, well, that boy wasn’t built for casual anything. He’s loyal and honest, and it’s a shame he can’t find someone to see past his tough exterior to see the good man he is.” Morris chews absently on a bite of the sandwich, and I smile softly. It’s the first real food I’ve gotten him to eat. He’s not on any restricted diet, as he’s at the end stage, and the medication he takes is just to keep him comfortable. It’s his depression that’s been causing him not to eat or drink, at least until now.

“And Jensen?” I ask, wanting to keep him talking.

“Jensen was engaged about... shit, I think, five years ago. Dorothy would know better. But that girl wasn’t any good. Jensen is a shy, quiet boy. If you ask me, he’s a little too sensitive for ranch life, but his brothers protect him. Briana, his ex, was terrible for him, dragging him to clubs and bars when he couldn’t handle it—constantly fighting with him, asking for money. It was terrible. She and the boys’ sister got into a terrible fight, and Briana left town. I was so happy when they split, but he never tried again, which is a shame because I know that pretty redhead at the bar has been looking at him with hearts in her eyes for years.”

“Fuckin’ bitches,” I joke, causing him to laugh loudly while shaking his head.

“You’re a foul-mouthed girl.”

“You’re a crotchety old man,” I snap back with a smirk on my face before we fall into a comfortable silence watching his shows.



Getting out of the shower and slipping on my shorts and tank top, I walk through the bathroom and into the sitting room, avoiding the large window. I secure the sheets I tacked up in the entryway before crawling into my little cocoon on the couch and turning the television on. I hate this room. I hate that window. I hate that things creak here more than on the other side of the house. And I hate that no one else is over here.

My tired thoughts go to Leroy's scarred neck—the hairless ring from the chain the Rowe's ex-employee used on that little guy. My fingers trail over my full floral neck tattoo, and I cringe each time I hit a scar.

*“Bad Brumby!”*

*“Stupid bitch, get on your knees.”*

*“Now bend over and stare out the window. I want you to see how close you are to your freedom as I fuck your cunt into submission.”*

*“I'm going to ruin you for all other men, Brumby. Now beg me for more!”*

“Stop it!” I scream out loud, pulling myself from the darkness I fell into. I don't know how long I was lost in the memory. I look at my phone, noting it's four in the morning. I've been touching my scars and hearing their voices for hours. I can't be in this room anymore. Standing up, I slip on my sneakers and put on a sports bra and jacket before walking out of the room, down the steps, and out the door.

As soon as the air hits my body, I feel slightly calmer.

“Hey.”

“What the fuck!” I scream at Jackson's voice while tripping on the step on the porch and falling, skinning my knee in the process.

“Shit, Ozzy, I'm sorry.” He says as he rushes over to me. “I was trying to let you know I was here so I didn't scare you.”

“Well, good job,” I bite out as I pull my phone out and turn the flashlight on. My knee has a little scratch right on my bee tattoo. “You scratched Bee-Yonce. Not cool, man.”

“Bee... yonce?” He looks at my legs, cocking his head to one side, making his hair fall over his shoulder. I have an urge to know what it feels like and how it smells. *Ew. Ozzy, could you stop it? What is wrong with you?*

“You have bee tattoos on your knees. Why?”

“They are the bees' knees.” I shrug and watch as Jackson actually cracks up and laughs. Aww... his laugh is really adorable- raspy but deep and warm.

*God damn it... that's it, I'm kicking my own ass.*

"You're kind of funny." He chuckles, and I snort.

"I'm hysterical. You just barely have a sense of humor, so most of my hilarity is lost on you."

"Wow," he marvels while shaking his head. "Tell me, Tink, how is it that a catch like you is still swimming around out there."

I give him a wink. "Because I'm the big bad shark that gobbles up the wannabe fishermen." I snap my teeth together before standing back up as two dogs run towards me. One is a reddish brown and white, and the other is a black and white dog. I grin as I let them sniff me.

"Hey there," I chuckle lightly. "And who do we have here?"

"That's Bear," Jackson says, pointing to the reddish-brown one. "And that's Rocky. They're my Australian shepherds." I grin as the boys continue with their kisses before running off down the driveway.

"They're sweet," I say while removing my zip-up jacket and tossing it on the porch. "It's really hot and sticky out already this morning."

Jackson coughs and looks away. "Yeah, there's a storm coming late tonight. Me and the guys will be rounding up the animals most of the day."

"Wait, is the storm going to be that bad?" Jackson shrugs and leans against the railing. I can't help but note how his muscular thighs fill out his Wrangler jeans so perfectly it should be illegal. God, I needed to calm my ass down. Jackson and his thighs and his laugh need to stay far away from me. *Wait... is he looking at my ass?* He catches me catching him and coughs before looking away again.

"We may lose power. They are calling for high winds, lightning, heavy—"

"What about Morris?" I say while trying to hold the panic back. "His machines, he can't be without—"

"We are in the country," He chuckles. "We have generators. This ain't our first rodeo." Letting out a breath, I nod as I begin walking down the dirt path.

"Good to know."

"You going to tell me why you're out here before dawn?" He calls out, and I turn to look at him as I walk backward.

"Now, why would I go and do a thing like that? Then you might show an interest in me, and that would be a tragedy for us all." He chuckles and shakes his head.

"Never, Tink, never." I give him a two-finger salute before sliding into

Gretchen, turning her on, and driving down the road. I need to go somewhere away from these woods and run for a little while.



“Morris,” I huff out in annoyance as the stubborn old man shoves his tray to the floor, causing the food I brought him to spill everywhere. “You feel better now?” I ask and grab the trash bin to start picking up the strewn contents.

“I don’t want your nasty ass food!” He shouts at me, and I tense my jaw. Morris is having a bad day. A day where the pain medication just isn’t enough. I know this, and I refuse to snap back. He is a sick old man, and he’s dying. He’s in pain, and he’s scared.

Tossing the food in the trash and cleaning up the mess, I move his tray off to the side as I hit the button to sit his bed up further. I grab a wipe and start to clean his face. That’s what started the whole blow-up. Morris was trying to eat the stew I brought up, but his hand wasn’t cooperating, and he missed his mouth a few times, causing him to lose it.

He slaps my hand away, and I do the same back to him. “Stop it,” I mutter. He does it again.

“I ain’t no infant.” He grumbles.

“Never said you were.” I go to wipe again, and he slaps me again.

“Morris,” I warn, glaring at him. “I know you’re having a bad day and scared, but you’re not going to keep hitting me.” I glance at the clock and note it’s time for a dose of his pain meds, he’ll be asleep soon. I feel bad when his medication makes him go to sleep; he tries to fight it, but I know he needs it today. I stand up and begin the task of preparing his IV bag.

“You could double my dosage,” he mutters, sounding distant. “End my suffering a little faster.”

“Now, why would I do a thing like that?” I force a smirk even though the comment breaks my heart. I like Morris, he’s a complete and total asshole who says precisely what is on his mind without fear of the aftermath, and I adore it.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he lets out a tired cough. “Wouldn’t want to miss out on an extra paycheck.” I see the upturn corner of his mouth, and I laugh

lightly.

“Extra paycheck? Hell, I’m holding out for that Christmas bonus!”

“You mean wiping an old man’s ass isn’t reward enough for you?” I bust up at that one as I sit back on his bed. I move to wipe his face and watch him start to pull back again, and I sigh.

“It was a little over five years ago,” I say softly as I continue to clean him up. “I had just finished a double shift in the ER I was working at. It was a bad second shift. There was a bus crash, many injuries, and a few deaths. There were kids involved.” My voice trails off, and I shake my head to rid myself of the memory. “Anyway, I went to the bar that a lot of us from the hospital frequented but, I don’t know, that night I didn’t know anyone there, so instead of sitting with a group of co-workers at a table, I went to the bar and had a drink and then another. I was about to leave when one of the bartenders set another drink in front of me, saying it was from a secret admirer.” I let out a shaky breath while unbuttoning his top to change him into a clean one.

“Never accept a drink from a stranger. It was the only real advice my mom gave me, and she would drill it into my brain over and over again, but I did.” I shove the shirt into the hamper with more force than necessary. “I remember drinking it, and that’s about it. Next thing I know, I’m naked and chained to a metal pole in a basement. I had this, ummm..” I feel my lip wobble as I try to focus on buttoning his new shirt. “They put one of those correction dog collars on me, but the pincher prongs were these sharp metal points that, when the guys tugged on it, would puncture and rip at my throat.”

Morris’s face darkens, and I see his jaw tensing. Clearing my throat, I decide I’ve shared enough today and stand up, looking for something, anything to do. “Anyway, you asked what happened to my neck the other day. There you go.”

“Ozzy,” he breathes out as he shakes his head. “I meant what happened to make you get that massive tattoo on your neck.” I give him a half-shrug before heading towards the door to take the laundry downstairs.

“Same difference. After I escaped, I got a tattoo to cover up each scar they left on me.” I get halfway out the door before he asks.

“How many tattoos did you get?” I turn back to him and force out a dry laugh.

“I didn’t have a single tattoo before they took me. Now, relax and watch TV.”

# Jackson

“Jackson,” my mama’s tired voice pulls at me as I finish wrangling the sheep into the barn, trying like hell to beat this fucking storm that the weatherman most definitely underestimated this time. “Just go up and talk to him.”

“Mama, I love you, but now ain’t the time,” I grunt as I hold my hat on my head at the same time the wind tries to rip it off.

“Son, your father—”

“Relies on me to run this ranch.” I snap as I close up the chicken coop. “As does everyone else. If I needed to go up there, if he needed me up there, I would be up there. Now go on inside, Mama, I need to finish up before the—” The skies open up and release a downpour on top of us. Mama tries to make her way to the steps as fast as possible with her bad hip. I’m about to help her when the door swings open, and Ozzy jumps down the steps and grabs my mom’s arm to help heave her up the slick steps and into the house.

Ozzy comes back out a second later and stares up at me. “Can I help?” She asks over the loud rain soaking us both and booming thunder.

I shake my head. “Take care of Mama and Pops! I gotta tie down the tools on the truck, and then I’ll be in!” She nods, and I watch her turn to go back inside, but she stops when we both hear a loud cry. Fucking Leroy. He’s still out there. She turns to look at me, eyes wide, and before I can tell her not to, I watch her jump back off the patio and run into the field.

“Goddamn it, Ozzy!” I shout while running after her as she sprints through the field and over to the hill Leroy’s dumb ass is standing on, screaming. I’ll give her this, she’s fucking fast. I’ve never had to push so hard to keep up with someone. Once I reach her, I grab her with my gloved hand

around her elbow, and she shoves me away.

“Don’t touch–”

“Ozzy!” I bark out while trying to catch my breath. Fuck, my lungs are on fire. “You can’t carry him! He weighs more than you! He’s scared, and you have no rope! What the fuck were you going to do?” She stares up at me, eyes wide, chest heaving from her labored breathing. She goes to speak, but a bolt of lightning next to us stops her. I hear the loud cracking of a tree limb, and I look up to see the large branch falling. Without thinking, I grab Ozzy and shove her away before the limb drops, part of it cutting through my jeans and the side of my thigh. “Fucking cocksucker!” I bite out as I grip my injury from my place on the wet ground.

“Jackson!” Ozzy gasps as she runs back over to me, trying to inspect the wound.

“Stop,” I growl, swatting her away. “You can see we are in a dangerous area; now isn’t the time! Get your ass back to the ho– Where are you going?” I shout at her retreating figure.

“If you won’t let me help you, I’m helping him!” I watch in horror as she runs up the hill towards Leroy.

“Fucking damn it!” I punch the ground before standing up and trying to walk towards the fucking reckless, psychotic woman and that fucking goat. I’m going to kill one of them. The pain radiating through my leg is unreal, and there is zero chance I’m getting to her and Leroy, getting back to the barn, and then to the house. Patting my pockets, I curse when I don’t feel my phone to call for my brothers. My clothes are beyond soaked, and it feels like weights pulling me down as I slowly limp towards this fucking pain in my goddamn ass and the stupid goddamn goat.

When I get to Ozzy, she is sweet-talking Leroy as she walks him down the hill and into one of our pole barns. I finally reach her, and she is fighting with everything she has to close the door, struggling against the dangerous wind whipping around us. I put my arms on either side of hers, helping her close and secure the door. Ozzy turns around, and I watch her narrowed eyes go round with fear.

“Jackson!” She gasps while grabbing my soaked shirt and pulling me into her just as a shovel whistles by my head. *Well, I guess my fucking brothers didn’t bother to check the truck to see if I had everything strapped before running inside.* I stare down at her. Our faces are a hair’s width apart. She’s so cold. Her body is shaking like a leaf. Her teeth are chattering, and her

hands, which are still gripping me, feel like ice.

“Get back to the house,” I say, my voice coming out gravelly as I refuse to move away from her. “Tell Jen and Carter to get their asses out here and pick me up.” Her brows furrow together, and I refuse to think about the wrinkles between her brows or how they are kind of cute. Now isn’t the time.

“Why aren’t you coming back?” Is this one of those fuck it, I might die moments? Because I have no reason to be *this* fascinated with Ozzy’s lips or that pretty little opal ball on her tongue. What would it feel like to kiss her? To feel that piercing in my mouth?

“No,” I say, trying to push those thoughts away. We are minutes from a goddamn tornado touching down, and I’m over here fantasizing about her tongue piercing? “It’s too far, and my leg is killing me. I’ll stay here until they get a quad runner and get me. Now go.”

“But—” I interrupt her protest by groaning.

“Isn’t it bad enough that you nearly killed yourself and caused me to fuck up my leg? Go to the house and get my brothers to come get me.” She narrows her eyes before shoving my chest and storming off. I didn’t like letting her go alone, but hopefully, she would get there quickly and safely. Until then, I get to sit here, stressed the fuck out, because I will have no way of knowing if she’s okay until one of my brothers shows up.

Not that I care. I mean, I care because she’s a human and a woman, and I was raised to take care of women, to protect them. No matter what.

At least ten minutes have passed, and I finally hear the quad runner coming up the hill. I see Carter coming over the hill, and I’m thankful she actually listened to me and went to the house.

“You alright?” Carter asks, helping me stand.

“Sure,” I say sarcastically. “Never been better.” I wince as he helps me on the back of the quad, and we take off through the field, dodging branches and straw flying every which way.

We arrive in time to see Ozzy and Jensen finishing up tying the tools in the bed of the truck. I swear to fucking christ. It’s like no matter what I say, she has to disobey me.

They come over and help get me off the quad, and I glare at the woman. “What part of this seems safe for you to be out in?” I growl as I hold on to Carter while hopping to the house.

“Will you stop? I was helping. Sorry, I was trying to prevent another shovel from attempting to take out your big ass head!”



“It ain’t safe out there for a woman,” I bark as we walk into the house, where Mama is waiting to hand us towels and dry clothes.

Ozzy scoffs, getting into my face and rolling her rich brown eyes. Being this close, I can see they aren’t just brown. They’re flecked with gold, like the lightning outside in the dark stormy skies and the rolling fields in autumn. They’re so deep and captivating. “Be careful there, Superman, your misogyny is showing.”

*Well, that takes care of the whole ‘captivating’ thing. This woman is infuriating.*

Ozzy walks in behind me, her body near convulsions. She’s shaking so hard. “I’m changing and grabbing my kit, so make sure your leg is accessible.” I go to tell her not to worry about it, but she doesn’t wait for a response. Instead, she takes the towel from Mama and walks away.

“What the fuck happened?” Jensen asks as we all begin to disrobe in the living room so we don’t trail water through the house. I hiss while slipping my jeans off over my cut. Fuck, it stings.

“Fucking Leroy was out, and then a damn limb fell on me,” I grunt as my brothers and I wrap towels around their waists, and they collect their wet clothes, leaving to get themselves cleaned up. Limping over to the ottoman, I sit down, holding a rag against my cut. I hear Ozzy walk over and look up to see her dressed in shorts and a baggy long-sleeve shirt, with her long, wet hair on top of her head in a bun.

“Alright, let’s have a look.” She says, kneeling in front of me. I glance at her thick, tattoo-covered legs as she sits on her feet. Fuck, she’s so curvy. Her legs are fucking delicious and wiggle when she moves in a way that just—

“Ow! Son of a bitch!” I hiss at the burning sensation in my leg.

“Sorry, you had some bark in there.” She says, holding up the piece with her tweezers to show me.

“You enjoyed that too much,” I whine as she beams at me before cleaning my leg up.

We are alone as she continues her work, frowning while she does so. “You need stitches.” She mutters, and I watch her eyes shudder as she looks over my naked torso.

“See something you like, Tink?” I purr while bouncing my pecs. She rolls her eyes and fakes a gag.

“Get over yourself,” she huffs while standing up and padding to the kitchen. Coming back, she hands me a bottle of whiskey. “Drink,” she orders

and begins to fish through her bag.

“I mean, you don’t have to tell me twice.” I laugh while unscrewing the cap and taking a long swig, enjoying the burn running down my throat.

“You’re going to want more.” She mutters, and now I see she is readying a suture kit.

“W-wait a minute,” I start trying to move, but note that the knot of the towel is no longer secure, and if I stand, all of my junk will be front and center. “Tink,” I let out a nervous laugh. “Listen, I... you’re a nurse, I get that, and while I’m sure you can do—”

She gives me a dry, unamused look as she stares at me. I’m annoyed at how fucking pretty she looks right now in her baggy clothes and no make-up. Like really fucking pretty. “Listen, big man,” she states with all the attitude in her body. “Nobody, and I mean nobody, sutures a wound like me. Now, take another shot, shut the fuck up, and lie down. If you start crying, I will absolutely make fun of you.” Not one to be called out, I snort before taking another long swig before staring back at her.

“Tink, if I lay down, you’ll get an eyeful.” A slight smirk plays across her lips before she hands me a small square of gauze.

“That should handle it, right?” I laugh. I can’t help it. She’s a fucking asshole, and it’s kind of... alright, it’s downright hilarious. Nothing about her is what you would expect, given how high maintenance she appears to be with her hair, nails, make-up, and clothing. I’m starting to think it’s more for show. Nothing about her underneath this disguise she wears is what you would expect.

She hands me a paper sheet and is about to start when we both freeze, hearing the second loud cry we’ve heard this evening. This one causes my blood to run cold. My boys... My dogs, Rocky and Bear, are outside barking and crying in the distance. They must’ve got out while Jensen and Carter were tying everything down. I hear one of them let out a cry like they are in pain, and it twists my fucking gut. I have to get to them.

## Ozzy

I flinch when the dogs howl again before standing up. Jackson grips the paper sheet to his junk as he goes to stand. “Fuck, my dogs are still out there.” I stop him before he can get off the couch.

“I’ll get them,”

“The fuck you will!” He snaps, batting my hand away. “Rocky and Bear are my boys, and I ain’t having you—”

“Shut up!” I snap back. “You’re not my owner, my husband, or anything else. They need help, and you have a massive gash in your leg, and you’re naked. So again, shut up. I’m going to get them.” I slip my still-soaked shoes back on and open the door, holding on for dear life as the wind tries to rip it out of my hands. The rain is falling in sheets I can barely see through. I hear Jackson yelling something, probably calling for his mom or brothers. I hear one of the dogs crying out again and take off running. The rain is cold and painful as it slams into my body. I cry out as what feels like hail hits my shoulder, but I don’t stop running.

“Rocky!” I yell out, trying to find them. “Bear!” I hear a bark and see Bear running back and forth, his coat soaked. I run up the hill and curse as a chunk of hail hits my head. I reach Bear, and my eyes scan the area before finding out what is with the crying. “Fuck, Rocky!” I run to the frantic dog whose paw is caught in some broken chicken wire.

“Shhh...” I pet the whining pup and cringe at the loud boom of thunder rattling the earth. Bear continues to bark as if telling me we need to go. I grip the wire and pull, but the rain has made it slick, and I lose my grip, causing me to slice my palm on the sharp edge. “Ah! Fffuck!” I cry out, gripping my bleeding hand to my chest. I stare at Bear, who is trying very hard to remain

loyal to me and his brother, but obviously wants to run to the house. I look at Rocky; he's so scared. His paw is completely tangled, and the hail is still pelting us, breaking apart my skin.

No... I'm not leaving him trapped, alone, and hurt. I take my shirt off, leaving me in a black cami, and wrap it around my hand before gripping the wire. Sitting on my ass and placing my feet on the post, and letting out a scream, I use everything I have in me to rip the wire off the post. It's still wrapped around Rocky's paw, but at least now I can get him back to the house. I grunt as I lift the large dog into my arms and whistle for Bear to follow. I get to the top of the hill just as Jackson, wearing only his jeans, comes running to me.

"Fuck, Ozzy! Rocky!" He goes to grab the dog, but I stop him.

"Don't," I bite out in pain. "My hand is caught in the wire with his paw." He nods, ushering me and Bear into the house.

"Mama!" He hollers once inside. "Get the cutters!" It takes only a moment for Dorothy to come in on her cane.

"Oh, my word!"

"Get Rocky first," I pant out. "I can't see my ha-" A tree falls right in front of the porch, causing us all to jump.

"Your brothers need to get back in here. They went to grab stuff to take to the cellar if we need to go." Dorothy whispers, and I look at Jackson, who is snipping away at the wire on Rocky's paw. It only takes three cuts, and he's free, and Dorothy begins bandaging his paw.

"I told you not to move," I state as Jackson starts clipping and removing the wire from around my hand.

"You're not my owner," he snaps while removing the piece of fence. He unravels my shirt from around my hand, and I hiss. "Sorry Tink," he says softly.

"Oh, sweetheart," Dorothy all but cries as she looks me over. "Let me clean you up."

"I'm alright," I smile at her. "But maybe you could give Morris his medicine. It's all laid out, and tell him I will be up as soon as I stitch up Jackson." Dorothy nods before slowly limping off towards the steps while Jackson grabs my medic bag.

"I'll take care of myself," I say, snatching the bag back. Jackson raises his brow.

"Catch a bug up that perky ass there, Tink?" I flip him off with my good

hand.

“No one touches me,” I state firmly, grabbing my wound care and steri strips. The cut is clean and not too deep, so I choose not to give myself stitches. After I’m properly bandaged, I look back at Jackson.

“Pants off, you’re still getting those stitches.” He rolls his eyes but heads back to the couch. Once I have his wound cleaned, I grab my tools and begin suturing. It’s definitely more of a challenge with my injured hand, but this isn’t my first time suturing a wound with a busted hand. Jackson is taking the suturing well, barely a hiss or grunt, which is somewhat disappointing. I kind of wanted a reason to tease him.

“Thank you,” he grunts out as I begin the process of knotting the suture.

“You haven’t seen the line,” I joke. “Don’t thank me yet.”

“No, no, I meant thank you for everything. Leroy, the boys, and well, this.”

“It’s fine,” I mutter, uncomfortable with his kindness. “You’re all done,” I say, cleaning him and the trash. “I need to go check on—” The power goes out, and I curse, stuffing the garbage into the bin before running up the stairs and into Morris’ room.

I look over the machines, seeing that the battery backups are fully charged and working. “Dorothy, you have a generator, right?”

“Ah,” Morris groans. “Ain’t using that on me, and you can’t use it in a storm anyway unless you’re lookin’ to get burnt.”

“Let me go change, and I’ll be right back,” I say as Morris scoffs.

“I ain’t no child. You don’t need to hold my hand during a storm. I’m just gonna go to sleep.”

“Grouch,” I mutter, teasing him before walking to my room and changing again.

I slip on a black cropped ribbed tank top, grey sweats, and a black zip-up hoodie. Glancing out the dreaded window, a bolt of lightning illuminates the dark area and... Oh my god...

“No,” I whisper as I blink and run to the window. My eyes scan the tree line as it’s lit up again. No, no one is there. I’m just seeing thi-

There’s a knock on my door, and before I can say anything, the door opens, and Jensen sticks his head in.

“Hey Ozzy, I– what the fuck?” I panic when he sees the sheet I have up between the rooms.

“Please, don’t say anything,” I whisper as he walks into the room. His

blue eyes assess me for a moment.

“We need to get down to the storm cellar.” He states slowly after a brief moment. “There’s a tornado warning.”

“W-what about Morris?” I ask as he leads me out of the room.

“We offered to move him, but he pitched a fit and told Carter and me to take Mama and go with Jackson.” I stop walking at his words and look at Morris’ closed bedroom door.

“Go to the cellar.” I open the door and slide in, locking it as Jensen pounds on it and yells at me.

“Oh, hell no.” Morris groans when we lock eyes. I give him a cheeky grin and wave with both my hands.

“Oh, you thought you were getting out that easy? Nope, if you are headed to the land of Oz, so am I. You wanna get high in the poppy fields with me?” I ask while rifling through his sock drawer and grabbing a pair before slipping them over my bare feet.

“Stealing a dying man’s socks?” he huffs as I sit in my chair.

“You ain’t dying today, old man. Give it up.” He lets out a short laugh.

“Rather the storm takes me than this shit.” He waves his shaky hand around at his monitors. I push my lips out in thought and give him a half nod.

“I get that, wanting to die on your terms.” He huffs as he looks out the window. You can barely see the field through the heavy rain and dark clouds.

“You should go on downstairs with Dorothy and the boys. You need to have a healthier fear of God’s power, girlie.”

I stare at my sock-covered feet on his mattress before looking up and giving him a half-shrug. “I’ve seen the power of man. Trust me, God has nothing on that.”

“You, my dear, are deeply damaged.” I wrinkle my nose at him and grin.

“I like to think of it as ‘extra seasoning’.” We both look up at the ceiling when we hear what sounds like part of the roof being ripped off.

“It’s about to be too late to get off this ride.” He warns, and I give him a shrug.

“Old man, you’re stuck with me until the bitter end. You ain’t flying solo.”

“Why? You got a death wish or something?” I look down at my bandaged hand.

“Or something,”

## Jackson

“As soon as this storm is over,” I growl, continuing to fume on the bench in this stupid fucking storm cellar. “If she ain’t dead, I’m going to kill her.” Looking from my fidgeting mother to Jensen, I jab my finger in his direction. “And I’m kicking your ass.”

“What should I have done? Broke the door down and carried her over my shoulder?” Jensen huffs. Yes, that is *precisely* what he should’ve done.

“She obviously has a screw loose,” I state slowly. “Letting her stay in that house when a —”

“Enough,” Mom snaps as she glares at us. “In the last week, that girl has made your dying father show some life in his eyes, saved Leroy twice, saved you and your dogs. She decided to stay up there with your father so he doesn’t have to be alone.” Her voice cracks, and tears roll down her weathered cheeks. “I should be up there,” she whispers. “Not her, he’s my husband.” Carter and Jensen wrap Mom up in a hug as I listen to the ripping wind, praying this ends soon.



“We’re in the clear,” Carter says, looking down at his phone. Jensen walks up the steps and opens the hatch to let us out. We climb up the steps together, Carter helping Mom and Jensen carrying Rocky as we make our way back to the house. I’ll have to assess the damage tomorrow, but the house is still



standing, meaning Pops and Ozzy are okay.

Once inside, I follow Mom up the stairs because, for whatever reason, I need to actually see that Ozzy is alright, or I won't be able to relax. Mom gives me a warning look before turning the knob on the door, it's locked.

"Hold on!" Ozzy calls from the other side. She unlocks the door and smiles brightly at us. "Hell of a night, am I right?"

I snort before walking away. She's fine, that's all I needed to see. With my conscience clear, I walk down the hall and into my room to get a much-needed shower while there's no longer a lightning storm outside.

"Hey!" I groan, hearing Ozzy jogging to catch up to me. Resting my head on my doorframe, I let out a breath.

"Tink, I'm tired, hurt, and want to shower."

"You can't get those stitches wet for forty-eight hours. Hang on, I'll grab you a waterproof bandage." She leaves before I can protest, and I let out a frustrated groan while walking into my room.

*Without knocking*, I slip off my pants just as she walks back into my room. I hold out my hand, waiting for her to hand me the bandage. She doesn't. Instead, she drops to her knees and removes the other bandage.

"I'm capable of—"

"Just shut up." Did she just growl at me? I try to ignore the sensation of her rubbing my leg to smooth out the bandage before she stands back up, wincing as she does.

"You alright?" I ask as she rubs her shoulder.

"Yeah, the hail beat me up a little," she laughs softly while heading to the door.

"Hey, Ozzy," I inhale sharply as she looks back over her shoulder at me, and I don't remember what I wanted to say. "Thanks," I settle on finally. "For everything."

She gives me a small, genuine smile. The first one I've seen. "Of course. Good night, Jackson." I go to say it back, but she shakes her head and quickly closes my door before the words leave my mouth. What was that? She looked almost annoyed that she smiled.

I shake my head on my way to the bathroom. I'm tired; today has been hell, and I'm ready to go to bed.



“I’m tired!” Carter whines from his place on the roof. We’ve spent the last week trying to get the ranch back in shape. The barns, pens, and house have all been damaged. And apparently, “Gretchen,” Ozzy’s old ass car, also took a beating. To which she wailed as if her best friend had died. Odd, considering the busted-up thing didn’t look *that* different post-storm, but what do I know? But she did a lot during the storm and with the cleanup, so I’m popping out dents in her car. And maybe changing her oil, and I might have one of the boys that works on the ranch on his way into town right now to get her new tires considering these fuckers are as smooth as a bowling ball.

“Do I look like I give a shit?” I call from under the hood of the car. When was the last time she had an oil change? Never?

“You know,” I roll my eyes at Carter’s voice. He can’t just shut his mouth and work. I glance up to see him lying on the roof, shirtless. “If you’re trying to fuck Hellraiser, there are easier ways to do so... cheaper too.”

I turn around and straighten up, anger beginning to run through me, “What the fuck did you call her?”

Carter grins brightly as he rolls onto his stomach, kicking his legs behind him like a fucking moron. “Good one, right? Because she is one, and it’s an Ozzy—”

“I know the song, don’t call her that. Also, I ain’t trying to fuck her. I am just helping her out. Thank her for what she did during the storm.” Carter scoffs and smacks Jensen on the arm.

“You hearing this shit? He’s trying to say he wouldn’t fuck Hellraiser.”

“I said stop calling her that!” I bark out before turning back to the car. “And I wouldn’t fuck her! She ain’t my type.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Carter calls. “You ain’t into tits and ass now? What? You hit forty, and your dick shut off?” Growling, I whip back around.

“Listen, I don’t find Ozzy attractive, why is that so hard to—” *Fuck*. I see Ozzy standing on the porch. She has on black jeans that are so tight they look painted, and they are full of rips, showing over her tattooed legs and fishnets. Her shirt is cropped above her belly button and looks like it was washed in

bleach. Her black-painted lips purse together as she stands with her hands on her hips.

“What are you doing to Gretchen?” Had she not heard me?

“Uhhh... well, she needed an oil change and tires.” I pull my hair back and place a rubber band around it. She walks over, brows furrowed.

“I didn’t ask you to do this.” I lean against the front bumper and cross my arms over my chest, letting out a dry laugh.

“Yeah, apparently you’ve never asked anyone by the looks of your fluids and your bald ass tire.” Her eyes narrow as she looks under the hood and runs her tattooed hand over the cylinder head cover before looking at her palm and wrinkling her nose.

“I guess she is a little dirty.” She mutters. Is she serious?

“Tink,” I laugh; this has to be a joke. “When was the last time you changed the oil?” She raises a brow.

“You mean the gas? I filled it up—”

“Oh my god, the *oil!* Jesus Christ, how has this car not just stopped on you?” I’m in complete disbelief. How? How can she not know about oil changes? “Didn’t your Dad teach you how to take care of a car?”

“No,” She states crisply. “I don’t have a dad. And this is my first car. I bought her online a couple of years ago.”

“How is this your first car?” How fucking old is she?

“Because I lived in bigger cities, cars were a nuisance. We got rides or walked.” I run my hands over my beard and nod.

“Alright,” I breathe out, suddenly feeling like I need to go over this car again before I let her back in. “Is there something you need?”

“Yeah, I need to go to town. Your father needs medicine and some other things.” I nod while wiping my hand on a rag.

“Come on then, I’ll take you in my truck.” Ozzy stiffens before shaking her head.

“Just give me the keys. I’ll go alone.” I laugh lightly.

“Not happening, Tink. No one drives my truck but me.” She huffs and looks up at the roof, but I stop her from speaking. “Carter ain’t got a vehicle currently, and Jensen’s is being worked on. You got me or your feet.” Is... oh for fucksake, she’s considering walking. I get ready to give her shit, but she finally walks over to me, grumbling the entire way. We walk to my Chevy, and I open the door for her to climb in. She stares at me, eyes narrowed, brows furrowed, and a pensive look on her slim face.

“What’s the problem, Tink?” I ask while gesturing for her to get in. “I’m being nice.”

“Well, stop it. I can open my own door. I don’t need you standing behind me when I get in.” She snaps, and I hold my hands up.

“Fine,” Sighing, I round the front of the truck and get in the driver’s seat. Why is she pressing herself against the passenger door? “Is there a problem?” I ask as we take off.

“I don’t like other people in the car with me. It’s a rule I have.” She mutters while nervously twisting her fingers together.

“Well, I can promise you I’m an excellent driver.” She gives me a half snort and looks out the window.

“It has nothing to do with your driving. Think of it as being claustrophobic. I feel trapped in a tight space with no control.” She flinches and shakes her head before looking away as if she’s said more than she wanted to. *What happened to this woman?* I glance at her hands, firmly clasped together between her rapidly bouncing legs.

A flash of her bleeding from multiple cuts while carrying my dog in the storm last week comes into my mind, and I decide to extend an olive branch. Pulling off on the side of the road and throwing my truck in park, I watch as her body stills, and then she stiffens. She looks at me like a cornered wild animal. I raise both my hands up, trying to keep her calm.

“I ain’t going to do nothing, Tink, I’ll tell you what, how’s about you drive the truck?” I say as softly as my voice will allow. I know the look on her face. I’ve seen it on Jensen’s when his anxiety is too high. She’s on the verge of a panic attack. Her eyes are darting back and forth, chest heaving, and... she opens the passenger door and all but falls out of the cab, stumbling into the unruly weeds on the side of the road. I flinch when I hear her vomiting in the grass. Sighing, I get out of my seat and walk towards her, though I don’t dare crowd her for fear she might run. After she finishes, I grab a warm bottle of water in the back of my cab. “Better than nothing,” I shrug when she eyes the bottle.

I watch as she gargles and spits the liquid out before staring at me, her makeup running from the forced tears while she puked.

“Tink,” I don’t know how to ask the question. I don’t know if I want to know the answer. But I also know I can’t continue to trigger her. “Ozzy, I need you to throw me a bone here,” I say softly, earning a weary look.

“I don’t like men,” she says before sipping her water. “I don’t like being

alone with men, I don't like being touched, and I don't like feeling powerless."

"Okay," I say slowly, trying to figure out the right thing to say. "I won't touch you, and you are not powerless, not with me, alright? Do you want to drive the truck? Here." I open my hand to show her the keys. "Take them."

I watch her glare at the keys for a moment, and for a second, I think she's going to run. But instead, she slowly reaches out and grabs my keys. I make sure her hand is completely free from mine before closing it. As she and I head back to the truck, her in the driver's seat, I am reminded of her words when she lured Leroy out of the house.

*"He was obviously scared and cornered. He was looking for someone that made him feel safe."*

Glancing at her as she maneuvers herself to look over the dash of my truck to see the road, I realize she might be looking for someone who will make her feel safe, too.



"Jackson!" I smile, hearing the familiar voice as the short, blonde woman walks up to me. Theodore Hitchers Jr., or Theo, is our *sort of* adopted baby sister. Originally from Texas, Theo has a meaner-than-shit attitude and a strong back. She's tougher than most of the men I know, and she ain't afraid of hard work.

"Theo," I embrace her while waiting in line to get Pops' prescription. "When did you get back?" Theo has been visiting her family in Texas for the past month.

"Yesterday, I was fixin' to come back last week, but y'all got that nasty weather. Couldn't get a plane to come near ya." I nod and glance around, wondering what is taking Ozzy so long.

"How's your brother and grandma?" Theo lets out the least ladylike snort.

"Gram is fine, still chasin' after cowboys. I think she's off to Montana next week for some rodeo out there. Bryce still hates me, says I'm full of sin and going to hell. I'm thinkin' he's mad because I get more pussy than him." I bark out a laugh as I push the brim of her cap down.

“I don’t need to know about you and your... ladies. I used to change your diapers.”

“Did you get—” I jump at the sound of Ozzy’s voice behind me. I turn around and see her standing with a basket of items. “Oh, I’m sorry.” She gives me an uncomfortable smile while eyeing Theo. “Didn’t mean to interrupt.” Well, that’s a tone I haven’t heard from her before. I have to fight the smirk pulling at my lips. I watch her shake her head and look away from me.

“My god,” Theo whistles. “Well, hello there, beautiful. I’m Theo, pleased to meet you.” She grins and sticks out her tanned, rough hand. Ozzy places her paler, soft, and tattooed one in Theo’s. *Hmm... interesting.* I’m suddenly annoyed that Ozzy is willing to shake Theo’s hand but won’t touch mine.

“Ozzy, I’m a nurse for the Rowe’s.” Theo smacks my chest.

“Oh shit! This’n here is the one Derek’s girl called out?” Theo grins brightly. “Well, I’ll look forward to seeing you at the ranch when I get back to work.” Ozzy looks from Theo to me, then back.

“Oh, you work at the Ranch?”

“Yes, ma’am, all my life. Those boys and Mama Dorothy have been caring for me since my mother popped me out and said, ‘See you later.’ Jackson and them are my brothers.” Did Tink just relax? No. I must’ve been imagining things. We talk for a few more minutes before Theo says her goodbyes, and we grab Pop’s medication. We walk over to the checkout, where I suddenly become very aware of the other shoppers and how they are staring at Ozzy. She doesn’t seem to pay them any mind as she scrolls on her phone, that is until the sound of a phone camera goes off. I look up to see Dean Hickerson with his phone pointed directly at Ozzy. Dean is the town’s gossip. He started a neighborhood social media page and uses it basically to upload pictures of people double parking, loitering, or whatever else he deems a nuisance. Ozzy will not be the next photo he posts.

“Jackson, don’t.” I hear Ozzy say as I storm over to the snickering man. Dean is about sixty, beer gut, red-faced, and balding. His wife left him ten years ago because he loves his stupid motorcycle club more than he did her. All this to say, I understand he doesn’t have much going for him, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to allow him to hurt Tink.

He’s laughing with the store manager when I walk up and snatch his phone out of his meaty hand. “What the hell, Rowe!” He booms as I thumb through the photos. I hold him back as I find several of Ozzy. What the fuck,

was he following her through the store? I scroll up, ignoring the pictures of naked women he has saved, and then freeze. I recognize the outfit Ozzy had on in the photo.

