

STATESIDE DOMS  
Book 14

*Her*  
**MAINE**  
*Mountain*  
*Man*

**KAREN NAPPA**

HER MAINE MOUNTAIN  
MAN

STATESIDE DOMS, BOOK 14

KAREN NAPPA



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While I can't call it a writer's block, I did struggle with this story and especially understanding Joy took me a lot of time, because on the surface she's such a happy-go-lucky girl with a fabulous childhood— so why the insecurity. Without my beta readers, Cécile and JT, I would not have been able to figure it out. Thank you so much for the support and sticking with Joy and Ray when it got rocky.



## DISCLAIMER

This is a romance novel and not meant as a how-to on BDSM practice.

BDSM Play should always be safe. I also want to promote safe sex. If people in my books have intercourse without a condom, they have been tested and have discussed birth control or pregnancy (whether it's explicitly mentioned in the book or not).

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# CHAPTER 1

*FRIDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2022. 7:30 PM. WASHINGTON VET CLINIC, WASHINGTON DC*

Letting out a tired and frustrated sigh, Joy Bennett tossed her soiled scrubs into the laundry basket. Leaning against the wall of her small private bathroom in the vet clinic, she stared at the ceiling, but the florescent lights burned her eyes too much to keep them open. With a dull thud, she banged her head back against the tiles next to the door. The pain from the impact barely registered because her heart hurt more. Jewel just died. Four bloody hours of operating and the fluffy, fun loving, tennis ball chasing miniature poodle perished right under Joy's hands.

This afternoon, the energetic fluff ball had been chasing a squirrel when she was hit by a speeding car. Her devastated owners brought Jewel into the Washington vet clinic covered in blood and dirt. Her soft brown eyes, eyes that usually sparkled with mischief and happiness, had been glossy with pain and fear. The other two working vets had handed the case to her, but Joy had been able to do not a damn thing for the miniature poodle — too much internal damage.

She wanted to cry. But she had no right.

It was her job to operate and cure injured pets. It was her job to stay detached. And it was her job to tell the owners she'd failed.

Joy loved her work, she really did. She liked the pets and the owners. Well, most of them. She liked the challenge of discovering what bothered a small creature that couldn't speak. But these days, it seemed she did nothing more than try to repair the damage done to animals by modern life. Had

Washingtonians no respect for other living beings anymore? Had city life dulled the humanity in them? Who the hell drove over forty on a residential street? Of course, the driver hadn't even stopped to take responsibility and help. Moron!

Her cell phone rang and she opened her eyes. Some of her spirit lifted when she read the caller ID. "Hey mom."

"Hi, honey. I just wanted to check on you and ask what you're doing this Sunday."

"Sunday? I don't know."

"Well, your dad and I are going on a road trip to Niagara Falls, and we return to D.C. Sunday afternoon. How about an early dinner? The weather is surprisingly nice, we might even make use of the barbecue one more time this year."

"Sounds great. Can I bring something?"

"Can you pick up desserts?"

"Sure."

A car honked. "Okay, sweetheart, I got to go. Your dad is getting impatient."

"All right, mom. Safe travels and give dad a kiss for me."

"Will do."

Even as Joy lowered her phone, she heard her mother muttering about impatient men. Her mother's exasperation made Joy smile despite her grief for Jewel. Her parents had a loving relationship, and they loved their only daughter as fiercely as they loved each other.

Joy pushed herself off the wall. Time to stop procrastinating. And there was no way around it. The other two vets had already left. The difficult task of informing the

dotting pet owners their fur baby didn't pull through – that Joy hadn't been able to save their Jewel – had fallen on her.



More than an hour later, her eyes burning with grief and fatigue, Joy entered the apartment she shared with her fiancé. After leaving her coat, shoes, and purse at the door, she stumbled into the living room.

“Hey babe.” Richard didn't take his eyes from the game on the television or his feet from the coffee table. He knew she didn't like it; he just didn't care. “What are we eating?”

Joy's eyes roamed the room, from the three opened beer cans on the table, the half-emptied bag of chips next to them, his coat over the back of the recliner, to the clock next to the kitchen door. Eight forty-five.

After a ten-hour workday he expected her to cook him dinner? She stroked her forehead with her fingertips, trying to fight off the headache and simultaneously battling her temper.

When she met him, he'd been a veterinary pharmaceutical sales representative for Animal Health International and he'd charmed her pants off – almost literally. They had a whirlwind love affair; he moved in with her within a few weeks of meeting and proposed a month later. Richard was good looking, lavished her with compliments and presents, and took her to a different restaurant each weekend. She had been over the moon, until he gradually changed into a couch-hanging, beer-drinking dipshit. Joy had no clue what brought on that change.

“How late did you get home?” She winced. *I sound just like a disapproving housewife.*

“Huh?” He tossed back some beer. His throat worked as he swallowed. Richard was handsome and even this act of drinking looked sexy on him. Before the sight could soften her, she straightened her spine and reminded herself that he was also getting exceedingly lazy, and was being a dick.

“What. Time. Did. You. Get. Home.” She pronounced each word with care like she was talking to someone hearing impaired.

“I dunno. Two or three hours ago, maybe.”

“And it didn’t occur to you to, well—” She paused and mentally counted to ten. It did nothing for her foul mood, and the counting didn’t help to control her temper. “Maybe make some dinner, do some cleaning or at least—” She pointed to the mess surrounding him. “—clean up your own stuff?”