“Dean, I swear to Christ,” I growl as I grip the man by the collar of his shirt. “Keep reaching for the phone, and I’m gonna embarrass the fuck outta you.” I look back at the photo. It was taken the night Ozzy went to town for Mom. The next day, she asked where the nearest city was, and I...

*“No, I was going to say if you didn’t want them to stare, maybe don’t walk around covered in metal and tattoos. You obviously enjoy the attention, so don’t feign being offended because they are giving you what you’re asking for.”*

I fucking hate myself when it dawns on me. She was asking because this stupid fuck must’ve been following her then too, and she was uncomfortable, and I was a fucking prick. Shaking the memory and guilt off, I select all the photos from the oldest of Ozzy to the current and delete them from his phone and cloud before shoving him back, taking his cell phone and smacking it on the conveyor belt, cracking the camera in the process.

“New rule,” I state firmly. “I find you or any of your hillbilly biker buddies snapping pictures or even so much as glancing at that sweet girl. I’m gonna do that to your fucking face. Understood?” I glare down at the man as he nods and scurries off. I see Ozzy standing by the entrance, her cheeks stained pink. Walking over, I take the bags from her, shocked she doesn’t put up a fight, and we walk out the door.

Once we are in the truck and she starts the ignition, Ozzy lets out a shaky breath before speaking. “I didn’t ask you to do that.”

“I know,” I say casually. “In fact, I am pretty sure you told me not to.”

“Right,” she whispers. “I just... I don’t know what to do with that.”

“With what? He was being an asshole, I stopped him. Say thanks, or don’t, it doesn’t really matter, and move on.” Oh my god, is she about to cry? I watch her fading black-stained bottom lip begin to tremble. I’m about to say something when I watch her flinch and realize what she’s doing... She’s shutting down. I’ve only seen it happen once before, my brother, Derek, when he was married and found his now ex-wife getting fucked by his best friend, and he beat that man nearly to death. When it was over, and he walked away, he shut off the same way.

“Tink?”

“You ready to go?” She asks, and without waiting for my response, she pulls out of the space to head back to the ranch.



## Ozzy

“What in the fuck did you do to your shirt?” Morris asks as I walk into his room carrying the bags from the store. Setting the bags down on his dresser, I turn to stare at him. “And your pants. I know you’re getting paid enough to have pants without holes in them.”

“Now, Morris, if I were to cover up, how would the world know I’m in desperate need of attention?” I try to tease him while setting up his pills. Honestly, that trip wore me out emotionally. Between the crowd, that jerk taking pictures, and Jackson... goddamn it, I need to stop with him. I keep having these moments where, I don’t know, it’s almost like I can feel myself lower my guard with him, which is a fucking terrible idea.

“I heard Jackson let you drive his truck.” I look over my shoulder, raising a brow.

“Oh, and where did you hear that?”

“Theo called to say there had been quite a scene in the store.” I wince before I regain my composure. God, that was humiliating. That fucking asshole would not stop pestering me while I was in the store. The constant snickers and shutter sounds fueled my anxiety, just like the last time I had gone to the store. People see me with all my tattoos, piercings, strange hair, and clothes and think I’m weird. I get that, and usually, I can just let it go, but Jackson took me by surprise when he got so angry and called me a *sweet girl*. I know for a fact no one has ever used that phrase when talking about me. But he did, and... I liked it.

*Fucking knock it off!*

“Yeah, well,” I give him a slight chuckle, ridding myself of the

preposterous thoughts. “You should know better than to send my ass out there. The villagers might grab their pitchforks or throw their bibles and holy water at me. And that’ll ruin my very expensive makeup.” I force a grin that I don’t feel, and Morris stares at me, no laugh, no smile. I feel uncomfortable for the first time with him, and it’s for no reason other than he is seeing through my bullshit. Like he knows what happened bothered me, and I can’t have that. I won’t. I can’t allow these people to lower a guard I’ve spent five years perfecting. Unable to handle the silence anymore, I continue grabbing items out of the bags as I speak. “I am sorry if Jackson got into trouble, though he should’ve kept his big mouth shut like I said.”

Morris waves me off, “I didn’t raise my kids to keep their heads down when someone is being hurt.”

Rolling my eyes, I go to check his monitors. “I wasn’t being hurt,” I mutter before sitting in my chair and propping my feet up.

“Really?” he says, his voice unamused. “Because you look kind of like a kicked puppy.”

“Fuck off, old man,” I laugh, somewhat annoyed at how fast he saw through me.

“I’m sorry that fucker hurt you.” He mutters while closing his eyes.

“Which one?” I huff out under my breath.

“All of them.” He says softly, causing me to clench my jaw while I glare holes into my socks. I can’t cry. I won’t cry. Glancing up at Morris, I note his eyes are closed now, and I take the moment to look over the old man.

“I could deal with the physical pain all day, every day,” I admit softly.

“It’s the mental pain that hurts the worst,” he mutters, his eyes still closed. My eyes snap to his face, and I watch an eye peek open. “I wasn’t always a rancher.” His smile is tired, and I know he is drifting off to sleep. “I know all about the nightmares.”



“So,” Indy’s sweeter-than-sugar voice fills my earbud as I lay in the bathtub contemplating the day. “How’s it going there?”

“I would rather hear about you and Derek. Have you two decided to make

it official yet?” I hear her light giggle.

“He took me to a resort where you swim with penguins.”

“Oh god, so you’ve mated for life?” I joke while playing with the bubbles with my toes.

“Basically. So again, how are things going? Derek said there was a horrible storm.” I blow the bubbles off my hand and watch them float around.

“Yeah, pretty wicked. Umm... things are fine out here. I like Morris. He’s a crotchety old man just like me, so we are pretty cool. Dorothy is exhausted, but there’s no talking to her, so I just let her do her thing and help where I can.”

“And the guys?”

“Fine. I think Carter is afraid of me, Jensen doesn’t really talk to anyone, and Jackson is... whatever.” I shake off the tingly as I rinse the bubbles off me and drain the tub.

“Mhm..” Indy muses. “You know, it’s okay to like a guy.”

“No,” I state firmly as I stand up and grab my towel to dry myself off before slipping on my black pj pants and shirt. “It’s not happening.”

“But whyyyy?” She whines, and I roll my eyes while putting on my nightly face cream.

“You know why,” I mutter, massaging my face a little harder than necessary. “I can’t be with someone. Not anymore.”

Indy lets out an exasperated breath, *Oh? Am I exhausting her?* “Ozzy, your parts haven’t fallen off. You’ve been in therapy for five years; you really should give it a try, and Jackson is—”

“Hard pass.” I interrupt, deciding I’m over this conversation. It’s making my heart pound, mainly because these are all late-night thoughts I’ve had over the last week that I should not be having.

“Ozzy—”

“Cupcake,” I snap as I storm out of the bathroom, and my breath hitches at the dark window. *Is that a flashlight in the woods?*

“Ozzy?” Indy’s voice is so far away. I feel my heart rate accelerating, and I’m beginning to sweat as I walk towards the window. I can hear someone yelling something. What is it? Removing the bud from my ear, I toss it across the room before pressing my ear to the glass.

“BRUMBY!”

I nearly fall backward at the voice, the name. *His* voice. *My* name. Oh god, no. Not Patrick. How is he here? How did he find me? How did he get out of prison? Oh my god...

Stumbling, I run out of my bedroom and down the steps before running out the front door into the night. My car. Fuck it's useless right now... *SHIT*.

"*Brumby*," Oh my god, he's close. I hear the chain dragging the ground and have to hold onto my car for support as my free hand covers my tightening throat. I've got to run, I've got to get away. "*There you are.*" I hear his vile voice only a few feet away.

"Get away!" I scream before taking off, running through the yard and into the dark tree line. I can't see and keep tripping, but it doesn't matter. I have to keep going. He's not taking me back. I won't go back there.

*"BRUMBY! Get back here, you bitch!"*

# Jackson

“What the hell?” I groan as I stop mid-pushup and look at my phone to see why my music isn’t playing. It’s an incoming call from Indy. What could she want? Standing up from the floor, I answer the call.

“Hey, Ind–”

“Jackson!” I instantly still at the terror in her voice. Oh my god, Derek, is he– “Listen to me, I think Ozzy is having a flashback. You need to find her. Please, go to her room or wherever she is.”

“Flashback?” I say as I walk out of my bedroom.

“She has PTSD! Goddamn it, Jackson! Find her!” I’m about to ask her what she’s talking about when I see the front door is wide open. *Fuck.*

“I’ll find her and call you back,” I say, hanging up my phone and running down the steps. I grab a flashlight and slip on my shoes before walking outside. I don’t see anything or hear any–

“NO! STOP!” My head snaps towards her scream. It’s somewhere in the tree line. I take off running, my mind shooting off a hundred questions. Was someone attacking her? Indy said PTSD, what is she talking about? Where is she?

“Ozzy!” I call out, scanning the tree line, looking for any sign of her. I hear rustling, and when I shine my light towards the sound, I find her. Fucking hell, she’s tangled in a tree root, scrambling to get away.

“Ozzy,” I say softly as I slowly approach her, not wanting to frighten her. “What are you doing out here?” Her hair is soaked. She’s shivering and covered in dirt and leaves. She stares at me with wide, haunted eyes that

aren't focusing on me. It's like she sees me, but she doesn't at the same time.

"Get. Back." She chokes out, holding her hand out in front of her.

"Ozzy," What the fuck is happening? "Come on, let me get you back inside." I go to release her foot, and she literally swipes at me with her nails. "Fuck!" I curse when she cuts me across my lip.

"I will die a thousand times over before I let you take me back there! Shoot me now, Patrick!" She screams. *Patrick? Who the fuck is that?* "Do it, you piece of fucking shit. Put it right here." She points to her forehead as she spits at me.

"Ozzy!" I shout, kneeling down in front of her, trying to make eye contact so she knows it's me. "Ozzy. Baby, look at me, it's Jackson... whatever you see, it isn't real. Take a deep breath." I watch her blink. She's hyperventilating, "Breathe, Tink, come on, take a deep breath for me." She does, mimicking my breathing. She takes another, and then a third, and then a few more. After what feels like an eternity, she blinks and looks around our surroundings before back at me.

"J-jackson?" She croaks out. I nod softly before gesturing to her foot.

"Can I touch you to get your foot untangled?" I ask, and she nods slowly. As soon as her foot is freed, she bolts up and looks around.

"There was... Jackson, h-he was chasing me." The look on her face, she's so scared and confused, but also definitive in her words. It hurts inside my chest to see her this way.

"Ozzy, you and I are the only two out here."

"I saw the flashlight in my room!" She snaps, "I-I thought... he was..." I see her getting frustrated with herself and move a little closer.

"Hey," I go to rub her back but stop, afraid to touch her. "Okay, if you think you saw something, I will go look after I get you back inside, alright? I will look through our land completely if that will make you feel safer. But Ozzy, Indy called to say she thought you were having a PTSD flashback." I watch her flinch before looking back at me. Her beautiful brown eyes are broken, lost.

"Tink," I breathe out, at a loss for how to help her. I don't like this, seeing her this way. "Baby, tell me how to help you." She looks from my face to my hands. She looks like she's battling with herself, and just as I'm about to ask her what's happening, she startles me by holding out her dirty, shaking hands.

"C-can you hold my hand?" To anyone else, this would be the most

minute request, but for Ozzy, I know it means everything. I nod and hold my hand out, palm up to allow her to stay in charge. She hesitates for just a moment before placing her hand in mine. It's so soft against my calloused one, and if I weren't so afraid to speak, I would apologize for how rough it must feel.

Ozzy stares in shock at our connected hands before looking back up at me. "I don't... I can't stay in that room anymore."

I don't ask why. She doesn't need to explain right now. I just nod and motion to the house. "That's alright, there are plenty of other rooms. Come on, Tink, let's get you warm."



Nothing.

There ain't a goddamn thing out here. After I got Ozzy into the guest room on the main floor last night, I went back to bed for all of ten minutes before grabbing my gun and a flashlight and going out to check everything out. I was still out there long after the sun came up, but I had to make sure. I don't know why, but that look of fear in her eyes and the touch of her hand against mine... I needed to protect her. I needed to make her feel safe. Maybe it's wrong. I don't know much about PTSD other than Pops had it from the war, but I never remember seeing him act this way.

"Hey, son," Mama smiles as I drag myself into the kitchen.

"Hey Mama," I'm sure my weary voice matches my exhaustion. Sitting at the table, I thank her when she hands me a plate with a sandwich.

"You find what you were looking for out there?" She asks while wiping down the counter before grabbing her basket for collecting eggs from the chickens.

"No, Mama, ain't nothing out there to find," I say around a bite of the roast beef sandwich. She nods before glancing up at the stairs.

"She's been in there all day," she gestures with her hand towards Pop's door. "She was having a rough morning or something. The poor thing dropped a glass and started crying. Your father has been talking with her since." I rub my aching chest as my mother walks outside to tend to the

chickens.

Standing up, I make my way towards the staircase. I can see the door is cracked open slightly, and as I make my way up the stairs, I hear Ozzy let out a laugh, though it sounds tired.

“Morris, you better stop flirting with me. I’m guessing people around here like to gossip.” I press my back against the wall by the door as I hear my father’s weak laugh.

“Girlie, I wouldn’t flirt with you even if it would cure my cancer. Ain’t no way I’m falling into your web.” He sounds different. I hear his sarcastic tone, but he sounds weak like talking is a chore for him. Like breathing itself is becoming too much of a task. I slide down the wall, sitting on the floor, as I listen to them talk.

“How are you feeling?” Ozzy asks, and Pops lets out a dry chuckle.

“Like I’m dying,”

“Shut up, asshole,” she sighs, and I hear the clicking of her shoes hitting the hardwood. “You know I meant with meds. I wanna make sure I only gotta do this once.” Pops laughs, and I am disturbed by their shared morbid humor. But also, it’s endearing. Pops has never taken to anyone outside of us, and even then, things were different. He is a great father, and I never doubted that he loves me, but I know that he and I could never sit in the same room and bust each other’s balls for hours like this.

“You gonna tell me why you’re limping?” Pops’ question grabs my attention. I hear Ozzy sigh as she sits back down.

“Hurt it doing all this work for you. Think I could claim a workplace injury?”

“Ah, deflection, my favorite.” He muses, and I can almost see Ozzy’s pretty brown eyes rolling. I have to roll my own eyes at that thought. *You just had to add pretty in there, didn’t you, Rowe?*

But it’s true, she is pretty. At first, it was a physical attraction, and I mean... it still is, but now, after the storm, the truck ride, last night, and now listening to her banter and laughing with my father in a way no one ever could. Fuck.

“I had a flashback last night,” I hear her confess. “Jackson found me in the woods. My ankle got messed up.”

“That bad?” Pops’ voice is soft and sincere. I hear her shaking intake of air, like she’s steadying herself to answer.

“I swear he was there Morris,” she whispers desperately. “I-I know he



wasn't, he couldn't be. But I... I could feel him, smell him. But, I was wrong, and then Jackson was there, and, god, I was so embarrassed."

I want to walk in and tell her not to be embarrassed, but I can't. If Ozzy knew I was eavesdropping on their conversation, I would never hear the end of it.

"Don't be embarrassed," Pops says firmly. "You can't control it. Now what you should be embarrassed about is having your ugly ass bare feet up here on my bed." I crack a grin at his comment and Ozzy's loud laugh following it.

"You know, old man, there are people out there that would pay me mad dollars for pictures of these bad boys, and here I am, bestowing it upon you free of charge. You should be grateful."

"And you could use an odor eater, but I don't think either is happening anytime soon." I can't sit here anymore. If I do, they will hear me laughing. Standing up, I cover my mouth until I'm down the hall and in my room. I let out a breathy chuckle while removing my dirty clothes and tossing them into the hamper.

My mind is still on Ozzy when I walk into the bathroom and turn on the shower. Not that it's out of the ordinary, it seems like my mind often steers right back to her. Or some part of her. This time is different, though. I'm not thinking about her body. I'm thinking about her laugh, how fresh and bright it sounds.

How I would love nothing more than to experience it face to face.

## Ozzy

“Hey there, pretty lady!” Theo’s voice puts a smile on my face when I see her riding up on a brown horse. She’s very attractive, a little taller than I am, with tanned skin, shoulder-length blonde hair, and a very fit, athletic build you can tell has come from years of hard work on the ranch. If I were into girls, I’d jump into her relatively strong-looking arms and let her take me away.

*Alas...*

My gaze trails over to Jackson, who is fixing a part of the fence with Carter, shirtless. Jackson shirtless is a sight I didn’t know I needed, but now that I’m privy to it, I’d be okay seeing it regularly. Jackson is massive, with broad shoulders, muscular arms capped by big biceps, and those forearms... His chest is powerful and covered in dark hair that travels down his tight stomach and disappears into a place that I have no right to be looking at or even thinking about at all.

*...and yet...*

“Hey Theo,” I give her a small wave while trying to shake the spicy thoughts and feelings out of my head. I’m blaming Indy and my therapist for this. Right before I started here, it was suggested that I try some audio to relax me. ASMR and background noise, which turned into books, turned into me finding out that I have a strong pull towards the romance genre—something I will take to my grave— and then I found out about smut books. I don’t know how it happened, but here we are, and it’s because of those fucking books that I find myself burning holes into Jackson whenever he’s not looking. It’s deplorable. “How’s it going?”

“Better now that your pretty self came outside. What are you doin’ in there anyway? Usually, you’re out here more,” I shrug and lean on the fence. Making a point to turn my back to the man I can’t stop looking at.

“Waiting for Morris to wake up mostly.” The truth is, I’ve been trying to keep myself busy and scarce since my flashback a few days ago. I’m so embarrassed that happened, and I know Jackson wants to ask about it, which is why I’ve been avoiding him like the damn plague, staying in Morris’ room or downstairs in a smaller room off by the kitchen. I prefer it down there. It has one small window with curtains looking out to the front porch. I’m safer there.

“Ozzy?” I blink at Theo’s voice and look up.

“Sorry,” I say sheepishly, “I’ve been kind of spacey the last couple of days.”

“No problem. I asked if you wanna go check out the horses with me?” I look at the horse she’s riding. He’s so big and beautiful, with the deepest eyes I’ve seen on an animal.

“Well, I’ve never ridden a horse,” I admit softly while staring at the massive creature, and she smiles brighter.

“Oh, you are definitely coming with me then.”



“Theo,” I say hesitantly when she brings the cream-colored horse over to stand beside me. “I-I really don’t know, what if I scare him?”

“Well, first off, Betty is a lady; and second, anyone that can handle that asshole Leroy will have no trouble with Betty. The trick is to let them get to know you first. People think they can just jump on and take off, and while that’s fine for a quick trot, you ain’t gonna bond with her on a real level. There won’t be any trust.” She hands me a bucket with some bananas and carrots in it.

“Betty prefers bananas, Louis over there is a whore for apples, and Thing One and Two will throw a goddamn tantrum if not given watermelon.” I laugh as I peel the banana out of the bucket. Betty snorts and shakes her massive head.

“She’s excited,” Theo encourages. “Go on, Oz, I’m telling you, I am a horse matchmaker. Betty and you are about to bond. I’m never wrong.” Nodding slowly, I hold the banana out, and Betty pulls it from my hand.

“I did it!” I breathe excitedly. Betty lowers her head, and I look at Theo.

“Give her a pat.” She says, and I do, running my hand over her head softly. Betty snorts and nudges my face with her nose, making me laugh.

“Jr!” Carter’s voice rings across the field. Theo groans as she rolls her eyes.

“Dumbass lookin’ for a fucking beat down calling me that shit. You gonna be alright here?” She asks while hopping up on her horse with such grace I can’t help feeling envious.

“Yep.” I smile softly.

“There’s a brush over there if you wanna give her a rub. I’ll see you later on.” I watch Theo and her horse go off across the field. Picking up the brush, I walk up to Betty and run it over her mane. Betty shakes her head and snorts.

“Sorry,” I say softly to her, trying again, “I’m new to this.”

“That’s for her body,” Jackson’s voice nearly causes me to piss myself. I look over to see him walking up in his work boots, dirty jeans, and, oh, he’s wearing his shirt now. He bends down and picks up a metal comb.

“This is for her mane and tail. When combing out her mane, you want to treat it like your hair. You spray it with a detangler and then comb from the bottom on up. If you have a knot, don’t tug it with the comb, work it out with your fingers. Now, if you are brushing her body, there are many steps, but since I’m guessing Theo is just trying to let you bond with Ol’ Betty here, you’ll use this brush and go in short strokes, following the growth pattern.”

I nod while putting the brush on Betty’s side and swiping along her coat. “That’s good,” Jackson comes closer. “Can I touch your hand?” He asks, and my heart is instantly in my throat.

“Y-yes,” I whisper as his hand reaches to cover mine. It’s warm and rough, and... just like the other night, I don’t want him to let go. He pushes my hand down to show the proper pressure as we move in short strokes over Betty’s coat. I’m not paying attention to the brushing anymore. My focus is on him, his warm body, his masculine smell, and his powerful hand on top of mine. I steal a glance at his tan face; the crinkles at the corners of his blue eyes deepen as he smirks.

“Look at you Tink,” He says, letting go of me all too soon, “A fucking

natural.” I give him a shy laugh and shake my head.

“Yeah, I didn’t foresee adding horse brusher to my resume.” He gives me a crooked grin that makes me feel, well, normal. And it’s uncomfortable. I’m not used to feeling normal when talking to a man. But I do; Jackson makes me feel like I could be comfortable.

Clearing my throat, I look back at Betty before speaking.

“Thank you for Gretchen. Dorothy said you got her all done yesterday. And... thank you for the other night.” I mutter, not wanting to delve into this but knowing I at least owe him a thanks.

Jackson sits on the stool and stares at me for a long moment. “Don’t mention it, Tink.” Don’t mention it? He’s not going to ask about the flashback or why I was in the woods?

“You’re not going to ask about that night?” I say, walking over to a stall door and to lean against it, needing the support.

“Nope.” He says while beating his gloves on his jeans to get the dirt off before standing. “Not my business.”

I give him an appreciative smile, though I’m freaking out on the inside. Once again, I feel comfortable. “Well, I should get back to the house,” I say and go to move, only to have my foot caught in the bars of the stall door. “Fuck,” I try to jerk it out again, but it doesn’t budge. I try to twist my shoe out and hiss in pain.

“I can’t believe I have to say this,” Jackson states dryly. “But Ozzy, your foot can’t bend in that monstrosity you call a shoe.” I snort and roll my eyes.

“Well, it’s not like I can reach around the gate and free it!” I snap as he chuckles while watching me trying to balance on one heel. God, am I regretting these shoes. I mean, they’re perfection—black faux leather, lace-up ankle boots with chrome plating, a finger bone as the heel with studded straps. But I would absolutely give anything to not be in them right now. Jackson walks around the gate and looks at my leg. At least, that’s what I’m guessing. I can’t see through the wood, and of course, my foot would go in the one fucking hole in this stupid door.

“I think I’m gonna have to take the shoe, Tink,” he sighs dramatically. “It’s the only way.”

I give him an unamused look. “Do not touch me,” I warn as I try to twist and jerk my foot free, only to fall on my ass.

“You alright?” he snickers, and I glare at him.

“Such a gentleman,” I mutter while crossing my arms.

“Baby, I can’t be a gentleman if you won’t let me touch you.” *Baby*. The things that simple name does to me coming out of his mouth... god damn it. I need to take a cold shower and maybe change audiobooks.

“Fine,” I breathe out slowly. “Just don’t grab my ankle, alright?” He raises a brow but gives me a nod before kneeling behind the gate.

“I’m going to touch your calf,” he announces, and when I feel his hand on my leg, it sends both fire and ice through me. Instinctively, I stiffen and try to move away, but I’m stuck. “Hey now,” he taps my calf with his hand lightly. “Relax, I’m trying to figure this contraption out.” I focus on my breathing as he unlaces my shoe, and before I realize it, he’s holding my foot in his hand and feeding it back through the hole to ensure I don’t get hurt. The gesture is so sweet, especially when he lets go and I see he scratched the top of his hand. He comes around and hands me my shoe so I can put it back on.

“Sorry about your hand,” I say softly while retying my shoe and standing up.

Jackson looks at his hand and shrugs. “I didn’t feel it. My hands are so scarred and calloused, you’d have difficulty hurting them.”

I’m about to tell him thanks, but before I can, a loud scream is echoing from the house. It’s Dorothy. I look at Jackson before we both take off running. Despite my heels, I beat Jackson there by a couple of seconds. Running into the house, I’m filled with dread when I see Morris’ door is open.

“No,” I pant as I race up the stairs, my entire body feeling as though I’m wading through quicksand suddenly. *No, not yet. Not now.* I run into the bedroom and nearly collapse when I see Morris on the floor, alive. He’s fallen out of the bed.

“Morris,” I pant out as I walk in with Jackson behind me. “W-what happened?”

“Ah, I was trying to get up to take a leak. I fell.” I furrow my brows at him.

“Morris, you go in a urinal bott—”

“I know that!” He snaps while trying to get up. “It’s on the damn dresser. I couldn’t get it.” Guilt fills me. Had I not been outside, I would’ve heard him call.

“Okay, Morris, let me help you up,” I say as I reach under his arms to heave him onto his bed.

“I’m sorry, girlie,” he mutters, and I know it’s because he wet himself. I

scoff and give him a light, playful shove.

“Don’t be. I nearly wet myself coming in here, so it’s cool. Let’s get everyone out and get you cleaned up.” I turn to usher Dorothy and Jackson out when I see the look of complete shock on Jackson’s face. He continues to stare at Morris as if he doesn’t recognize him.

“Jackson,” I hiss out, motioning for him to follow me out with his mom. Once outside, I glare at the man, “Don’t stare at your father like he is some roadside attraction.” I snap, feeling protective over Morris suddenly.

I watch Jackson swallow and notice the glassiness in his blue eyes. “T-that’s my dad?” He gets out, and it sounds so choked. I look from him to a silently sobbing Dorothy.

“Yeah,” I say softly. “That’s your dad.” I barely get the words out of my mouth before Jackson’s face hardens, and he turns, storming off down the stairs.

“Jackson!” Dorothy sobs as he walks out the door, slamming it behind him. I give Dorothy a pat on the shoulder as she dries her eyes. “I should start dinner,” she whispers, and I nod slowly.

“Alright, I’m going to get him cleaned up,” I sigh and head back to the bedroom as I hear Dorothy softly speak,

“Alright, leave the clothes and sheets out here, and I’ll gather them up to clean in a bit. I was finishing up a chocolate cake for dessert tonight and need to go get it out of the oven.”



“Meals on heels! What are we watching tonight, old man?” I say as I open the door with a plate of chocolate cake in my hand. “I was thinking of a romcom.” At couple nights a week, Morris’ medication causes him some insomnia, and he can’t sleep. Being someone who would rather never sleep so as to avoid the nightmares, I sit with him, and we have movie nights. I place the giant piece of cake on the tray and sit next to Morris in his bed.

“I ain’t watchin’ no damn romcom. I wanna watch more of that horror movie with the guy in the mask.”

“Halloween, a man after my own heart. If I had one.” I wink while going

through the apps on the television to find where it's streaming. "Eat some of that cake because I ain't sharing once the movie starts." Morris chuckles and rests his head back.

"Jackson looked good, strong." He mutters, and I have to force myself not to freeze up.

"Well, he does have Dorothy's genes." I joke, and he laughs.

"Would you believe that I looked a lot like him just last year? I mean, I'm old, but..." He trails off, and I glance over the man. He's tall, or he would be if he could stand straight. I can see Jackson in his facial features; even though his cheeks are sunken in, his skin is almost translucent, and he's so very fragile and thin.

"I can see that." I agree before starting up the movie.

"I haven't seen him in six months at least." He mutters as I take a bite of the cake. *Six months?* I look at the withering man, and my heart breaks. He may be trying to protect his kids by hiding up here until he dies, but it's killing his heart to do so.

"So I met Betty today," I say while putting a forkful of cake near his mouth. I smile when he takes it.

"Oh yeah? How is my girl?"

"Your girl?" I ask while taking another bite.

"Betty has been my girl since I helped birth her twenty years ago. Rode her every day until I couldn't ride anymore, about a year ago." He lets out a shaky breath, and I twist my lips in thought as I rest my head against his bed. I need to get Morris out of this room, even if it's just one last time.

"You know," he breathes out while looking at me. "I don't recall saying you could sit your ass on my bed with me." Raising a brow, I take another bite of cake.

"Morris, that cake is better than sex." I sigh while shaking my head. "You should feel honored. You're the first man I've shared a bed with in over five years."

"Only one of us is willing here, girlie." He mutters and takes another bite of the cake when I offer. "I know you're just trying to make me husband number seven to get my money." I chuckle, shaking my head, before sipping my tea.

"I dunno, your wife may have something to say about that. For whatever reason, she's pretty smitten with your grouchy ass." Morris' eyes flicker, and I watch his smile become soft.



“My Dorothy is the greatest thing to ever come into my life. She doesn’t deserve what’s happening to her.” I watch the war waging over his tired face and give him a nudge, knowing that all he wants right now is to not think about what will be left behind when he is gone.

“You ready to watch this?” I grin, causing Morris to smile and nod. Settling into the bed, we share the cake while laughing at the movie.



It’s a little after three in the morning when I leave a sleeping Morris’ room. I walk down the steps and head to the kitchen to wash the dishes when I see Jackson sitting at the table.

“Hey,” I say softly as I pass him.

“How is he?” He asks, and I realize it’s one of the only times Jackson has actually asked about Morris.

“Asleep. I got him to eat some cake.” I watch as he scrunches up his face.

“Shouldn’t he be eating something healthier?” I turn around to stare at him.

“Jackson, you know your dad isn’t coming back from this, right?” He turns his head away. “I’m serious, you realize my job is just to keep him comfortable until—”

“Stop.” He mutters as he stands from the table.

“Jackson,” I whisper harshly. “Are you seriously in denial about—”

“I said stop!” He snaps as he smacks a bottle of water off the table, sending it across the kitchen, causing me to flinch while instinctively covering my face.

“Sorry!” I cry out quickly, walking around him and making a beeline to my room.

“Fuck! Ozzy, wait!” He calls after me, but I close the bedroom door before he reaches it, locking it for good measure. I hear his hand lightly smack my door. “I’m so sorry, Tink,” he breathes out, and I listen to him slide to the floor on the other side of the door. There’s a brief moment of silence before I hear him exhale a long breath.

“Ozzy?” He says softly, and... goddamn it, he sounds so lost and alone. Sighing, I walk over to the door and sit against it, resting my head back.

“Yeah, Jackson?”

“I...” he coughs to clear his throat. “I didn’t know he was... that he would be so...”

“Cancer is a cruel disease,” I say softly. “It takes everything you have to give, and when you’ve got nothing left, it finds more.”

“Is he in pain?”

“Yes,” I don’t want to lie to him, but I hate making him feel worse. “The medication helps some, mostly by keeping him asleep. I think he misses everything, though. Betty, Dorothy, you.” I hear a sharp intake of air come from him.

“Fuck.” His voice is so soft and weak I slide over from the door to the wall while reaching up and unlocking the door before cracking it open.

“Don’t,” he chokes out, and I hear him snuffle. I listen, not opening the door any further. Instead, I reach my hand through the crack and hold it out. He snuffles again before I feel his strong yet shaking hand grab mine, and we sit there in complete silence. I run my thumb back and forth over his rough knuckles, giving him the only comfort I can.

# Jackson

“I really don’t want to go,” I mutter, throwing a ball for Bear to chase. Rocky is still milking his paw injury. I can’t blame him, though. Every time he holds it up, and whines, Theo, Mama, or Ozzy gush all over him. I look at Jensen, who sits on our fence, as he works his jaw.

“Please?” He asks, and man, I bet that one hurt. We aren’t known for begging around here.

“Jen, it’s been a rough time lately, and we are prepping for the fair. I really just don’t feel like wasting a night at the bar. Why are you so hellbent on going anyw-” I stop when I see the redness in his cheeks starting up. “Ohhhh shit, is Niamh back?” Jensen groans, and yep, his girl is back in town. Niamh was adopted by the town, much like Theo. Niamh is a waitress at the local bar owned by her “American father,” Leon. Leon is close with Niamh’s parents, and when Niamh wanted to come here from Ireland and stay in America, Leon made sure she had a job and a place to stay. Jensen has been in love with the girl for five or so years now. But with his extreme aversion to crowds, he rarely sees her, and if he does, his anxiety and panic attacks keep him from talking. So, he looks at her from afar... like a creep.

“Take Carter,” I offer. “Or Theo or Ozzy.”

“Carter and Theo are already going, but you know they are going to hunt for ass, so I’m going to be left-” I look up from Rocky to see why my brother trailed off. “Jackson, what in the fuck is Ozzy doing?” I look out near the farm to see the woman screaming at the cows. She’s in her ridiculous heels, a crop top with a heart shape cut out to show off her very blessed tits, and shorts with neon orange fishnet stockings. I watch in amusement as she balls her fists at her sides in irritation.

“Listen,” she yells, “Have you ever not been fed, Greta?” The cow in question moos at her. Ozzy gasps and whirls around “THAT IS A BOLD FACE LIE GRETA AND YOU KNOW IT!”

“I think the manure has broken her brain.” I chuckle, walking over to Ozzy, and she growls in frustration as the spike of her heels sinks into the ground.

“Tink,” I chuckle as she falls backward, the chicken feed she had been carrying falling all over her. She looks up at me, and the chickens begin to hop around her. I try as hard as I can not to laugh, but it doesn’t work. “What are you doing?”

“It’s your parents’ anniversary,” she sighs, trying to pull her heel out of the ground. “Your mom asked if I would let her handle everything today with your dad because she wanted to spend it with him alone. I told her, sure, if she would give me the list of chores that needed done. “Ow!” She screams as Lori, the bitch of the hens, pecks her arm.

“Alright,” I breathe as I hold my hand out for her to grab. “How’s about we get you in some better shoes?” Ozzy waves my hand away before unbuckling her shoes and leaving them stuck in the mud.

“I am perfectly capable of feeding the—” Greta has made her way to the fence and lets out the loudest moo in Ozzy’s ear. “You are going to be a great fucking cheeseburger, Greta!” She screams while trying to brush the feed off her.

“Tink, baby, take a breath,” I say softly when I notice her body shaking and her cheeks going pink. “What’s going on? Don’t worry about the chores. I’ll have one of the guys do it.” I reach down and pull out her shoes before motioning for her to follow me.

She sits on a stack of square hay bales while trying to take in a cleansing breath.

“You wanna talk?” I offer, setting her shoes next to her. She shakes her head from side to side.

“It doesn’t matter, it wouldn’t make sense to you, and I just...” Her brows furrow together as her voice cracks. “Never mind, you have no reason to care about this.” She chuckles before getting ready to stand.

“That’s not fair,” I say, stepping in front of her. “I’m trying to care. You just don’t want to let me!”

“Why do you want to care?” She snaps while standing up in the space I left between us.

“Jesus Christ,” I groan while rolling my eyes. “I don’t know because I’m a decent human? I can tell something is wrong with you, and I’m offering to... what?” I ask as I watch her face crumple for exactly two seconds before she goes distant. When her eyes meet mine again, they are hot and full of anger. Her full nude lips form the deepest scowl I’ve ever seen.

“Fuck you, Rowe,” she sneers. “There is *nothing* wrong with me. You want to talk about someone having issues? You’re father is going to die any fucking time now, and you refuse to go sit with him. How about you handle your own shit before trying to get into mine.” She storms off, and about halfway down the field, she steps into something. Good, I hope it’s shit.



I tap on the bedroom door and take a steadying breath when I hear my mom’s voice tell me to come in. Walking into the bedroom, I stare at the two sets of wide eyes from my parents, and I shuffle from one foot to the other.

“Mama, Pops,” I say while removing my hat. “Umm... Mama, I know it’s y’all’s anniversary, but would you mind if I have just a minute with Pops?” Mom is up, shaking her head and leaving the room, telling me to take my time before I’m sure my whole question is out. I look from the door to my father. My father, who has always been my hero, my idol. The man I have spent my whole life emulating. He looks so... frail.

“Well,” Pops shifts weakly. “Which one of you ran her off?” I blink in confusion.

“Huh?”

“Don’t ‘huh’ me, boy. This room could be on fire, and you wouldn’t come in here unless you had to tell me one of you boys ran girlie off.” I wince at his words. Ozzy’s words came to mind, and I now realize how much I’ve avoided seeing my father.

“Ozzy hasn’t left. Not yet, anyway.” I mutter as I motion to the chair by his bed. He nods, and I take a seat.

“Good, she’s a good girl, be kind to her. Respect her, all of you boys.” I snort lightly at his words.

“She’s a difficult girl to be kind to sometimes.” Pops nods his head

slowly.

“She’s had a difficult past. You make sure she’s taken care of Jackson.” Though weak, I hear the stern warning in his tired voice, and a smile tugs at my lips.

“You never liked any of the girls besides Theo, and I think you only like her because she’s got a bigger set of balls than most of the guys here.” He lets out a weak laugh and shakes his head.

“Anyone that’s gone through what Ozzy has deserves kindness.” Has Ozzy talked to Pops?

“What has she been through?” I ask slowly as he shakes his head.

“Not my nightmare to tell, son. Listen, I ain’t got long left, and when I’m gone, she ain’t gonna have anywhere to go. She stays here until she’s ready to go, understood?”

“Pops—”

“Jackson,” his voice grows stern again. “She stays. I want you and the boys to go on out to Derek’s old house and start fixing it up for her. She was ready to die with me in that storm. This is her home. Are we understood, boy?”

I nod my head, “Yes, sir.” Pops nods his head and rests back against his pillow. I stand and head to the door before his voice stops me.

“You’re doing a good job, Jackson. I’m proud of you, son.” Ignoring the tightness in my throat, I take a breath before looking back at him.

“What’s her nightmare, Pops,” he goes to speak, but I cut him off. “Please, I don’t know what to do for her.”

“Son, you listen, you communicate, and be patient. When she trusts you, she will tell you.” I watch his eyes narrow in suspicion, “You got a thing for her?” I look down at my hands between my bobbing legs.

“Maybe,” I admit softly. “I-I don’t know what this is. She’s attractive and funny, but I don’t know.” I rub the back of my neck before looking back at him. “It’s probably some silly crush, nothing to be worried about.” I brush off the uncomfortable feeling before standing up. “I need to go get ready. I gotta go to Spurs with Jensen.” I mutter, heading to the door. Pops chuckles lightly while closing his tired eyes.

“Ahhh, that pretty redhead back?”

“Yeah, he’s going so he can stare at her from his table.” I leave the room. The sound of his laugh is the last thing I hear before heading to my room to take a shower.

Once in my room, I walk to the shower and turn it on while stripping down and tossing my work clothes into the hamper. I stare at myself in the mirror, running a hand over my full beard. It's not long; I prefer to keep it short, but it's still full and dark. I run my hand over my large chest and abs, wincing at the bruise I have on my hip from where fucking Leroy hit me yesterday. I have no idea how Ozzy is able to sweet-talk him like she does.

I step into the shower and let out a sigh as the water rinses away the long workday. My mind circles back to Ozzy while I scrub my hair and face. And... Seeing her out there today, doing farm chores, in her short shorts and that crop top. That heart-shaped cutout framing her gorgeous fucking tits. They've been a recurring thought recently. I shouldn't be this transfixed on her chest or those piercings that show through some of her clothes. Groaning, I look down to see that my dick has decided to wake up, not that this is anything new, my thoughts of Ozzy have been getting me harder than a damn steel rod lately, and it pisses me the fuck off.

"Why," I growl at my erection before rolling my eyes. An image of her in those fishnets hit my brain, and I let out a very emasculating whimper. "Damn it." I hate myself for jerking off to thoughts of her. I feel like it's disrespectful or shameful. I don't know. All I know is the days I do jerk off to thoughts of her. I can't look her in the eye.

I begrudgingly grip my cock as I stroke up and down the shaft while thinking about what I seem to always be thinking about over these last weeks: Ozzy in various positions. Her tight clothes with those curves and tits that I am dying to taste. I want her on me, gripping my throat, digging those nails into me until I bleed.

"Ah!" I hiss out and smack the tiled wall. I feel tingling in the base of my spine, and my abs begin to contract with every pump as I fall deeper and deeper over the edge. I think about her spicy scent, pillowy lips, how her thighs wiggle when she walks, and how I want to get lost in between them.

"F-fuck!" I groan out as I watch myself come all over the shower floor. Letting out a sigh, I roll my head up to the ceiling and groan as the secret shame fills me. *I need to stop this.* It's currently playing in a loop in my head, but... I won't listen. I'll be back here tomorrow, right on schedule.



“I really don’t want to be here long,” I grumble when we pull up to the town’s rustic country town bar – *The Spurs*. Its design and decor are meant to mimic Western saloons and honky tonks, but not the real ones, the ones you see on TV. So you know it’s over the top and completely wrong. But, despite its mechanical bull, dance floor, sawdust, and swinging saloon doors, it’s familiar and cozy. We’ve been coming here since before we were old enough to drink, though, since Pops got ill and I had to up my workload. It’s been a while since I had a night out.

“Come on,” Jensen rushes as he exits the truck. “I don’t know how long Leon will hold our table for.” He mutters, and I shake my head with Carter. Jensen has a specific round table he has to sit at. It’s away from everyone and the crowds, but he can still see the door, dance floor, and, of course, the bar. We walk into the bar and are instantly greeted by Niamh and her brighter-than-the-sun smile. Niamh is an attractive little thing about the height of Ozzy, with long strawberry-blonde hair and green eyes.

“Look at you boys!” She beams, her Irish accent strong. Usually, it’s strongest when she’s coming from her country, as well as the speed at which she talks. It’s so fast the first couple of weeks back. She gives Carter and me a hug before landing on Jensen.

“Jensen,” she smiles softly. “What’s the craic?”

Jensen looks from her to Carter and me, then back. “We have a table in the back.” He states, and I watch her smile dim slightly.

“Right, well, come on.” We follow her to the table, and after she takes our orders and leaves, I punch Jensen in the arm.

“I did not get forced out here just for you to talk to her like a dick.”

“I panicked!” Jensen hisses. “She looked at me, and I forgot what ‘craic’ meant, and I nearly asked her to have my children.” He groans, dropping his head into his hands.

“And that would’ve been bad, why?” Carter drawls while looking over towards the dance floor. “Well, I’ll be damned. Hellraiser has some moves.”

My eyes snap to him before following his gaze, not to the dance floor, but to the fucking mechanical bull that Ozzy is sliding up and down the back of



as it bucks and spins. I am up and moving before I can register that I'm doing so. Jesus Christ, could she look any *hotter*? I watch as she leans back and her hips roll forward, causing her black t-shirt to slide up, giving us all a view of her belly button ring and what appears to be a bat tattoo peeking out from her jeans. Pushing through the crowd of horny fucks that I have no problem murdering if they don't stop staring at her, I get to the front where mother fucking Theo is standing, flirting with the girl next in line.

"Theo," I hiss, making her jump.

"Hey, bubs, what are you doing over here? Gonna challenge Oz? Because that girl is—" She stops as Ozzy is thrown from the machine, landing on the mat. She stands up and adjusts herself before her eyes land on me.

"Jackson?" She breathes out as she walks off the mat. I watch as one of the ranch hands for another farm reaches his hand out to get Ozzy's attention, nothing aggressive, but I intervene anyway. I snatch his hand before it makes contact with her elbow and bend it backward.

"Scott," I say calmly, "I know you wasn't about to grab this pretty lady without her permission, were you?" Ozzy's face pales as she continues to stare at me.

"N-no sir!" Scott sputters. "I was just gonna ask for a dance."

"You ask with your mouth, not your hands. And she ain't interested."

"Uh," Ozzy snorts. "I could be."

"You ain't," I say again, more forcefully this time. "Get your ass over to the table. I ain't signing up to babysit all of you tonight."

"No one's asking you to, big man." She huffs before walking around me and up to the bar. Grumbling to myself, I stalk back over to the table and slam myself down into an empty chair.

"You know," Carter smirks as he sips from his bottle of beer. "If you two would just fuck, it would probably get rid of all that tension." An image of me grabbing my brother and slamming his face repeatedly into the table fills my mind, but I push it aside and let out a snort.

"Tink ain't my type," I lie. "I think I've already made that clear."

"You've shown her more attention than any other girl in years." Carter shrugs while I roll my eyes.

"I ain't got time for that drama. I got a ranch to run." I take a long pull from my beer, watching while Theo and Niamh have Ozzy follow them onto the dance floor.

"Shit," Jensen mutters. "Even Pops found time for Mama while running

the ranch. You just choose not to.”

“That’s because I have you two idiots, Mama and Pops, and Theo to watch over on top of the ranch and now that brat.” I snap, feeling hot and cornered. Carter is unfazed by my outburst, too busy watching Lacey Hale swaying her hips in her tight jeans. Jensen, on the other hand, seems uncomfortable.

“Sorry, Jen,” I say softly, knowing he tends to take things like this personally. “I’m just—”

“It’s fine,” he waves me off, eyes focusing on Niamh. Glancing over, I see Niamh grinning as she shows Ozzy how to dance. Ozzy looks so happy at this moment. Her face is relaxed, and her smile is wide and genuine. I would call it sweet if it weren’t for her edgy, sinful look. I chuckle inwardly to myself as I think about Carter’s words. Somehow I know that if I were to actually fuck Ozzy, it wouldn’t get rid of any of the tension.

“Well, god damn!” I cringe at the sound of Beau’s stupid fucking voice. Beau was my older brother Derek’s best friend until he started fucking Derek’s then-wife, Justine. The Rowe’s wrote him off after that. He supposedly married her after Derek left, but that hasn’t stopped either of them from finding someone else to fuck just to piss the other off. Beau stalks through the bar and to the dance floor, and goddamn it, of course, he’s going after Tink. I stand up and make my way over just as Ozzy holds her hand out at the man.

“That’s far enough,” she says to Beau. Her voice is anything but confident despite how she’s trying to act. Beau chuckles while taking his hat off, revealing his wavy black hair.

“Now, now, no need to be so rude.” He purrs, looking her up and down. I don’t like it. No one should be looking at Tink like that.

“Why don’t you come on over here, baby girl? Show me what those curves can do.” He snatches her wrist, and I see red. Instantly, I grip Beau’s thick wrist and twist it to break his hold on Ozzy. Grabbing Ozzy by the waist, I shove her behind me as I glare at the man.

“You going deaf or something, Beau?” I grind out, the heat causing my skin to prickle as I feel Ozzy’s shaking hands clench the back of my shirt. She’s gripping *me*. She feels safe behind *me*, which awakens something I don’t remember feeling before. The protectiveness I’m feeling for her, it’s almost terrifying. “She told you that was enough. Now, get the fuck on out of here before you get your ass kicked by another Rowe.” I watch his lip snarl,

and for a second, I think we are about to fight, but instead, Beau turns to leave. I turn around and look at the pale woman, her eyes watery and her body shivering.

“Baby,” I whisper, bending down to meet her at eye level.

“Get me out of here. Please,” she manages, her voice trembling, and I waste no time. Holding my hand out, I can’t help the warmth I feel when she places her hand in mine as I take us out of the bar and to my truck.

“Ozzy, are you going to be okay with me driving?” I ask her, but she doesn’t respond. I watch her jump as every noise around us. “What do you need?” I ask her, unable to hide the desperation in my voice.

She looks up at me, and her face is shattering. “Quiet? Safety? To not be scared? A fucking hug...” I watch the tears begin to fall, and I can’t handle it. I can’t handle seeing this strong, smart-ass woman crumpling before me.

“I-I can hug you,” I offer, stepping forward but halting when she tenses. “Okay,” I sigh and think for a moment before looking at my truck, and a crazy idea pops into my head. Walking up to my truck, I open the passenger door before turning to her as I unbuckle and rip my belt from my pants before sliding in. “Come here,” I say to the confused girl. I watch as she warily walks over, and I make cuffs out of my belt before pulling the belt with my teeth.

“There are d-rings in my glove box. Grab one, push it through the belt loop, and then place it by the backseat window on that hook.”

“What? Why?” I roll my eyes at her question.

“Tink, give me thirty seconds of trust, alright? Thirty seconds.” I watch her exhale before climbing into the cab and grabbing a ring from the glove box. She forces it through the hole and pulls my arms over my head to attach the ring to the hook. I grunt the position isn’t comfortable, but this isn’t for me.

“Alright,” I breathe out while showing her I can’t move. “Ozzy, *you* have all the power here, baby, alright? I can’t touch you. I want you to close the cab door, and I want you to hug me. I want you to scream, cry, punch me, hug me, whatever you need, without fear of being touched, okay?” Her mouth falls open, and her eyes shudder.

“Jackson...” She breathes weakly, and I shake my head.

“Close the door, Ozzy. Close the door and let go.” Shockingly, she closes the door to the cab before slowly making her way closer to me as if approaching a trapped wild animal. I inhale, and Jesus fucking Christ, her

smell, it's spicy and woody, while her hair has a floral scent that mixes perfectly. It's a smell I wish I could live in.

Ozzy trails the sharp point of one of her nails over my arm and up my neck, and I have to ignore the shiver that runs through me. "You could break that hook in seconds." She breathes out, her voice cracking like the sob is right there, waiting to fall out.

"Yes," I admit. "I could, but you could get out before I could break the hook and release my hands." She nods and gets to her knees before... oh my god, she is straddling my lap. I—I don't know what I was expecting, there's no easy way to hug in the front of my truck, but... fucking god. *Okay, Rowe, act unbothered.*

Ozzy is shaking so hard, it's breaking my heart.

"Jackson," she whimpers as we look into each other's eyes. I've never stared at Ozzy this closely. I look from her red-rimmed eyes down her slender nose and her lush lips. Fuck, I bet they are so fucking soft. I stare at her neck tattoo and frown. *What is that?* Squinting my eyes, I look closer and... are those scars? I follow the tattoo down the exposed skin on her chest, the same raised skin, it's... everywhere.

"Ozzy," I whisper, meeting her eyes again and trying to force the lump in my throat down. "Baby, w-what happened to you?" The sob that escapes her is terrifyingly loud in the truck's cab, and she collapses against my chest; her arms wrap around my neck with such a powerful force it's like she's afraid to let me go. My arms scream in burning pain, but I ignore it. Someone hurt her worse than I ever thought. This is more than some stupid ex that hit her.

Ozzy continues to wail, and the sound is so gut-wrenching it causes me to feel physically ill. I want to wrap her in my arms, but I can't, and it's not what she needs. So I continue to stare up at the roof of my truck as she soaks my shirt with her tears, and I try to ignore the burning in my eyes. I am still and quiet until her sobs calm slightly, even though her grip around my neck doesn't loosen.

"Tell me..." She manages to get out. Her voice is congested and hoarse as she speaks. "Tell me I'll be okay, Jackson. Just lie to me and say I won't be this way forever, please—"

"Hey," I shift my head and timidly press my cheek against hers before whispering in her ear as softly as I can. "This feeling is temporary. Baby, I don't know what happened to you, but you survived it, you hear me? You are so fucking strong, Ozzy. I mean, look at you, barely able to hold my hand,

and now you're hugging me. I promise you, you got this, baby, and I won't let you fall, alright? You got me, always."

Ozzy pulls back and stares at me. Her mouth is so close to mine I can smell the mint of the gum she must've been chewing earlier. She leans in, and my heart stutters, thinking she's about to kiss me, but she reaches over and releases my arms from the hook. I groan as I slowly lower them and mourn silently as she climbs off my lap.

"Can you drive us back to the ranch?" She asks weakly, and I give her a small smile and nod. As we drive back to the ranch, it doesn't take long for her to shut down like usual. Her eyes go distant, and her face becomes stony. I don't take it personally, though. She's given me something today. She is letting me drive, and she let me touch her face. Ozzy has given me her trust, and even if it was only a tiny amount for a few minutes, it's more than I had before, and I think it's probably more than most get from her. So, I'll treasure it. And I'll do whatever I have to, to earn more.

## Ozzy

*“Come on, Brumby,” Patrick’s cold voice grunts as he slams the metal inside me again. I feel it ripping and tearing my inner walls, but I won’t beg him, not again. I’m going to die because of these men. I’m going to die, and I can’t stop it. But I won’t give him any more satisfaction. The sight of the pistol rakes against my inner walls, and I scream out through my clenched teeth, and the fiery pain courses through me. He jams the pistol back into me, and I see him smirk through my tear and sweat-covered eyes.*

*“Beg Brumby, beg like the worthless whore you are, and I’ll stop.” He drives it deeper inside before I hear the cocking of the gun’s hammer. He raises a brow, waiting for my response. I look at him and spit in his face before laying my head back down. Patrick chuckles and shakes his head before pulling the trigger. I freeze, expecting to feel pain, to hear the gun, but the only sound is the click. The chamber is empty.*

*“Well, looks like you got lucky. Wanna see if you can get that lucky again?” I shudder as he rips the gun out of me. “Oi! Hugh!” He yells, his spit or sweat landing on my mouth. “Get over here, mate! May as well put her mouth to good use if she ain’t gonna listen to me.”*



I bolt upright in my bed, sweat covering me. I flail around, trying to remove

the tangled sheets from my body before standing up and turning on the light. It was just a dream... A nightmare. Well, flashback. I run my hands through my tangled hair before feeling something different. I pull my hands away and notice three of my fake nails are missing, and I clawed my forearms to bits during my flashing. I sigh deeply while trying to ignore the phantom pain in my vagina.

*It's been years, Oz. Your body is healed... mostly.*

Deciding I need a glass of water, I walk out of my room and to the kitchen before stopping in front of the stairs and looking up. My mind goes to Jackson and his truck. The way he let me hug him and cry, the way he made sure I felt safe. And I did. I can't remember a time I felt that safe before, especially since what has happened. My brain catches up just as I reach Jackson's door. I knock lightly and then wince. What am I doing? It's the middle of the night, and he's probably sleeping.

I'm about to walk away when the door opens, and Jackson's massive, shirtless body leans on the door frame. His shoulder-length brown hair is loose and messy from his pillow. Did I mention he's shirtless? Because... fuck, those powerful working muscles and that chest hair that carries on down his abs...

"Tink?" His voice is groggy, and it sends butterflies to my stomach. "What's up?"

"Can I come in?" I ask quickly and then wince. "No, never mind, I-I'm sorry, I'm an idiot. I don't—"

"Shhhh..." He waves his hand. "Girl, it's the middle of the night. I ain't got that kind of brain power yet." He opens his door wider and steps aside to let me in before closing the door and turning on the light. His room is quite large. It's very similar to my old room. A sitting area where Bear and Rocky are sleeping on a couch and then his room with... a window.

"You people and your windows," I mutter as I avoid looking at the blackness outside.

"Most people like the scenery." He yawns while opening his water bottle and taking a sip.

"Most people didn't run naked at gunpoint through that kind of scenery." It slips out, and I hear his bottle drop to the floor, and I turn to look at him.

"What?" He whispers, ignoring the water spilling on his rug.

"It's n—" I watch him come to stand closer. His hand goes out, maybe to touch my face, but he stops and pulls back, and... it kills me. It kills me

because it's exactly what I need but not what my body will allow. I want him to touch my face, call me baby, and wrap his arms around me. He has such strong arms. I bet they would feel so good if my fucking body would let it happen.

"I don't know what to do." He admits, and again, it kills me.

"How so?" I whisper, looking up at him through my lashes.

"Ozzy," His voice is almost pained as he looks at me. "I don't know how to help when I can't get close to you. I don't know what to say because I don't know what happened."

"I needed to feel safe. I... I had a flashback in my sleep, and..." I hear his sharp intake of breath when I hold my arms up to show him the scratches. "Yeah," I let out a weak laugh. "Haven't done this in a while." Jackson walks to the foot of his bed and sits on the floor. I watch him slip his arms through the metal posts of the footboard.

"Alright, Tink, come on." He jerks his head, indicating for me to go to him, and I do. I kneel in front of him and look over his naked torso. There isn't one tattoo on his body, but my eyes find a scar on his abdomen and frown.

"What happened here?" I ask softly, and Jackson chuckles.

"I was fifteen, trying to impress a girl at a rodeo my brothers and Pops were watching. Fucked with a bull and he fucked right back." I gasp at his story while inspecting the jagged scar closer. "It could've been worse. I would've taken the bull's ass beating over Pop's ass chewing once he knew I would live." I chuckle lightly as I run my fingers over the raised skin. I watch his muscles tense, and I rip my hand away.

"I-I'm so sorry, I don't know what—"

"It's alright," He chuckles lightly. "Just tickled a little." I give him a soft, shy laugh as I move closer.

"I'm sorry—"

"Don't be," he interrupts, his voice low and serious. "You got to have someone you can trust, Tink. If this is what has to be done to help you, then I'll do it."

"Why?" I manage to get out, and he attempts to shrug.

"Because you've done a lot for me and my family. You saved my boys. You stayed with Pops despite what very well could've been the end. You gave without question, and you deserve someone to do the same for you, Ozzy." Leaning in, I wrap my arms around him while burying my face in his



neck, trying my best not to cry on him again. I feel his cheek pressing against mine again, and I revel in the feeling of it. The bristle of his beard, the feel of his breath on my jaw, and his clean smell. I want this, god I want him.

*This is a bad, bad idea, Ozzy. You've been so careful. What in the fuck are you doing?*

I hear my inner voice screaming at me, but for once, I don't listen. Pulling my head back, I look into his warm eyes. They flick down to my neck before returning to meet my gaze again. I take a breath before straddling his thighs, deciding that he deserves to know something about my past.

Running my hand over my neck, I open my mouth. "I was drugged at a bar," I say through the lump in my throat. "They took me and... kept me. One of the ways they made sure I couldn't leave or misbehave was a correction collar they forced me to wear. It was modified and sharpened to stay pierced in my skin, and when it was tightened, or they jerked on my leash..." I trail off as the thought of the collar ripping my throat flashes through my mind. "Well, I'm sure you can imagine."

"Ozzy..." He whispers, and I know he's trying to meet my gaze, but I can't look at the pity that I'm sure is there.

"So yeah," I say, trying to muster up the strength to put my emotions away. "I got out of there and was pretty bad off, lots of scars...I didn't want to look at something so ugly, so..." I gesture to my tattoos.

"Nothing about you is ugly," his firm voice causes me to look up and meet his gaze. What I find isn't pity or disgust. He looks protective. Caring. "Tink, you are so beautiful, tattoos, scars, all of it. Those scars aren't ugly. They prove that you survived something ugly; you came out the other side, which is beautiful." I don't know what comes over me as I lean forward and crash my lips against his. His mouth opens on a gasp. Taking advantage of his open mouth, I slip my tongue between his lips and feel a jolt run through my body at the feel of him. Jackson caresses my tongue with his. It's so soft and kind, and I can't help but whimper against his mouth as I press myself closer, needing more. I run my hand through his hair, gripping it tightly and earning a growl that shoots right into my core. Fucking hell, when was the last time a man made me feel this way?

*"Stupid slut, you don't want to beg, I'll just bite those lips off."*

Hugh's voice causes me to gasp, and I shove away from Jackson,

scooting back on my butt until I'm pressed against the opposite wall. "Oh my god," I pant, eyes wide. Jackson stares at me with equally wide eyes. "I-I got to go," I say, jumping to my feet.

"W-what? Ozzy, Ow!" He curses as he tries to stand, but in his haste, he must've forgotten his arms are tangled in the posts.

"I-I'm so sorry," I whisper while running out of the room and down the stairs. I am about to go to my room but stop, knowing Jackson will follow me. Grabbing my purse, I run out the door just in time to see Jackson leaving his room. I jump into Gretchen before starting her up and racing down the long driveway. I don't know where I'm going, but I know I've got to get away from here.



"Ozzy," Indy hisses over my nearly dead phone. "You can't just leave them. Morris needs—"

"I know," I snap, breaking off another of my fake nails with my mouth and spitting it across the car. They were going to have to come off anyway. They were getting ridiculously long. "I'm going to go back. I just... the flashbacks are bad right now, Indy." I admit while popping off the last nail.

I hear Derek in the background grumbling to Indy about it being three in the morning. "Stop being so old," she sighs. "Now, I get that it's scary, Ozzy, but Jackson is a good guy."

"Did she fuck Jackson?" I hear Derek mutter and then a smacking noise.

"I swear," she mutters, and I hear her getting up and moving around. "You said Morris and you get along and that Jackson is a nice guy. Why give that up over a little heat-of-the-moment kiss?"

"Because I spent five months chained and raped and sold Indy," I growl as I shift to get comfortable. "I don't know how to feel anything besides fear and anger anymore. Now I've kissed a guy? I felt things. I can't—" I hit the back of my head against the window and groan. God, that kiss was so amazing. Why did I have to hear Hugh's voice? "I hope you realize this is all your fault," I mutter, causing her to gasp dramatically.

"My fault? What did I do?"

“You had to send me those dirty books!” I whine, and Indy starts laughing loudly.

“First off, I never sent you dirty books. I sent you some audiobook recommendations that specifically had no sex in them. So whatever you’re talking about is your doing.”

“You opened the damn box, cupcake! Once it’s opened, everything just sort of... I don’t know! All I know is Jackson walks around with sweat and muscles and chest hair, and he does this thing with his tongue—”

“Oh my god, take her off speaker!” Derek’s voice groans, and Indy starts cackling.

“Indyyyy!” I whine, “Help me!”

“Okay, okay... do you want to quit?” I am quiet for a second as I stare out at the foggy area I’m parked in. I’ve been here long enough that the sun is beginning to rise and lighten the sky.

“No,” I say confidently. “This place is... no, I don’t want to quit. But I also don’t know if I should... continue things with Jackson... like at all.”

“Well, then slip on those sexy big girl panties and walk back in there. And if Jackson tries to question you about what happened, just say ‘you’re welcome’ and move on.” I snort at her comment before my phone beeps, alerting me it’s serious about dying this time.

“I should go. My phone is dying.”

“Yes, go back to the ranch. Derek has already told Jackson to fuck off like twelve times since we’ve been on the phone, so good luck with that not continuing things plan.”

“Love you, cupcake,” I say before hanging up the phone. I look at the twenty-seven unread texts, and I’m about to open them when my phone goes black. Tossing my phone onto the passenger seat, I stare at the fog weaving through the trees and over the fields as my mind wanders.



*“Come on!” The large balding man slaps the younger man on the back. He looks my age, maybe a little younger. “You’re twenty-one now! Fuck going to a bar. Go get your dick wet!” The man shoves the younger man towards me*

and Hugh, who holds me on my knees with my leash.

I glance up to see Hugh put the chain into the nervous man's hands. "You get thirty minutes. You kill her or permanently disfigure her face or tits. You best not come out of that room, got it?" He warns with an almost protective tone to his voice. Funny, considering my ass is still not healed from what he did to me last week. The boy nods and looks down at me. I can't imagine what he must think, the infected cuts and sores, my snarled patchy hair, the ass plug with the animal tail I am sporting with the gag and muzzle.

He starts walking, and I follow him on my hands and knees, praying that this "shy boy" aura he is radiating isn't an act. The last John got off on pain and... I just don't have it in me to handle another one right now. I crawl into the room, sitting on my feet, head down, while he closes the door. I flinch as his hands reach for my muzzle. He removes it and my gag before looking me over. There's so much fear in his eyes. Why? It's not like I can hurt him.

"Are you okay?" His question is so out of the blue I nearly choke on a laugh.

"W-what?" I ask, my voice weak and raspy. "Of course not. Now can you fuck me so I can be done?" I sigh as I remove the plug from my ass and head towards the blood-stained bed. The man grabs my wrist, and I flinch at the touch.

"I'm Adam, and... I don't want to fuck you." I raise my tired eyes to him. Is this some kind of weird foreplay?

"You don't want to, but you must? Okay, got it."

"No," He hisses, looking around the room. "You have thirty minutes. Is that enough time to run away?" I stare at him, frozen. Is he... serious? Is this a test? I look over to the door before turning back to him.

"They will kill me And you, too." Adam shrugs softly.

"Then I die trying to be a hero instead of a slimeball like my dad, and you don't have to live like this anymore if you want." I swallow hard, and it's so painful. I glance out the window, knowing this could be my only shot. These infections will kill me if I don't get help soon.

Deciding it's now or never, I nod firmly while gathering the chain in my hands. It would have to come with me since Hugh wore the key to the lock on around his neck. Adam looks at the window and frowns.

"We need to break the glass," he whispers, and my heart drops. Undeterred, Adam rips the sheet off the bed and hands it to me. "Wrap it around your fist, punch straight through, then trace all four sides to swipe the

*glass away. You'll need to do it as soon as I give you the signal."*

*I wrap the filthy sheet around my hand and wait as Adam unplugs and grabs the lamp before standing on the bed. He nods at me, and as I drive my fist through the glass, he slams the lamp onto the hardwood floor before bouncing the headboard against the wall.*

*"That's it, you nasty slut!" He snarls, making as much noise as possible while I clean the area and slide my naked body out, trying not to cry out as the missed shards rake down my skin, cutting it open. "You take it, you bitch! More!" I give him one final look before my bare feet touch the cool, damp ground. Instantly, I take off, running with everything I have into the foggy night. I get to the tree line when a single gunshot rings out and stops me in my tracks. It takes all of thirty seconds before the second one follows. They shot Adam and then his dad. I don't have to see it to know they took that kind man down. My lip quivers, and I feel weak, like I can't run.*

*"No," I whisper to myself. I can't save him, and this here is my only chance. He gave this to me at the cost of his life. I won't piss it away.*

*"BRUMBY!" Patrick's voice cuts through the night, giving me the jolt I need to start moving again. I run as fast as my legs will move through the woods, ignoring the scrapes and cuts from the rocks and branches as I continue to run. I refuse to look back. I refuse to stop. He is going to have to kill me and drag me back.*

# Jackson

“You’ve reached Oz-” I growl in frustration as I hang the call up again. She left. She left, and now she is either ignoring me or her phone is dead. I’m beyond pissed off. She kisses me and then runs away. What the fuck?!

I continue to storm back and forth on the front porch, torn between going out and looking for her ass and staying here to chew her out when she comes back if she does. I stop moving at that thought. What if she doesn’t come back? I rub the ache in my chest as I look back at the house. Pops would be devastated, and there would be no getting another nurse after this. He would refuse. And I would be—

I whip my head up when I hear tires rolling over the gravel. Ozzy’s car comes up the drive, and I am equal parts relieved and pissed the fuck off as I storm down the steps and march up to her car as she steps out.

“Morning,” she says calmly while biting into a donut.

“Morning?” I glare down at her. “What the fuck, Ozzy?” I watch her bite into the donut again and try to forget about her mouth and how it felt against mine. Fuck, that tongue ring in my mouth felt like a sinful act I’ll never be cleansed of, and that’s fine by me. That kiss was fucking amazing.

“What?” she questions while holding out a box. “I got enough for everyone.”

“Is this really how we’re going to be?” I ask, snatching the box from her. I watch the lost look in her warm eyes, and soften slightly. “I was worried,” I admit under my breath. “You ran away,”

“Yeah, I’m good at running,” she breathes out a laugh. “Best not to get too close to me. Running is what I do best.” I frown as she walks past me and

enters the house, leaving me standing with a box of donuts, a thousand new questions, and no idea what to ask first.



“Oh my god,” Theo pants, placing her hands on her knees. “I’m about to chop this wood naked. I’m warning y’all now.” Carter, Jensen, and I all grimace at the thought. None of us want to see that. Theo may technically be a grown woman, but in our minds, she is a little brother to us.

Carter clears his throat before nudging me in the side. “So, what did you do to Hellraiser?”

“I told you not to call her that,” I state lowly, though he doesn’t seem fazed.

“You also told me not to fuck Emmaleigh Anders, didn’t listen then either.” Theo snorts before spitting on the ground.

“What a man,” Jensen deadpans as he drives his axe through his log. Theo ignores Jensen and points her axe at Carter.

“You’re a dumbass for fucking her,” she states before swinging her axe through her log. She lets out a wheeze before bending over at the waist again.

“What’s the matter, Theo,” Carter taunts. “Getting to be too much to hang out with the real men?” I furrow my brows, and the guys stop laughing just as Theo bites back a cry and goes to her knees.

“Fuck,” I curse, running to her. “Jensen, get Ozzy! Theo, what is it?” I ask, holding her shoulders to keep her up while Carter grabs her a bottle of water.

“I dunno,” she winces and pushes the bottle away. “It hurts, fuck,” she cries out while bending forward. I see her gripping her stomach, and I go to lift her into my arms. “Grab the tools,” I say to Carter as I start heading back to the house. Ozzy is walking out the door with her medical bag, and she looks over at Theo.

“What happened?” she asks, touching Theo’s pale face. “What hurts?”

Theo cries out again and points to her stomach. “Lay her down,” Ozzy orders, and I lay Theo on her back in the grass, only to have her roll to her

side in the fetal position. Ozzy drops to her knees and lifts Theo's shirt. "Does this hurt?" she asks, pressing on the lower right side of Theo's stomach.

"Mother fucking cock sucker!" Theo screams out as she rolls over.

Ozzy looks up at me, "You need to get us to the closest hospital, now."



A ruptured appendix. It's serious.

Theo was rushed into surgery, but Ozzy says it's relatively common, and she would be okay. Apparently, Theo was experiencing appendicitis yesterday but thought it was just menstrual cramps, which makes me wonder exactly how bad cramps are.

"You alright?" Ozzy asks as we sit in the OR waiting room.

"Yeah. Sorry, just... tired." I am tired, more than tired. "I hate hospitals," I admit for no reason other than to maybe get her to converse with me. She nods her head slowly.

"Understandable, most people don't like them. It's usually not associated with a favorable time in one's life." I watch her cross her legs. She's wearing cut-off jeans, and like the rest of her, her legs are covered in tattoos. I chuckle to myself at her "bee's knees." I remember her saying something about not wanting to see her scars, and I wonder, how many of those tattoos are to cover scars?

"I was sick a lot as a kid," I say softly. "I spent a lot of time in and out of hospitals." Ozzy gives me a sympathetic look.

"That must've been hard. Was it for long?" I rub the back of my neck, feeling somewhat uncomfortable talking about this, but at least she is talking to me.

"About a year. I was eight. I caught the flu at school, and it turned into something crazy. I had pneumonia and bronchitis on and off nearly that whole time." I shake my head, remembering the sad looks on my mom and brother's faces. "Mama was sure I was going to die. I was skin and bones and couldn't breathe on my own. It was terrible. Then, when I started to get better, I was still so weak both physically and immune-wise. Plus, my parents



and I were terrified to let me near other people because we feared one cold would send me back to the hospital.”

At some point during my story, Ozzy moved to the chair next to mine. “Well, look at you now. You’re all muscles, chest hair, and beard,” she gives me a reassuring smile.

I laugh in surprise. “I don’t know what my chest hair, and beard have to do with anything.”

“Yeah, not my best one,” she sighs and rests her head back on the chair. “I’m just tired. I’ll think of something more clever tomorrow.”

“Oh, so you’re planning to talk to me tomorrow?” I ask, and she peeks open a black-lined eye.

“Yes.” She says, and I’m caught off guard by how much weight that simple word holds for me. She sighs before slipping her hand into mine and interlacing our fingers. “You’re the first thing ever to keep me grounded.” I watch as she brings our joined hands up to inspect. “Even before I was hurt, I was a runner: rolling stone and all that. My dad was never in the picture, and my mom,” she lets out a dry laugh. “Well, she’s where I learned it from.” Her smile is sad, and her eyes are distant. “I rarely saw her unless it was time to move or meet her new boyfriend. My point is I’ve never stayed anywhere long, never wanted to be close to anyone. Hell, Indy is the only friend I have, and I firmly believe it’s because our friendship is almost entirely done over text and phone calls.”

She takes a breath as she places her other hand on top of where our hands are still joined and begins running her fingers over my calloused knuckles. Fuck, it feels nice. I didn’t realize I had been missing this. Not that I ever really had whatever this is. I’m no saint, but there hasn’t ever been hand-holding or soft touches that didn’t result in sex. And in the last five years, I can count on one hand, with fingers left over, how many times any touch resulted in sex. I want to touch her back, it’s almost like a fucking ache. I know I can’t, and it eats at me to not be able to give her the same calming sensations she’s giving me.

“I don’t know,” Ozzy’s sigh pulls me out of my thoughts, and I look from our hands up to see her worrying on that fucking pouty bottom lip of hers. Her lips are so fucking soft, and sucking that lip into my mouth last night... *No, Jackson! Stop! You can’t get a fucking boner in the waiting room. Jesus Christ!*

“It’s the first time I’ve come back,” she whispers before peeking at me.

“To the ranch. To you. I wasn’t going to, I was... I was ready to run again. But I’m tired.” She lets out a small laugh that doesn’t meet her glassy eyes. “I’m so goddamn tired of not feeling safe and running away.”

“Do I...” Clearing my throat, I rephrase the question. “Did I make you feel unsafe last night? When we—”

“Oh! Oh, god, no! That’s the problem.” I furrow my brows and cock my head to one side.

“You’re gonna have to spell this one out for me, baby.” Her nose wrinkles when she smiles, and I have to look away. That smile, fucking hell, there ain’t a thing on this earth I wouldn’t give to her if she smiles at me like that again.

“I like it when you call me baby,” she admits, a light blush creeping up her cheeks.

*Keep smiling at me like that, and I’ll call you baby until the day I die.*

Woah. That was a bit much there. Say something like that to her, and she’ll definitely rethink that whole not running thing.

“I liked kissing you,” she continues... *What should I say? Thanks? Me too? That was nothing?*

“Funny way of showing it.” Perfect Jackson, fucking perfect. And there goes the hand-holding, goddamn it. As she stands, I’m about to say something, but she cuts me off.

“I know, and I’m sorry. That was a real dick move. I just... Jackson, this is all so fucking scary for me.” She gestures between us with her hands. “I’m damaged on a level that is so bad I haven’t even disclosed it all to my therapist for fear of upsetting her. I live my life in constant fear, and I never let men close to me in any capacity. But I did last night. And before with holding your hand. And it scares me because...” Her eyes find mine, and I see how hard she’s trying to hold back her tears, and it fucking guts me. “Because I wasn’t scared of you. I liked it, and I felt safe with you. I feel safe with you, and it scares me to allow someone else that kind of power over me.”

I nod slowly as I stand up. “This is weird on my end too, Tink. I’m terrified of saying the wrong thing, touching and upsetting you. And please don’t take that the wrong way. The last thing I want is for you to feel bad, and I don’t want to hurt you.”

“No, I understand. What you’re saying makes sense. I just... I don’t know what’s happening right now, but I do know that I feel safe with you and don’t

want to lose that.” I give her a small smile, wishing like hell I could hold her.  
“I don’t want to lose it either.”



“Did you see my nurse?” Theo waggles her eyebrows, and I smack my face.

“You have been out of recovery for fifteen minutes. Keep it in your pants.” Theo scoffs, her eyes unfocused and heavy-lidded.

“Shit, I ain’t about that life. I’ll have her number before the end of today.” She trails off, and Ozzy snorts.

“She and Carter are fucking twins, I swear,” Ozzy mutters while checking over Theo’s monitors. I don’t know why, but her double-checking everything pulls at me, maybe because it shows she cares about my family like I do.

“Theo puts on a player act, but that’s all it is. She’s more like me than anyone when you cut through the shit.” Ozzy raises a brow as we start to walk out of the room to let Theo rest. Her surgery went perfectly, and she’ll be laid up for a bit, but it won’t be long before she’s back to her usual self.

“Like you, huh? And how’s that?”

“Not into the casual bullshit. The one-night stands, the drama, the forced getting to know you’s, followed by the awkward morning afters. She and I never really liked that, not the way Carter does, anyway.”

“So, you and her are looking for your wives? What about Jensen?” I laugh as we leave the hospital and head to my truck.

“I don’t know about Theo, but I ain’t looking for shit. I’m getting old and don’t have the time for nonsense.”

“*Getting* old? Aren’t you like... fifty-something?” I turn and stare at her amused expression.

“I oughta leave your little ass here to walk back,” I mutter before opening the passenger door to the truck. “I’m forty, thank you very much.” She sticks her tongue out at me, and I focus on that fucking ball shining in the sun. “Did that hurt?” I hear myself ask before I can stop. She gives me a smirk before shrugging.

“Not too bad. The piercer was really fast. Now my left tit,” she blows out a breath. “I think I died for a second.” I want to laugh, like I know she’s

being funny, outgoing, and friendly, but I can't. I can't because she's reminded me of those fantastic tits that I have no business thinking about having piercings through the nipples.

"You okay?" I flinch at her voice, which causes her to jump.

"Yeah," I mutter, feeling my cheeks go red. "I ummm... I'll go now."

"Go where?" she laughs, and fucking hell, what am I saying?

"Go to the driver's side and start the truck," is my desperate attempt at a save as I stumble over my stupid big ass feet as I get into the truck. Now that I am on my side of the bench seat and I have to focus on driving, I feel calmer. At least until Ozzy opens that fucking mouth again.

"Are you attracted to me?" I slam on the brake and turn to stare at her, my eyes wide.

"No?" I breathe out and wince. It sounds more like a weak, desperate question rather than a definitive answer. I watch something flash through Ozzy's eyes, but before I can pinpoint what it is, that fucking wall of hers is back up.

"Might wanna start driving there, Rowe," she states just as a horn honks from behind us.

"Why would you ask that?" I say after several minutes of silence.

"Curiosity. Now I know."