“Hell, babe,” he said, tearing his gaze from the screen to give her the lopsided grin she fell hard for each time. “You know I’m not good at that household shit. And for damn sure I can’t cook.”

*True.*

“You could *learn*.”

“Why don’t you hire a housekeeper? You make good money. We can afford hired help.”

Joy sighed. They’d had this discussion several times before. And it always resulted in a fight, followed by make-up sex. He was good with his body, Richard, and his mouth, both for talking and...

Her phone rang before she could finish the thought. Without checking the caller’s ID, she answered, “Hello?”

“Joy, sweetheart. It’s aunt Louise.”

“Louise?” Alarm chilled her body. Her mother’s youngest sister almost never called and there were tears in her voice. Joy gripped her phone tighter. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s—” Louise swallowed hard. “T-Thea and Archie.”

“My parents?” Joy’s heart started to slam in her chest as if her limbs needed oxygen to start running. “What about them?”

“I’m so sorry, honey.” A snuffle. “They—They’ve been in an accident – drunk driver ignored a red light. It’s, it’s not good. I’m so sorry. Your dad. He... He was killed on impact. The drunk’s truck plowed straight into his side.” As a cold numbness invaded Joy’s chest, making it painful to breathe, Louise went on. “Your mom... I’m at Harborview Medical Center.” Her aunt started sobbing. “Your mom... oh, sweetheart... I... They... They think she isn’t going to make it either. Please, can you come?”

## CHAPTER 2



*FRIDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2022. 7:30 PM. RAY'S CABIN,  
OUTSIDE CHESUNCOOK, MAINE*

“You are such a good girl,” Raymond ‘Ray’ Redington crooned and stroked the dark head with his big, callused hand while he observed the protruding, rippling belly.

Panting, Kyana rose and walked in a few restless circles. The Alaskan Husky scratched her front paw to make her bed for what must have been the hundredth time in more than seven hours. Ray expected her to drop down any moment, but with a low whine, she snuggled into Ray’s side again as another contraction hit her.

As a breeder of Alaskan Huskies, Ray wasn’t unused to labor up to twenty-four hours, but that was for the entire process and usually the first puppy was born within four hours.

Even for a first-time mama, Kyana was taking her sweet time and Ray tried not to let his worry show. The dog needed him calm and reassuring.

Kyana whined and lifted her head. Pain-filled eyes, one light-brown and one ice-blue, pleaded with him.

“I know, girl. I know.” He stroked her flank.

Outside the shed, the other dogs howled their worry and unhappiness. Ray winced. A Husky’s howl could be heard ten miles away. Thank goodness he didn’t have neighbors that close. He couldn’t deal with nosy people on top of his worry over Kyana.

Not for the first time since old Martin retired and went to live near his granddaughter in Florida, Ray wished the vet was still living in Chesuncook. If Martin had been here, Ray would

have called him hours ago to assist. The closest veterinarian clinic was in Bangor now, which meant Kyana and Ray were on their own. His mind wandered to the third man in their animal-loving trio, fellow musher Jason. He wished he could call him, but since the man lived off the grid in a cabin with no cell service, the best he could do was try to get him on the radio. The man lived even more remotely than Ray did.

Again, Kyana let out another pitiful whine and received an answer from the other dogs.

No, Ray wouldn't go to his cabin to radio Jason. He wouldn't leave Kyana alone, no matter how long this labor took, and Jason was probably out with his own dogs, too. Ray settled more comfortably next to the dog bed and let Kyana drop her weight against his body. Nothing to do but wait this out.



*SATURDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2022. 9:45 PM*

Ray leaned a shoulder against the wall of the shed, yawned, and enjoyed the sight of seven wriggling bodies seeking heat and food from their mother. After the initial pup that gave both Kyana and him some difficult moments, the other six pups came in the normal forty-five to sixty minutes intervals.

In good Alaskan Husky tradition, the pups came in different colors: one agouti and white, two black and white, one gray and white, two red and white, and one sable and white.

He grinned when the mother dog lifted her head and gave him a doggy smile. “Good girl,” he praised. “How about we settle for the night? I’ll take care of the other dogs before I come back and check on you and your pups, hmm?”

Kyana thumbed her tail on the clean straw, blankets, and rags Ray replaced the soiled bed with earlier. Damn, it was almost like she understood his every word. Maybe a dog wasn’t the greatest conversationalist, although some of his Huskies liked to backtalk, but they were sure as hell better listeners than most people. Now *obeying*, that was a different story.

Kyana dropped her head on her forepaws and let out a contented sigh. Just like her own mother, this dog would be a great mom. He hoped her pups would not only inherit her wonderful character, but also her aptitude in front of the sled.

Ray’s lungs expanded to their fullest as he let out a deep, satisfied breath. He’d done well with his dogs. Before rising, he stroked Kyana’s head and gave her a hearty scratch behind her floppy ears.

Ray then walked out the shed's door and almost tripped over the other seven excited and curious dogs—all pressing forward at once. There was no way he could allow the other dogs with the pups for at least a few weeks. Kyana's mother instinct would go into berserker mode with the pups so small and vulnerable. Regaining his balance, he tried not to laugh at their antics and gave a low command.

Immediately, five of the dogs settled down, but Aga and Suka didn't budge. He wasn't surprised. Alaskan Huskies were loyal, but extremely independent. His two lead dogs were smart, adventurers at heart and both stubborn and willful—good qualities for sled dogs, but not always convenient for humans.