"You know what?" I ask, terrified that she's about to out me.

"That me kissing you was wrong. I didn't get your consent to do that, and I apologize." I glance over at her. She looks dejected. Her shoulders are hunched over, and her gaze is on her hands in her lap. I turn and park in the grocery store's parking lot. Ozzy looks up from her lap and then whips her head to look at me. I turn to look at her and take a breath.

"Don't apologize. And don't look like that." I say, pointing at her face.

"Like what?"

"Like I rejected you or some shit." Ozzy shakes her head, and a lock of black hair falls from her bun. I stop my hand from tucking it behind her ear, but only once it's already halfway to her face. I go to move my hand away, but she grabs it.

"Do it," she breathes out, and she looks almost shocked by her own words.

"Do what?" I ask softly. "Baby, you're gonna have to be so fucking specific with what you want from me."

Ozzy slides closer to me as she bites her lip nervously. "You were about

to move my hair, weren't you? Do it."

"I o-okay." I reach my hand up and watch as she fights off a flinch when my hand reaches her face. I run my finger over her temple, and she takes a sharp breath. I tuck the hair behind her ear and go to move my hand when she catches my wrist and holds me still. It's my turn to inhale sharply as she rests her cheek on my palm and closes her eyes.

"Ozzy," I whisper, refusing to move an inch. She's a wild bird that has landed in my hand—one wrong move, and she'll fly away.

"Oh my god," she breathes out and opens her eyes. "You're touching me." I give her a small smile.

"You're doing amazing, Tink."

"Does this bother you?" She asks, refusing to let my hand go, which is fine. She can have it.

"No, why?"

"Because you're not attracted to me." I groan and rest my head back against the headrest.

"Alright, you and I both know you're attractive. Obviously, I find you attractive. Anyone would."

"But does this bother you?" She murmurs into my palm, and the feel of her cheek in my palm causes my dick to harden. Goddamn it.

"N-No," I manage to get out. "But, I kind of need my hand to drive, and I'm sure you need to get back to Pops." Realization washes over her, and she pulls back, leaving my hand suspended momentarily.

"You're right," she says quickly. "I need to get back to Morris."

Sighing, I silently curse myself for disrupting the moment. It was perfect. She was letting me touch her. And, oh my god, her face is so soft. My mental beatdown stops when I feel Ozzy slide her hand into mine. A smile pulls at my lips as she runs her thumb over my hand while staring silently out the window.

## Ozzy

“Morris,” I growl in frustration. “You ain’t winning this one, old man. Just lay down and take your loss!”

“No! Challenge!” He barks out, and my lip begins to twitch.

“You’ve never heard of a ‘cup of jo’? Jo is a valid word!” I argue as I gesture to the Scrabble board.

“I said challenge! I want a definition! Not some damn website that obviously has an ulterior motive.”

I snort as I lean back in my chair. “You’re right, Morris, the makers of Scrabble created that website just to fuck with you.” I look down at my vibrating smartwatch. “Alright, old man, this will be continued later. I have to go and make your lunch.”

“Make sure you add seasoning this time. I could taste the poison in my eggs last night.” He smirks, and I shake my head before walking out of his room and down the steps.

Making my way from the staircase to the kitchen, I spot Jackson at the island and sigh uncomfortably. We haven’t spoken much or at all since the hospital last week. Jackson and the guys have added work with Theo being off, and, well, we’re avoiding each other. He touched my face, and I didn’t scream and run. When we got home after that, I took care of Morris and then ran to my room to call my therapist, who warned me about mixing feelings of security and trust with lust or love. I didn’t really understand what she meant until the following morning when I had woken up from a very vivid sex dream starring me, Jackson, and the bed of his pickup. After that... yeah, I became very scarce.

“Hey Tink,” Jackson’s voice is off. It’s not his usual rich, authoritative

tone. It's weaker, scratchy, and tired.

"Hey," I respond slowly and walk into the kitchen. "I was coming down to make your dad lun- Jackson, are you alright?" I ask as I look over his dark rings and pale complexion.

"Yeah... I just umm... I'm not feeling the best today, but I'll be alright." Hesitantly, I reach my hand up to touch his forehead, and I notice how he closes his tired eyes and leans into my touch.

"You feel a little feverish. You should go lay down." Jackson shakes his head, and I watch him dump his uneaten food into the trash.

"I don't have the time. I'll lay down tonight." He mutters before slipping his dark cowboy hat on and walking towards the back porch.

"You can't be out there if you're sick!" I huff, following him.

"If I ain't out there, this ranch ain't running. I don't have-" I run around him and stand in front of his large frame. His body sways as if he's unsteady on his feet.

"If you don't march your ass back inside-"

"You'll what?" He *attempts* to taunt me. It's the least threatening he's ever sounded. I raise a brow in challenge as I look out at the land.

"It would be unfortunate if I felt the need to follow you around to check on you all day in front of your brothers and employees." His face falls before he shakes his head.

"I fucking hate you," he mutters before returning to the house.



Taking a breath, I close my eyes and hit pause on my audiobook. The sex scene was intense well performed, but intense. I lay in my bed, looking at the ceiling as an image flashes through my brain. This time, it's not the usual flashbacks. No, it's Jackson on the floor the other night, his tongue wrapping around mine in such a possessive way it causes my toes to curl just thinking about it.

Biting my lip nervously, I slide my hand into my pajama pants. I don't do this, ever. Orgasming was turned into a weapon, and I usually find the release triggering, so I usually hold off until I can't anymore, like now.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath to calm my nerves as my fingers find their way to my center. A whimper escapes as I feel a wave of nausea rolls through me. Goddamn it. This isn't going to work if I keep getting nervous.

I nearly piss myself when my phone starts buzzing. Looking at the screen, I groan. Jackson. Perfect. My hand is on my crotch, and he is calling. Sighing, I accept the call and stick my earbud in with my free hand.

"Jackson? It's late, and you are right upstairs." I hear him chuckle softly, and it sends a current through me.

"I know where I am," he groans, "I was calling because I've decided that maybe I'll try some medicine, and I don't know what to take." I let out a laugh, and I close my eyes, my fingers absentmindedly running over my clit, causing me to let out a shaky breath.

"You okay?" He asks, and my body instantly heats up.

"Yep," I say way too quickly. "Yeah, I can bring you up some masturbation—MEDICATION." Oh my fucking god, I didn't... I did *NOT* say masturbation. There is a long, painfully long silence before I hear some rustling like Jackson is moving around in the bed.

"Ozzy," Oh my god... why does he have to be talking to be all low and soft like that?

"Yeah?" I squeak out. I'm never going to be able to come out of this room again, ever.

"Did I interrupt something?" I hear the smile in his way too-sexy tone, and I groan.

"Fine, yes! But don't worry, because I will never do it again... not that I was getting very far anyway." I mutter under my breath. He hears me, though, because why wouldn't he?

"Well, is there... something I can—"

"Stop. Talking." My mortification can't go any higher. I feel tears of embarrassment filling my eyes. "This was such a bad idea. Why I even thought I could do this is beyond me. I'll grab you some medicine and leave it at your door."

"Hey, hey, slow down. Talk to me. What's wrong?" I hear him shift again in his bed. I'll bet it's warm and soft and smells like him.

"Nothing," I whine. "Nothing I wanna talk to you about, anyway."

"Well, I happen to know a lot about masturbation. I've been doing it on my own for nearly three decades." He jokes, and I can't help but crack up. He



makes everything so much easier. He makes me calmer. His voice alone has the ability to calm me down and turn me on simultaneously. “What’s wrong, baby?” he asks in that soft, alluring tone again, and I have to fight the urge to roll my eyes back in pleasure.

“Every time I try... to do *that*. I am reminded of the times I was hurt.” I admit softly. “I was trying to do it while distracting myself, but it wasn’t working, and then you called.” He chuckles lightly, and I hear him stretch.

“Distract yourself how?” He asks casually, and I sigh, running my fingers over the elastic waistband of my pajamas.

“Thinking about people that don’t scare me,” I whisper, my cheeks growing warmer.

“Is one of those people me?” I nearly choke on my sharp intake of air. I try to gather myself and formulate a cocky response, telling him not to be so full of himself, but he doesn’t let me. “Don’t lie to me, Tink. Am I one of those people?”

“Yes,” I manage weakly, my entire body on fire. “You are the only person,” I add because, at this point, why the fuck not?

“Do you want to touch yourself, baby?” The whimper I release at his question is embarrassing, but I don’t care.

“Yes,” I pant out.

“Okay,” he whispers. “Close your pretty eyes and slip your hand between your legs.” My heart flutters, but I do as he says. My hand reaches my slit, and a soft whimper escapes me as I slide my finger over my clit. “You wet for me, baby?” Holy shit, his voice in my ear. It’s so intense.

“Y-yeah.” I hear him chuckle lightly before he speaks again.

“Pull those juices out of that pretty pussy, just one finger, one time, and rub it over your clit. Can you do that for me?” Even though he can’t see me, I nod while inserting my middle finger into my wet center. I feel a rush of panic fill me.

“Jackson,” I pant nervously.

“Shhhh... I’m here, baby. Take it out and rub your clit the way I know it’s aching to be touched.” I do as he says, letting out a low moan as my wet fingers find my bud. “Holy shit,” he pants out. “My god, the sound of your moan is enough to cause a man to go insane.”

I let out a breathy laugh before rubbing my clit again. “F-fuck, oh Jackson,” His name falls from my mouth so effortlessly, like I’ve been saying it forever.

“Goddamn it, that’s my good girl. Rub faster and listen to my voice. I’m right here with you. It’s just me and you, Tink.” He pants, and it fills me with a sort of pride to know that I’m having the same effect on him that he has on me.

“Do you want me?” I pant as I rub my clit faster.

“Jesus Christ... painfully, Ozzy.” He groans out.

“What would you do if you were right here?” Wow, that’s a ballsy question, Oz.

“Honestly? I would wrap those thick ass thighs of yours around my head while I tongue fucked that juicy little pussy until you passed out from orgasms.”

“Oh, my god,” I pant, “More.”

“Baby, you’re killing me,” he groans. “I’m trying very hard not to fuck my hand right now.” He takes a ragged breath. “I want you on top of me. I want to fill you so deep with my cock you’ll feel me for a week. I want you to hold me down and ride me like that fucking bull at Spurs.”

I feel myself getting closer. My body is alive with electricity, my core tight and on fire. “I want to hold you down,” I whine out. “I-I want to hurt you,” I cringe at my choice of words, but Jackson is undeterred.

“How?” he growls softly. “Use that perfect mouth and tell me exactly how you want to cause me pain.”

“Jackson,” I whine louder, and he moans.

“Come on, baby, you wanna choke me?”

“Yes,” I pant, my legs shaking.

“You want to make me bleed?”

“Yes,” I whisper, unsure how he will take that, unsure why the thought of making him bleed turns me on so much.

“I want you to,” he whispers, taking me by surprise. “You riding my cock while trailing your nails down my chest, leaving a path marking your pain all the way down, goddamn it...” He growls, and I can’t anymore. I can’t hold on another moment.

“I-I going to come...” I say frantically.

“That’s my baby. Come for me. Let me hear you find your pleasure.”

“Jackson!” I cry out as I hit my peak, the tightly wound cord snapping and filling my body with a delicious, warm feeling. I start to come back down, and the reality of what I did, what we did, comes into view. Oh my god, how am I supposed to ever look at him again?

I'm about to tell him I quit and then run away when I hear squealing tires outside and...

"What the fuck? Is that a kid crying?" Jackson asks, and I stand up, hanging up my phone and walking out of my room. I hear his door open but don't look at him as I walk to the front door and open it slowly.

"Oh my god," I whisper, looking at the teary-eyed boy on the porch.



"No way," Carter laughs nervously as he paces back and forth in the living room where Jensen, Jackson, and Dorothy sit, staring at me, holding the now-sleeping toddler. His name is Wyatt, at least it is according to the piece of paper attached to his suitcase. Wyatt Carter Rowe.

"I triple-wrap this shit!" He yells, sounding on the verge of tears.

"Language!" Dorothy hisses. "Now, who is his mother? And I'm using that term very loosely at this moment."

Jackson looks at the note and curses under his breath. "Emmaleigh Anders."

Carter groans, "Oh my god, that was one time, like four years ago!"

"Huh," I say sarcastically. "You don't say."

Carter points a finger at me. "Listen here, Hellraiser," he snaps before Jackson stands between us.

"Take a breath, and choose your next words wisely." He warns Carter lowly, and it sends a jolt to my abdomen, fucking hell. Can he stop turning me on?

"What am I going to do?" Carter groans, looking at the sleeping boy in my arms. "I don't know what to do with kids. Does he still need breast milk? I'm not lactating!"

"Son," Dorothy sighs before grabbing his shoulders. "He's over three. He's eating food by now. Stop freaking out, this will be okay. You're gonna do the right thing and care for your son." Carter's face falls as he stares at his mom like she's betrayed him.

"I can't. I... there is no way he's mine. You're gonna believe Emmaleigh over me? He... goddamn it! Fuck this, I'm out of here." He growls before

turning and leaving the house.

Dorothy sighs as her head falls into her hands. “Jackson, what are the chances we can get Derek to fly back out here for a little while? With your brother like this and Theo out of commission... we need help to get our ranch ready for winter.”

“Don’t worry, Mama,” he coughs into his elbow before reaching into his pocket and grabbing his phone. “He’ll come.”

I stare down at the tear-stained boy, and my heart breaks for him. I can’t believe his mom would just abandon him on a stranger’s doorstep like this. I’m not a fan of kids. I’ve never really seen myself as a mom. It’s just not my scene. But still, I don’t think I could look my son in his wide, innocent eyes and say bye. I look up, and my eyes find Jackson. He’s talking on the phone to his older brother, Derek, but his eyes aren’t leaving me. His eyes shudder as though he is coming back into focus before he responds to something Derek must’ve said over the phone. And I wonder if he was thinking about what we just did. Does he regret it? Was he just swept up in the moment? Is this like a phone sex one-night stand?



Once Dorothy and Wyatt have fallen asleep, I make my way back to Jackson’s room with the bottle of medicine and tap on the door before walking in.

“Oh, hey Tink,” he sighs, coughing into his arm. I walk over and shake the container in his face.

“You need to take this medicine.” He looks at it warily.

“It’s liquid. I ain’t taking that.” He mutters before pulling the blanket over his head.

“Come on,” I groan. “That’s all I have.”

“Be gone, devil woman, and take that vile shit with you.” I look at the purple bottle.

“It’s grape-flavored.” There’s a muffled “ha” before he pops his head out.

“I’m not drinking that. Liquid medicine tastes like fucking ass.”

“Fucking ass huh? Well, I guess you would know. I’ve never partaken in such delicacies.” I hear him snort, but I walk over with the cup of liquid anyway. “Drink it.” He groans and rolls over.

“I am forty years old, I can handle a cold without that nasty shit.” I huff before walking to the other side to face him again—stubborn ass.

“You’re forty years old, but acting like you’re seven. Now take the damn medicine before I force you.” I warn, causing him to raise a brow.

“Sounds kinky, I’m game.” I try to ignore the heat rising to my cheeks at his comment.

“Come on, don’t make me fight you like I have to with your dad.” Jackson lets out a weak laugh before downing the cup and shuddering.

“Ugh, that is disgusting.” Rolling my eyes, I hand him his water.

“Stop being a baby. It’s not that bad.” He scoffs into his water before setting it on his nightstand.

“You wanna taste it?” I lean down so that I’m eye level with him and move towards his lips but stop myself. What am I doing? I can’t just kiss—

“Listen,” he whispers, and I feel his breath on my lips. “If you’re stopping because you need consent, baby, I’m telling you right now, your pretty ass has the consent to do anything, always.” I giggle lightly. How does he always make me feel so damn calm? I thought for sure I would never be able to look at him again after the phone call, but here we are.

“Put your hands in my hair,” I whisper and gasp as I feel his fingers on my scalp. My heart rate quickens, and I feel my flight response kicking in.

“Stay with me, Tink,” he whispers, pulling me back. I stare into his blue eyes before nodding.

“Pull me to your mouth.” I breathe, and he does. His lips consume mine, and... okay, the medicine is gross. I ignore it, though, as I whine against him. Jackson pulls my bottom lip into his mouth, running his tongue over it, and I let out a cry as I feel my arousal heighten.

“Shit,” I pant, pulling away.

“W-what? Did I hurt you?” He asks nervously, and I shake my head.

“No just... ummm...” I feel my face heating as I look away. “I’m just...” Fuck, this is so difficult.

“Tink,” Jackson says softly as he walks up to me. “Baby, talk to me. Can I touch you?”

“...yes,” I say softly and whimper when his arm wraps around my waist. The heat between us is almost too much. “Jackson,” I breathe as I press my

back against his chest.

“Mhm,” he nuzzles into my hair, and my knees actually buckle. “Tell me what you want, Ozzy.” His voice is low and husky in my ear, just like it was on the phone, and I can’t help the shuddered breath that escapes me.

“I-I don’t know,” I whisper honestly. “This is... fuck, this is just really new.”

“How so?” he whispers against my ear, and I feel his thumb brush over my belly button.

“J-Jackson, no one has touched me in over five years,” I admit, and his body stills. Squeezing my eyes shut, I wait for it- for him to realize that my attackers were the last and that he won’t want to touch me.

“You mean anywhere? At all?” I turn around and stare up at him as a tear breaks free and rolls down my cheek.

“Yeah,” I manage over a sob. “In fact, what we just did on the phone, it’s the closest anyone’s been with me since...” I shake my head and look back at him. “I know that was just a spontaneous thing, and you probably have no interest in-”

“Stop,” he states firmly and backs up a step, his eyes assessing me. “Baby, you have no idea the level of interest I have.” My breath catches in my throat as my eyes widen.

“Really?” I breathe out and watch him nod.

“Ozzy, I don’t know how or when, but yeah, I like you, and I’m not the kind of man that tries to play off his feelings and shit. I’m honest and upfront. So let me make it very clear: I am interested in you.”

Stepping towards him, I smile nervously. “It’s going to be hard,” I warn. “I’m not going to be an easy person to like.” A laugh escapes him as he brushes his hair out of his face.

“You haven’t been yet. I didn’t see that changing anytime soon.”

“I want to hug you,” I confess, and watch his arms go out instantly and without an ounce of hesitation, inviting me in. I wrap my arms around his waist as I press my face against his chest. “I really should let you go to bed now that your germs are all over me.” I joke as I release him.

“Alright, but first,” a smirk pulls at his face. “How nasty was that medicine?” I giggle as I shake my head.

“Tasted like fucking ass.”



Derek Rowe is... not what I expected. I don't know. I guess when I think of a Rowe man, I think of my guys. Whoa, my guys. When did that happen?

Apparently, all the Rowe men are tall and broad, with cocky smirks and tanned skin that crinkles in the corners of their eyes and lean, worker bodies. Derek is tall and built like a fucking boxer with his large, tight muscles. I know he's a tattoo artist, but I am still taken aback when I see his entire body is covered in different black and grey art.

"Hey," his voice is gruff as he sticks out his hand. "I'm Derek,"

"Hellraiser ain't into physical contact!" Carter calls from where he's leaning on my car. That fucker.

"Get the fuck off Gretchen, you bitch!" I growl, storming over to the man lying on the roof of my car. I grab his boot and pull, but the large man barely budes. His boot flies off, though, causing me to fall backward onto my ass.

"Ow," I whine and spot Jackson walking over. He holds his hand out to help me up, and I take it without a thought. However, my lack of thoughts is causing me to have several new thoughts—none of them decent. Once I'm standing, Jackson walks over to Carter, grabs him by his shirt and pants, and... Oh. My. God.

Jackson lifts Carter up like he's nothing, the same way I've watched him with bales of hay, and tosses him on the ground without much effort. That was... way too hot.

I am mildly aware of Derek huffing out a laugh. "Trying to show off for your girl?"

Jackson snorts and shoves his older brother's shoulder. "There ain't no showing off here. Tink is not one to be impressed. She is one to bitch loudly, though, and between my cold a few days ago and the lack of sleep due to the kid—"

Derek's face pales, "You're sick?"

"It's a oh, for the love of god, it was a cold, days ago!" He yells at Derek's retreating figure before shaking his head. "You wouldn't think he grew up on a goddamn ranch with how he acts." His eyes find mine, and he raises a brow. "Why are you staring at him?"

I snap my eyes to Jackson and raise a brow of my own. “I wasn’t staring. I was looking.”

“I...” he shakes his head. “I don’t have it in me to deal with your shit today. Fine, go look at his old ass.” He grumbles before storming off, leaving me confused.

“What the hell?” I mutter to myself.

“Making old Jackie jealous, huh?” Carter smirks as he walks up to me with his hands in his pockets.

“Don’t you have a child to parent?” I snap, and his face pales.

“Fuck! Where did I leave him?” I shake my head before walking off while Carter yells at me to help him find Wyatt. Wyatt’s fine. He’s with Dorothy, where he’s been all day. But it’s good for Carter to feel a slight panic.



“Well,” Morris sighs, shaking his head. “At least I got to see my first grandchild before I died.” I toss the rag I had been using to bathe Morris into the pile of dirty laundry and help him lay back on the bed. “You ain’t flinching with me holding onto you.” He observes while I take my usual seat and cross my arms over my chest.

“Kind of hard for a dying man to overpower me, Morris.”

“I know that, but that hasn’t stopped you from flinching or tensing if I touch you wrong.” I shrug, glancing at the television so that I can avoid his gaze.

“I wouldn’t get too excited. It could all go to shit in a heartbeat.” He hums in agreement before taking a breath.

“You gonna tell me what’s got your panties in a bunch this afternoon?”

Rolling my eyes, I look at him in irritation, “Yeah, you had way too many sons. Too many cocks in the hen house.”

Morris lets out a weak, tired laugh. He’s been getting tired a lot more the last couple of days. “Well,” he lets out a breath while shaking his head. “At least I got to see my first grandchild before I died.” I give him a tight smile and nod as he closes his eyes. He’s been repeating himself, too. I take a sharp



breath in as I stand and cover him up.

“You better wake up for dinner,” I whisper, giving his cold hand a squeeze before walking out of the room and down the steps to the living room, where Derek and Jackson sit with Dorothy and the very quiet Wyatt.

“I want to move Morris down here.” I declare once I reach the bottom of the steps. “He deserves to get to see his ranch, his horse, and his family.” I watch Jackson’s face pale.

“I don’t think now is a good time to—”

“Then when?” I snap, startling Wyatt. Dorothy picks the boy up and walks into the kitchen as I glare at the men. “He’s dying, and whether he’s in that room or down here, it will happen soon.”

“Tink—”

“If you don’t move him, I will,” I state firmly. “And if I am the one that moves your father to his final place, you will regret it. It will eat you to death. You can act like it won’t, but we both know that when he’s gone, I’ll be gone too, and you’ll be left here to think about all the time you chose not to be around him.”

“Hey!” Jackson snaps, anger filling his eyes. I’m mildly aware of the back door opening, and I assume it’s Dorothy taking Wyatt outside. “Shut the fuck up. You have no idea what you’re talking about. You think just because you’ve given him his pills, you have some deep connection to him?”

“Fuck you,” I growl through gritted teeth, my eyes beginning to burn.

“Jackson,” Derek mutters, grabbing his brother’s shoulder.

“No,” Jackson jerks away from Derek and points his finger at me. “You want to run that mouth, little girl? You best make sure you won’t crumple in fear when someone calls you on it!”

“Jackson!” Derek’s voice is loud as he shoves his brother. “Get your ass outside. Now!” I stare in shock as Derek ushers Jackson outside. Did he really say that to me?

I feel my bottom lip wobble, and I shake my head to rid myself of the tears trying to spill over.

## Jackson

“**W**hat in the actual fuck?” Derek growls as he shoves me again, forcing me to go into one of our sheds. “You don’t raise your voice to a woman! Have you lost your damn mind? And to Ozzy? I know you know that girl has been through shit, and you go after her like that? I’m going to beat your fucking ass, I swear to fucking Christ.”

I flinch before sitting on a bale of hay and groaning. “I didn’t mean to! It’s just... goddamn it.” I feel like shit. After last night, she and I got closer, and then I told her I was interested... only to end up screaming at her twelve hours later. Taking a deep breath, I stare up at my glaring brother. “Go on and hit me, I deserve it.” Derek sighs and runs his hand over his beard, his brown eyes assessing me.

“No point in hitting you when you look that pathetic already.” He mutters while sitting on the bale next to mine.

“I can’t do this, Derek,” I admit weakly. “I-I can’t. I can’t watch him die. I can’t remember him this way. I... he’s our dad.” I choke out, trying to hold the emotions back.

“Jackson, he would do it for us. He was willing to do it for you. You were wasting away when you were sick, and that man never let you feel alone. I hired Ozzy to help with the care, not to be his only company. Now, she’s right. If he’s close... he deserves to get out of that room. He deserves to see Betty again. He’s *dying*, Jackson. Ozzy is right. The guilt of not doing this will consume you. You know that. You were closer to him than any of us.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” I hiss through clenched teeth. “That man has been my everything since day one, and now he’s a skeleton. Nothing but

a shell; shitting and pissing on himself!”

“He is still our father. If you don’t want to see him, you need to get out.” I blink and stare at my big brother.

“What?” I ask weakly.

“You heard me. I’m here for a short time to help get things smoothed back out. I’m moving him to the main floor. You don’t like it, get out of the house.”

I shake my head, staring at him in disbelief. “You really going to kick me out of my house?”

“You really going to make me?” He challenges me, and I look away. “You need to go apologize to that girl.”

I snort and stand up. “If I try to talk to her right now, she’ll be wearing my nuts as earrings.”

“You like her?” Sighing at his question, I look away and scratch my eyebrow.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Then go apologize for being a dick, nuts or not.” I give him a begrudging grunt before heading out of the shed in time to watch Ozzy’s car race down the driveway in a cloud of dirt and gravel.

“Where is she headed?” I ask Jensen as I walk up to the porch. My little brother gives me a pained look, and I roll my eyes. “Theo,” I groan, and Jensen sighs. Derek walks up behind me, snickering.

“Baby sister still out here stealing your girls?”



“You know,” Theo starts, though her eyes are laser-focused on the brunette on the dance floor. It’s ladies’ night at The Spur, which means it’s a feeding frenzy for Theo. And now that she’s coming up on her second week of recovery from her surgery, she’s playing up the ‘wounded puppy needing love’ act. “Maybe I should just take Ozzy off your hands.” I let out a loud breath while staring at the brat.

“I’m not asking again,” I grind out. “Where is she?” I know she is here. Her car is out front, but for the last ten minutes, Theo and Niamh have been

playing a very dangerous game of who can piss me off more.

Theo taps the beer bottle to her lips. “I dunno. You try calling her?” I’m going to kill her.

Turning to Niamh, who is snickering, I raise my brow. “Niamh, come on., Where’s Ozzy?” She blinks her big eyes and cocks her head to one side.

“Ozzy, who?” She asks innocently, and I’m about to scream when I see the silver hair in the kitchen window.

“Ozzy!” I holler out, going behind the bar, ignoring Niamh’s protests, and running into the back kitchen.

I look at the woman who ducks around me and heads out the door.

“Tink,” I call, following her back out. “Can we talk, please?”

She sits on a bar stool and gives me an amused look. “Sure thing,”

“I meant somewhere a little more private.” I say cautiously, and she makes an “O” with her mouth.

“Yeahhh see, I would but... I don’t really feel like it. Appreciate the offer though.” She gives me a wink before turning back to the grinning Theo.

“Ozzy, please.” I try again, walking into her space.

“Rowe,” she says sternly. “Back up.”

I give her a pleading look. “What do I have to do to get you to talk to me? Beg?”

“I don’t know...” She taps her finger to her chin. “Couldn’t hurt,” she chuckles at Theo before starting a conversation with her, dismissing me completely. I look from my traitorous sister to the stage by the dance floor. Fine, she wants me to beg? I’ll beg.

Shaking off my nerves, I walk through the crowd and hop onto the stage. Grabbing the microphone, I jump back off the stage and walk to the middle of the dance floor.

“Ozzy Davenport,” I speak into the microphone and watch her entire body cringe as she slowly turns around on her barstool. Fuck, if looks could kill, my family would be picking out my casket right now. Smirking, I drop to my knees as the bar’s patrons watch. “I’m a lowlife, stupid piece of shit, and I’m sorry. Please, will you give me one minute to talk to you? Sixty seconds of your time is all I ask.”

I see the color in her cheeks flare up. She stands before making a beeline to the front door. Dropping the microphone, I stand up and run after her, following her as she turns the corner and goes to the side of the building before whirling around and glaring at me.

“Really!?” She hisses while shoving my chest. Feeling the amount of force she put into the shove, I give her a bone and stumble. “What is the matter with you?”

“You said beg, I begged,” I say simply, and she huffs out an annoyed laugh.

“Oh, and what? If I say bark like a dog—”

“Woof,” I say softly and watch her glare. She looks me over before rolling her eyes.

“Alright, Rowe,” she sighs, crossing her arms over her chest and leaning against the building. “Go on, talk.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, hoping she can hear the sincerity in my voice.

“I know, and I’m not mad about it. I pretty much forgave you before I left.” My eyes widen, and I look at her in confusion.

“Then why did you leave?”

“Because I’m starting to feel like we should separate a little bit,” she shrugs, avoiding my gaze.

“Why? What about last night?”

“I think that might’ve been a mistake,” she mutters, and I have to fight back the annoyance flooding my body.

“Don’t say that,” I whisper, stepping closer. “Don’t say that if you don’t mean it because... I meant it last night.”

“I just think,” she lets out a shaky breath before continuing. “Maybe they did break me. You’re right, I-I crump—”

“No,” I interrupt, stepping closer. “No, Tink, they didn’t break you. I’m just a fucking cocksucker, and I’m scared. I’m scared because I’m losing my dad... and because I’m feeling something for you.”

“Jackson... don’t,” she pleads, unable to take a steady breath as her eyes begin to water. “Don’t say things like that.”

“Why? It’s true.”

“Because, when you say that, it makes it hard for me to remember why I should put the distance between us.” I press my lips in a hard line as I stare at her, and it’s like I’m staring into her beautifully tragic soul. It’s then that I see it. I feel it. She wants me to kiss her.

“You know what,” I let out a small breath, “Fuck it.” I close the space, and she gasps when I capture her soft lips with mine. She grips my shirt, pulling me to her, and I groan in satisfaction. She slips her arms around my neck and takes me by surprise when she jumps up and wraps her thick legs

around my waist while swirling her tongue around mine.

“Fuck,” I whisper, pulling back to look over her face. I see the desire and trust... fuck, that trust is so hot. I want her to only give me that look, and I want to do everything in my power to make sure she does.

“Mmm... Jackson,” she pants, and a jolt shoots to my cock, and I groan against her lips.

“Baby, you moan my name like that, and you’re going to start feeling something. I’m trying very hard to keep you away from that.” She chuckles before leaning back to force me to press her against the wall, and then she fucking grinds against me.

“Holy shit,” she gasps, grinding against my bulge again.

“Fucking Christ,” I growl out as I rest my head on her chest. “You’re going to kill me.” I press myself against her again, and she lets out a whimper. “Is this too much?” I ask between kisses.

“No,” she thrusts again. “God, no,” She moves her head to my neck, and I feel her licking and sucking on my flesh.

“Fuck,” I hiss out. The sensations are too much. I feel her bite down and suck as she thrusts and grinds against me. “Ozzy, I...” *You’ve got to be kidding me... NO!* But it’s too late. I feel my body stiffen and then shudder as I lean against her. Oh my god, I just came from dry-humping like a teenager.

I pull back, feeling my cheeks reddening from the embarrassment as I set her down and step back. I’m mortified, beyond mortified. How? How!

“I... I gotta go.” I mutter and turn to leave. Leave to where? I don’t know. Maybe I’ll find a nice hole in the ground that is willing to consume me.

“Wh-what? Why?” She calls out, and I hear her running after me. *Is she serious?*

“You know why,” I grumble as my cheeks grow hotter.

“Oh, come on,” she laughs lightly and nudges my side with her elbow. “You blew in your pants, big deal.”

“Oh my god,” I groan loudly, staring at the sky. “Can you not make this any more embarrassing? It’s bad enough it was like two fucking minutes.”

“Listen, lots of guys can accomplish a lot in—”

“Oh, my god! Tink! I can last longer... I just... Jesus Christ, just get into the truck so we can go home.” She wraps her arms around her waist and begins cackling. Yeah, as adorable as it is to see her laugh, I wish it weren’t at my expense. “You really know how to boost a man’s self-esteem, Tink.”

She snorts loudly and must notice because she stops and covers her mouth and nose, only to burst out laughing again while walking towards the truck.

“Just so you know,” she starts once we are in the truck, and she’s calmed down. “I’m not laughing because you came. I’m laughing at how embarrassed you are.”

“Oh gee, that’s so much better,” I mutter, backing out of the parking space.

“I like that you came quickly,” she shrugs, and I nearly wreck the truck at her words.

“Why?” I ask skeptically.

“Tells me you were as nervous, excited, and turned on as I was. Makes me feel... not so alone in this.” I glance over at her, and I feel the seriousness in her tone.

“Tink, you’re not alone.” I offer, holding out my hand, which she grabs. “You are right, you know? I want to move Pops downstairs.” She looks over at me, and I see a sad smile tug at her full lips.

“Good. We can start after you guys wrap up your fair thing this weekend.”

## Ozzy

“You gonna miss me while I’m gone?” Jackson waggles his brows suggestively as I help him load his truck. The guys have some end-of-the-year trade fair they’re setting up this weekend, so the ranch will be pretty empty all day. It’ll be weird not seeing them around.

“Nope,” I say, popping my lips on the p. “In fact, as soon as you clear the drive, I’m having a huge house party.” Jackson snorts and rolls his eyes.

“I’m sure.”

“I am. There’s gonna be a bikini contest and everything.” I watch his gaze darken as he steps closer to me. I notice he leaves an opening on my right so I can move away, and, fuck that does something to me. He’s so sweet, even when he’s about to be an asshole.

“Anyone looks at you in a bikini on this ranch before me, and I’ll pluck their eyes out and force them to eat them. Is that something you want on your conscience?” I can’t help the laugh that escapes me at his words.

“Were you trying to sound all possessive and alpha male?” His face falls.

“I am a possessive alpha male, thank you very much.” I give him a playful nod before looking around. When I see there is no one near us, I lean in, wrapping my arms around his waist.

“Will you kiss me?” I whisper and watch the crooked grin appear beneath his beard.

“Always,” he cups the side of my face, and I smile to myself when I barely flinch at the contact. It’s not that I necessarily fear he will hurt me, but my body has been conditioned to respond to all contact as bad, and it’s not something you can just switch off simply because a really good man enters your life. There is no magic fix; it takes time, therapy, healing, patience, and



repetition.

His lips connect with mine, and I feel my toes curling in my teal Doc Martens. I let out a shuddering breath against his mouth as I remove his cowboy hat to deepen the kiss. My tongue plunges into his mouth, earning a needy moan from him.

“You taste so good.” He whispers against my mouth.

*“Filthy whore,”*

I freeze at Patrick’s voice and feel the dread sinking in. Jackson must notice my change because he pulls back and looks me in the eye.

“Tink,” he says, holding my face. I blink before staring up at him. My face falls as shame fills me for ruining the kiss. I’m about to say something when he grabs his hat and sets it on my head.

“Now there’s a look,” he chuckles lightly. “Pretty, tattooed, and pierced hottie in my hat. I’m gonna keep that one right here.” He taps his head, and I snort before rolling my eyes.

“Wrong head there, bud,” I smirk before moving away to finish helping load the truck.



“Ozzy, you are being a little hard on yourself.” Dr. Lois Krane’s soft voice says in my ear bud as I continue pacing in my room.

“You aren’t understanding,” I groan in frustration. “There I am, kissing this hot as fuck guy, I’m finally feeling something for the first time in years, and all of a sudden, I hear Patrick in my ear reminding me what a dirty whore I am.” I shiver at the thought. “And this is after I had already done it with him over the phone! And dry humped him in an alley... I mean, yeah, I didn’t freak out, but—”

“No buts, Ozzy,” I hear her shift, followed by a clunking noise. She must’ve taken off her shoes. I love Lois. She was the psychiatrist I saw during my recovery in the hospital. I was supposed to take a referral and get a “more grounded, more available psychiatrist” after I left. Lois didn’t take

new clients. She was in her late fifties and only continued to see a handful of long-term clients. But I told her I wouldn't see anyone else if she left me. So she took me, and I refused to let her go. Lois doesn't sugarcoat things; she's not "professional" with her language and will talk with me instead of expecting me to speak for an hour. "I understand that you're frustrated about hearing him. But you were able to keep it separate. You were able to stay in the moment, and that is an amazing thing! Don't overlook that. Healing from trauma is not linear. You know this. Jackson is the first man you've been willingly close to in—"

"Six years," I mutter, picking a loose thread on my pajamas. "What am I supposed to do when he wants to see me naked?"

"Well, you take it slow, and you communicate with him. Are you worried about your scars?" I grunt out my response. "Ozzy, he knows you have scars."

"It's different. The scars down there... they aren't covered." After what happened to me in that house and then having so many people looking at me down there when I was in the hospital, I wouldn't let anyone tattoo me in my bikini area.

"Okay, so maybe some more trust-building exercises need to happen before you two get to that part. What about the act of sex?" I scoff at her question.

"What do you mean? You know why I can't."

"Ozzy, it's important for you to voice it." She says patiently, and I groan while rubbing my temples.

"Besides the fact that I'm mutilated down ther—"

"Try again," she snaps, refusing to let me say it. I sigh in annoyance.

"Besides the fact that I haven't come to terms with how I look down there, I fear having someone inside me again. Especially since I know it will feel weird for them." I whisper, looking at myself in the mirror.

"This isn't a race, Ozzy. You aren't going to be okay just like that. Intimacy after trauma isn't always easy, and like I said, this isn't linear. You may find yourself okay with intimacy one day and triggered the next, and that's okay. But you have to be okay and supportive of yourself just as much as your partner needs to be, and it sounds like Jackson wants to try. He doesn't seem scared from what you've stated previously, which I understand can, in turn, amp up your anxiety."

I roll my eyes at the ridiculous statement, "How can someone not being

scared make me anxious?”

“You know exactly how. If Jackson is willing to work with you and not shrink away, that means you don’t have the excuse that you will be a burden on him. Now, I will email you some exercises and resources to help him understand, along with some exercises for you to try and modify the thought process you’re going through. Now, are you ready to discuss how you plan to cope with Morris?” Cold washes over me, and my heart begins to constrict.

“No,” I say shortly. “Actually, I need to go. I have to get ready to get him breakfast. Bye.” I disconnect the call before staring at myself.

“Goddamn it,” I growl before grabbing my clothes for the day. I take off my pajamas, trying to ignore the growing sadness in my chest at the thought of not only having to disappoint Jackson but also coping with Morris. Why would she say that to me? I know he’s not going to be around much longer. I also know that I’m not ready to “cope.”

I walk to my mirror and run a brush through my hair. I really need to get my dark roots touched up. Staring at my bare breasts, I look at the dark floral design running over them, the flowers, lace, leaves, and vines wrapping around me with a large bat under my belly button. It’s as far as I allowed my tattoos to go. Taking a shaky breath, I pull my panties down and look at my pubic area, a sob wracking me.

The crude scars make it impossible for hair to grow and cover it. My brand, marking me forever as his.

## **BRUMBY**



“Hello?” I say through a yawn as I answer the phone, not bothering to look at the caller ID. I’m too exhausted to care. Between helping the guys load up this morning for the fair, therapy, Morris, and trying to move some of his stuff to the living room while helping Dorothy with chores, I’m ready for a nap.

“Hey, Ozzy,” I furrow my brows at Carter’s nervous voice. It’s a tone

I've never heard before, well, that, and he didn't call me hellraiser. "I need help. We're at the fairgrounds, and something is wrong with Wyatt. I... I don't know what to do. I'm freaking out, and Jackson is trying to get everything packed up. I want to call 911, but they're--"

"I'm on my way. Is he breathing?" I ask as I run to Gretchen and turn her on before speeding off towards the fairgrounds.

"Y-yeah, please just hurry."



I whip into the vendor area at the fairgrounds and barely throw Gretchen into park before getting out and racing over to Jackson's truck. I see Carter in the passenger seat, ghost-white and holding his sleeping son to his chest.

"What's wrong?" I pant as I run my hands over the boy's head. He whines, and I can feel he's warm.

"I-I don't know. He was extra fussy this morning, but I figured he was still adjusting to everything. We got here, and he was okay for like half an hour, and now he won't stay awake. He's coughing and burning up." Relief washes over me as I look up and smile at the panicked man. "Why are you smiling?" he snaps. "Something is--"

"Carter," I laugh lightly. "I think it's just a cold. Babies and kids get them a lot. Jackson just got over one, and he's living around people and germs he hasn't been exposed to before." Carter seems indigent at my response.

"I'm not an idiot. I know what a cold is. This is different, though! Look at him!" He shouts in a way I've never heard from the playful jokester that is Carter Rowe. It's actually a bit intimidating.

"Hey," Jackson's voice is calm but authoritative. "Let her look at the kid. We all told you it's a cold." Carter glares at his brother before allowing him to take the small boy. I walk to the back of Jackson's truck with him as he grabs his coat and lays it on the back hitch before laying the small boy on it. I grab my bag and go to work, check his temperature, listen to his heart and his breathing.

"Is he drinking and urinating?" I ask Carter, who is pacing back and forth. Carter stops moving as he looks around frantically.

“I- his water cup. I filled it this morning, but did you refill it?” He asks Jackson, who shakes his head. Carter brings the nearly full cup to me as worry and shame fill him. “Oh my god,” he whispers. “I didn’t make sure he was drinking...”

“Hey,” I say calmly. “It’s okay; kids don’t always drink when sick. He’s dehydrated and has a high fever, but higher fevers are normal for smaller kids. Give me a second,” I say as I put my earbud in to make a call.

“Hello?” I hear Indy’s light voice in my ear.

“Hey, cupcake, I wanted to talk to you about Wyatt, Carter’s son. Pediatrics is your area.” I then explained his symptoms and his lack of fluids.

“If the place has sugary juice, give him little bits at a time. I would use a syringe if need be. Then, you should run to the store and get some oral rehydration solutions. Monitor his fever, and if it doesn’t improve or worsens, head to the hospital.”

“Alright, babe, thanks. Love you.”

“Love you, too. Call me later.” I disconnect the call before relaying the instructions to Carter.

“Why don’t you guys go back to the house, and I’ll run to the store?” I offer while putting Wyatt in his car seat. I grab some fruit punch and fill a clean syringe I got from my medic bag with it.

“Hi, Bubba!” I grin as I lean over Wyatt, who gives me a grumpy look. “Want to take a sip? It’s sooooo yummy!” He whines and moves his head. “Look! Your daddy will drink it!” I put the syringe in Carter’s mouth, and he makes a show of liking the juice.

“It’s sooo good, Wyatt!” he beams. Wyatt looks from me to Carter and whimpers.

“Daddy do.” He whines, and I watch Carter freeze.

“D-did he just call me Daddy?” He whispers in astonishment. Until now, Wyatt hasn’t called Carter anything. He looks from me to the boy. “Yeah, bud,” Carter’s voice takes on a watery tone as he climbs into the back of the cab. “Daddy will give you the juice.” I hand him the syringe and the bottle.

“Don’t force it; just try little bits, and I’ll be back at the ranch soon.” Carter nods, only half listening to me, all his attention on the small boy in his arms.

I walk over to Jackson, who is closing the hitch up and making sure Jensen and his helpers can handle the rest of the evening. “I’m going to go grab some stuff for Wyatt,” I say softly while giving his hand a squeeze.

“I wish I could go with you, but I doubt Carter is moving from the backseat.” I laugh lightly. “It’s alright. I’ll be there—”

“Oi! Rowe! Come here and have a look at this Brumby!” The stranger’s Australian accent and the word “Brumby” is the last thing I hear before a high-pitched whine fills my ears, and my heart rate explodes. Then, my world goes black.



*“GET OFF ME!” I scream as I grab Hugh by his scraggly hair and rip it out.*

*“You fucking whore!” He spits and backhands me so hard that I fall onto the table. “Weeks, and you still putting up a fight?” I hear Patrick’s cold, sickening laugh.*

*“You know, in my country, we have a name for feral horses,” I watch as he continues to look at the fireplace, where I see five glowing orbs sitting on the rack in the fire. “A Brumby.” He says while slipping some heavy-duty gloves on. I wince as Hugh grips the leash, causing the collar around my neck to squeeze and pinch my flesh while he holds me down on top of the coffee table.*

*I go to move, but Hugh grips me tighter as Patrick rips my underwear apart before walking to the fire and pulling a long poke with one of the glowing orbs off of it. I stare at it as he comes back. Is that one of those branding irons they use on ranches? I look closer. It’s a backward ‘B.’*

*“Every now and then,” he smirks while pinning my leg down. “You get a Brumby that is just a little wilder than the rest, a little harder to break. Luckily, I know that with the right amount of patience and the proper punishments, any Brumby can be broken.” I scream as the iron hits my mound. The sizzling sound and rancid smell of my burning flesh make me want to vomit.*

*“One down, five to go.”*



“Ozzy?” Is that Jackson? What happened? Opening my eyes, I look around the room. It’s Jackson’s room. I blink at him several times.

“Jackson,” I cry out as I sit up and pull him to me, hugging him as tightly as possible.

“Baby,” he coos, and I feel him wrap his arms around me softly. I cry at the sweetness. “What happened? You were going to go to the store for Wyatt, and you passed out. I barely caught you before you hit the ground.” Pulling back, I look up at him, worry etching his beautiful face. Deciding to listen to Lois, I sit up to look at him better.

“Did Wyatt—” Jackson waves me off.

“He’s fine. Derek went to the store, and his fever is already lowering, though he’s extra clingy on Carter, not that I think he really minds.”

I give him a small smile and a nod. “I heard one of the other guys yelling for you. Said he wanted to show you something.” Jackson thought for a moment before it must’ve hit him.

“James? The one with the accent? He’s a horse tamer. He wanted to show me the new girl he got in. That’s what Brumby means it’s like—”

“Stop!” I snap louder than I mean to. “Don’t say that word again... please,” I whisper my plea as I look into his nervous gaze.

“Ozzy, I am so confused, baby.” Taking a shaking breath, I nod as I slip the covers down. I unbutton my jeans before looking at him as I slide the front of them down to show the crude letters burned into me. His breath hitches as he stares at it.

“Ozzy,” he whispers before I pull my pants back up.

“It’s what one of the men called me. I can’t... please Jackson.” I look at him, expecting to see disgust or pity. Instead, it’s anger and something else I can’t pinpoint.

He leans over and captures my lips with his. The kiss is so soft and sweet, “I’ll never say it again, ever.” He whispers before kissing my forehead.

“Are you grossed out?” I cringe. I didn’t mean to actually ask that. He looks me straight in the eyes.

“No.” He says, and his voice has no hesitation, but I’m still unsure.

“It’s okay if you are,” I whisper. “I wouldn’t blame you, it’s not pr—”

“Stop it,” he orders. “Am I feeling murderous because of what those sick fucks did to you? Yes. But you, Ozzy, you are beautiful. I am attracted to you, scars and all. And if I have to kiss every one of them to prove that to you, I will.” I feel my eyes well with unshed tears with his promise.

“That might take a while,” I breathe. “There’s a lot of them.”

“I’m a patient man,” my breath shudders as his lips glide over my hand where my scrollwork tattoo wraps around my scarred wrists and hands.

“Jackson,” I moan as he kisses the inside of my wrist.

“Tell me to stop, Ozzy,” he murmurs against my arm as he continues to locate every section of scarred skin and kiss it. “You tell me to stop, and I’m off.” A sob escapes my chest at his reassurance.

“D-don’t stop,” I whisper, the tears rolling as he moves to my shoulder, kissing the butterfly covering the burn scar from a fire poker. He moves to my jaw and then my lips before looking me in the eyes. He’s blurry from my tears. I try to blink them away, but it’s futile as more take their place.

“Ozzy, baby, you let those tears out, don’t try to force them away. You are safe with me, you got it?” He holds the side of my face, and I nod weakly before he moves to my neck. My body stills at the feeling. I wait for him to change his mind and for the flashbacks to start, but nothing happens.

Jackson runs his tongue over the side of my neck, and I feel pinpricks run over me. “You’re so beautiful, baby,” he coos in my ear before slipping down to the other shoulder, running hot kisses all the way down my collarbone, making his way down my body.

“Jackson,” I moan through my tears as I feel the heat pooling in my center. It’s been too long since I felt this way. It’s almost shameful like I shouldn’t be getting turned on over him touching my scars. My marks, my disgusting reminders of—

“Hey,” I flinch at the sound of his voice pulling me out of my thoughts. His eyes are on mine again, his thumb stroking my cheek. “You stay with me, Tink.”

“Jackson,” I whimper out, shame and embarrassment flooding my body. “I am scarred, inside and out.”

“Do you trust me?” He asks, and my eyes shudder. Do I? I look up at him, his body trapped between my legs. How he could easily dominate me, but I don’t fear he will.

“More than anyone else,” I answer honestly, and he gives me a half-



smirk.

“Remember to say stop if you feel scared. Not self-conscious though, alright?” Furrowing my brows, I nod as he kisses me softly before trailing between my breasts, never moving my shirt and stopping at my jeans. I stare down as he looks up at me while slipping my jeans down.

“Oh my god,” I whisper, my heart pounding so hard it feels like it will break free from my chest. I force back a sob as he slips my panties down, all while staring into my eyes.

“Stay with me, beautiful.” He murmurs while nuzzling his face over my belly button.

“I’m nervous,” I choke out as the memory of the faint smell of burning flesh hits my nose.

“Ozzy,” Jackson says firmly. “You are in control, and there will be no surprises. I’m going to kiss you right here,” He says, touching me just above the “B.” My lip wobbles, but I nod. His soft lips are on my flesh, sending a current through me. He does it again above the following letter and the next. “You’re doing such a good job,” he praises, his hand stroking my thigh softly. He finishes the kisses and moves back to the beginning. “Now, I’m going to touch the scars, okay?”

“You don’t have to,” I offer softly, even though I don’t want him to stop at all. This feels so good. I don’t know if anything has ever felt this good.

I feel him chuckle as he runs his tongue over the “B” before kissing it. “I cannot believe you think this is some sort of obligation for me.” Oh my god, this is wrong, so wrong, I shouldn’t enjoy this. But I do. His tongue, his soft lips, and kind words, it’s like he’s reminding me that I’m still human, with wants, needs, and desires.

“Oh baby,” he purrs lowly as he finishes kissing above the “Y.” “That little noise you just let out will live forever in my mind, goddamn.” He kisses lower, right above my clit, and I whine in a need I thought I would never feel again.

*“Needy cunt, I knew you wanted it – look how wet you—”*

“Tink,” I blink and stare up at him, his body over me again. “Baby, let’s take a breather,” It’s now I realize I’m sobbing harder, shaking and covered in a sheen of sweat. I grip him around his strong neck and pull his weight on top of me. I need him: his scent and his warmth to ground me.

“I’m sorry,” I cry into his chest. I feel him try to pull back, but I cry in protest. “Don’t! Please, stay here.”

“Baby, I don’t want to hurt you.” He kisses the top of my head, and I whimper.

“Then don’t let me go,” he tightens his hold on me, and I love it. I love the strength, the feeling of security and warmth. I love the feeling that I’m home. I freeze as I hear the tiny thought whispering in the back of my head.

*I’m falling in love with this man.*

# Jackson

Staring down at Ozzy's sleeping form, I let out a sigh before covering her up and slipping out of the bedroom. It's three in the morning, and I can't sleep. All I keep thinking about is what has happened to Ozzy. What I know is bad enough, but what I don't know... It's killing me. I want to lay in bed with her and cuddle her close to me as we sleep. And I was, except she had been the only one sleeping, and fuck, she has a god-awful snore that I hadn't expected. So, instead, I laid there, staring at her scars in the dark. They cover her from the neck down. Some are thin and straight; others are thick and jagged. And that brand made me want to cry, vomit, and murder someone all in the same instant.

While lying in the bed, all I could think was, what did those fuckers look like? How many? Are they in prison? What all did they do?

Turning on the light in the garage, I let out a sigh. What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to be okay with feeling those scars? Seeing her "brand" and not being allowed to go and kill the people who did this to her? I grab my phone and do something I've gone to do a thousand times but never could. I pull up the web browser and tap out her name before hitting enter. It doesn't take but a second to locate her; with that kind of original name, I knew it wouldn't.

I look over the news article, and my heart sinks.

**Local nurse missing for five months appears in a hospital one city over, assaulted, drugged, and screaming about being kidnapped. Ms. Ozzy Davenport claims to have been held captive in a small shack on the outskirts of town for months while being sexually assaulted, beaten,**

## **drugged, and forced to wear a correction collar.**

I skim through several more articles until I find one about the trial. So, she did press charges. Jesus, they were just put away, right before she came here? That must've been why she couldn't come here sooner when Mama broke her hip. I continue to read over the information on the site, and... oh my god.

My phone falls from my hand when the "evidence photo" appears. How? How can they put that on a website for anyone to see? I cover my mouth as I look at the photo of my Ozzy. She's so skinny with sunken and bruised eyes, highly infected wounds, cut lips, and snarled hair. I want to cry while looking over her tattoo-free body. The picture has her privates blurred, but all the cuts, burns, bites, and what looks like stab wounds are fully displayed. It's her eyes, though. The fear in her eyes... curling my lip, I pick up my phone and am about to hurl it against the wall when I hear talking from it. Looking down, I realize I'm playing a police interview with Ozzy. Quickly, I rewind the video to start from the beginning.

"Can you state your name for the record?" The female officer asks, and the camera sits on Ozzy. Her hair is cut to almost nothing, and she has bandages around her neck. I can see sores on her face and arms.

"Ozzy Davenport," she says, her voice small and timid.

"Ozzy, can you tell us what happened to you during your captivity?" I watch as a woman- presumably Ozzy's lawyer, looks at another woman sitting on the other side of Ozzy. The other woman speaks.

"As her psychiatrist, I will say that Ozzy's mental state is fragile, and while she's free to answer, we will end this interview if we feel it begins to cause harm to her."

Ozzy scoffs, and it's the first time I see my girl in there. "Right, because she can hurt me? Please, ain't nothing you can say could hurt me."

"Ozzy," The therapist touches her arm, but Ozzy jerks away, causing the chair to screech across the floor.

"Alright, Officer McCallister, what do you want to know? How did they drug me and took me from the bar? How they chained me up like a dog? How I was their carving board? How they branded me? How I was starved or fed rotting food? How my body was sold? Huh? Tell me!" Ozzy screams while smacking the table. "You interested in hearing how they tore my cunt to shreds when they raped me with their gun?" I fall to my knees, unable to

stand anymore. *With their gun?*

“Or would you like to hear how Officer Reynolds over there enjoyed fucking me in the ass with his nightstick after shooting me up with heroin?” There are gasps and shouting before the video cuts off, and I’m left staring at the phone screen. A cop knew? And he...

Running my hands through my hair, I stumble back as the picture enters my head. How could they do that to her? My beautiful Ozzy...

“Goddamn it!” I roar as I grab my hammer and drive it into Jensen’s truck that we’ve been fixing. I’m about to try and calm myself when I see it in the reflection of the truck’s window—the modified correction collar for the animals they made her wear. Anger floods through me again as I heave an empty oil drum over my head and slam it down.

I don’t know how long I’m out here before Derek and Jensen walk in, but I’m barely able to stand or breathe when they do. The garage is destroyed, I’m bleeding from my hands, and I think I’m crying.

“What the fuck?” Derek looks around before his eyes land on me. “Jackson, what’s going on?”

“I need...” I wheeze out, trying to catch my breath. “I need help,” I mumble, and both my brothers’ expressions soften.

“Jackson,” Jensen walks forward. “What can we do to help you?” I shake my head as another sob emerges, and I fall back to my knees.

“She’s been so badly hurt... I’m so scared I’m going to hurt her. I’m so scared that this is too much. I-I don’t want it to be. I care about her, but... how am I supposed to look at her after seeing what I did?”

“What are you talking about?” Derek asks while looking around as if they’re trying to figure out what was in here that caused me to freak out.

“Ozzy was... attacked by men years ago,” I tell them. “I looked up her name and saw the evidence photos from her trial. And...interviews with police.”

“You did what?” Jensen gasps, and Derek shakes his head.

“You completely invaded her privacy. What the fuck?” I wince and look away.

“I know, but I needed to know, and now... Now, I don’t know how to look at her and not see that photo. I don’t know how to look at her the same way.”

“She is still the same woman.” Derek offers, and I roll my eyes.

“You haven’t seen what I have.”

“And you shouldn’t have seen what you did,” he hisses, grabbing me by my shirt collar and taking me out of the garage. I’m mildly aware of him telling Jensen to go back to bed before we start walking in silence. I don’t know where we are going until I see our lake glittering in the night.

“If you brought me out here to get a hand—”

“I’ll kill you if you finish that sentence,” Derek warns through clenched teeth, and I smirk, remembering finding him and his girlfriend out here earlier this year stargazing or some shit. I watch him pick up a rock and skip it across the water lazily.

“Two skips, you’re rusty as fuck.” I taunt, causing him to snort.

“Keep talking, big man,” he gets ready to toss another one but stops and looks at it. He gets some weird look on his face before stuffing it into his pocket. I’m about to ask why he is collecting rocks when he brings me back to why we are out here. “I know about Ozzy,” he states while walking over to the dock and sitting down.

“How?”

“Indy told me about her. I guess shortly after getting out of the hospital, Ozzy went through a rough patch. She was still addicted to whatever those fuckers were pumping her with and was trying to cut off cold turkey. So she was hurting, withdrawing and everything else, and she was going to kill herself. Indy saw Ozzy sitting on a bench. She was on vacation with her mom and walked over because, well, you know, Indy—a stranger is just an undiscovered best friend,” He rolls his eyes in annoyance, but I can tell he finds it endearing. It’s hard not to find Indy endearing. “Anyway, she went over and just started talking to Ozzy. Apparently, she wouldn’t shut up for like forty-five minutes about nothing important. Ozzy broke down, started wailing, and collapsed onto Indy, telling her everything. She told her she was scared because she didn’t think she could press charges against the men, she didn’t think she could stay clean, or that she could continue to live. Indy listened to it all and then took her to get a cupcake.”

“She’s going to hate me when she finds out I looked,” I admit, feeling the guilt and shame surface.

“She won’t be happy, I’m sure. Ozzy has probably told you a lot, but she did so when she felt comfortable. You’ve taken that away from her, and we both know you ain’t going to be able to lie and fake it. Your best bet is to tell her the truth.” I groan and shake my head.

“You ever feel too old for this shit?” Derek lets out a dry laugh.

“Little brother, I’m forty-five with a girlfriend two decades younger than me. I am always too old for all the shit in my life. Now, come on, I’m gonna need breakfast before we start moving pops and chores. Then I gotta help the guys work on the side house before packing to return home.”



“You got him?” I ask as Jensen and Derek carry Pops in his wheelchair down the steps. I try my best to keep my emotions neutral as I stare at the frail man.

“Yeah,” Jensen sighs as he sets the bottom of the wheelchair down. “Easy.” He gives Pops a pat before Derek wheels him to his hospital bed that we moved down here by the large windows overlooking the field.

“Alright!” Ozzy clasps her hands together once we get him in his bed. “Now see, we can watch movies on the big screen!” I watch her drop into a seat next to his bed, propping her feet up on his mattress. I’m surprised when Pops pats her sock-covered feet with his hand, and she doesn’t flinch away. Though I shouldn’t be shocked, she and Dad are very close, despite the shitty things I said to her the other day. I cringe, remembering my harsh words. It’s obvious how much she cares for Pops and how much he cares for her, which says something because the last person he allowed into our circle was Theo.

“Now that I’m down here,” Pops’ voice is so tired, but I can hear the excitement he’s trying to put on. “Maybe you’ll get out of my ass a little. Let me do my own thing.” Ozzy scoffs while shoving him with her toe.

“Please, old man, you adore me, and you know it. Now I’m going to go shower, and then I’m feeding you, and you’re gonna eat what I bring you whether you like it or not..” She warns before standing up and walking past me. As she does so, our fingers brush, sending a current through me. I want to grab her. I want to kiss her in front of everyone and tell her I adore her. I continue to stare forward towards my ailing father, who chuckles as he rests his head back.

“You gonna stare at me like a roadside car crash? Don’t tell me all the chores are done out there.” My brothers all chuckle and start filing out, leaving me alone with the old man. “I wasn’t just talking ’bout your

brothers.” He states as he looks out the window.

“Yeah, I know. I was just going to talk to Ozzy for a second.” Pops cracks open his eye and looks at me.

“She’s a good girl.” His voice is tired but holds a firm warning. A warning I hear loud and clear.

### **Do not hurt her.**

“She is,” I nod, suddenly feeling overly hot. “She’s been through—”

“Hell,” he replies sharply. “She’s been through hell, and she’s come out the other side.”

“Yeah,” I say softly and sit in Ozzy’s chair. “She’s got a few demons that latched on when she came out, too.”

“Well, of course she does!” Pops scoffs. “You think you can go through hell and not come out without some demons? I know she’s only told me the minimum, but I see those scars and her eyes.”

“I looked her up on the computer,” I admit before I realize I’m doing it. Tripping over my words, I continue. “I-I don’t know what I was thinking. But I did. I read... Pops, they had photos and videos—”

“Did she tell you you could do that?” I hang my head in shame.

“No sir, I just... I had to know, and now, I don’t know how to look at her and not see those images. I don’t know how to look at her the same way.” I see something out of the corner of my eye and look up. “Oh no,” I breathe out as I stare into the teary brown eyes that belong to Ozzy.

“How could you?” She hisses, looking between me and Pops before her eyes fall back to me. “How could you!” She screams before turning and walking away.

“Fuck!” I growl, standing up and running outside to catch up to her.

“Ozzy! Ozzy, wait!” I step in front of her and go to touch her shoulders, but she shoves me back.

“Do not touch me!” She warns before walking down the driveway.

“Where are you going?” I say, running after her. “You can’t leave Pops!” She spins on her heel and glares at me.

“How could you betray me like that?” Her cold words break my fucking soul. “I was trying to open up and trust you and you...you—” She curls her lip in disgust before shoving past me and walking back to the house just as Theo, Derek, and Jensen walk over to the porch.



“Ozzy!” I call out as she hits the steps. “Please, come on, talk to me! You know I didn’t do it to hurt you!”

She ignores me and looks at my siblings. “If you want me to continue to care for Morris, you’ll keep him the fuck away.” She walks inside, slamming the door behind her. I go to walk up the steps, but Theo and Derek block me.

“Move,” I warn under my breath, causing Derek to laugh.

“You going to fight me, little brother?” He taunts, and I shove him to get by. Derek grabs my shirt and throws me back to the ground. I land on my ass with a grunt as he jumps off the steps. I watch him take off a bracelet he’s wearing and toss it to Theo before looking back at me.

“I beat your ass when we were kids. I’ll do it now, Jackson. You stay away from that girl.”

“Fuck you,” I spit, squaring off. “She and I need to talk!”

“What you need to do,” Theo calls from her spot on the porch. “Is fuck off. Go work on something and leave her alone, less you want to get you ass handed to you.”

“You gonna deliver it, Jr?” I taunt, needing to fight or talk to Ozzy. I need this anxiety rushing through me to calm down. Theo frowns, and she’s about to come at me when Derek stops her.

“Stitches,” he warns, and she scoffs.

“Fuck them stitches. I’ll beat his face in, and then we can both go to the hospital.”

“Awful big talk shortbread. Tell you what, how about you leave the fighting to the ones with real dick—”

## Ozzy

“Well, that was stupid,” I mutter. Morris and I watch Theo punch Jackson so hard in the face that he fell unconscious. Theo jumps up and down, cursing and crying while gripping her fist to her chest while Derek doubles over, cackling. “I really don’t want to go back out there,” I say, and Morris laughs weakly.

“No need to.” Morris waves his hand as I set his sandwich down on his tray. I grab half of it and some chips before sitting down. “Those kids have been beating the piss out of each other since they were in diapers. Ain’t the first time Jackson’s been knocked out.” I stuff the chips into my peanut butter sandwich before taking a bite. “That’s disgusting,” Morris says, and I shrug.

“One more thing for everyone to be weirded out by me.”

“Listen,” Morris sighs, and I’m about to tell him to save his breath, but I like it when he talks to me. I wonder if this is what a relationship with a father would’ve been like. Quickly, I bury that thought and those feelings before biting into the sandwich again. “Jackson is as stupid as the days are long sometimes.” I nearly choke on my food and reach over to swallow some of his water.

“Wow,” I croak out. “How sweet of you.”

“I love him. But he is a fixer. He wants all the information so he can make a plan. When I was diagnosed,” he takes a shaky breath. “It killed them all but him and my Dorothy. They went into fix-it mode. They made plans, medication, new age shit, diet, experimental drugs, surgeries. They did all this while transforming how the ranch was run, without anyone’s input. Right now, my wife and her bad hip are down at the barn making orders for feed to

last over the winter.”

“I wish she would let me help some, so she has more time with you.”

“Ah!” He waves his hand. “Dorothy and I had our tearful goodbye already. She has a ranch to run, and those boys out there need to see her moving. She is the glue holding everyone together.” I hear the sadness in his tone, and it kills me. I hate that this man is dying. And I hate that he doesn’t want to leave them behind. “Jackson had no right to look up whatever he found, and I mean none. But you know he didn’t do it to hurt you, right?”

I shift uncomfortably and look out the window. Jackson is sitting on the ground, his long hair out of his band and shielding me from seeing his face as he stares down at his knees.

“I do,” I say softly. “I know he didn’t mean to hurt me. I just... I wasn’t ready for him to learn what I’m sure he did.”

“You like my boy?” He asks, and I stare straight into his eyes.

“Morris, I think I’m in love with him, and I’m fucking terrified.” He stares at me so long and hard, I feel myself growing nervous. Should I have kept my mouth shut? *Of course, I should’ve. He doesn’t want someone like me to love his son.*

I watch a soft, wistful smile fall to his lips, and his eyes almost look as though they are misting over.

“Morris?” I go to stand, but he shakes his head.

“I got to meet my first grandbaby and two of my boys’ loves.” His smile widens as he closes his eyes. “What an absolute gift this is.” I feel my treacherous bottom lip wobble, and I try to force down the lump growing in my throat.

“Morris,” I laugh to cover my sob. “Just because I might love him doesn’t mean he feels the same about me.”

“Sweetheart, he would be a fool not to, and you would be a fool to believe for one second he isn’t crazy about you. Now, let me go to sleep.” I chuckle lightly as I stand, giving his gnarled and papery-thin hand a squeeze.

“You better wake up for dinner, old man,” I whisper before walking out of the room.

## *Jackson*

“Here,” I grumble, shoving the paint can at Adam, one of our ranch hands. “Start painting that room, and you,” I say to the blond one, Steven. “You start tearing up the floors so that as soon as the new flooring is delivered, I can start laying it.” I turn and walk away from the men, knowing they are probably snickering at my bruised cheek courtesy of Theo. Thankfully, my beard covers most of it.

As per Pops’ request, we’ve been working on fixing up Derek’s old house for Ozzy. The house is small, more of a cottage. We’ve busted the walls down to make the living room, dining area, and kitchen all open. Upstairs, there are two bedrooms and a bathroom with a shower, while there is a half bath down here. This was the house Pops built for Derek when he and his ex-wife were together. Then it was used by all us brothers when we needed time out of the main house and Theo when she needed somewhere to fuck.

Walking up the steps, I go into the bare primary bedroom and look out the bay window. This house has a view of the wide open pasture, far from the tree line.

“It’s weird being in here,” Derek mutters, leaning against the doorframe. I give him a slight nod while looking out at the yard.

“I think Ozzy would enjoy a garden,” I say more to myself. Derek walks over to the window and stares out at the yard.

“It gets great sun back here for wildflowers.”

Sighing, I turn back to my brother. “It’s time to take you to the airport, huh?” Derek gives me a pained look.

“If you cry and hug me, I’m kicking your ass.” He mutters, and I laugh,

following him out of the house. I look at the concrete step and frown.

“I should build her a porch,”

“Maybe apologize to her first.” He chuckles, and I groan, still unsure how I’m going to fix what happened yesterday.

# Ozzy

“It’s going to kill me,” I mutter, staring at the hissing bird.

Carter shrugs, continuing to feed the chickens. “If Henrietta tries to kill you, not only will I not save you, but I’m going to laugh as you die.” I glare at him as I slowly reach under the chicken, trying to retrieve her eggs. Henrietta lets out a god-awful squall before biting me, jumping off her nest, and running after me with her wings spread. The rational side of my brain tells me the small bird can’t do much of anything now, but my much louder side is screaming that a fucking Pterodactyl is about to kill me.

“Carter!” I scream at the cackling man as I trip over one of Wyatt’s toys and fall on my ass. “Get her!”

“Oh, my god!” He wheezes as he ushers the winged spawn of satan away, and she trots over to grab her lunch. “I damn near pissed my pants!”

“I swear to god,” I growl, standing up and pointing at the evil bitch. “I’m taking your ass to McDonald’s. You’ll be a chicken nugget by lunch tomorrow bitch!”

“Zeze!” Wyatt’s sweet voice grabs my attention. I look at his scrunched-up face. “Zeze poopy hand.”

“Huh? Oh god!” I groan as I look at my shit-covered hand, causing Carter to cackle more. “Don’t you have something better to do?” I ask him while limping over to the hose. I’ll at least wash the big parts up before going to the house.

“Fuck no,” he laughs as Wyatt tsks.

“No-no word Daddy!” He scolds, and Carter rolls his eyes.

“Why Mama told him that, I don’t know, like I have control over what this mouth does.” I snort before grabbing the basket of eggs and heading back

to the house. It's been quiet today. I thought after the fight yesterday, Jackson and I would talk. But he never came to see me, and today, everyone left to take Derek to the airport.

Setting the basket down, I remove my shoes before walking into the house and heading straight for the stationary tub, where everyone washes off in the mudroom. I walk through the house and see Morris is sleeping. I check his vitals and place my hand on his for a moment before deciding to shower before I need to give him meds and set up for movie night.

As I enter my room, I disrobe and shudder at the stench of the pieces of fabric while walking to the bathroom. It amazes me how truly terrible it smells when you come inside, but when you're out there... It's just a calming aroma. I don't know how to explain it or explain when I made that shift. The old me would've died if her hand had fallen into animal shit. I would've hated being out there feeding the animals, collecting eggs, cleaning out pens. While I'm not exactly whistling and skipping along, I don't mind it. It's calming and honest work. And I love the animals... except Henrietta. That cunt is going to be on my plate one day. Probably not, but I still don't like her.

As I step out of the shower, I towel off and rub lotion all over before walking back to my bedroom to grab my clothes.

"Holy shit!" I freeze at the sound of Jackson's startled voice from where he's standing in the middle of the room.

"Jackson," I whisper, trying to figure out what the fuck is happening.

"Uh huh?" He mutters, his eyes locked on my very bare tits.

"I'm naked," I state, and I swear I can hear him swallow.

"Yeah, I'm... aware."

"Stop looking!" I hiss, breaking him out of his trance. His tanned face goes tomato red as he breaks tit contact and turns to face the wall. Quickly, I go to my dresser and grab baggy sweatpants and a green henley. Once I'm decent, I walk over to him. "What the fuck? You ever hear of knocking?"

"O-Ozzy, I am so sorry. I thought I could slip in and out without you knowing. You came out just as I was leaving." I raise a brow at his words.

"Why were you in here?" I didn't know his face could get any more red. I watch as he looks at my nightstand, where a single red rose lies with a box. I scrunch my brows as I walk over to the box and pick it and the rose up. "What's this?" I ask nervously.

"The rose is because I'm really sorry for yesterday, like... so fucking

sorry. I'm an idiot, and I will understand if you want nothing to do with me again. I won't like it, but I'll understand. And that," He gestures to the box. "I saw when I was in the city earlier, and it made me think of you." I watch him rub the back of his neck nervously as I set the rose down and open the box. "If you hate it—"

"Oh my god," I breathe as I look at the silver necklace. It looks like a wax seal with a large poppy on it. "It's... Jackson, it's beautiful but—"

"I know," he interrupts. "I know you don't like things around your neck, but I thought maybe as a bracelet or something? I don't know. I just saw the poppy, which made me think of you."

My hand goes to my throat, and he must mistake the gesture as apprehension because he steps forward and takes the box.

"Tink, I swear I didn't mean for it to go on your neck. Shit, maybe I should've asked if they could've put it on a bracelet."

"What? No!" I snatch the box back, clutching it to my chest. "No," I repeat softer. "Jackson, I... nobody has ever gotten me something before." He gives me a dry laugh.

"You mean jewelry?" I stare up at him, and his face drops when he sees the look on mine.

"Anything," I whisper, gripping the box tighter. "Thank you, I love it."

"Oh," he seems almost shocked. "Yeah, you're welcome." There is an awkward, quiet moment between us before I take a deep breath and set the box down.

"Can I kiss you?" I ask, and I watch the nervousness on his face melt, and a smile replaces it.

"Always." I smile at that small word. It hits me in a way I hadn't expected as I close the distance and press my lips to his. He captures my bottom lip in between his, and I feel like I'm melting. I get halfway through licking his lips when the alarm on my phone startles us.

"Fuck," I whisper, reaching over to silence the thing. "It's the alarm telling me I need to start getting your dad's meds ready in an hour and get dinner going." I turn to walk away when Jackson cups my cheek and pulls me back to him. He walks us back until my back hits the wall before bending down, hovering his mouth over mine.

"Can I kiss you?" He asks, and I would give anything to say 'always' to him. But I can't give him the permanent consent he gave me. So, instead, I nod, and he captures my mouth, causing me to whimper. I feel his hand



grabbing my thigh, and I nod again, silently consenting as he lifts me to his waist. I feel his erection against my center.

“Fuck,” I hiss out as I grind against him.

“Tink,” he grits out, the need and lust thick in his voice. “Goddamn it, there isn’t a thing about you that doesn’t drive me crazy,” I whine while gripping his hair with my hands, lust filling me as well.

“I want you,” I whisper, watching his body stiffen before relaxing.

“R-Really?” I can’t help but chuckle at his surprised tone. I mean, I understand the question, but still, his hands are holding my thighs apart while he grinds against me.

“Yeah, I’m just scared,” I say as I move off him and sit on the bed. “Things about me are... well, I guess you know now.” I look up to see his face fall. He walks over and drops to his knees in front of me.

“I’m so sorry for invading your privacy like that. I could say I never meant to see what I did, but even if that’s true, I shouldn’t have been looking at all.”

“You hurt me,” I whisper as his head hangs.

“Baby, you have no idea how much that guts me.” I place his hands on my thighs and look at his broken knuckles.

“What happened?” I ask, and he looks at his hands.

“I uhhh... I tore up the garage after I saw what I did.” I grab him by the back of his neck and pull him to me, kissing him softly.

“How sorry are you?” I ask, running my tongue over his lips, and I can feel him shiver.

“Fuck, I’m so fucking sorry.”

“Show me,” I say and watch a fire ignite in his eyes as he crawls over top of me, plunging his tongue into my mouth. Goosebumps rise on my skin when I feel his hand trace over my waistband.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispers, trailing hot kisses over my neck. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I whisper. “God, yes, but I...I need to see your face. I need you to talk to me so I don’t... leave.” Cupping my cheek in his hand, Jackson kisses me again as his hand slips into my waistband.

“You ain’t leaving me, Ozzy. You and me, right here, right now.” I gasp as I feel his palm press against the brand on my mound. “Stay with me, pretty girl.” He kisses and licks my neck, his tongue dragging up to my ear. “I’m going to stick my finger in your slit, baby. You relax, breathe, and I promise,

nothing will happen without you knowing, alright?” God, I’m fucking terrified. I stare into his blue eyes, and I know I trust him completely, which terrifies me more.

“I’m trusting you,” I whisper, silently pleading with him not to take advantage of this.

“I know, baby, eyes on me.” I look right into his eyes as his finger dips between my lips. “My god, you’re soaked.” He marvels while running his hand up and down me.

My eyes shudder and roll. This feels too good. I feel Jackson’s hand grip the side of my face. “Eyes on me,” he repeats. “Be a good girl and slip those pants down for me,” I nod, wiggling the sweats down as he continues to slide up and down me. “I’m going to touch your clit now, okay?”

“Y-yeah,” Goddamn it, I’m about to scream at him to just let me do it. This slow thing is going to drive me insane. I think he knows it, too. Jackson maneuvers his thumb over my clit, and “Holy Sh–” He silences my loud cry with his mouth.

He laughs softly, brushing his nose against mine. “Shhh... People are going to hear you, baby. Those noises and only for my ears now, understood?” Wow, yeah, okay, that dark voice is way too hot. “You ready for me to enter you, or would you rather stay here?” He asks, circling my bud. I pant as I try to roll my head back but can’t. His other hand is still on the side of my face, stroking my cheek and making sure I don’t look away.

“Just... I’m going to feel different,” I warn, and he kisses me.

“I love the way you’ve felt so far. Every inch you’ve allowed me to touch has been a gift I don’t deserve.” If this asshole makes me cry while fingering me, I’m kicking him in the balls.