With his feet shoulder-width apart, Ray braced himself and let out a stern, "Whoa."

Aga dropped and wagged her tail, backing down straightaway, but Suka stood her ground—not a problem. Standing directly in front of the bold dog, Ray took a step forward. The dominant Husky turned softer and took a small step backward. Using his body to drive Suka further away from the shed, Ray kept eye contact and waited. The dog dropped down. "Stay."

Ignoring the insolent dog, Ray let the others into the barn where he fixed their food and checked the water, driving the message home who was the pack leader. When all the dogs were eating, he went to fetch Suka. Before entering the barn, she licked his hand in apology and submission, and he ruffled the soft red fur on her neck and shoulders. "Good girl."

When the dogs had settled in the barn, Ray returned to the shed to the new mom and her litter.

Kyana wagged her tail at his entrance, but didn't move as not to disturb the pups. Ray stepped forward and sank on his haunches. Kyana licked his fingers and nudged his hand toward the pups. The trust she showed him left Ray speechless. With a careful finger, he stroked the soft, warm bodies. He enjoyed their little tummies round with milk, the soft little squeaky sounds they made.

He wasn't looking forward to retreating to his cold and empty cabin. *Pity, I can't join the pups in their pile of limbs and fur bodies.* Ray scoffed at himself, muttering, "Pathetic much?"

Kyana tilted her head, as if in question. With a deep sigh and a last stroke over Kyana's soft fur, he rose and left. Oddly content and disconcerted at the same time, Ray walked across the courtyard to his rustic cabin.

He ducked under a low-hanging branch and shuddered as some sleet dropped from the tree between his collar and neck. "Damn."

On the porch, he stomped his boots to clear most of the mud before pulling them off. He wiggled his sock-covered feet and spotted how the big toe on his right foot stuck out of a hole in the material. He grunted.

A low hoot, one his grandmother had described as the "Who cooks for you?"-call, sounded behind him, and Ray's mood lifted at the typical Barred Owl call.

He went inside the small cabin and found his way without bothering with turning on the light. He loved living in Maine and the cabin he inherited from his grandmother, along with her love for animals. Ray didn't know why his mood was so glum lately.

He made a good living breeding and training sled dogs, and his contacts with the human world were limited. *Just as you like, you broody bastard.*

So why did he feel this unsettled and discontented? He tried to shrug it off. *Maybe Kyana's hard labor gave me a bigger scare than I want to admit.* Too tired for anything else, he made his way to his bedroom. He sure hoped he could sleep, because when a problem stuck in his head, it was more likely to stay and stick around than December snow in Maine.

Tomorrow, he would try and radio his friend Jason.

*Maybe we can go for a hike or do some training together. That will dramatically improve my mood.*

Unlike most humans, Jason Campeau was trustworthy and not self-absorbed, and he loved his dogs as passionately as Ray cared for his.

## CHAPTER 3



*SATURDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2022. 10:55 AM. BANGOR AIRPORT, MAINE*

Two weeks after the funeral, Joy wondered if she'd done the right thing as she departed the flight from JFK to Bangor. First, she'd taken an early plane from Baltimore to New York, had to wait almost two hours at JFK airport, and now she had at least four hours of driving to accomplish before reaching her final destination.

*Who buys a vet clinic in the middle of nowhere? Sight unseen, online? Well, duh, I did!*

Together with her aunt Louise, and with no support whatsoever from her fiancé, she arranged the funeral for her beloved parents and put their house on the market.

She gave the Washington clinic her two weeks' notice, signed over the lease for the apartment to Richard, and returned his engagement ring all in a few days.

There was nothing tethering her to D.C. anymore. She wanted – no, *needed*, a clean break. Jobless and without a relationship or home, she was free as a bird. Now if only she knew what to do with her freedom. A trip around the world? Seemed like the sort of thing she ought to do, but she had no enthusiasm for it. Joy knew she didn't want to stay in D.C., but she was unsure what she wanted to do with the rest of her life.

So, when one of her colleagues mentioned his mentor's rural vet clinic was for sale, it had been like the answer to a prayer she wasn't aware she had sent up above. Nevertheless, Joy saw it as a sign and had made an offer without seeing the actual place. However, from what Martin Cavanaugh told her,

the clinic had all the modern amenities and had been profitable until he left for sunny Florida, and the clinic came with a fully furnished apartment upstairs. As Mister Cavanaugh didn't need much to support himself, they settled quickly on a price that was about half of what she expected to receive for her parent's house, even after costs and paying off the small mortgage.

Now, after a teary-eyed farewell from Aunt Louise more than a day ago, she made an insane trip to reach Bangor and was waiting until the 2019 certified pre-owned four-door plug-in hybrid with a powerful two-liter motor was hers.

Seated in the uncomfortable chair surrounded by the scent of rubber, new cars and motor oil, she questioned her sanity. Until this point in her life, she'd burned her bridges, severed her ties to D.C., and spent over three-hundred-thousand dollars on an uncertain adventure in a rural village she had never visited before.

With a slightly creepy and insincere smile, the salesman handed her the keys, papers, and the maintenance log and she was a couple of tens of thousand dollars lighter and one black Toyota Prius richer.

“All right, Doctor Bennett, let me show you how to put on the snow chains, fasten them, take them off again, and you're set to go.”



SATURDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2022. 6:15 PM.