I nod my consent, but he shakes his head. “Not this time, baby. I’m not entering you until you tell me that’s what you want. Use that pretty mouth and that sinful voice to tell me you want my finger inside you.”

“Jackson,” I breathe, feeling him teasing around my entrance. “I want you to stick your finger inside me, pl–” He cuts me off by inserting his thick middle finger inside my center.

“You never beg. You got it?” He says firmly while the heel of his palm rubs my clit. “You are to be worshiped, a queen or a goddess; they do not beg.” I force down the loud moan as he presses up on my wall. “I beg you. I worship you. If ‘please’ is to come from anyone’s mouth, it’ll be mine. Now, *please*, baby, let me add another finger into this perfect pussy so I can

give you the release you deserve.”

I don't know what he's saying at this point. I'm just nodding over and over and over again. Yes, yes to everything: fingers, release, worship, whatever. “Jackson!” My cries become more audible as he inserts a second finger inside me.

“Ozzy, god, you're so tight, baby,” he kisses my chin as his hand works faster. I watch the smirk form on his lips. “You're about to come, aren't you?” I open and close my mouth silently several times, trying to figure out how he knows that. “I can feel you contracting, baby,” he answers my unspoken question. Leaning closer, he continues to stroke my cheek while keeping eye contact with me. “I want this moment burned into my brain. I'm not missing a thing. Now, can I make you come?”

“Yes,” I choke out, and it's less than five seconds before I'm coming around his fingers. I start to cry out, but Jackson's lips silence me, swallowing each and every one of my cries and moans, claiming them as his own. They are his, all of it, all of me.

Jackson continues to stroke my face as he removes his hand from my center. I watch him bring his hand up to his mouth, and while never breaking eye contact, he sucks his fingers clean. “My fucking god,” he groans before smiling. “Fuck, you taste... perfect.”

I chuckle nervously as he rolls off me. “And what does perfection taste like?” I smile softly as I turn on my side to stare at him. I can't stop staring at him. Seeing him right now is the only thing keeping me grounded.

“Like happiness. You taste like Christmas morning and the first snowfall in winter, like fresh honey and spring rain.” He leans in and kisses my lips. “That's what perfection tastes like. That's what you taste and feel like. You are perfection, Ozzy.”

I am too stunned to speak. I'm about to offer an awkward thanks and then try not to confess my love for him before we even actually go on a date. Thankfully, the reminder on my phone goes off again, and I sigh.

“I really gotta go. It's movie night tonight, so I need to get things ready.” Jackson groans but nods and rolls off the bed so I can get up and get my pants back on. Once on my own shaky feet, I stand on my tip toes and give him a soft, sweet kiss before walking out of the bedroom to start dinner. I stop at the door and look back at him. “You wanna join us?”

His head jerks up, and he furrows his brows. “Huh?”

“These meds tend to keep Morris up later than usual, so we watch a

movie, eat junk food, and whatnot. Would you like to join us?" I watch his eyes go to the door, and I know he's staring through it to his dad. I think he will say no, that he has something, anything to do, but he looks back at me and nods.

"Okay, let me just change first." I can't hide the smile on my face at his words.

"Great! I prepped pizzas earlier, so I'll put them in the oven now."

# Jackson

This is unreal.

What happened an hour ago was mind-blowing enough, but to be sitting here with Ozzy, Mama, and Pops, watching a movie... we didn't even do this as kids. Mama nodded off on the couch, holding Pops' hand about twenty minutes ago. Ozzy and Morris are still wide awake, making snarky comments at either the actors on the screen or each other. It both fills my heart and breaks it because the longer I'm around Pops in this state, the more I'm unable to deny what's coming.

I look at Ozzy, who is catching pieces of popcorn in her mouth that she throws into the air. God, she's beautiful. I am in awe that she allowed me that close to her to be that intimate with her. Watching her overcome her fears for that moment and give in to the pleasure I delivered was otherworldly. She wasn't the only one who had to overcome negative feelings, though. When I put my finger inside her pussy and felt what those cocksucking mother fuckers did to her, I didn't know if I wanted to cry or commit a murder. She does feel different; you can feel the divots and the scars, but it doesn't make her any less desirable. It just makes me a little more violent.

Ozzy glances at me from her spot on the chair next to Pops. I give her a playful smirk and wink, which causes her to roll her eyes and throw a piece of popcorn at me. I stick my tongue out, and she responds with her middle finger.

"Am I going to have to separate you two?" Pops says in fake annoyance, causing us both to chuckle.

"She started it." I grin at her look of betrayal.

"Me?" she huffs. "You're the one staring at me like a goddamn creep."

I give her a shrug. “Just enjoying the view.” I can’t help the grin on my face as she turns bright red, and Pops laughs lightly.

“That line is older than me,” his voice is tired and weak, but I can hear his playfulness coming through. “Surely I’ve taught you better than that boy.”

“I mean, I don’t know, Pops, it seems to have had the desired effect.” As if on cue, Ozzy’s face becomes a darker shade of red.

“You guys are assholes,” she huffs while refocusing on the movie. We sit in comfortable silence until the credits roll, and I see Pops is beginning to get tired, so I start cleaning up the dishes while Ozzy gets him comfortable for sleep.

“You know,” I hear him say to Ozzy. “The lady Doctor in town is gonna be hiring soon. Her nurse, Linda, is retiring in about a month or so.”

“Uh huh,” Ozzy mumbles while putting the blanket over him. “Are you wanting me to call and give her a recommendation?”

“I want you to give her your resume,” he states firmly, and I stop my movements and look at them. Ozzy seems taken aback at the suggestion.

“Morris, that would be a permanent job.” She says, her tone uneasy. “I would have to find a place to live. I would have to be there every day...”

“I know how a job works, girlie. This would be good for you.”

She looks from Pops to me and gives me a ‘help me’ look. I don’t want to help her, though. I don’t want to because that means she’s thinking about leaving once Pops passes, and I can’t handle that. I don’t even know how I’m going to handle losing him, but losing Ozzy, too, will destroy me.



“Do you want to go on a date with me?” I blurt out over the breakfast table. Ozzy drops her fork onto her plate of half-eaten pancakes and stares at me, mouth open and eyes wide.

“I mean,” Carter shrugs, leaning against my shoulder. “It’s all so sudden, Jackson. What will the townspeople think? Two brothers—”

“I will beat your stupid face in if you don’t shut up.” I hiss out before looking back at Ozzy and giving her an apologetic look. I hadn’t meant to blurt that out loud at the breakfast table in front of my entire family. She

gives me an uncomfortable smile and... *Oh god, is she about to try and let me down gently?*

I can feel the embarrassment and rejection overcoming my entire body. I feel pinpricks and sweat all over, and fucking hell, why did I blurt that out.

“Sure,” her voice interrupts my mental screaming session, and I look at her in confusion.

“What?” I ask, causing Carter to snort and Mama to hit him upside the head with her hand.

“Sure, Jackson, I’ll go on a date with you.” Ozzy smiles softly. “What did you have in mind?”

“In mind for what?” I ask. Still stunned, she said yes. I watch her face fall as she looks toward my family and then back to me.

“For the date you nimrod,” Pops calls from his bed in the living room.

“Fuck, right uhmmm.... It’s a surprise.” I give her my best confident smirk that I guarantee in no way delivers. She giggles lightly and shakes her head while standing up to clear her plate.

“Yes, to both of us, evidently.”



“Ladies love picnics,” Carter says while spinning his squealing son around over his shoulder. “Guaranteed to get you puss-”

“Your son is right there.” Theo smacks him in the forehead before looking at me. “But yes, a picnic. Plus, you can do it on the ranch. Go over to the tree line and have the woods to look at and shit.” My heart drops. I can’t do that to her. She would be in a panic the whole time. Sighing, I get in my truck and wave them goodbye. I need to go into town to grab food and stuff for this picnic thing. I could drag the outside table back out from the shed, and we could eat there. That constitutes a picnic, right?

Placing my bud into my ear, I hit Indy’s contact on my phone. I need to know what kind of food to get Ozzy without asking her straight out.

“The fuck you calling my girl for?” Derek greets me, and I roll my eyes.

“Jealousy is not attractive, brother,” I hear him scoff.

“Shows what you know. Women eat that possessive shit u– Oh hey,

Darlin’.” He laughs nervously, and there is rustling before Indy’s voice comes on.

“It’s a shame I’m going to have to murder your brother.” She mutters, and I snicker at her remark. “So what can I do for you, Jackson?”

“I’m taking Ozzy on a date,” Indy nearly blows my eardrum with her squeals of happiness.

“I knew it! Derek! You owe me five dollars!”

“Ha ha, very funny. Anyway, I wanted to take her on a picnic and needed to know what she likes on her sandwiches because all I’ve ever seen is peanut butter and chips, which is disgusting.”

“Don’t knock it until you try it, and why are you making sandwiches? That’s soooo boring. Oh! I know! You could do a charcuterie board with some meats, cheeses, and fruits. Pair that with a good wine... well, she doesn’t drink, so scratch the wine, but a good fancy dessert! What’s the location for the picnic?”

Pulling into the store’s parking lot, I furrow my brows. “A char-what? What happened to bologna or ham? Also, I was going to pull the table out of storage and do it in the back ya—”

“Oh. My. God. Jackson Rowe, if you subject my friend to that crap, I will forbid you from ever dating her again. Am I making myself clear? I’m not even waiting for an answer because I know I’m making myself clear. Now, here is what we are going to do. You are going to keep me on the phone with you, and you will buy everything I tell you, and we will give her the best picnic date ever.



## Ozzy

“I don’t care,” Dorothy hollers as she paces back and forth in the living room, her phone pressed to her ear. “Your family and I have done business together despite the horrendous actions with your daughter! You can’t just—” She shakes her head and hangs the phone up.

“What’s going on?” Morris asks, weakly looking up from watching Wyatt play toy cars on the floor with me.

“The Anders are doubling the price of feed on us.” She sighs, dropping her head into her hands. “They say that they’ve given us a break long enough over the Justine thing, and they can’t keep paying for her sins, especially with her not working there, unless she’s hurting for money.”

“Can’t you get feed somewhere else?” I ask, standing up from Wyatt. “Surely they aren’t the only feed distributors.”

“They’re the closest,” Morris sighs, “And were the most reasonably priced. This has nothing to do with them giving us a break. It has to do with the Barnett’s selling off their ranch and the Lionel’s not far behind. They’re hurting and are gonna squeeze us for it.” I frown as I look between the two, wishing like hell I knew what to say to help them.

Dorothy, sensing my unease, smiles at me. “It’ll all work itself out. We wanted to leave after what Justine did to Derek, but Derek insisted it didn’t bother him, and that girl was never a part of her parent’s business like our kids, so we stayed because it was convenient. We’ll figure something out. Now, don’t you have a date to get ready for?”



Staring at myself in the mirror, I frown. I look so stupid in this outfit. Curled hair in a high pony, nearly no makeup, jeans, and a plaid flannel with a white tank underneath. When I googled “Country winter date clothes,” this was the vibe. Well, it may be their vibe, but I am so uncomfortable I want to cry.

A knock at my door pulls me out of my thoughts as I clasp my necklace on my neck. The first few times I wore it, it only lasted a second. Now I can go a couple of hours, and I find it’s actually really comforting. I like rubbing my thumb over the seal grooves.

Opening my door, I find Theo standing there looking... well, sweaty.

“If someone don’t get fucked tonight after the horseshit I just got roped into, I’m gonna be pissed.” She looks me up and down, and her lip curls. “The fuck are you wearing?”

Stamping my foot, I storm back into my room. “I-I can’t go! I don’t have the right clothes!”

“Oz, it’s casual. Actually, I think you’re wearing something similar to Jackson, which is weird.” She chuckles, and I whine as I flop onto my bed.

“I just want to look the part for him!”

“Ozzy, this ain’t the part he’s looking for you to fill. He likes you the way you are! These clothes ain’t you. Now, let’s see, it’s outside, so it’ll be cool.” She mutters, and I still wonder what he has planned for us. “You start doing your normal makeup. I’ll find your clothes.”



Standing in front of the mirror once again, I smile brightly at my reflection. My hair is down and in loose waves. I have done my eyeliner, mascara, and sharp eyebrows, then completed the look with a dark plum lip stain. The outfit Theo put together is perfect - a mini sweater dress that’s off the shoulder with thick black and grey stripes and my black tattered skinny jeans

with skull fishnet stockings underneath. I paired it with my classic black Docs, and it's perfect.

"Much better," Theo grins, and I have to agree with her as we head out of my room, passing a napping Morris and outside to where Jackson should be waiting. I feel like myself in this. I just hope her earlier words are true and Jackson really does like me this way.

"Wow," I hear him murmur as he looks me up and down from where he is loading something in his truck. I give him a shy smile as I walk over.

"Hi," I say softly. He lets out a nervous laugh as he continues to stare me up and down.

"Hey beautiful," he whispers, and wow, that's a lot of butterflies fluttering around in my stomach. "You ready to go?" I give him a nod before waving at Theo and climbing into the truck, allowing Jackson to hold the door open and close it for me.

Our ride is quiet for the first ten or so minutes before I let out a breath, unable to take the silence anymore.

"Where are we going?" I ask, needing to know because the anxiety is killing me.

"Parking lot." He says simply, and I frown.

"Our date is in a parking lot?" He gives me a half-shrug.

"You don't like crowds, and you don't like the woods. A parking lot has neither." I'm about to tell him that is the dumbest idea for a date ever when we pull into the lot. It's an old drive-thru movie theatre that obviously doesn't play movies anymore. Jackson parks and hops out of his side, and I hear him opening up the back of his truck. I get out to see the sun starting to set behind him.

"Jackson, help me out here. What are you—" I stop when I see he's turning on large, soft, glowing string lights around the bed of his truck, and inside is a literal bed with tons of pillows, blankets, and a picnic basket. He taps his phone several times, and soft, slow music starts to play. "Oh my god," I choke out.

"Okay," he breathes before hopping down off the truck bed. "So I'll admit, ninety percent of this is Indy's doing. So we got a charcuterie board, which is just a fancy word y'all use for a party platter; I got bottles of sparkling grape juice because you don't drink, and for dessert, I got us supplies to make s'mores, including a small portable campfire." He shows me a steel tin with a decal of a flame on it, and I'm going to cry.

I lean forward, pressing my lips to his, catching him off guard. Jackson groans against my mouth while wrapping his arms around my waist and lifting me up onto the tailgate. I wrap my legs around his waist, drawing him closer.

“Mmm...” He pulls back and chuckles. “Baby, as much as I’m enjoying this, I didn’t bring you out here for that. I really wanted to have a nice date with you. Let you relax and do—” He stops talking as his eyes stare at my neck. His eyes meet mine, silently asking permission that I grant. His fingers run so delicately over my chain, pulling out the pendant and holding it in his hand.

“You’re wearing it around your neck.” His voice is full of surprise but also excitement, maybe? I give him a small nod.

“Only for short periods right now. I’m still getting used to it,” I watch him heave himself up onto the tailgate before pulling me towards the bed.

“I’m about to spend all night with my tongue wrapped around yours if we don’t get this date started.” I give him a small laugh. Would that be such a bad thing?



The date is perfect. The food was delicious, and the drinks were a sweet gesture. Snuggling up in the dimly lit bed of the truck next to Jackson is so relaxing.

“Why a parking lot?” I ask, breaking the comfortable silence. I have been leaning against his chest, listening to his heartbeat for fifteen minutes now. This is my favorite spot, my favorite position, which is weird because it never was before. Even before my attack, I wasn’t known for my cuddling.

“I told you,” he murmurs as his fingers play with the strands of my hair. “No people and no tree line.”

“You aren’t worried about the cops coming by and saying something?” I feel his chest shake as he chuckles.

“Small town baby, nobody worries about that shit. Besides, Leon, who owns The Spur, owns this property, and I told him I would be on it. If you would rather go-”

“No!” I bolt up to stare him in the eyes. “No,” I say softer. “This is actually the best date I’ve ever been on. I’m just... I can’t believe you did all of this for me.”

“Tink,” he pulls my face toward his, and I feel my heart quickening. “Baby, there isn’t a fucking thing I wouldn’t do for you. Ask it, and it’s yours,”

“Why?” I manage out over the lump growing in my throat. “I’m noth—”

“Stop that,” he snaps, though his tone stays soft. “Ozzy, I would burn this fucking world to the ground for you, so don’t you dare say something hurtful about yourself.”

“You would what?” I ask, unsure I heard him right, unsure he means it.

He pulls me onto his lap so I’m straddling him as he brings my face to his, always making sure we are keeping eye contact. “I would burn this fucking world to the ground for you,” he repeats, his voice low. “You want it, and you will have it.”

“Oink like a pig,” I say, watching him blink in surprise before chuckling.

“Oink.”

“Sing me a song,” I smirk as I watch his face fall, and his cheeks redden.

“I uhhh... I’m actually not a real good singer.” He gives me a nervous smile, and I give him a shrug.

“Guess there is a limi—”

“Jingle bells,” he begrudgingly mutters in a half attempt at singing. “Jingle bells, jingle all the... Okay, you can’t laugh!” I cover my mouth as I continue cackling like a maniac.

“Why?” I try to ask through my laughing fit. “Why would you pick jingle bells? I have literally heard you guys on the ranch belting out every song known to man, and you pick that?”

“I don’t like this game anymore.” He huffs and looks away.

“Awww... okay, I only have one more,” I say, taking a breath. His eyes roll, still refusing to look at me. “Have sex with me.” His entire body stiffens, and his head whips around to look at me, his eyes round and large.

“I... Baby, if you are testing me right now, I need you to know, I was a C student at best, and I fear I may be about to disappoint the fuck out of you because if you think for one second I’m going to say no or that we shouldn’t, you are so fucking mistaken.”

“I know what I’m asking,” I say, grinding against his crotch to emphasize my point. His head rolls back as he lets out a long “fuck”.

“Are you sure?” He pants while watching me move back and slip off my jeans. “Fucking god, you have the sexiest legs known to man.” I giggle as I slip my socks and stockings off, my shoes already off from earlier.

“Really?”

“Yes,” he breathes. “I just want to hold and lick and own them.” I grab a blanket and hand it to him as I remove my sweater dress, shivering as the cool night air hits my bare flesh. “If this is a dream, please, for the love of Christ, don’t wake me up.” I giggle as I reach behind me and unclasp my bra. I nearly moan as I watch him palming himself through his jeans. The look of need on his face is almost too much. I hold on to all my strength as I toss my bra to the side, leaving me in nothing but my thong.

“Say something,” I say after a minute of him just staring.

“I... where can’t I touch you?” My heart melts at his sweet question.

“No ass play and no choking.” He nods, but I take note of how dark his eyes go. “So, are you going to just let me freeze out here alone?” I laugh, and it snaps him out of his trance.

“Fuck, sorry.” He makes short work of his shirt before undoing his belt and pants and sliding them down to reveal...woah. Scrunching my face, I scratch the top of my head. He sees me looking and begins to appear nervous. “What?”

“Well, think it’s... big enough?” I ask, and he lets out a surprised laugh before motioning for me to come to him. When I do, he wraps the blanket around us, and looks down at my tits.

“Can I touch them?” He asks, and I nod. His hands cup my large breast, and I let out a groan. “They’re so fucking soft.” He says as his lips touch my clavicle.

“W-wait,” I say, stunned by how fast he pulls back.

“I’m sorry.”

“N-no, I just, not your lips. Kissing me on the lips or near my ear is fine, but... I need to hear you.” His brows furrow.

“Hear me?” He repeats, and I nod.

“Yeah, I ummm...you talking to me, I think it’s what’s keeping me grounded, and I’m afraid if I don’t hear your voice, I’ll—” He kisses my lips and nods.

“Completely understandable. Holy shit!” He gasps when I grind against his bare dick.

“So are you going to put it in or?” I buck my hips again, and he lets out a

whine.

“Ozzy, fuck, baby, I’m trying to go slow.” Shaking my head, I reach down and move my thong to the side.

“Don’t make me beg,” I whisper against his lips as I slide my wet pussy over his tip. “You promised I would never have to,”

“God help me,” he mutters as he places one hand on my hip and the other he uses to angle his cock to my entrance. “You say stop, and I’m out instantly.” I nod, my body shaking in fear and excitement as he pushes his head inside me.

“A-ah!” I cry out at the overly full feeling. I try to focus on my breathing, but it’s no use, and I end up holding my breath.

“Hey!” Jackson scolds, squeezing my thigh. “Breathe, baby, I don’t need you passing out on me.” He grunts as he seats me fully on him. I shudder against him as I situate myself.

“Mm...oh god!” His voice is guttural as he rolls his head back. “Goddamn it, your pussy is amazing.”

I rock my hips, and we both groan at the feel. “God, you’re so big,” I whine as I move up and down his cock, trying like hell to keep the voices quiet.

“Baby, look at me.” His voice is hot and husky, and I cry in pleasure as I move again. “Do you feel that?” He groans. “How your pussy molds to my cock? Baby, we were made for each other.” His hand finds my thigh as I continue to rock. “God, you’re doing such a good job. You’re making me feel so good. How about you, though? Tell me what you need, baby.”

“C-clit...” I grunt out. Jackson nods and positions us so that my legs are spread wider, and my clit is grinding against his pubic bone. “Oh!” I cry out, digging my nails into his shoulders.

“That’s my girl. Come on, hurt me, baby.” He praises while grabbing my hips and moving me faster, and then he hisses in pain as I rake my nails down his chest. “Fuck baby, do you feel how hard my cock is?”

“Mhmm...” I whine, my body vibrating with the need to release.

“That’s all you, Ozzy. I’ve never been this hard before, only for you. You going to explode around my cock for me?” I nod, gripping his hair and tugging it.

“Jackson,” I pant, my legs shaky, and my core is on fire. “Jackson, don’t leave me,”

Gripping my face, he pulls me to him. “You come on my cock Ozzy, and

it's all over. You are mine, and I am yours. You come on me, baby, and I will be yours, always."

I open my mouth to speak, but an orgasm rips through my body, unlike anything I've ever experienced before. I scream his name and hear him roar mine only seconds later as I'm filled with his hot come.

We sit still, both of us panting and staring at the other in complete and total shock. Both of us thinking the exact same thing.

*What happens now?*



## Jackson

Walking down the fence line, I feel more of a spring in my step. It's been three days since Ozzy and I went out, and it's been amazing. I am loving every second with her. She's amazing, funny, smart, and... currently sobbing in the chicken coop?

"What's wrong?" I ask, panic in my voice as I run up to her. She turns to me, her face tear-stained, and that's when I hear them. Chicks. I look at all the cheeping little chicks and kneel down next to her.

"Look at them!" She sobs, holding one to her chest. "I love all of them so much!"

"Then why are you crying?" I laugh nervously as she continues to sob. I'm still trying to figure out where the fuck these chicks came from.

"Because! They're so cute and little!" Her bottom lip pouts out, and it's the fucking cutest thing ever.

"Alright, well, considering mama hen has apparently said fuck it, help me grab these chicks and get them over to the brooder." Her brows furrow as she scoops up five of the eight babies while I grab the other three.

"What's a brooder?" She asks, following me to the other barn we use for chicks, piglets, ducklings, and calves born during the winter.

"It's a little area to keep them safe with food, water, and a heat lamp. Heat is vital for them." She nods, and I can see she's trying to take in all the information. I spend way too much time explaining to her how to care for them, the proper temperature, and everything else. Ozzy has decided to name them all. All eight of these little fuckers. I didn't have the heart to tell her we don't name but the closest ones because things happen on the ranch, and it

usually happens to the chickens first. If I had, I am sure she would move her bed out here or them into the house. So we have: Chicklet, Chick Norris, Beaker, Rex, Peter Pecker, Sanders, Punky Rooster, and Little Foot.

“Why Little Foot?” I ask, and she points to the chick.

“It was sitting on a tree star when I found them.”

“A what?” She looks at me as if I’ve just insulted her.

“Rowe, you are not allowed to be my boyfriend if you don’t know what a tree star is.” She huffs and looks away.

“Boyfriend, huh?” Her face snaps back to mine, and I watch her cheeks go rosy.

“I, well, I just assumed after... with what you said. I mean,” I chuckle at her stammering and walk over, kissing the tip of her nose.

“I like that title,” I say softly, kissing her lips. She gets this dreamy look on her face as she pulls back.

“Me too. I better go start making breakfast for your dad.” She says, hiking her thumb over her shoulder.

“Alright baby, you look beautiful, by the way, even covered in chicken shit.” Her face falls as she looks down at her shirt.

“I’m gonna need ranch shirts if I’m going to be here.” She mutters, and fuck, I’ll give her a lifetime supply if it means she’ll stay.



“How’s the house looking?” Pops asks me as I sit with him while Ozzy goes to check on her chicks again.

“Good,” I sigh out, resting back in the chair. “Needs furniture and a new stove and fridge, but it’s ready for her to move in.” I watch him nod as he looks out the window.

“You seem to have this place running smoother than I ever could’ve. Your mama told me you talked to a feed supplier a city over who will get us a good rate?” I nod, crossing my legs at the ankles.

“Yeah, actually, Ozzy found them yesterday. She did a web search and haggled the price. It was pretty impressive.” Actually, it was hot as fuck, and all I wanted to do was bend her over and fuck her right then and there, but

I'm trying to give her time. She had a hard time the morning after we had sex, apparently having night terrors, and she flinched when I went to touch her. She had a session with her therapist, and I asked if I could sit in so I could learn how to help. Apparently, that was the right thing to do because we made out for like three hours after that.

"She's a keeper," Pops hums, and I nod.

"She is. I'm in love with her Pops." He laughs weakly.

"Not a better soul for either of you. I'm happy for you, and I'm happy I got to see you find someone you deserve, Jackson."

"Yeah," I laugh out. "Next is Carter and Theo," Pops shakes his head slowly.

"You'll have to take care of that for me, son. I won't be making it that long." I laugh lightly.

"Hell, even I probably won't make it to see those two find people to settle down with." Pops stares at me, and I know what he means, but I also know I'm unwilling to talk about it. Not yet; we still have time. He's eating, laughing and talking with us. He's not gone yet.



"I might die." Theo wheezes, and she sits down on the stump. I chuckle and shake my head, throwing the last few logs into the trailer.

"You act like you don't come out here and do this for fun regularly." I take a sip of my water as my eyes scan the land. Fields as far as the eye can see, and somehow, I land on the pretty girl walking back to the barn to check on her chicks... again.

"That was before they took an organ out of me." I snort at her comment.

"It was an appendix. Stop acting like you lost a lung or something. I ain't one of your potential lays." Theo laughs while standing up.

"I met this girl last night, we're supposed to be going out tonight, and I'm telling you, the ass on this one..." Groaning, I shove her face away from me as I scan the barn, waiting to see my girl again.

*My girl.*

Fuck, I love that. I love that Ozzy is mine. I love that she smiles at me,

confides in me, and trusts me. It's a feeling that I just want more of. Along with other things. Fucking Christ, I need her on my cock again like I need oxygen.

"You know," Theo's voice interrupts my thoughts. "You look like a fucking idiot with that face." Blinking, I turn to look at her.

"What look?"

"That 'I'm so in love and I'm so happy' look, you look dumb." I give her a half-shrug.

"I'm alright with looking dumb for her."



"Son," Pops' weak voice says as he looks up at me. I am about to head out to do my night rounds and allow him, Ozzy, and Mama to have the living room for a movie. I would rather stay in here with them, but if I don't go and check on those fucking chicks and ensure the doors are secure, Ozzy will never forgive me.

Glancing towards the frail man, I'm taken aback as a memory from my childhood flashes in my brain. It's of Pops. Back then, he was a giant in every sense of the word. At least compared to my then childhood stature. He was hauling two newly birthed calves over his massive shoulders up a hill to take to the barn because they had run off. He did it with such ease in my memory while humming some old song while I struggled to keep up with him.

He gave me his hat that day because it was my first day working on the ranch after my stay at the hospital. It's the hat I still wear.

"Yeah, Pops?" I manage over the tightness forming in my throat and chest. I'm trying to accept seeing him like this, but it's hard. It's so fucking hard when night rounds have been our thing since I was a kid, and now, he's lying here, a near skeleton with translucent skin and hallowed eyes.

"Take me outside for rounds?" he asks me. "Let me see her." I know who "her" is. I also know that he shouldn't. But why shouldn't he? If he's never going to get better, why should I deny him? I look from him to Ozzy and Mama. Ozzy gives me the slightest nod, and I sigh before grabbing his

wheelchair. Ozzy stands and walks over, unhooking his IVs and wires before helping me get him in the chair. She kneels down, situating his feet on the rests before smiling up at him. Her smile seems off, almost sad, and she reaches up and hugs my father.

“You’re a pain in my ass, girlye.” Pops chuckles as Ozzy pulls back.

“Like you’d have it any other way, old man,” Ozzy stands and squeezes Pops’ hand before Mama runs behind us, wrapping a blanket over Pops and kissing his cheek before I wheel him outside. It took a lot of careful maneuvering, but I got Pops to the barn where the chicks are. I wheel him next to the brooder as I walk around, making sure everything is secure.

“She wouldn’t shut up about these fuckers,” Pops laughs, and I can’t help the smile.

“You should’ve seen her sobbing over them when she found them this morning.”

“Yeah, I think we take new life for granted sometimes. We see the babies so much, it’s just commonplace, sometimes even a nuisance. We forget what a miracle life is.” I walk over to his chair and start wheeling him out of the barn.

“So I’m thinking Wyatt will love to do the gingerbread house competition,” I say as we make our way along the darkening path. “You and he could talk about it and try to take Carter down.” The family has a ‘who can build a better house’ competition every year. Fucking Carter has been undefeated for eight years. Last year’s was a fucking castle, complete with a moat and drawbridge. I said that should disqualify him since it wasn’t a house, but apparently I was wrong.

Pops doesn’t say anything, and it kills me. It kills me because he really thinks he won’t make it even a few more weeks. This is my *father*. There is no stronger man than him. He will make it, fuck everyone who has been acting for months like he only has days left. I’ll admit, in the beginning, I did, too, but he’s still here, and I’m not giving up on him.

We reach the horse stalls, and as soon as Betty spots Pops, she begins to neigh and shake her head wildly.

“Oh! My beautiful girl!” He wheezes a joyful cry as I park him and release Betty from her stall. She immediately goes to Pops, neighing, purring, and snorting. I watch the tears begin to roll down his cheeks as his weak hands run up her nose and over her jaw. “Betty, I didn’t think I’d see you again, sweetheart,” he chokes out. I look away while tensing my jaw. Seeing

how happy he is with his horse, and thinking about how I tried to stop this from happening, how I tried to stop him from leaving that room, and that guilt...

"Pops," I manage softly after another minute of him loving on Betty. "I'm so sorry."

He releases Betty, and he looks up to me. These few minutes must've taken everything he had left; he looks exhausted. "Sorry for what, son?"

"For," my voice cracks, and I clear my throat before trying again. "For leaving you up there, for leaving you alone." His smile is so weak and faint, it's almost not even there.

"Jackson, you know I love you all equally, but you and I..." He takes in a shaky breath. "We've always been different, closer. Son, I didn't want you to see me this way any more than you wanted to. I would've been fine dying in the room, and your memory of me being who I was before I got sick. But, that Ozzy..." I chuckle at her name.

"Yeah, she's pretty stubborn and opinionated... and possibly right."

"Yeah, her head's big enough, though. Best not add to it." He smirks, and I shake my head. "I'm proud of you," he says as we look out at the land. "You've done amazing work keeping this place going."

"Don't," I warn through my clenched jaw, feeling the prickling in my eyes.

"Ah, it'll be alright. You're going to be okay, Jackson. No need to get too choked up." A traitorous tear rolls down my face as I put my hand over his cold one.

"I don't want you to go, Dad," I admit, and he pats my hand.

"I know, but I lived a great life. I got to do what I loved, found my soulmate, and had the greatest kids I could've asked for. I couldn't have asked for a better life. It's okay."

"I'm not okay, though," I choke, tears falling freely. "W-what if I need you? What if I don't know what to do? Dad, you..."

"Jackson," He exhales softly. "Son, you got this. You are stronger and smarter than I ever dreamed of being. You are better with Theo and your brothers, you are a great man and a hell of a rancher. I promise you, you won't need me. There are many things I'm selfishly upset I'm going to miss, but I can assure you I will rest peacefully knowing you don't need me anymore. I believe in you, boy. Now believe in yourself." My shoulders roll inward as I lower my head, trying to breathe and gather myself back up.

Being out here with him, it's all just finally hitting me. My father is leaving me.

"I should take you back inside," I say once I've composed myself. I watch his gaze wander over the scenery.

"Nah," he says softly. "Let me sit out here and watch this sunset." I frown as I look towards him. He has a peaceful smile on his face, and I can almost see the old him again. Full of pride and spirit.

"It's getting cold," I try, and he looks at me with questioning eyes.

"You worried I'm gonna get sick?" I chuckle, not because I want to, but because I know he wants me to. I stand from my stool and go over to the stall, grabbing a couple of snacks for Betty and handing them to Pops before retaking my seat. We sit silently for a long while as the sun sets over our ranch, casting everything in warm tones before fading into the indigo of the dusk sky.

My mind drifts to Ozzy and how I will have to thank her and tell her she was right about moving him out of that room. This is so hard. Coming to grips with the fact that I may not have weeks left with Pops is gut-wrenching. But this right now, it's something he and I needed more than I realized. I miss my father and sitting here, watching the sunset over everything we've built. It means more to me than just about anything, and I know it also does to him. I need to give him a few more special days, and I will, regardless of how few he has left. I plan on making them the best I can. Maybe tomorrow I can take him out again, get him to the lake, and let him see Betty again.

Once it's fully night, I sigh and stand up. I need to get him back inside before Tink comes out here and screams at me. Looking over, I see Betty is resting her head on Pops' shoulder while he rests his on her face. "Alright, you two," I chuckle. "I'm gonna get my ass chewed out for having you out so... Pops?" I feel my body run cold as I watch Betty move back and Pops' head slump to one side.

Dread slaps me like a bucket of ice water as my brain tries to make sense of what I'm seeing.

No. This can't be happening. Not now! Not right this... No!

"D-dad?"

# Ozzy

Jackson: Ozzy

Jackson: I think he's gone

I sprint through the dark field as fast as my legs will move. I'm barefoot but barely feel the earth below me, my medic bag bouncing against my body with each movement. He's wrong. Jackson has no medical training. He has no idea what he's saying. Morris' medication can cause him to go into a deep sleep sometimes, and that's all this is.

*It's movie night, my brain reminds me. His medication tonight doesn't make him sleepy.*

"Shut up!" I growl as I make it through the fence. I can hear the rest of the family back at the house making a commotion as they head over here. When I reach the horse stalls, I see Jackson. He's looking at me, his eyes dancing in the moonlight, full of tears, and my heart stops.

*No. Morris is not leaving.*

"Ozzy," he croaks, but I don't stop.

"Move!" I yell as I shove past him towards the man in the wheelchair. He's gone. I can see it before I reach out to feel for a pulse I know isn't there. But I refuse to accept it. I can't. I won't.

"Morris!" My voice is a strangled sob as I touch his cool face. "Please," I whisper as tears cloud my vision and my body begins to shake. "Don't leave, please, please, please." This is so fucking unprofessional, but I can't help it. I grew too close. I grew too close, and now—

"Morris!" Dorothy's sob guts us all. I watch Jensen and Carter hold her up as her knees buckle. I move back so she can see her husband. She kisses



his lips softly before sobbing into him, collapsing to the ground and breaking down on his lap.

I lose it.

Wrapping my arms around my abdomen, I turn away from the mourning family as I begin to sob harder. Through my burning tears, I see Jackson's figure sway like he can't keep himself up anymore. I watch as he falls to his knees, and without thinking, I walk to him and wrap myself over his large back. My arms wrap around his neck as I press my face into his shoulder blade. I feel him stiffen, but quickly, his body goes limp as sob after silent sob racks him. There's nothing anyone can say. There is nothing anyone can do except try to comfort one another as best as possible.

They lost a father and a partner, and I'm losing the closest thing I ever had to a family.

Falling backward, I rest my back on the fence and pull Jackson to me as he sobs harder and harder. "I've got you, baby," I manage to get out through my own tears. "I've got you. Always."



I begin the task of cleaning everything while Dorothy sleeps with Theo, who came over shortly after we called the funeral home. Jensen is on the phone with Derek and Indy while Carter plays with Wyatt, who was scared from everyone crying earlier.

"You don't have to do that right now." Jackson's raspy voice pulls me out of my mindless tasks. I shake my head and give him a fake smile.

"I don't mind," I whisper. "Makes me feel useful."

"You don't have to be useful right now." I watch him wince, apparently unhappy with his choice of words. I'm unfazed by them, too exhausted and numb to care. I turn back to the sheets, fold them up, and lay them on the hospital bed. I feel the burning begin again, and I don't know how, but I start crying once more. I must make a noise because I sense Jackson next to me.

"What can I do, baby?" He whispers, and a sob is my only response as I hang my head.

"I'm so sorry." I cry out as I turn to look at him. "H-had I not said to

move him, had I just—”

“Ozzy,” his hands reach out and cup my cheeks, wiping away the falling tears. “Baby, what you did, what you said. It was right. Taking him out there... it was the right thing to do, and I am so thankful I got that moment with him.” He chokes out as he looks away, tears rolling down his face.

“Goddamn it,” he groans. “I’m sorry, I know this isn’t really man—”

“Stop,” I whisper as I stare up at him. “You are allowed to cry. Don’t say that.” I look at his crumpled body and take a shaking breath. “Can I hug you?” I watch his bloodshot eyes snap up.

“Always,” his voice cracks, and I walk to him, slipping my hands around his waist and resting my hand on his chest. I stiffen when his arms wrap around me, and I feel the flight response kicking in. I know it’s just because I’m already amped up from Morris. I’m on edge, but I’m okay.

*Ozzy, Jackson is safe. Breathe. You’re just on edge because of everything. It’s fine.*

I take another breath as I bury my face deep into his hoodie. He smells so good, like wood and leather mixed with his crisp, clean soap. His poor heart is beating so fast I can’t keep up with the beats.

“Don’t let me go,” I whisper into his chest.

“What?” He says softly into my hair. I think I hear him inhaling deeply. Is he enjoying my smell like I am his?

“You asked what you could do,” I murmur and continue my grounding exercises in my head to keep my anxiety down. “Don’t let me go.”

I feel his powerful arms hold me closer before he speaks. “Never Tink, I’m going to lift you.” Giving him a nod, I feel his hands go under my ass, and he lifts me to his waist. I wrap my legs around him as he carries me upstairs and to his bedroom. Once inside, he closes the door with his foot before taking me to his bed and setting me down.

“I need out of these clothes,” he mutters while stripping off everything but his boxers. He walks to his dresser and grabs a pair of pajama bottoms. I take this moment to start removing my clothes as well.

“Can I borrow a shirt?” I ask, and he turns to say something, only to stare at me in shock and nearly fall over.

“Uh...y-yeah shirt...there should be some in the tit-top drawer.” He shakes his head, scolding himself, and it brings a small laugh out of me.

“What? They aren’t old news yet?” I ask while grabbing a long-sleeved shirt. It has the Rowe Ranch logo on the back- a large horseshoe, and on the

front is Jackson's name over the chest.

"Baby," he gives me a light chuckle that sounds so tired. "Nothing about you will be old news to me. Now, there's a sight." He smirks, looking at me in his shirt. I playfully slap his chest before crawling into his bed.

"Come lay with me before I have to go to sleep." Jackson climbs into the bed, and I curl next to him as has become customary since our date. I usually lay here until I can't keep my eyes open anymore and then go to my bed. It's safer this way, for both of us. I'm afraid I'll have a nightmare or something in my sleep and lash out or hurt him, so it's best I sleep alone.

"You could sleep here, you know." He says into my hair as his fingers trail over my arm. This is also customary. He reminds me every night that he doesn't care about the possibility of being hurt and just wants me there.

"Jackson," I sigh while running my fingers over his chest. "I just don't think it's safe." My voice is soft as I press my lips to his chest.

"I don't want to be alone," he whispers, and it breaks my heart. Looking up at the man, I kiss him softly while pressing myself closer to him.

"I will stay as long as I can, okay?" I offer, and he nods, wrapping his arms around me.

"Forever," He says softly. "Stay forever."



"Fetch!" I watch from the window as Wyatt throws the tennis ball with all the might in his tiny body, which gets it about five feet. Rocky is a good sport about it, though, and runs around before diving on the ball to get Wyatt to squeal in delight. It's been nearly a week since Morris passed. The funeral was yesterday, and the entire town showed up to pay their respects. Indy was supposed to come out with Derek, but he told her to stay home for fear she might have a flare-up on the plane ride due to her Multiple Sclerosis. Now that things are quieting down, Derek is leaving tomorrow to head back to California, and Dorothy is hyper-focusing on Wyatt while the guys and Theo run the ranch.

Then there's me. I walk away from the window and up the stairs to Morris' room. His monitors and bed have been returned to the medical supply

company, and Dorothy is waiting for a new bed to arrive to put in here. All that remains is the chair, my chair. Walking over, I sit in the seat like I have a hundred times over these months. I look down at the bee tattoos on my knees that are peeking through my ripped skinny jeans.

“I know,” I groan while leaning back in the chair. “I went and caught feelings for you, you bastard.” I clench my jaw as I press my lips together. “Real fucking cute of you cutting out before my Christmas bonus, fucking ruddde.” I joke dryly as I rub my hands together. “It’s not fair,” I whisper into the emptiness. “I should’ve never come here. I should’ve told Indy no. I knew I couldn’t handle you professionally, and now...” My voice cracks, and I watch tears splatter over my tattooed hands. “Now I’ve lost you, and I’m going to lose this place and everyone here.” I hear a knock and look up to see Jackson in the doorway.

“Come with me.” He doesn’t wait for my response as he walks off. I wipe the tears and follow him down to his room. Walking inside, I shut the door behind us and watch him remove his dirty clothes and boots.

“Jackson?” I ask tentatively as he gets to his undershirt.

“You okay with keeping your room for another few days?” He asks while walking into his bathroom to wash his hands.

“What?” I ask, following him. “My room?”

“Yeah, Jesus, I’m a mess. I’m gonna hop in the shower. Give me five minutes.” I go to speak, but he closes the pocket door to his bathroom, and I can hear the water in the shower turn on. Trying to keep the image of Jackson naked and in the shower out of my mind, I walk over to his loveseat and sit down to wait for him.

*A few days? Is he expecting me to move out?* Panic begins to fill me. Of course, he is. He has a whole ranch to run. He can’t have me on his plate, too. After all, I am no use here now that Morris is gone. I’m a nurse, and I have nothing left here to do.

Jackson is true to his word and re-emerges five minutes later in black sweatpants while running his towel through his hair. He’s shirtless, and I follow a bead of water as it runs over his pec and down his muscular stomach.

“So, are you okay with that?” He tosses his towel in his hamper, walks to his dresser, and grabs his deodorant. Watching him like this feels oddly intimate.

“With what? The timeline? Yeah, I should be able to find a place by next

week.” His eyes find mine, and he raises a brow.

“Ozzy, we have a place for you. I just wanted the appliances to arrive before you moved in there. Did you really think we would kick you out after he passed?” I blink at him, completely confused.

“What?”

“Derek’s old house. We’ve all been working on it for a while now, getting it ready for you so that you would have a home of your own.” *A home of my own?* I feel my lip begin to tremble, and my eyes start to burn.

“Jackson, I... that’s so kind, but I can’t stay. I’m not a ranch person. I don’t know how to do anything here.”

“And?” He crosses his arms over his chest, and I watch his corded forearms, and dammit, I feel the warmth pooling in my lower abdomen and look away.

“And, I’m not anyone’s charity. That house should go to someone in the family. I need to go soon, find another job.”

“You’re my girlfriend. I don’t want you to go.”

“Jackson, a lot of couples live apart.”

“Goddamn it, Ozzy,” he growls, running his hands through his hair. “Just... I lost my dad. Derek is going home. Please, I can’t take this. I’m barely holding it together and... and...” I watch his chest rise and fall as he avoids my gaze. His left hand grips his dresser while his right grabs his chest. “Fuck,” he pants.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, standing and walking over to him. He looks at me, eyes wide.

“I-I think I’m having a heart attack.” He whispers. I walk closer and put my fingers to the pulse point in his neck.

“Where is the pain, and what does it feel like?” I ask as I guide him to his bed to sit.

“Uhhh... here.” He points to the center of his chest. “It feels like someone is stabbing me and... I can’t breathe. Fuck, I’m hot and cold, and—”

“Shhh...” I say softly and grab his hand. “It sounds like a panic attack, not a heart attack.” He looks at me, his forehead wrinkled in concern.

“Are you sure? Because if this is how Jensen feels with his anxiety, I owe him a huge apology.” I give him a small smile before squeezing his hand.

“Yeah, I’m sure. You’re under a lot of stress. Something horrible and traumatic just happened. It’s common. What can I do for you?”

“Stay.” He says, almost frantic. “Stay in this room for now and then in

that house. Don't make me say goodbye to anyone else, please."

I sigh before rubbing his bare shoulder. "You wouldn't be saying—" Seeing the look of panic and desperation on his face, I relent. Nodding my head, I give him a reassuring smile. "Okay," I say softly as I feel him lean into my touch. Relaxing myself, I lean in and pull him to me, allowing his head to rest on my shoulder. We sit like this for a long moment before he raises his head, his eyes staring at my mouth.

"Tink," he breathes softly. "I haven't kissed you in five days, seven hours, and," He looks at the clock on his nightstand, "twenty-eight minutes. If I have to go ten more seconds, this will become a heart attack." God, he is so sweet. I just want to grab him and tell him I'm in love with him, but I can't. Not now, with so much up in the air. My living and job situation on top of us all mourning Morris, now isn't the time for love confessions, no matter how badly my heart yearns to tell him.

"Then you had better kiss me." I'm not sure I finish the sentence before his lips are on mine. God, his lips feel so good, soft yet powerful, and, oh my god, his tongue. I moan as his tongue begs for access to my mouth. Granting it, I gasp as he teases and tastes my tongue before sucking on my bottom lip.

"Jackson," I pant into his mouth, earning a groan.

"I've never loved my name so much as I do when it falls from your lips," he whispers huskily. I straddle his legs while tangling my fingers in his hair.

"God, you're so fucking gorgeous." His voice is low as I feel him gently grip my hips. His lips leave mine and land on my neck, and I breathe slowly as his tongue runs over it. I feel him halt his descent and pull back. I'm about to ask him what's wrong when he moves my shirt collar, and his expression softens. "You're still wearing it," he whispers as his fingers touch the silver chain.

"Yeah, I don't have to take it off anymore," I say, leaning in to kiss him. His lips meet mine, and I feel his frantic need this time. He lifts me up and carries me to the middle of his bed, laying me down before looking me over. He says nothing, but I know what he's asking.

"If I can't handle it, I can say stop?" I manage out, and he nods before falling to his knees in front of me.

"Always, Tink. Just let me worship you." He pulls my pants and underwear off, and instinctively, I go to cover my brand, but he's faster. His lips and tongue skate across the scars before traveling down to my inner thigh. He grips my hips and throws my legs over his shoulders before looking

up at me. Fuck, he looks sinful down there, pupils dilated and a lust-filled smirk on his lips.

“I’m going to lick you,” he murmurs, not breaking eye contact. I nod, watching his mouth make contact with my pussy. It sends a jolt through me, and my body jerks as I feel his tongue run up my slit. “That’s a good girl. Now, here’s how we are going to do this.” He kisses my clit, and I nearly cry as he pulls away and grabs his phone. He taps it a few times before handing it and his earbud to me. “You’re going to listen to this while my mouth is busy eating you out. You will use your words and communicate with me the entire time, understood?”

I think... I think I’ve short-circuited. I stare dumbly at the nearly feral-looking man, all but vibrating between my thighs, and nod. He growls in frustration and softly nips my inner thigh, causing me to moan.

“I said to use your words.” He states slowly. His voice is gentle but still holds this authoritative tone to it that causes a shudder to run through me. I hit the play button and put the bud in my ear.

“*Hey baby,*” Jackson’s way too sexy voice purrs in my ear. “*You say stop, and it’s over, I promise. Now, are you going to let me taste you?*” Oh my god, this is not real life. This man actually made a recording of him dirty talking for me to listen to while he’s going down on me.

I stare down at Jackson, my eyes wide as I watch him stare up at me while he kisses my inner thigh. “Lick me,” I pant out. His blue eyes never leave mine as he moves to my center and runs the flat of his tongue up my center. “H-Oh, my god!” I gasp, my hands gripping the back of his head. He chuckles softly, doing it again.

“Baby, we haven’t even started, and you’re already this tightly wound up?”

“Shut up and do it again,” I pant out, and he does, up and down my slit. This man licks me like a goddamn ice cream cone, all while moaning in satisfaction as if I’m the best thing he’s ever tasted.

“*Baby, I’m telling you right now, I want you to look down at me and see what you’re doing to me. I have been a starving man, and you’ve presented me with a goddamn feast. Relax that pretty ass of yours because I’m going to savor every last bit of you. I’m not coming up for air until I’ve consumed your arousal completely. Now, knowing you, you’re being quiet. If you don’t open that pretty mouth and tell me what you want, we will have a problem.*”

This man, he will be the end of me. I know it. “I need more,” I whine

after another moment. He quirks a brow at me, and I growl in frustration and tug his hair to move him towards my clit. "Please," I beg.

Jackson moves his tongue away and stares up at me. "Ozzy, I told you, you don't beg. You want it. You demand it. Use. Your. Words." I stare up at the ceiling, his intense gaze becoming too much.

"Jackson," I manage through my nerves and embarrassment. "I want you to do like you are saying on the recording. I want you to consume me like you've been left to fucking starve."

"Keep talking like that," his voice is full of such a deep, hungry lust it makes me shiver. "And you'll never walk again."

"Ohh... Jackson!" I moan as he sucks and licks me. I can feel his hands on either side of my center, spreading my lips apart so he can better access me. "Uhhh! Y-yeah!" I whimper, grinding up against his mouth. He growls in approval, and I feel the vibrations inside me.

"*You still with me, baby?*" Jackson's recording asks. "*You are doing so well. God, I just know your pussy is so wet for me. Keep those pretty eyes on me.*" Looking down, I see Jackson nuzzling and tongue fucking me like it's what's going to get him into heaven.

"You taste so goddamn good," he pants between licks. It's then that I feel his finger near my entrance, and my body stiffens. "Do you want me inside you?" He asks, and the air whooshes out of me as I nod several times. He smirks and kisses the inside of my thigh before inserting a finger inside me.

"You with me, Tink?" He asks, and I give him a tight "Uh huh." It feels good, or it would if I could calm the fuck down. *Shut up, brain, and enjoy the hot rancher finger and tongue fucking you! He's done this to you before. Relax.*

"*Grab my head.*" His recording pulls me out of my thoughts. "*And fuck my face, baby. Stay in charge. You got this. If you're still going, well... go me. Now, show me who's boss.*"

"You feel so good," He praises lowly, and I whimper at the feel of him pushing up against my wall as I take the earbud out. "God, you're so wet." I feel him lean in and kiss my clit before teasing it with his tongue while adding another finger. "Good girl, I feel you arching that perfect ass." He smirks before sucking my clit.

"Fuck!" I cry out as I grip his head, pushing him against me; his beard is rough against my flesh, and it causes goosebumps to erupt. "More!" I cry out, grinding against his face with more force as I feel the tension building. I feel



Jackson's massive arms turn to steel around my thighs as he grips me and rolls us over on the bed so I'm straddling his face. He grips my hips, urging me to grind against him, and I do as I'm told, without mercy. Gripping his headboard, I grind against his torturous mouth, and he licks, sucks and bites me. Throwing my head back, I cuss towards the ceiling as he hits the spot, the perfect spot that causes the tightness building inside my body to snap.

"Oh! Oh no! Jackson, I think I'm... Oh god!" I cry out, feeling wave after wave of toe-curling pleasure wash over my body. Jackson doesn't stop or slow. He continues to lap me up until I tell him I can't take anymore.

Once he releases me, I'm a shaking mess, my body so alive right now. Jackson pulls me to him and starts kissing my fingertips, knuckles, and wrist. It makes me want to cry, watching him try different techniques to keep my mind focused while I come back down.

"Do you know," he says while nipping my jaw, and I can hear the grin in his voice. "That when you come, your nose wrinkles."

"I don't remember humiliation being one of the grounding techniques we went over." I deadpan as he moves to look me in the eyes.

"Tink, I want you to hear me when I say this, alright?" His voice is direct and serious, so I forgo the annoyance and look him straight on. "You have nothing to be humiliated over— girl. I swear to god you keep rolling those eyes, and I'll give you a reason to." He warns, and... *fuck, did that just turn me on?*

"I'm serious, Tink. You did amazing. As much as I would love for my cock or tongue to be the magic cure-all for your trauma, it's not. But that's alright because I'll keep trying, and you'll keep trying, alright?"

My bottom lip pouts out as I stare at him. "You're really fucking sweet," I whisper, causing him to chuckle.

"Yeah, I'm a fucking treasure." I snort into his chest.

"I love—this," I stiffen, and Jesus Christ, Ozzy, nice fucking save. Jackson doesn't still or stiffen like I do; instead, he molds against me, kissing the top of my head.

"I love *this* too."

# Jackson

Opening my eyes, I stare up at the ceiling and feel the overwhelming sense of dread wash over me. I need to get up, get dressed, have coffee, continue winterizing the ranch, check on Mama, and ensure my brothers and Theo are all doing alright.

“Fuck,” I manage out, even though I feel like there is this invisible force trying to strangle me.

“You alright?”

“Jesus fucking Christ!” I scream at the female voice coming from my couch. I watch as Ozzy peeks her head around the corner, grinning ear to ear.

“You scream like a girl.” She chuckles, and I roll my eyes.

“Fuck you,” I mutter while flopping back onto the bed. “Just what I needed, a faster heart rate.” I feel the bed sag and look to see her crawling over my mattress. Fuck... she needs to stay back. Her looking like *that*, sleepy and rumped and sexy as all hell, is making my already hard dick ache. She places her hand over my bare chest, above my heart, and her touch is fire and electricity all at once.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I mean it. I was getting dressed, and you had been talking in your sleep, and then I heard you curse. I was legitimately checking.”

If this woman doesn’t get her goddamn hand off me, my cock will explode. No ifs, ands, or buts. My cock will explode into a million pieces. Morning wood is natural. *This* is lethal.

“Tink,” I breathe out softly. I feel her fingers moving ever so slightly through my chest hair. It’s a micro-movement and would be undetectable if I wasn’t so hyper-aware of every fucking sensation right now. “H-baby, I’m

going to need you to leave.” I watch her brows knit together in the very dim room.

“Leave?” she asks softly, and I give her a weak “Uh huh.” Her hand leaving my chest is so painful I nearly call her back.

“I gotta get ready for work,” I add, hoping to get her to stop looking so fucking rejected.

“Oh,” her voice is small, and I hate it. “Right, I should go do... something.” I watch her eye the door, but she doesn’t make a move towards it.

“Ozzy—”

“It’s just,” she interrupts and looks at me. “I think, I mean, should we talk about me sleeping on your couch last night?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, not really excited over my girlfriend’s preference for my couch to my bed, but I try to remain patient with it. “I mean, is there something you want to say about it?” I watch her shake her head from side to side. “Well, then I guess there isn’t—”

“Okay, I lied.” She groans, causing me to rest my head back and sigh.

“I don’t have the energy for you today, girl,” I whine but freeze when I see her face looking down at mine. “Can I help you?”

“I like kissing you,” she admits. “And I like... other things too.”

“Uh huh...” I say slowly before moaning as she straddles my waist. I know she can feel my cock pressing against her ass. She doesn’t pull away, though, and fuck it takes everything in me not to flip her over and fuck that delicious little pussy. She tasted so fucking good last night. I wanted to fucking drown in her juices and suffocate between those thick ass thighs.

“Tink,” I hiss as she grinds against me. “Baby, you’re playing with fire,” I warn and watch her shimmy down my legs, taking my pants and my resolve with her. My cock springs free, and for a second, I think she’s going to panic, but instead, she grabs it in her soft hand. Fuck, she’s so soft.

“Ozzy!” I gasp as her warm, wet tongue licks me from root to tip.

“Hands on the headboard.” She orders, and fuck, she ain’t gotta tell me twice. My hands are wrapped around the rods of the headboard so tightly I’m waiting to hear them crack. I look down as Ozzy licks me again, slower this time, and fucking god! That tongue piercing is pressing on just the right spot.

“Shit.” When Ozzy slips my head into her mouth, I’m done. I feel her holding my hips to the mattress, and I know she’s afraid I’ll thrust up.

“Baby,” I pant as I try not to go cross-eyed. “Baby, I-I won’t move...

fucking god... I won't move, trust me." I moan as her hand strokes my shaft and takes me deeper down her throat. Her other hand fondles my balls, and "H-Holy fuck!" I gasp as her fingers hit a spot behind my balls. It's... fuck do I like this? *I do- a lot.* Gripping the rods tighter, I growl out as she massages the spot before releasing my cock and staring up at me, lips wet and swollen, chest heaving.

"Do you want me to go further?" She asks, and I'm nodding before she finishes her question because—yes. Yes, to anything and everything. Yes, to whatever she wants as long as she doesn't fucking stop. "You wouldn't have any lube, would you?"

"I'm a grown single man. Of course, I have lube." I pant and motion to my nightstand drawer. She reaches over and opens the drawer, grabbing the small bottle.

"No condoms?" She inquires while coating her fingers.

"Don't entertain much," I breathe out, my body vibrating with the need to release. Sensing this, Ozzy smirks before leaning back down, her lubricated fingers finding that spot again as she begins to massage it.

"Oh my fucking god," I cry out. It's more of a whimper, but I'd dare any man to experience this and not crumple.

"I like having control like this," Ozzy chuckles as she shoves my cock all the way down her throat before popping it back out.

"Well, you got all the control." I try to say confidently, but it's mostly just panting. If she doesn't let me come soon, I will lose it.

"Tell me to stop if you're uncomfortable," she says while running her piercing over the sensitive spot on my head as her finger... oh fuck. Her finger finds my ass, and I'm about to jerk away, but I hold still, and when she inserts her lubed finger and presses on a spot in there, I didn't know existed while stroking my shaft and sucking my head. I see stars, and I feel a tightly wound coil snap. Before I can warn her, I'm coming—hard. Ropes of my pleasure shoot from me into her mouth and down her throat as I roar out her name over and over again, all while continuing my death grip on the headboard.

Coming back down, I'm mildly aware of her getting up and going to my bathroom before returning and smiling shyly at me.

"You should get ready for work." She smiles seductively while biting her bottom lip.

"You should get out of here before I call off for the day."



“So,” Adam, one of my younger ranch hands, smirks as he leans on the fence. It’s one of the last warm days of the year, and you would think he would be... I don’t know, working. “You fucking that pretty girl, or am I cool to go in?” I stop my hammer mid-swing and look up at the guy. There’s no way I’m hearing him right. There is *no* chance he is trying to ruin my fantastic mood.

“Come again?” I ask through gritted teeth while trying to keep my composure.

“That tattooed girl living there. The one with the massive pierced tits, you fucking her, or can I dive—” I grip the kid by the throat and bring his scared face to mine.

“Never, and I mean never, look at my girl again.” I snarl before shoving him backward, causing him to fall on his ass.

“J-Jackson, I’m sorry! I didn’t know she was with you. I just wanted to ask!”

“Find a better way to ask.” I snap, picking my hammer up. “And I catch you talking about her or her tits again, I’ll fucking ruin you.”

“Scaring the help?” Theo asks as she walks up to us. Rolling my eyes, I grumble under my breath before returning to fixing the broken posts.

“I was just... inquiring about Ozzy,” Adam says softly, and Theo snorts.

“Is that what you and the other hands are calling it?” She smirks, and I look up to see Adam’s young, tan face instantly go pale. “Cause I’m pretty sure I heard y’all placing bets this morning on who could... What did you call it, Adam? Make the ol’ cow moo first?”

“You’re dead,” I snap. Adam stumbles and runs off, and Theo blocks me, grinning ear to ear.

“Morning.” She smirks, and I flip her off.

“He and the rest of those fucks are fired.” She scoffs while leaning against the post.

“Now, now, if you do that, I might actually have to work.”

“What a tragedy that would be.” I deadpan.

“Why don’t you tell me what’s up with your grumpy ass. You would

think someone fucking a dime like Ozzy would put you in a better mood.” I don’t look at her as I stand and start walking to check the next post. “Wait, are you two not knockin’ boots?”

I glare at the woman, trying to give her my most intimidating look. She’s immune though. Not much can faze Theo, especially not me.

“I *was* in a great mood until that halfwit and your ass showed up and ruined i—” I’m interrupted by Ozzy in... *god dammit*.

A robe and flip flops. I watch her walking towards the pen where the pigs are with their feed container.

“Good morning,” she says, half annoyed as she opens the gate and steps in as one of the pigs goes between her legs. “Uh Uh! Trip me again, and your ass is bacon!” She scolds while throwing the food in the trough before walking out.

“Hey, pretty thing!” Theo calls out to get her attention. “Wanna give us a show?” I slug Theo in the arm for her comment but snap my head back as Ozzy takes off the robe, revealing her bikini top and too fucking short denim shorts.

I drop my hammer, only mildly aware of it hitting my boot, before stalking over to the grinning woman who is prancing towards the barn her chicks are in.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” I mutter as I catch up to her. “I’m three seconds from throwing you over my shoulder, taking you into the house, and putting you in a potato sack.

She smirks up at me. “Bet I could still get your dick hard in a sack.” This is true, but neither here nor there.

“Keep playing,” I warn her playfully. Though that top is... fuck, that top is doing the most incredible job showing off her perfect tits, and that dark red...

“Why don’t you carry me back to that house and fuck me?” I’m mid-swallow, and I instantly cough and begin choking at her seductive invitation.

“W-what?” I sputter, trying to regain my composure.

“Take me to that house you’ve been working on, and fuck me.”

Without wasting time, I heave her over my shoulder. She moans roughly, and I head towards my truck before sliding her in and getting in myself. She’s on me before I can get the truck on, straddling my lap and untying her top.

“Mother of fucking Christ, woman,” I growl, looking at her pierced nipples. They are begging for me to touch them, to taste them. *Later, ladies, I*

*promise.* “I will drive with you on me if you don’t sit down.” Her mischievous grin widens.

“I would rather you drive with you in me.” With her still in my lap, I start the truck and drive to the small cottage behind the main house.

“So, how long have you been working on this place?” She asks, looking around.

“Tink,” I say flatly. “Baby, you are topless in front of me. Do you honestly think I have enough blood flowing up here to talk to you about this house?” I ask while gesturing to my head. She gives me a light chuckle, and I lean down to kiss her softly. “Are you sure you want this?” I murmur in her ear while running my thumb along her collarbone.

“Yes,” she says softly, leaning her head back. “I won’t lie to you. I’m nervous to do it again after the nightmares last time, but I want you, and I know you’ll keep me safe.” She kisses me, and I feel her hand run over the front of my pants.

“Fucking hell,” I groan while kissing her harder. “Tell me what to do,” I say almost frantically, pulling off my clothes as she wiggles out of those tight shorts. “Do you want on top? For me to be tied? Whatever it is, you need to feel safe. Just tell me.” She looks around before walking over to the kitchen counter and hopping up onto it.

“Fuck me here,” she says, spreading her legs to reveal her pussy to me. It occurs to me that this might be a dream. Maybe I fell and hit my head on a fence post, and now I’m in a coma. *Eh, fuck it. I’m alright with it.*

“Can you do it hard?” She asks tentatively, and fuck, that’s a loaded question. I take a breath before nodding.

“Promise me you’ll say something?” She kisses my lips and nods as I situate myself between her, making sure I’m in position before thrusting myself inside her. She lets out a cry that breaks me on a soul level as she clings to me as if I’m her life raft. She’s so tight, and I can feel the scars inside her. I can’t imagine what it must’ve been like, mentally or physically.

“Shhhh...” I run my thumb over her lips before dipping into her sweet mouth. Her eyes soften, and I feel her tongue play with the tip of my finger. “Good girl, now here’s what we’re going to do.” I take my thumb from her mouth and move down to circle her clit. Fuck, she’s soaked. “I’m giving you three pumps, baby. You tell me yes or no, got it.”

“Got it,” she whimpers, and I grab her gently by the back of the head as I drive into her. “Jackson!” She screams my name as I drive into her a second

and then a third time. I stay as deep inside her as possible and move my mouth to her ear.

“Am I hurting you?” I whisper as she whimpers against my shoulder.

“No,” she croaks, her fingers getting lost in my hair. “I’m not in pain... physically, anyway.” Her voice breaks on the last word, and I feel protectiveness surge through me. I didn’t know her back then, and I couldn’t protect her, and while I can’t keep the memories of those demons from her now either, I can help fight them with her.

“I’m going to hug you,” I say softly as I wrap my arms around her waist. Her legs go around my waist as I lift her and carry her up the stairs and into what *will* be her bedroom. It has to be, because I won’t let her go after this here. And if she tries, if she refuses to stay on this ranch, then... I’ll leave with her. But I’m not living my life without this perfect woman in it. Never. She’s it for me, and I will show her in every way I can.

I situate myself on top of her and reinsert my cock and watch as her teary eyes roll back. “You’re so strong,” I murmur, kissing her lips. “But you don’t have to be strong alone, Tink. Let me help you. Trust me,” I give a small, slow thrust, and she whines before looking at me.

“I can’t,” she breathes through her tears. “I can’t let you into that part. I can’t let you... I can’t give you that part of me.”

I push myself inside her to the hilt before cupping her cheek. This is not the fucking I had envisioned for us. This isn’t even sex. We are two souls trying to connect. It’s so raw and intimate... It’s making me feel things that run far deeper for this woman than I thought possible.

“Tell me why,” I grunt out, thrusting into her again.

“Fuck,” she moans as her tears continue to fall. “Because... if I give you that part, and you leave...” She trails off and stares at me in a way that halts my movements. Her eyes are suddenly clear. Her tears paused while she speaks. Her face is so vulnerable. I nod, lean down, kissing her again, trailing over her neck, and licking the chain on the necklace I bought her.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I promise, thrusting again. “Baby, you don’t have to give me that part yet, but I’m not leaving you.”

“Jackson,” she whispers my name on a broken whimper, and I look at her, really look at her. Fuck, does she have feelings for me too? As if she could see the question on my face, she nods, more tears rolling free.

“It’s okay.” I kiss her wobbling lip and groan into her mouth as I feel her meet my next slow thrust. “I know me too, baby,” I whisper as she arches her



back.

“More,” she moans as her movements quicken. I take the hint, picking up the speed and adding more force behind each thrust.

“You like that, baby?” I ask, reaching between our slapping flesh and playing with her clit.

“Fuck!” she cries out at my movements. “Yes, fuck... Jackson.” My name in her sweet mouth, in that voice, it’s almost too much. I look down into her eyes, and god, if this woman doesn’t have a direct link to my heart. The pleasure on her face fills me with so much pride. *I am the one giving this goddess pleasure. I am the one kissing those dark thoughts away, and... I am the one in love with her.*

“Fuck,” I growl, feeling her walls contracting. “You about to come for me, Tink?” She nods frantically, and I watch in awe as her back arches while she screams out my name. Her toes curl, and I watch her nose wrinkle before looking at her bouncing tits. Once she’s coming down, I roll her on top of me and sit up, nuzzling her nipple before sucking on it. She gasps as she continues to bounce on my still rock-hard cock. I feel the sheen of sweat coating her skin, and fuck. I want to lick it off of her.

“Talk to me, baby,” I mutter against her breasts. “Use your words. Tell me what you like, what you want.”

“I liked, oh god...” she groans as I flick her nipple piercing with my tongue. “Harder...” I look up at her, her hardened bud between my lips. Popping her nipple out, I smirk at her.

“Tink, you secretly like it rough?” I tease, and her already-flushed cheeks deepen.

“I mean... god, it’s going to sound so fucked up,” she whispers, her grinding halting and fuck no. “It sounds terrible, but I like it rough with you. I’m fucked up, I’m sorry.” She is off me before I can stop her, and I might fucking cry. Standing, I walk over to her and grab her hand.

“Hey,” I say softly, trying to ignore my cock and balls that are still demanding a release. “That’s not fucked up. Especially if you aren’t the only one that likes it.” Her head snaps up, and I watch her eyes dart back and forth.

“Really?”

“Yes, really! You get on your hands and knees on the bed, and I’ll drive into you so far you’ll feel me in your throat! I just... I want you to feel safe with me, baby. That matters more than anything.” Walking over to me, Ozzy

stands on her toes and kisses me while tugging on my cock.

“Fuck,” I whimper as she strokes me again. She guides me to the mattress and... “Jesus fuck Ozzy.” The breath leaves me as I watch my sexy girl get on all fours and put that perfect ass in the air. She has two large roses on either ass cheek, and when I look up at her back, I want to cry, or commit murder, as I see the tattoos covering her scars. I notice a red cluster on her lower left side.

“Poppies?” I ask, and she chuckles.

“Imagine my surprise when you named that flower and gave me my necklace. Now, are you just going to leave me here or what?” I’m taking that as my green light, and I drive myself into her. Ozzy lets out a shuddering moan as she lowers her upper half. “Harder,” she says, and I deliver again and again and again. I grip her hips and drive as deep as possible, her cries for more fueling me to deliver. I feel my balls tighten, and my thrusts become erratic, and just as her tight pussy clamps around my cock to unleash her orgasm, I release myself inside her, screaming her name with every powerful thrust.

# Ozzy

“Are you excited?” Niamh squeals as I look through my drawers for an outfit. My drawers, in my room in my house. My house that I’ve lived in for three days and loved almost every second of it. The only times I don’t is when Jackson leaves at night to go to his bed because I won’t ask him to stay over.

“I would be if I knew where we were going so I could dress properly.” I sigh, flopping onto my bed. Jackson has a date planned for us, and even though I told him I would like to know where we are going so I can dress accordingly, he told me the last time I didn’t know and the outfit was “quite literally fuckable”, I didn’t have the heart to tell him Theo chose that outfit, had I, he would’ve needed to wash that memory from his brain. “This is probably the first time I wish I had something... pretty.” My clothes are many things - sexy, tattered, gothic/rocker, but ‘pretty’ is not one of them.

“Want to go to the boutique on Main? They always have cute clothes.” I lean up on my elbows and look at the girl.

“Only if you’ll go too.” Niamh beams before saying she wants to say bye to Jensen before we go. Sighing, I grab my phone, open the camera app, and take a quick selfie before sending it to Jackson.

Me: Due to you being secretive, you are forcing me to go shopping for this date. I should be asking you for your credit card.

Jackson: Jesus Christ, how is it possible you are THIS fucking hot just as a selfie?

Jackson: Also, I’m by the horses. Come get my card.

Jackson: Carter just saw your picture and called the selfie' spank bank' material. How badly do I need to beat him?

I can't help but laugh out loud at his comment.

Me: I mean, he's saying it's jerk-off material... so I don't know.

Jackson: brb, I have to commit a murder.

Me: Before you go! What am I supposed to wear?!

Jackson: Layers

Me: Layers?

Jackson: Yeah, we'll be outside, so wear layers so you can stay comfortable.

It's November, where is he taking me that involves needing layers?

Jackson: No woods. Promise.



“I’m still not sure why they have to be such bitches in this town, you know?” Niamh sighs as we sit at her house while she touches up the color in my hair, something I desperately need. Niamh is a hair stylist by day and a bartender by night, and honestly, I don’t know why she is in this town. She’s such a talented stylist.

“It’s alright,” I shrug. “I’m used to it.” I’ve been telling her that the actions of the women in this town aren’t her fault, but she still feels terrible. Especially after the cashier refused to take my credit card, stating, “I look like the type to have declined cards.” It’s alright though. I found this really pretty red maxi skirt with white and blue floral print and a white oversized cable-

knit sweater. I paired the outfit with a pair of black booties that Niamh let me borrow.

“Still,” she grumbles, taking me to her kitchen sink to rinse me out. “They’re just mad because you nabbed yourself a Rowe. Those men are impossible to catch, and the fact that it took someone from the outside upsets them. Stupid cows.” I laugh as we walk back to the kitchen chair so she can start styling my hair.

“They seem to like you, and you have Jensen.” Niamh nearly drops her hair dryer.

“Oh! I don’t have him!” I watch her entire face go red.

“Ohhh, still secretive?” Niamh shakes her head while she starts drying my hair.

“No, Jensen isn’t interested in me. I’m just a silly girl with a crush. I’m supposed to be getting set up next week with someone Leon knows. I think he’s like the son of a bar owner or something. Apparently ain’t hard to look at and has money so,” she shrugs, but I can see the disappointment on her face. I feel bad for both her and Jensen. Jensen is so scared. I’m not sure he will ever be able to tell her he likes her, and he comes off so standoffish. I’m sure that can seem like a rejection to Niamh. But she has no idea how much he thinks about her, how often I’ve seen him checking her social media pages, or how he takes Jackson’s truck to drive by the bar and see if she’s there.

I look down at my phone and see I have a message. It’s a photo. Once I see Niamh turn away, I open it to see a shirtless picture of Jackson in his mirror with his jeans open, showing his V and my fucking god....

Jackson: Spank bank?

Me: My god, I’m making this a poster, hanging it on my wall, and licking it every night before I go to sleep.

Jackson: OR hear me out. You could lick the real thing.

“Oh, you dirty little,” Niamh snickers, and I turn red as I cover my phone.

“Okay, okay. I know, I’m a pervert.”



“Ozzy!” Niamh calls from the living room. “Spank Bank Daddy is walking up!” I snort at the nickname while fluffing out my loose curls.

Staring at myself in the mirror, it’s almost shocking. I feel comfortable. It’s not the weird feeling I got on the last date. I just feel pretty. If not for the piercings, I would look normal. Just a young woman with funky hair. Not a scarred human who is completely covered in tattoos to hide the past. My eyes shudder, and I look away from the mirror before heading down the hall.

“You look hot as fuck!” Niamh calls to my retreating figure.

“Love you!” I yell back as I walk out the door, just as Jackson approaches my door. Woah. He’s... wow. Clean cowboy boots, dark wash jeans, and a black button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to show his delicious forearms.

“Hey,” I smile softly as I walk up to him. He’s just staring, mouth hanging open. “You look really nice, Jackson,” I say, snapping him out of his trance.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he breathes out. “Tink... my god.” I give him a shy smile before doing a spin to provide him with the full look.

“You like it? Now I look almost normal.” I joke as I walk closer to him. “Minus the hair and piercings.” I stick my tongue out, showing off my tongue ring to further prove my point. He frowns at me, shaking his head.

“You look breathtaking, but don’t think for one second I prefer the conservative you. Give me all those piercings and tattoos,” he growls out a sigh before pulling me to him and kissing me softly.

“You two are disgusting!” Niamh calls from the porch. I chuckle before walking to the passenger side of the truck. “I expect her home at a proper hour!” She says to Jackson in a mock parental tone. He gives her a small salute before sliding into his truck, and I watch Niamh head off to her car to head home.

“So,” I ask, trying to tamp down my excitement. “Where are we going?”

“Holiday festival.” He says simply, and I raise my brow.

“Holiday... festival? Like... what?” He chuckles lightly.

“Come November until the end of Christmas, the town decorates the main

street for the holidays. Shops stay open later, Christmas lights, music, apple cider?" I watch while he parks the truck, and he looks at me. "You hate this idea?" His face falls. "I'm sorry, there just ain't much here, and I didn't want to take you to the bar and—"

"N-No! It's so sweet." I say softly while squeezing his thigh. "Sorry, I just don't think the women here like me."

"So? When have you cared whether people like you?" He has a point. Why do I care? I guess because I like him, and this is his home. I could move anywhere. But Jackson, he's firmly planted here. There is no uprooting him, so it's important to me that the people in his life accept me.

"Hey," his hand grips mine, and I look at him. His blue eyes look over my face before he chuckles, almost nervously. "God, you're so pretty. It's almost too hard to look at you." Oh wow, that was a smooth one. Leaning in, I kiss him, enjoying the small moan escaping his throat. "Tink," he whispers against my mouth. "If you want to do this date, we gotta stop." I chuckle against his lips before nodding and sliding out of the car.



"Thank you," I say to the glaring older woman as she all but throws my hot apple cider into my hands. She's all smiles once Jackson turns around, though.

"Jackson Rowe, my lord, look at you." She gushes while handing him his drink and bag of food. "You know my Joanna is single now." She gives him a wink. "I could give her your number." Okay... so I'm invisible? Jackson chuckles politely before snaking an arm around my waist.

"I appreciate it, Ms. Reddner, but I think I'm doing alright in that department." He leans in and kisses my cheek, making the old woman scowl at me before we head out to the sidewalk. The sun has set, leaving the sky dark, but as promised, the entire street is covered in Christmas lights and decorations. People in town square play music, and little shops are open later, selling candles, jewelry, baked goods, and more.

"Here," Jackson holds up a donut. "Try it." I hold his wrist as I lean in and bite the pastry.

“Oh wow,” I moan, as the holidays literally have an orgasm on my tongue. “Okay, she can hate me. I forgive her.”