CHESUNCOOK'S VET CLINIC

Ray checked his watch and blew hot air over his hands. Fucking city boy was over two hours late and Ray was pissed.

Like an agitated bull moose, he stomped his feet. He would give Doctor Bennett another ten minutes and then Ray would leave and let the incompetent asshole figure out how he would get inside the house.

Why the hell did old Martin ask him to take care of the property until a new owner was found? Ray wasn't a damn tourist guide. *Give me a dog and I know what to do. People? Not so much.*

Frustration mounting, Ray paced up and down the private weed-covered driveway toward the vet clinic off High Street. The driveway was maybe six yards long, and soon Ray reached the building and turned to head back to the public street. The new Doc was taking his sweet time.

It was strange to imagine another man taking over the clinic. When going into town to pick up groceries, Ray used to check on old Martin. But he never let the old man know he had been watching out for him.

Ray wasn't a people person. First, his parents and then his work as a dog handler for the Maine Police department in Vassalboro taught him humans were selfish and unreliable. When his grandmother left him her two Huskies and her cabin eighteen miles outside of Chesuncook, he quit his job, never looked back, and retreated into the mountains. It had been the best decision he ever made. Even better than leaving his parents' home at seventeen.

Didn't mean he didn't meet people. People came to buy dogs or bring their canines for training. He just limited the interaction with human creatures to the bare minimum.

As he almost reached the building for what must have been the twentieth time, crunching gravel behind him alerted Ray of an incoming car. He glanced over his shoulder, saw it was one of those ridiculous Asian Hybrid vehicles, and sighed. The car owner was either a lost tourist, which wasn't likely at this time of year, or the new Doc, which didn't bode well for his mental capacities. The vehicle wasn't even an all-wheel or four-wheel drive. How was the dude expecting to get to the remote areas?

Again, Ray wondered what reason a big-city boy could have to buy a dilapidated vet clinic in such a remote area. Of course, it could be the bloke liked the peace and quiet like Ray did, and his reasons for choosing Chesuncook as a place to live were similar to Ray's, but the thought he would have something in common with a city boy didn't sit well with him.

Ray shielded his eyes with his left hand, but the low-standing sun made it impossible to see the driver.

The driver's side door opened, and a small hiking shoe appeared, then a part of a jeans-clad leg, before the driver exited the vehicle and Ray got his first good look.

The *woman* lifted her arms, did a catlike stretch directing Ray's gaze to her perky breasts, and cricked her neck from side to side. Ray glanced to the passenger side of the car. Did the dude bring his wife?

He must have made a sound or moved because the woman jumped in surprise, and startled blue eyes connected with his.

He froze, not liking how he noticed this woman's body and sexy posture. She held herself with a distinctive grace and a

seemingly natural veneer of elegance that didn't need makeup or designer clothing. She wore tight-fitting dark blue jeans, a simple button-up blouse and a denim jacket. From what Ray could observe, no artificial stuff slathered on her face and no jewelry, except for a small silver chain with a little dangling cross around her neck — no wedding ring or any other ring. It was ridiculous how that little fact pleased him.

She stretched, working out the stiffness of an hours-long drive in one graceful movement. A beautiful woman, much as he hated to admit it, fit and agile and just his type in all the ways he was determined not to notice, now or ever.

“Oh, hi.” Her voice, although a little breathless, was melodic and friendly. “I didn't expect anyone here.” Her voice —soft like velvet, smooth and full-bodied like red wine— slid over his senses. She stepped forward with an outstretched hand. “I'm Joy Bennett.”

Tilting his head, Ray studied her and ignored her friendly gesture. “Where's your husband?” He folded his arms over his chest and didn't miss how her eyes lingered on his biceps.

“Huh?” Elegant light brown eyebrows crept toward the golden crown of hair, and those stunning blue eyes slightly narrowed.

“I'm talking about Doctor Bennett, the new vet.”

“Aahh.” The sensual mouth he wanted to lick, kiss and nibble on curved in a challenging smile. She was even more beautiful smiling. “There *is* no husband, fiancé, or boyfriend, I'm afraid but just me— *Doctor* Bennett. And you are...?”

Embarrassed, Ray scowled at himself, gruffly explaining, “Last Doc was a man. Not used to change, I guess. Raymond Redington.”

Instead of huffing over his admittedly pig-headed assumption, the woman smiled and offered her hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Redington.”

“Ray,” he said without thinking. He hadn’t meant to get so familiar with her so soon. *Or ever. Damn!* The woman surprised him again. First with her beauty and the insane attraction he felt, and now with her tolerance and easy manner. It worried him how unbalanced she made him feel. It was like stepping onto snow and discovering it didn’t cover any ground but concealed a rabbit hole. To Ray’s utter frustration, he couldn’t fight his sexual interest in her. *This is going to be a nightmare, and I need to be sure to avoid her at all costs.*

But avoidance wasn’t an option right now. Speed however was.

He straightened and hoped his face and tone of voice were all business. “Martin left it to me to hand over the key and paperwork and show you around.” He cocked his arm to check his watch and grumbled. “Let’s get moving. I need to get back to my dogs.”

She lowered her gaze. “I’m sorry I kept you. The salesman at Quirk in Bangor took his sweet time and my luggage was delayed. However, if I had known someone was waiting, I wouldn’t have played tourist on my way here.”

Ray’s breath stuttered in his chest at her sincere apology and beautiful deferential posture. Every dominant instinct he had told him to claim this woman and make her submit to his will — now. *To order her to strip, put her on her knees and...* He shook his head in a jerky movement as if he could shed the thought like dogs shook water from their fur. “All right, Doctor Bennett, apology accepted.” He didn’t wait for her reply, but turned and marched toward the clinic, digging for

the keys in his back pocket. He needed to get the hell out of the reach of this blonde, who had his brain in tangles and his libido firing up like a raging inferno. A cold shower and some hand action would get his wayward body under control.



Joy studied the beast of a man as he walked her through the clinic. He moved fast, said as little as possible and then carried on, covering the grounds with a barn and a few stables, and the apartment in what felt like just a few minutes. She wished he would have spent more time on the tour, but not because she was afraid she would get lost on the property. She couldn't miss how his faded black jeans hugged that fine ass, powerful thighs – the size of her middle– and how his back and arm muscles rippled under his stereotypical checkered flannel shirt. She hadn't been offended when he didn't hold out his hand to shake hers. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, many people didn't like to shake hands with strangers. Joy was a tactile person and liked to touch and hug, but she always respected other people's boundaries. Apparently, Mister Redington was selective in who he touched.

*Maybe it's for the best, because I might want to do more than touch this man's hand if I lay one finger on him.*

Very different from Richard, this man oozed danger and sex in a rugged way, with his couple of days' worth of stubble on his cheeks, his muscled body and his aloof, almost hostile air.

Contrary to her instant fascination with him, he gave the impression to dislike her on the spot.



*That doesn't bother me. I'm not here for romantic reasons. I want to settle as a vet in an area where people and animals live in harmony, and where I can make a difference.*

A throat cleared, and she turned her gaze to his. "Oh, sorry, I guess I'm tired from the trip and zoned out for a moment. What did you say?"

He lifted his hand and jangled the keys inches from her face. "I asked if you would be all right on your own."

Something inside her bristled, but she managed an even, "I will be fine, thank you," before she snatched the keys from his hand, earning herself a little smile from the broody mountain man.

*I sure hope the other villagers are more welcoming than Mister Redington.*

## CHAPTER 4

MONDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2022. 8:00 AM.

CHESUNCOOK'S VET CLINIC

At eight on the dot, Joy ceremoniously opened and closed the clinic's door and made the bell jingle.

*Open for business. Well, sort of.*

She'd used Sunday to unpack and sort through the clinic's inventory. The place might look shabby and rundown on the outside, but Joy had been impressed with the insides, and happy as a lark to discover a very tidy and extensive cabinet with patient files. *So very old school.* She would need to digitalize the files for easy access sometime soon, but she was elated with the information on the locals, both two- and four-legged.

There was no computer and although she brought her old laptop, the device didn't have enough power or storage for professional use. She needed a good desktop computer. She also needed a way to tell Doctor Cavanaugh's old clients they had a new vet.

To her surprise, she had a working landline, running water and electricity, and from the papers she gathered, the previous owner had prepaid the utilities for the rest of the year.

*I need to make a list.*

She dug through the reception desk drawers to find a pen and paper and came upon at least a dozen glossy pictures of sled dogs. The hunt for pen and paper forgotten, she took the photographs and studied them. At least ten healthy looking dogs, a mix of Malamutes and Huskies from what she could see, and —her heart stuttered— a younger Raymond

Redington with a full beard and a huge smile. She blinked. *The man has a happy face? Maybe he reserves his scowl just for me?*

She scanned the picture. *Oh whoa. The man has competed in the Iditarod Dog Sled Race.* She went on to the next picture, wondering why these were in the drawer of the clinic's reception desk.

The bell jingled. As she righted herself to greet her visitor, she banged her knee against the open drawer, so that instead of a greeting, a painfilled cry escaped her parted lips. And mortification swamped over her as she recognized her visitor was none other than the mountain man she was just admiring in some pictures.

Before she had a chance to react, he was around the desk, kneeling and his big hands engulfed hers, cradling her injured knee.

“What happened? Let me see.”

Like Saturday, he wore black jeans, scruffy work boots, and a flannel shirt over a plain T-shirt. He must have shaved between then and now because his face was much smoother, and she found she liked him with the full beard from the pictures, the stubble from Saturday, as well as without facial hair.

She wished she wasn't as aware of him as she was. She shouldn't pay attention to his looks.

“Well, Princess,” he murmured. “Show me your injury.” Warm fingers pried away her hands, and he cautiously palpated her knee. “What were you doing anyway?”

“Um...” She blinked. “Getting started with the clinic, of course. What did you think I would do? This vet business

doesn't run itself." Like their first meeting, their gazes connected, and he held her captive with his dark, unreadable eyes. But now she'd seen those eyes lightened from the inside with happiness.

"It doesn't look like the skin is broken, but you should probably check to be certain later. Still, I can feel a lump already forming, so we need to cool it."

Joy could only stare at him as he walked away, moving through the room like he lived there. Yet she couldn't bring herself to protest, sitting obediently while he pattered around and soon came back with a bag of ice and a towel. He pressed the makeshift cool package against her knee with so much care, she could only blink at him. Who'd guess this cold man could be so... tender?

The silence between them stretched.

As if they both couldn't handle the awkwardness any longer, they started talking at once. Joy snapped her mouth shut.

"Sorry. You go first," he said, but didn't release her from his gaze and didn't move away from her.