“Apple spice with maple frosting,” He smirks, taking a bite. “And she doesn’t hate you. If anything, she hates her daughter.”

I steal another bite as we walk towards the square. “Why is that?” I ask while sitting on the bench and sighing. We’ve been walking around for over an hour, and Niamh’s shoes are starting to rub me raw.

“Because we were supposed to get engaged.” He says simply, and I choke on my apple cider.

“W-hat?” I sputter, staring at him in shock. “Are you... what?”

He waves his hand. “We were high school sweethearts, and I use that term very, very loosely. Anyway, she went to the city to go to college and cheated on me within the first two weeks. She said she needed to travel and experience life before she settled on a rancher in a small town. So I told her to get all the experience she wanted because I wasn’t waiting for her.”

“Wow,” I breathe out, looking around at the lit trees. “What a cunt.” Jackson barks out a laugh and shakes his head.

“It’s alright. It was... fuck... two decades ago. Damn...” He trails off before looking back at me. “You know, I just realized I have no idea how old you are.” I give him a small shrug.

“You never asked. Don’t worry, I’m legal.”

“Ha,” he says dryly. “No, seriously, how old are you?”

“How old do I look?” I ask, and he lets out a surprised laugh.

“Oh no, I know better than to play that game, Tink.” I laugh lightly and shrug.

“I’m thirty-two. My birthday was back in October.” He looks at me in confusion.

“You had your birthday and didn’t say anything to any of us so that we could do something for it?” I wrinkle my nose and shake my head.

“It was movie night with Morris. I was doing what I wanted to do. He made me watch *The Shining*. Good movie, a little creepy, but I—”

“Ozzy,” he interrupts my rambling while turning to look at me better. “You have no idea how much you meant to him. He’s never opened up like that to anyone.” I shift uncomfortably, and I stare up at the black sky.

“If we keep going,” I manage in a whisper. “I’m going to start sobbing.” He gives me a soft chuckle before nodding.

“Fair enough... So is this how you looked before the tattoos?”



“Oh god, no,” I laugh while reaching into my purse and pulling out my phone. “Now, if I show you these and you laugh, we don’t get to be friends anymore.”

“I would never laugh,” Even as he says it, I can hear the laugh wanting to come out.

“Hmmm... not convincing, but okay. So this is my senior year.” I say, handing him my phone.

“Oh, my god!” He laughs, shaking his head. The picture is of an eighteen-year-old me: big, round glasses, braces, frizzy hair and unkempt eyebrows. I had a massive smile on my face while holding a trophy for a chess tournament I won. “You were so adorable! Look how excited you are!” I look at the picture fondly.

“I was excited,” I say while taking the phone back. “I beat my crush, Simon Montgomery, in the finals.”

“Ohhh... bet he loved that,” I shrug while scrolling through my photos.

“He ended up fucking my mom. I think they have a kid or something. I don’t really know. Oh, here.” I look up at the shocked look on his face and wave him off. “He was of age, and trust me, that’s not even in the top ten worst things my mom did. Anyway, this was me about a month before... well, you know.” I hand him the phone and watch him as he stares at the photo. The woman staring back is basically a stranger now. Shoulder-length black hair, glasses, a soft face, clear eyes, and a massive smile. I miss her so much. Back then, my trauma was dealing with my lack of a mother.

“I had a mullet,” Jackson says, breaking the silence. “And not like a luscious badass mullet either. It was wispy, strawberry blonde, and I had these straight across bangs and shaved sides—hey now! I didn’t laugh this hard at you!” He smiles, and I’m cackling at the mental image of a young Jackson with a mullet.

“Wait, is that why your hair is long?” Jackson laughs lightly.

“You know what, Tink, I have long hair because my hair is gorgeous.”

“Okay, fair enough. You do have gorgeous hair.” The night continues with mindless conversations and easy questions. I learned that Jackson taught his brother Jensen sign language when they were younger so Jensen could talk to him, even when it was too overwhelming to speak vocally. He doesn’t eat fish, and just about every night at two in the morning, he wakes up and wants a snack, so he keeps a snack drawer in his room.

I told him that I was a trauma nurse before my accident, and since I had

been so afraid of people that, I worked part-time as a virtual nurse before getting hired on at the ranch. When I grew up, all I knew was that I wanted a puppy and that I've lived in busy cities my whole life, but I made sure to live in the loudest parts after my accident because the noise helped with the flashbacks.

"Do you miss the city?" He asks as we head back to the truck, main street having closed down over an hour ago.

"God no," I laugh. "It was so busy, but I was completely alone. At least here I have the ranch and you." I nudge him slightly as he opens my door.

"Do you see yourself leaving here?" I look up at him. His nose and cheeks are pink, and I give him a smile.

"Not if someone gives me a reason to stay."



"You know," Theo starts, though her eyes are laser-focused on the pretty brunette on the dance floor. It's ladies' night at The Spur, which means Theo is picking up, and somehow, I got roped into being her "wingman." I would much rather be sitting on the couch with Jackson, trying to continue to work up the nerve to get him to spend the night in my bed, but alas, here I am, watching the ladies quite literally throw themselves on Theo.

"Dr. Denise is still needing a nurse. The one Pops told you about. I went there yesterday, and she asked what you were doing now." I take a sip of my bottled water. I do remember him mentioning her briefly, but I brushed it off, not wanting to think about another position because that would've meant accepting Morris' passing.

"Who is she again?" I ask as Niamh walks over and sets a soft pretzel basket down in front of us. I notice she has a face mask on today, covering her from her nose down. It looks like it's overheating her. Her face is flushed, and a sheen of sweat coats her forehead.

"She is our lady doctor." Theo continues, unbothered by Niamh's appearance. "Handles all our exams, prenatal, and does home births if the ladies can't get to the hospital in the city. She's very nice. Her old nurse retired last month, and we don't get many medical professionals in this town,

so I'm sure you'll be getting job offers from her and the town's primary doctor, Dr. Hill. If you're looking to stay around." I knew of Dr. George Hill. I talked to him multiple times over the months to get refills for Morris' prescriptions.

"Yeah, I do recall Morris mentioning that. I guess I could give her a call tomorrow." I say softly, and Theo grins.

"Well, alright, we might just be able to keep you around." I laugh lightly.

"I would like to stay here, it's quiet." However, the quiet isn't the real reason I want to stay. My eyes flicker to the opening front door, and I watch my real reason walking through the door with Jensen by his side. Theo glances up and rolls her eyes.

"Niamh, lover boy is here," I watch the look of horror shine in Niamh's eyes as she starts brushing back her hair and taking off her apron to reveal her light blue flannel shirt.

"Shit," she whispers. "He never comes in on ladies' night."

Theo snorts. "Looks like Jackson is dragging him along." I smile shyly as our eyes lock, and goddamn this man. His rugged looks and piercing eyes. The eyes that bore into my fucking soul when we have sex. I never thought I would want sex again, but he is kind and patient and constantly communicates with me. I didn't know sex could be like that. It's otherworldly. The orgasms he gives are otherworldly. I wonder if I should thank him for the fantastic sex... but like, how? Do they make a thank you card for that?

"Hi Jensen!" Niamh beams brightly. I watch Jensen look away and cough into his hand.

"Is our table available?" The poor girl visibly deflates, and I have the urge to smack him upside his head.

"Jensen," Theo shoves the man with her boot. "Don't be an asshole, Niamh said hi."

"Oh," Niamh shakes her head and looks away, "No, it's fine, um... It's not right now, sorry." There is an awkward moment of silence before she takes a step back. "Well, I better be off. I need to actually do my job." Niamh jokes and walks off, leaving me to glare at the man.

"Wowww..." I mutter. "A real panty dropper right here." I muse, causing Theo to choke on her beer as she tries not to spray it everywhere.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jensen huffs, staring at where Niamh walked off.

“It means,” Theo drawls, spinning to look at her brother. “You could be tapping her ass if you weren’t such an idiot.” Jensen’s face blanches before looking away.

“I have no desire to *tap her ass*,” he whispers, his face going from ghost white to red. “She is my friend, and that’s all.”

“Uh huh, well that’s a good thing because I think someone else might be moving in on her ass” Theo snorts at Jensen’s almost feral expression, “Alright, Romeo, come on. I need someone less attractive than me so I look better by comparison. Ozzy has been getting all the numbers tonight.” I laugh as Theo finishes her beer and drags a grumbling Jensen away.

I stare shyly at Jackson, who raises a brow. “You look awfully familiar,” he teases, and I roll my eyes while he sits on the stool beside mine. “No, no, I swear, I’m sure I’ve seen you somewhere before...” He taps his chin before snapping his fingers. “That’s right! You’re an actress!”

I scoff and give him a quizzical look, “Alright, I’ll bite. No, I’m not an actress.” I say, unable to fight the smile pulling at my lips.

“Really?” His voice is low and smooth, and he has that cocky smirk front and center. “Because you’ve been starring in my dreams every night.”

“Oh my god,” I groan between laughs. “Please tell me that’s never worked before.”

He leans in closer, his lips hovering a whisper away from mine. “I don’t know. Ask me again tomorrow.” I bite my bottom lip and watch his eyes flick to them. “Dance with me,” he says, and I pull back.

“W-what?” I laugh, looking at the floor.

“I said, dance with me. A pretty girl like you shouldn’t be sitting at the bar all night.”

“What makes you think I haven’t been out there? Theo told you I’ve been very popular.” I watch his lip curl just the slightest bit before he covers it up.

“Careful, Tink,” he warns, extending his hand. I take it as he leads me to the dance floor.

“Careful of what?” I ask as a slow song starts, and I wrap my arms around his neck.

“I’m trying to be a good man, but if you go around poking me, I will show you a different side.” His hand rests on the small of my back, and I love the heat it’s causing. I give him a playful smirk.

“Oh? And what side is that?” Jackson leans in, his hot breath on my ear causes goosebumps.

“The side that will rip the eyes out of any mother fucker stupid enough to look at you.” He kisses my ear before pulling back.

“You have a jealous side?” I say, somewhat stunned. Jackson just never came off as that type. Sure, he threatened that guy the last time we were here, but that was because he was grabbing me.

“With you?” His hand reaches up and cups my face, “Baby, I told you, I will burn this world down for you. I will turn into the worst kind of man to keep you protected. And I have no problem beating the shit out of anyone who tries to take you from me.” I stare up into his eyes, so serious. Part of me feels like this would’ve given me pause months ago, but now, I know him. I know Jackson is a good man. Leaning up, I capture his bottom lip between my teeth and run my tongue over it, earning a groan from him.

“Ozzy, you drive me fucking mad.”

“The feeling is mutual.” I smile softly. “Can I ask you for something?” I say tentatively.

“Baby, I’ve told you, you don’t have to ask. Tell me what you want, and I’ll give it.” He says while inhaling my neck while we continue the slow dance.

“Stay with me tonight,” I force out, even though I’m terrified. “Stay in my bed.” Jackson pulls back and scans every part of my face, something I’ve noticed he does to make sure I’m comfortable with what I’m saying.

He must be satisfied with whatever he sees, because he kisses my forehead. “Come on, then.”

“W-what?” I laugh as he leads me off the dance floor. “Now? It’s like nine o’clock!”

“Uh huh, yep, gotta go, wayyyy past your bedtime.” I squeal as he throws me over his shoulder, causing the bar to let out whistles and cheers before making his way to the truck.



“Are you really sure?” Jackson asks for the millionth time as I sit on my bed.

“Jackson, if you don’t get on this fucking bed, I’m going to kick you out,” I warn while watching him remove his jeans and shirt. He crawls into the

bed, and I watch as he lays completely straight. *Aww... he's nervous.* Chuckling softly to myself, I slide over to him.

“Can I touch you?” I ask softly, and he gives me a slight smirk.

“Always,” I grin as I kiss his chest while my hand slides down his stomach to his waistband. I hear his sharp intake of air and smirk as he lets out the sexiest noise when my hand grips his shaft. “Mmm... fuck baby,” he pants, and I make my way down until I’m at eye level with his rapidly hardening dick. I lick him from root to tip, relishing in the hiss he lets out. “Fucking god, Ozzy... baby you... You don’t have something for me to hold on to.”

Looking up from swirling my tongue around his head, I see what he is talking about. I don’t have a headboard yet.

“If you grab my belt—”

“Fuck my mouth,” I interrupt, shocking us both. He blinks several times as he tries to compute what I just said.

“Ozzy,”

“You told me if I want it, I just have to say it.” I move off him and fall to my knees on my floor. “I want you to hold my head and fuck my mouth like you do my pussy.” He stands, looking down at me in apprehension.

“How are you going to say stop? You have to give me a way of knowing it’s too much, or I will have to say no, baby.” I look around before reaching onto the nightstand and grabbing his phone.

“I’ll signal with this,” I say, waving the phone. He still looks nervous but nods.

“Alright, I’m going to grip your head,” I close my eyes at the feeling as his fingers hold my skull. “Open that mouth, sweet girl.” He breathes, and I obey, opening wide while looking up at him. His jaw is slack as he watches his cock disappear into my mouth. He hits the back of my throat, causing me to gag, and is about to pull out when I grip his hips and force him in further. My eyes fill with tears that roll down my cheeks as I try to adjust. After a moment, I moan, letting him know I’m okay.

“Goddamn,” he groans, and I feel his grip tighten as he pulls back and thrusts back in. My one hand grips his hip while the other massages his balls, causing him to throw his head back, his abs tight and his chest heaving. “You feel so good, Ozzy. You’re doing so well. You okay, baby?” He pants out, and it overfills my heart that he continues to check in with me. I give him a small nod and a moan as I hollow my cheeks, sucking on him as he

continues.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.” He runs a thumb over my tear-stained cheek. “Fuck, that’s... right there, baby. I’m coming, get off now, or it’s going down your throat.” I don’t get off. I put him in fully as I feel his release coat my throat. “Ozzy!” He grinds out my name on a breathy cry as his hips thrust a couple more times. I lick and suck him clean before he helps me stand.

“Ozzy,” his voice is soft and stunned. I smile and kiss his palm.

“You looked tense. Maybe now you will relax and cuddle me.” I go to the bathroom to clean up, and upon returning, I find Jackson back in my bed. This time, I curl up against him, and he wraps himself around me. I wait to feel claustrophobic, but it doesn’t come this time. This time, I close my sleepy eyes and fall into a deep sleep.

# Jackson

“Fuck, I’m freezing.” I shiver as I walk into the warm house, only to have Mama whack me on my arm.

“Son, how many times am I gonna have to scold you for cursing in front of your nephew?” I give her a sheepish grin before kissing her cheek.

“Sorry, Mama,” I say, stomping the snow off my boots. “This cold front moved in quicker this year,” I mutter, removing my coat.

“Did everything get done?” She asks while sitting on the couch to continue coloring with Wyatt.

“Yeah, we are good for the winter. I’m gonna head upstairs, try to thaw out in the shower, and then grab Ozzy since it’s still snowing out.”

“You don’t think she can drive in the snow?” I hear Mama call as I head up the stairs and huff out a laugh.

She would try just to prove a point, but I would rather not deal with that headache tonight. The last three weeks have been a whirlwind, to say the least. We’ve been in crunch time, getting the ranch and animals ready for the winter, which has been made a little more complicated because Jensen has been in an angry depression for two weeks. It’s something I didn’t know was a thing until I witnessed it. Niamh has a boyfriend, a nice boyfriend who treats her well, and Jensen is beside himself and, therefore, utterly useless on the ranch. Ozzy got herself a job as a nurse at the women’s clinic in town. She seems to enjoy it, though it’s only been about a week. It took time to get paperwork and whatnot done, but she looks happy and seems to be getting out of her shell some. She goes to ladies’ night at The Spur, and I stay home because I want to give her her time. She helps Mama around with her chores, and she has her own little flock of chickens.



Things between Ozzy and I have been great. Her therapy sessions have been bumped up to twice a week, one that we do together so I can make sure I'm continuously helping her and not doing something that could hurt her. It's a little uncomfortable. I've had to listen to things about her past, and I'll admit, there have been times when I wept once I got alone after hearing her stories. She's so brave and strong, but hearing what has been done to her and knowing I'll never fully be able to remove that pain from her is a helpless feeling.



Tapping my fingers on the steering wheel, I look at my clock. She should've been off fifteen minutes ago. I don't want to go in or call because she didn't know I would be coming, and she could be talking to the doctor, or they might have a patient in there. But seeing as another storm is coming, I need to go in and let her know that we gotta get home.

I get out of my truck just in time for the back door of the doctor's office to fly open, slamming against the building. I watch as James Kenton, the local asshole deadbeat, pushes his wife, Leah, out of the building. She stumbles down the steps but doesn't fall into the snow. I storm over and am about to shout at him for putting his hands on Leah that way when my blood runs cold. James is still in the doorway, shouting at Ozzy, and when he grabs the neck of her scrubs, I'm on him.

I grab the heavysset man and heave him down the steps. He lands on his back in the snow, and I hop down the steps and grab him by the collar of his hoodie. "I knew you were dumb, Kenton, but this is a level I didn't see coming. You shove your girl, then yell and put your hands on mine? Boy, you got a death wish because I will fucking grant it." I cock my fist back and deliver a blow across his face.

"Enough!" Denise's strong voice shouts. "Rowe, take Ozzy home. Ozzy, you're off tomorrow. Leah, come inside with me and wait for the cops." I look up to see Ozzy crouched down with her arms covering her head. Fuck.

Walking up the steps, I gently place my hand on her back.

"Don't touch me!" She shouts through a cry, and it breaks me. In one

second, Kenton took everything from me, and now all I want to do is murder him. I manage to guide my shaking girl down the steps, stepping on Kenton's hand in the process.

I go to open the door for her, but watch as she starts to walk towards her car. "B-Baby," I walk up to her to try and stop her from walking away. "Ozzy, baby, you can't drive home. There's snow covering the roads, and another storm is on the way."

Ozzy looks at me, or through me, I don't know. She looks so lost. "Ozzy?" She blinks and looks around the parking lot.

"Right, snow." She mutters, and I watch her flinch as I open her door. I swear to god, Kenton is going to pay for this.

The ride home is quiet. Ozzy staring out the window, her hand gripping her throat.

"Baby," I try softly. "How about I draw you up a hot bath and make you dinner while you relax?" I offer. She doesn't respond verbally, but I see her hand tighten around her throat.



Once I pull up to her cottage, the snow is coming down in sheets. I'm about to get out when she turns to look at me.

"I don't want you here." She says distantly, and I feel a stab in my chest.

"W-what? Ozzy, I'm sorry--"

"I'm not mad at you," she interrupts. Her entire body shakes, and the urge to wrap my arms around her is almost too great. "But I don't know how to handle this with a man close to me. So please, I don't want you in there."

"What am I supposed to do?" I ask, the desperation and panic in my voice. "Baby, I-I can't just leave you in there alone when you are like this. Please." She doesn't speak, only shaking her head and hopping out of the truck. I watch her trudge through the mid-calf-level snow to her door. She opens the door and steps in, shutting the door behind her and never looking back at me.

"Fuck!" I shout, punching the steering wheel before running my hands through my hair, tugging on the strands in frustration. I stare at the small

house, my mind racing with what to do. Sighing, I grab my phone and hit Theo's number.

"What?" she whines.

"Are you at the house?"

"Yeah, I didn't get out before the—"

"I need you to stay with Ozzy." I interrupt, my tone giving her no room to argue.

"Alright, I'll take the four-wheeler over." Hanging up the phone, I continue to stare at the house. How do I leave? How do I turn my truck on and leave her alone? She's my whole world. She's hurting, and I need to protect her. I can't just... abandon her. I watch as Theo pulls up on the four-wheeler and heads to the door, knocking on it. Ozzy opens it, and I let out a relieved breath when she lets Theo in. Theo is in there for about five minutes before walking back out and coming to my truck. She hops into the passenger seat and shakes the snow off her hat and coat.

"Okay," she breathes, turning to me. "You need to leave." My face falls.

"W-what? No!"

"Jackson, I get that you want to help her, but the best thing you can do is go home. I promise I will stay with her and text you updates, but you have to go." I look at Ozzy's front door and sigh as I nod.

"Alright." The word is weak and bitter as it falls out. Theo pats my shoulder.

"I'll stay with her, I promise." I nod numbly as Theo exits the truck and heads back inside, leaving me completely alone.

# Ozzy

“**B**rumby,”  
“Brumby,”

“Ozzy!” I startle awake and look to see Theo kneeling in front of my couch, worry etched on her face. “Oz, you’re scaring me. I really think I need to call Jack—”

“No,” I snap, sitting up despite the screaming in my head. “I can’t have him here right now.” I stand up to head to the kitchen. God, yesterday was a nightmare. Mr. and Mrs. Kenton were late to her appointment due to the weather, and I told Denise I would stay with her and call after the appointment to have Jackson pick me up in his truck if need be. When the Kentons got to the clinic, and I asked Mr. Kenton to wait outside, he lost his mind, saying that he wasn’t waiting out there while his wife got an IUD secretly implanted. Denise called the police then, but Mr. Kenton grabbed his wife so roughly, and I saw that look in her eyes, pleading for help. So, I did.

I remember tripping him and pulling her out of his grasp, and shoving her behind me when he got in my face. I remember him grabbing my shirt and snapping my necklace off, causing me to slap him across his face. Mrs. Kenton tried to run out the back door of the office, and her husband tried to grab her. I grabbed him by the back of his shirt as he shoved her, and he whirled around on me.

*“You dumb fucking whore, you better watch your back because I’m going to make you pay for that.”*

He shouted that at me and went to grab me again when Jackson stepped in—my sweet Superman. I’m so embarrassed, not because of what that man said, but because I can’t come down from this panic attack. I’m so on edge, and I just can’t have him sitting here watching me jump or cry, watching me zone out or me flinching at his touch.

“Knock, Knock!” Niamh walks in with a box of pastries and a paper bag. “I come bearing tea and treats!” I watch as she pulls out a teapot.

“What are you doing with that?” I chuckle. “I think I got some cheap tea bags in the cabinet. Just nuke it in the microwave.”

Niamh sets the pot on the stove and turns the burner on before staring at me. “We will not be friends if you ever do something that atrocious again. Now, go sit down, and I’ll make you a proper cuppa.” She rolls her eyes and shakes her head, muttering about the microwave.

Once we have “proper tea” and cookies... biscuits, whatever she wants to call them, we sit on the couch to relax.

“Okay, this is actually amazing,” I say in awe as I drink the hot liquid.

Niamh nods, “Precisely. Americans and their bastardization of the beauty that is tea.” She snorts in dissatisfaction. “Now, I hear you are hiding from Jackson.”

“Oh? And did Theo’s big mouth tell you that?” I glare at the now indigent-looking blonde.

“I didn’t say shit. My lips are sealed tighter than a nun—”

“Really?!” Niamh slaps the snickering girl. “Keep that up, and you’re going straight to hell.”

“Babycakes, I eat pussy. I’m destined to go there.”

“Anyway!” Niamh looks back at me. “No, her lips were, in fact, sealed. But Jackson is outside watching the house.”

My face falls. “It’s freezing out there!” I peer out the window to see him shoveling snow. I also see Gretchen is here, and my heart aches. Standing up, I walk to my kitchen, grab an insulated cup, and make a cup of tea before stepping outside. I’m shivering instantly, only in pajama pants, one of Jackson’s ranch shirts, and slippers.

“Jackson!” I call out, and I watch his shovel drop instantly. He turns and makes his way over to me.

“Baby, get your ass inside, it’s freezing out here!” His face is red from the cold, and I can hear his heavy breathing.

“I could say the same to you. Here, I got you some tea.” I hand him the

cup, letting our fingers touch briefly.

“Here,” he says, reaching in his coat pockets. He opens his hand to show me a jewelry box. When I open it, I see my pendant. “When I went with Jensen to get your car, Denise had it. I uhh, I went and got you a new chain—Why are you crying?” I cover my mouth and shake my head.

“Because I thought it was gone. I was scared Mr. Kenton still had it. And because I miss you.” I watch his face crumple.

“Baby, I’m right here... the second you give me your consent, I’ll be in your house again.” I let out another sob as I walk forward and press myself into him. “Oh, thank you, god,” I hear him whisper in relief as he holds me to him. “Ozzy, it’s too cold out here,” I pull back and stare into his blue eyes.

“Come over tonight? Please?”

“You never have to ask. I’ll be here.” We hug once more before I go back inside, my heart trying to pound through my chest.

“Wow,” Theo states dryly. “Can you imagine having a relationship like theirs where they just say what they’re feeling and are honest all the time?”

“Yeah,” Niamh huffs out. “How absolutely healthy of you two.” I roll my eyes but can’t help the chuckle that escapes because I absolutely adore that Jackson and I have this open communication that I’ve never had with anyone else. It’s one of the reasons I’m so madly in love with him.



“Come in!” I call when I hear the knock on the door from my place in the bathtub.

“Just letting anyone in here?” Jackson’s voice carries up through the house.

“You just texted to say you were on your way!” I laugh as I hear him tap on the bathroom door, telling him to come in, and I smile at his shy gaze. “Oh, come on, I’m old news now.”

He breathes out a nervous laugh. “Ozzy, there will never be a day that just your presence doesn’t take my breath away.” My lip pops out, and I reach out my wet, bubble-covered hand. Jackson walks over and sits on the floor, his cold hand wrapping around my hot one.

“Jesus,” he laughs lightly. “You trying to scald yourself in there?”

“Eh, it’s possible.” I sink further into the water and rest my head on the rolled-up towel I’m using as a pillow. I run my hand over Jackson’s hand, and he lets out a hiss. Looking over, I gasp at the freshly busted knuckles on his hands.

“Jackson,” I breathe, sitting up. “What did you do?”

“Doesn’t matter,” he mutters while removing his coat. I watch as he pulls my pillow towel from the tub and wrings it out.

“It does matter! We don’t keep things from each other.”

“He deserved it.” He says, putting the towel in the sink and grabbing another for my neck.

“What did you do?” I repeat slowly, dread filling me.

“He ain’t dead,” he rolls his eyes at my insinuation. “I mean, he would be if Jensen and Carter would nut the fuck up, but I beat the shit out of him. And I’m not sorry, I don’t regret it, and I won’t feel bad. You are my girl, and I don’t care if it’s misogynistic or what the fuck ever Theo said. I protect you, and you protect me. No one touches you without your consent and without me dealing with it. So go ahead, yell at me, hate me, whatever you want, but mmff—” My lips are on his, hungrily devouring every moan and grunt that comes out of his mouth. God, I missed him.

“More,” I cry out, grabbing his hand and leading it to my breast. “Get in,” Jackson snorts.

“Baby, I’m a large man, we ain’t gonna—”

“You said if I want it,” I state while standing up. He stares in awe at the water and suds sliding down my body.

“Yeah,” he whispers, wholly fixed on me as he staggers to remove his clothes. “I-I did say that, yep, man of my word, move over.” I snicker as he all but jumps into the tub. Once situated, I begin to sit back down as he angles his cock inside me.

“Oh... god,” I cry as I lean against his chest and watch him use one hand on my clit while the other is on my breasts, playing with the bars in them.

“I love these piercings,” he says, and I pant as I grind against him. “I love... all your piercings, fucking god,” I smirk at his cry as I squeeze myself around him and lean forward.

“You gonna come for me, Jackson?” I purr and look over my shoulder at him.

“Baby, you dirty talk me, and it...fuck, it’s going to be over.”

I pick up the speed, ignoring the water sloshing around. “Oh! Right there! I’m so wet for your hard cock, fuck me, fuck me like you own me!” I’m definitely not on Jackson’s level of dirty talk, but he seems more than happy with what I say as he grips my hips and starts bouncing me up and down on his cock.

“Say my name,” he moans. “Say the name of the one that belongs to you.”

“Ah! There.... There! Jackson!” I cry out his name, and he slams me down on him as I feel him come inside me. We lay on each other, my knees still spread on either side of his and my back to his chest. Both of us panting as we come down from our high.

“I don’t want you to leave,” I admit after a minute.

“Then I’ll stay,” he says against my damp hair.

“Always?” I ask and feel him freeze before sitting me up and turning me to face him. I kiss him softly and wrap my arms around his neck.

“What?”

“Will you stay here, permanently- live with me?” I watch his lips pull into a smile.

“Seriously?” He asks, and I nod without hesitation. He leans in and kisses me. “Yes, baby, always.”



“YOU CHEATER! HOW COULD YOU!” I scream while looking at my boyfriend in betrayal. He gives me an unamused look.

“She’s my sister. And I told you, you are with Jensen, and Carter is with Wyatt and Mama.” I stare at the plates and bowls of ingredients to make gingerbread houses.

“You told me you would be with me.” I hiss while sitting with the brooding brother. Jensen is not talking to me because, evidently, I’m supposed to try and sabotage Niamh’s relationship so that she can continue to be single and he can crush on her in secret. “He’s not going to help.”

“Jensen!” Dorothy hits him with a candy cane. “You will perk up. This one is for your daddy.”



“Sorry, Mama,” Jensen mutters, sitting up and starting to help me build our house. We all work in silence for a moment, all thinking the same thing. We miss Morris.

My eyes glance from the table to the window where his bed was, and I can almost hear him giving me shit and chuckling at me for my lack of artistic abilities. I miss him. I miss him so badly it hurts. He gave me something I never thought I would have.

### **A home, a family, and love.**

Morris ensured that I was set up with a home and a job when he left. He cared for me, loved me, and I loved him. I never got to tell him that or thank him for the talks, movie nights, and for teaching me how to be strong without being rough. He taught me it was okay to be vulnerable, and to open myself up to the possibility of love, and I’ll be forever grateful that he gave me this gift.

But as grateful as I am to have this, I’m selfish because I want more. I want him with us. I want him to see Wyatt grow, to see Jackson and I grow together. To bring Dorothy’s smile back.

I feel a tear slip, and I quickly wipe it away. My eyes lock with Jackson’s, and I see that we are having the same problem. In fact, we all are. None of us are making anything. We’re all just sitting here, looking off into the distance.

“*Jesus Christ, suck it up and grow a pair.*” I hear Morris in my head, and I have to force the sob from escaping.

“I have an idea,” I croak out, standing up. “Instead of teams and a competition, let’s do something a little different.”



Jackson laughs lightly as we walk into my house, well, our house. Or it will be next week when he moves his stuff over. “I can’t believe you got Carter to give up the competition for a group project.” I shrug, hanging up my coat.

“A gingerbread Rowe Ranch is way cooler than that pirate ship he was going to do. Which, by the way, that should disqualify him. That’s not a

house.”

“Ahh, well, he would argue that men and women live and die on those ships. So to some, it is.” I give him a blank stare before shaking my head.

“That’s a lot of big words for him to use over a cookie house.” Jackson snakes his arms around me and kisses my cheek.

“It’s a very big competition. Next year, we will team up and take him down.” I spin in his arms, raising a brow.

“You think you got another year of putting up with me in you?” He tucks a lock of hair behind my ear, and I flash back to the first time he did it and how hard it was to allow him to touch me.

“Baby, there will never be enough years with you.”

## *Jackson*

“Again! Again!” Wyatt cheers as he and Ozzy go down the hill for the millionth time in the sled.

“Later,” Carter calls out. “I need to get your butt inside before you start losing toes.”

“SPOIL SPORT!” Ozzy calls as she walks my nephew up the hill to his father. Truth is, Carter is taking Wyatt so I can talk to Ozzy. I’m going to tell her I love her, and if she says she loves me too, there is a ring in my pocket that is literally making me nauseous thinking about it. Not that I don’t want to ask, but am I rushing? Will she feel pressured? Will she run? All these things have been on my mind for the last week since I moved in.

Living with Ozzy alone is... not perfect. She has night terrors, and sometimes she sleepwalks. She is not a fan of my early morning snacking—even though she keeps my drawer fully stocked— she also stocks the cabinet like we are kids and the parents are away. I couldn’t find a single vegetable.

But I wouldn’t change the imperfect parts for anything in this world. I’m so in love with this pink-cheeked, snow-covered woman coming up to me, and I’m tired of her not knowing.

“Dashing through the snow...” she sings as she walks up to me, and I laugh, shaking my head.

“You’re an asshole.” I kiss the top of her head.

“Yeah, and you knew that and still thought, ‘Yeah, I want that one.’ I’m kind of concerned with your tastes, to be honest.” She wrinkles her nose as I poke her forehead.

“I don’t regret it.”

“Alright, well, I can’t feel my legs, so let’s go in and warm up under a

blanket.” She grabs my hand, but I don’t move. “What is it?” She asks, spinning back around.

“Ozzy, I got something to tell you, and I want you to know this is how I feel, and it’s okay if you feel differently.” Her brows knit together, and she gives me an uncomfortable laugh.

“Okay? That’s not ominous or anything.”

“Ozzy, I’m in love with you.” I watch as her eyes go wide. “You’re smart and strong, and you have the biggest heart. You’re beautiful inside and out. You are my world, Ozzy, and... I don’t want to spend another second without you knowing you own my whole heart.” Her eyes become watery as she covers her mouth with her gloved hand.

“Jackson,” I deflate slightly but try not to show my disappointment. She needs more time, and that’s—

My thoughts are interrupted by Ozzy leaping on me, her icy lips attacking mine.

“I love you too. I love you too. Goddamn it, I’m so in love with you.” She says between her frantic kisses.

“Oh my god,” I laugh in relief as I hold her to me. We stay like this for another moment before she stands back up, wiping the tears from her eyes.

“There’s one more thing,” I say as I reach into my pocket.

“Oh god,” Ozzy gasps and looks almost faint.

“As I said, you own my heart, and I’m hoping, in return, you will give me your hand? Ozzy Davenport, will you marry me?” I open the box, and she falls to her knees, sobbing against my chest. I pull her up and look at her, tears clouding my vision. “Is that a yes?” I chuckle, and she looks up at me.

“Always.”

Ozzy  
~

## EPILOGUE

“CUPCAKE!” I scream as Indy, and I launch at each other. I hold my friend close to me as we stand in the middle of the closed showroom of the tattoo shop Derek works at, Hel’s Ink.

“You’re here!” She cries, hugging me again. “I’m so happy! And Jackson!” Indy moves over to embrace my fiancé as we make our way back to Derek’s station.

“I appreciate you doing this, Derek,” I say softly. “Especially since the shop is closed.” It’s two days after Christmas, and Hel’s Ink is closed until after the new year, but Jackson, as one of my Christmas gifts, got me in with Derek for a private session to cover up my final scar.

“No worries, Ozzy. Indy would’ve killed me if I said no.” Derek smirks while finishing the set-up.

“Absolutely, I would. Now go ahead in there and disrobe in the bathroom,” Indy beams, and I give her a nod. In the bathroom, I remove my pants, leaving only my underwear on, and look in the mirror at the brand. Derek says he can cover it, and I believe in his abilities.

Running my fingers over the letters, I no longer feel the same disgust. Disgust at what happened, yes. That will be a horror I live with forever. But I no longer feel disgusting. I am no longer filled with the shame the brand once brought whenever I looked in the mirror. I am strong and finally ready to cover my final scar.

Walking out, I hop onto Derek’s table and hold onto Jackson’s hand as Derek tucks the paper sheet into my underwear and slides them down before placing the stencils.

“You know,” Indy smiles as she spins around on a chair. “Derek rarely

does colors. Like, I suck his cock, and still, the purple band is all I got.” Derek stops tattooing me to stare at my friend.

“I’m gonna put you outside to wait in the car.” He mutters before going back to the tattoo.

It takes hours, and it’s the most painful tattoo I’ve gotten... my neck might be a little more painful, but this is a close second. Jackson has held my hand this entire time. Making sure I’m hydrated, I’m not hungry, and when I feel like giving in. He’s there. I’m so in love with him. One hundred percent my Superman, and I’m so thankful to have him.

“Alright, Ozzy,” Derek sighs and cracks his back. “You’re done, girl.” I walk over to the mirror with the help of Jackson, and when I see the bright red poppies with the buds and greenery woven in, I nearly collapse. It’s perfect, and I can’t see his mark anymore. I look up at Jackson, tears in my eyes.

“Thank you,” I say, kissing him.

“You’re welcome, now, if you’ll excuse me.” I watch as Derek sits at another station while Indy strips his down. Jackson rolls up his sleeve with a smirk on his face. “Go get dressed, baby, this won’t take long- Ow! God damn Derek!” Derek snorts.

“Little brother, I don’t wanna hear it after your girl just went through that.” Indy follows me into the back, and we get my tattoo wrapped before I put my loose sweats on.

“What on earth is he getting tattooed?” I wonder out loud, and Indy chuckles.

“They should be about done. Go look.”

Walking down the hall, back to the tattoo area, I see Derek cleaning up.

“That was, like, fifteen minutes.” I chuckle while walking to Jackson to look at his wrist and cover my mouth. It’s a little red poppy, the size of a quarter, and next to it in pretty black lettering, it reads:

*Always*



As we walk out of the shop with Derek and Indy, I’m still in utter amazement

at how lucky I am to have these amazing people in my life. To have a great family and friends, a wonderful fiancé, and a whole ranch to take care of.

“Sure we can’t get you to stay past tomorrow?” Indy asks, and I shake my head.

“Can’t, my other Christmas present will be there in three days.”

“Ohhhh! What did he get you?” I grin before opening my phone up and showing her the German Shepherd puppy in my camera roll. Indy squeals and hugs me. We wave goodbye, promising to meet them for breakfast before our flight.

“Hey,” I say as we approach our loaner car. “I love you.” Jackson smiles and squeezes my hand.

“I love you too, baby. Can I kiss you?” I give him the biggest smile, and without hesitation, I look up at him and say,

“Always.”

***The End***



## *Afterword*

So far, writing Ozzy's story has probably been the most emotionally difficult one. I'm known for profound messages and funny banter - which I believe I delivered here, but I didn't want it to take away from Ozzy.

Ozzy broke my heart, and while her story is fictional, and she was able to find her happily ever after. The message is very real, and only some get that happy ending.

While writing *Stray*, I wanted to ensure it was done in the best of lights without shying away from what some have endured. It took a lot of research, interviews, and sensitivity readers to ensure I delivered the best possible version of her story.

Remember that every victim has their own experience, and no two will feel the same. And remember that's okay - we all heal differently, but what's important is we do heal.

Take care of yourselves, and remember you are loved.

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## *About the Author*

Crowned the Queen of Banter, DJ Krimmer is known through the community for her witty, smart mouthed characters. In real life she will often say her slogan is:

***“Purposely Awkward, Accidentally Funny.”***

It’s a slogan she takes very seriously.

When DJ isn't making inappropriate jokes or hiding from the worst imposter syndrome known to writer-kind, she’s weaving contemporary romance stories filled to the brim with imperfect alpha-holes and witty females whose love conquers every hurdle thrown their way.

In her books, representations of the imperfect sides of life are not hidden in the shadows, they're front and center, a reminder that everyone deserves a happy ending.

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# *Come Stalk Me*

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