As she inhaled, she caught a whiff of his fresh outdoors smell —wood, pine and a unique, earthy fragrance she associated with rain. A touch of embarrassment rushed the blood to her cheeks until she could feel the heat burning her face. "I wanted to ask you why you came by today."

"Ah, yeah." He looked away and rubbed the hand not holding the icepack over the back of his neck. "I guessed since you're new, you didn't know your way around and I—" He broke off and shrugged.

Her mouth twitched. *Is the big, bad mountain man feeling shy?*



The mouth he wanted to devour curved, and Ray wondered about his motive to seek her out today. It was so out of character for him, it wasn't even funny.

He removed his hand from the back of his neck, used it to place her long, delicate fingers over the icepack, and rose. Needing some distance between himself and the alluring woman, he paced a few feet away before turning back to her, folding his arms in front of his chest. Like the defensive posture could shield him from the strange pull she had on him.

“Huh?” She cocked her head and her forehead puckered. “You want to drive me around and introduce me to people?”

Not liking the wariness in her tone, he shrugged.

“That’s nice, I guess, but why?” She sounded almost affronted, like his offer meant he didn’t view her as, what? Self-reliant, maybe?

For some odd reason, that made the corners of his mouth twitch. “Can’t a man do something for a woman without an ulterior motive?”

“Well,” she hedged, and he couldn’t help enjoying how her blush spread. “Of course, that’s possible. But you don’t strike me as a person who’d do something just out of the goodness of your heart.”

“Ouch.” He grimaced dramatically but couldn’t deny the painful contraction in his chest.

“I’m sorry.” She held out her hand like she wanted to touch him. “That was... I’m just...” She closed her eyes. “Sorry, that was uncalled for and there’s no excuse. All I can say is that’s it is more about my own baggage than about you, all right?”

The woman kept surprising him —open, genuine, and sweet with a backbone.

*Damn. No wonder she is so alluring to me.*

When she exited the car on Saturday, her body had captured his attention, but with every facet of her personality she revealed, he discovered he liked her a little more.

And that was what drove him to step out of character and check on her. All right, she gave him honest, and he owed her the same in return.

As Ray moved to stand in front of her, her pupils dilated and she swallowed. “You’re partially right,” he said. “While I’m not the asshole you seem to think I am, I’m not a people person. Truth to be told, I prefer dogs over most people. But I liked Martin.” Noticing her confused expression, he amended, “Doctor Cavanaugh, and I owe it to him to help you get settled.”

Her face brightened as her mouth softened into a sweet smile. “In that case, thank you Mister Redin—”

“Ray,” he said curtly.

She nodded. “Thank you, Ray. I would love a tour and an introduction to some locals. I was just trying to figure out how to go about starting the clinic and this might be just the way to ease into society.”



Joy glanced out of the passenger side window as he drove down High Street and pointed out houses. Having someone else drive gave her the opportunity to admire the lake, mountains, and woods, too.

The sights reminded her of the camping and hiking trips with her parents, and the devastating pain of their absence stabbed into her heart with a fierceness. She almost wanted to check if blood was dripping from her chest.

She swallowed around the lump in her throat and tried to get her emotions under control again.

*I don't think Mister Mountain Man would like to have a blubbering woman in his car.*

Forcing a cheerful note in her voice, she asked him, “So are there any good hiking tracks in those woods? I love a good walk.”

He kept his eyes on the road, but she could feel his attention snap to her like a laser beam. “There are a few small trails, but nothing fancy on this side of Lake Chesuncook. Anyway, I don't want you to hike alone.”

“Excuse me?” She pulled herself up to her full height and glared at the insufferable man. “Because I'm a woman?”

“What?” He shot her a sideways glance and slowed his van down. “No! That's not what I meant. Unless highly trained and experienced, no one should hike alone.” He clenched his hands around the steering wheel. “It's just common sense, but you'd be surprised the things people do. Hell, people come in here, they don't know the area, and then they take off without letting



anyone know which trail they're taking. It's sheer foolishness."

Joy closed her eyes for a moment and battled down her emotions. It was hard to think clearly through the grief, but the man wasn't being unreasonable or sexist. *Hell, I misjudged him again.*

She pulled in a breath, held it for a few heartbeats before expelling the air to the count of eight from her lungs. "You're right, only experienced hikers should consider taking off alone, and I shouldn't have snapped at you."

"No, you shouldn't have." He frowned but his white knuckles slowly turned to their natural color.

## CHAPTER 5

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2022. 7:30 AM.

CHESUNCOOK'S VET CLINIC

Closing the door behind her, Joy adjusted the straps of her well-used backpack with all the necessities and double checked the weather report on her cellphone. She would have a few hours before it would start to rain, and she genuinely needed to walk off some of the frustration.

After the unexpected visit from the mountain man, she hadn't seen him again all week. Neither had any of the locals visited her clinic or called for help.

It was disheartening, and she tried not to be too disappointed. She truly hadn't expected waiting lines in her first week, but one or two patients would have been nice.

Not for the first time, Joy wished she could call her mom and hear her mother's cheery voice telling her she had every faith in her daughter. Or how she wished for her dad to be here to sling an arm around her shoulders, pull her close and tell her his girl could do anything she set her mind to.

Her parents had always supported and believed in her, no matter what. *In vet school, when she wanted to give up. In high school, when she struggled through all the usual teenage drama. And even after the prom, when...*

Joy slammed a mental door on that, though. She wasn't going to revisit the past. She was here to build a new life, without the complications of a relationship, and today she needed some exercise and fresh air to clear her mind.

For the last couple of days, it seemed like the walls of the clinic had been closing in on Joy, and she needed space and a

firm connection with nature to breathe.

A tingle of unease trickled up her spine as she remembered the stern warning Raymond Redington had given her in the car.

Not being a fool, Joy left a note on the clinic door with the date and time of her departure, her estimated time of return, and the route she was planning to take. If something should happen, people would know where to look for her.

Her backpack held supplies for about every situation as well as a whistle and a GPS and satellite communicator designed for hikers. So even if she were to wander into territory with no cell service, she would be able to communicate if need be.

The familiar weight of her bulky backpack strapped to her shoulders felt almost like her father's embrace, and her well-worn shoes enclosed her feet protectively against the uneven path.

The rough gravel from her driveway made way for the smoother High Street, as she turned left toward Chesuncook Lake and the resorts, rental cabins and hiking trails that surrounded it. Soon the path would be even harder to walk, but Joy didn't mind. She wanted to follow the bend where the West Branch Penobscot River streamed into the lake, and where water cradled the small community, like Joy's mother would hold her daughter in soft, protective arms.

Courtesy to the mountain man, Joy had a decent grasp of the lay of the land and she itched to explore. A gust of wind ruffled her hair and made the leafy trees weave. Aside from the scuffling of gravel and pebbles under her shoes and the distant clank of a tractor, the world around her was silent and peaceful. She sank deeper into the quiet moment.

Watching the gentle lap of water hitting the shoreline, she halted for a moment and breathed in the crisp air. A few mosquitos buzzed around her head, and she absentmindedly flicked her hand in front of her face.

Tears burned the back of her eyes as she felt the presence of her parents in everything around her. They were the ones who had taught Joy the love for nature and animals. The most loving, doting pair of parents a girl could have ever wanted. She had not been ready to lose them.

Pulling in a shuddering breath, Joy allowed the sorrow to swamp her. It was all right for her to grieve a moment in this simple and peaceful place, where it was easy to feel a connection with the earth as well as the sky— anchored with life and linked with the spirits above. Unmoving, she stood as the wind whispered reassurances in her ears and water splashed only inches from her toes.

For the first time in days, her decision to move here seemed the right choice, and Joy was sure her parents would have approved. As if confirming that thought, a seagull cried out above the lake, soon answered by another.

Using her shirt sleeves, Joy wiped away a few tears and, crunching along the shoreline, she continued her walk.

Breathing in the fresh air and scents of grass, wet soil and water, she enjoyed the rocky shoreline with interesting gravel in shades of gray and white, knobby driftwood at the water's edge, and waves lapping the shore. Joy kept her pace even and brisk while taking in the world around her with her senses wide open.



*SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2022. 11:50 AM*

Noisily breathing through his nose, Ray reread the text on the paper attached to the clinic door and tried to get a reign on his temper. Someone for sure needed to drill some common sense into this woman.

With his heart pounding a drumbeat in his chest, Ray clenched his hands into fists. An unwelcome headache throbbed behind his temples. Surely this was a mistake. It had to be. He reread the neatly printed page.

He let out an exaggerated sigh. At least, it gave him a starting point.

Joy Bennett needed a reminder of her promise, so it appeared. A muscle in his jaw ticking, Ray sharply turned and marched back to his ride.

*She should have heeded my warning.*

Why she hadn't was a conundrum. Didn't the woman value her life? Or was a blatant disregard for her own safety a direct reaction to his order? He'd sensed she was stubborn the first time they met.

Did he trigger some rebellious streak or was this city princess just a spoiled brat with no common decency or sense?

He didn't think so, and yet...

Ray was pretty sure she understood his warning and agreed not to go hiking alone. She had to know it was downright disrespectful to blatantly ignore a promise.

How would she react if he threw her over his knee and spanked her as a reminder to heed his warnings?

Ray checked his watch. According to her note, she'd been gone almost five hours. Depending on her speed, that would have her walking, what, fifteen miles or so?

Did she take food and water with her? Dehydration could be a serious problem. Was she carrying her cellphone? Not that it would do him any good, since he didn't have her number, but –depending on service– at least it would give her a way to communicate. Fuck, so many factors he didn't know. Basically, Ray was navigating a blizzard without a compass or his sled dogs' instincts to guide him.

Practically jumping in his vehicle, Ray made two decisions. One, he was going to rescue the city princess from herself today. And two, once he was sure she was safe and properly chastised, he would stay clear of this bundle of trouble.



*SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2022. 1:30 PM. SOMEWHERE  
IN NORTHWEST PISCATAQUIS, MAINE*

Leaning against a boulder, Joy washed down the last of her trail mix with a healthy gulp of her water and stared over the West Branch Penobscot River. The meandering water oozed peacefulness and serenity, and Joy lapped it all up like a dog drinking from a water bowl. Behind her, a car engine broke the peaceful quiet, and she sighed. Joy liked people, she truly did, but today she wanted solitude instead of company.

Tires crunched over gravel, coming closer and then stopping hard. She had the distinct impression her alone time had ended. Reluctantly, she turned and blanched as a six foot plus tower of muscle came stomping her way. *Behold, the mountain man in all his grumpy glory.* This was just her luck!

With flaring nostrils, he marched way up into her personal space and halted. “What are you doing here?” he demanded, raking her body and the surroundings with his blazing eyes, looking for injuries or falling logs or perhaps a rabid bear to wrestle. “Are you all right?”

She blinked in surprise “Of course I am.”

“Don’t use that breezy tone with me,” he snarled through clenched teeth, the veins in his neck standing out. “You could have been lost, wounded or dead before I found you.”

She shivered at the controlled menace in his words. “Lost, wounded or killed?” *What the hell?*

“Yes.” His eyes blazed. “Did we or didn’t we discuss how dangerous hiking alone is?” Ray swept his arm through the air



with an exasperated sigh. “You know what? Just get in the truck, I’ll drive you home.”

Her hackles rose. This man was unbelievable, and high-handed, and...

And his hands were trembling. His face was pale, making the livid color in his cheeks stand out even more. Despite the cool weather, a rivulet of sweat streamed down his temple.

Joy sighed and purposefully met his furious gaze. “I get that you were worried about me. Thank you for your concern.” Her voice came out a bit throaty and she curled her toes in her shoes to keep from tapping her foot. “As you can see for yourself, I’m perfectly fine. So, why don’t you go on with your day and let me go on with mine?”

His arm brushed against hers as he audibly inhaled through his nose. “No, we’re not.” He turned sideways and raked a hand through his hair. “God, you’re infuriating.”

“*I* am infuriating? *Me*? How about you? I’m here, enjoying my Saturday and minding my own business, and you come crashing in and making demands.”

Fascinated she watched as his white face transformed into an interesting red color. Pity for her, as a side-effect of her beguilement, she became too late aware of his intent.

One moment they were facing off at the riverbank, the next moment he ducked and slung her over his shoulder.

An embarrassing ‘Oomph’ escaped her. “What the—”

She didn’t finish the sentence, but sucked in a breath when he anchored her with his hand precariously close to her butt.

When her old backpack appeared in her line of vision, she squealed and started squirming. *My equipment.* “Stop, you

caveman! Let me get my backpack! My stuff is in there!”

Without letting go of her, he turned and collected the bag, as if he wasn't carrying a full-grown woman over his shoulder.

Her breath hitched and suddenly she was one-hundred percent aware of the very male body beneath hers. Her nerve endings hummed to life, and the blood rushing to her head had little to do with her upside-down position.

When he lowered her to the ground, she felt her breasts glide over his much harder body, and she almost whimpered at the contact.

“Get in the van.” His harsh voice snapped her out of her sensual haze, as did his following words. “Or you won't be able to sit down tomorrow.”

Stunned silent, his words churned around in her head. The feminist in her wanted to bitch slap him for the threat, but another more suppressed part of her was too curious for comfort about how exactly he would punish her.

Several seconds passed and she didn't move. Sighing, he pushed her to the side, opened the passenger door, and planted her inside. The back door opened and her backpack landed on the seat behind her.

Without uttering a word to her, he closed the door, prowled around the hood and took his place in the driver's seat.

“Put on your seatbelt.” He waited for her to obey before pulling out and turning the van around.

Soundlessly, she glanced over at the man driving the vehicle. His jaw hard as granite and his posture stiff, he appeared as unyielding and unmovable as the boulder she ate her lunch on. More appalled about her own reaction than about

his actions, she folded her arms in front of her breasts and inhaled deeply. “Look —”

“Not now, Princess.” His tone was carefully controlled, but that didn’t fool Joy into believing he was calm. He was drawing in slow, steady breaths and avoiding eye contact, and his hands around the steering wheel were white-knuckled.

She raised an eyebrow at the nickname and let out a huff of irritation. *Fine.*

A muscle ticking in his jaw, the mountain man kept one hand on the steering wheel and one rested on the gear shift. For several miles, neither of them spoke, then he cleared his throat in an exaggerated, “Ahem!”

*The caveman demands my attention.*

Joy looked at him crossly, waiting.

“You promised me you wouldn’t go hiking on your own.”

“I never did any such thing.”

He was silent for several beats, then rubbed the back of his neck. “Look. I don’t know if you exactly promised, but I do remember you agreeing hiking alone was for experienced people.”

*Yes, yes I did, and I am.* “True.”

His nostrils flared. “So why did you go on your own?”

She frowned. “What makes you think I don’t have experience?”

A longer pause. “You’re a city girl.”

“You...I...You... What?” Joy couldn’t help it. She threw back her head and burst out laughing. She laughed and

laughed, until tears trickled down her face, and her stomach and sides hurt.

## CHAPTER 6

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2022. 1:50 PM. PINE STREAM ROAD, NORTHWEST PISCATAQUIS

His muscles ached more than after finishing the Iditarod, and the pain in his jaw told him how much he was grinding his teeth. Ray breathed through his nose to keep his anger in check.

Clueless about *why* he cared this much about the safety and well-being of this woman — this *stranger*, he just tried to concentrate on driving. Willing his arms and hands to relax, he casually rested his right hand on the gear stick and used only his left to steer the car, relieved they were on a smooth patch of the roads.

Still grinding his teeth, he tried to come up with a way to make sure she wouldn't take off on her own again like that.

*I wish I could order her, but I can imagine how that will go. Either she'll tell me to mind my own business, go to hell, or to shove the order up my ass. Maybe she'll call it rectum, though. Doctor Princess wouldn't call it an asshole, right. Maybe I can appeal to her reasonable side? Does she have one?*

Ray cleared his throat. "You promised me you wouldn't go hiking on your own."

She jerked and her eyes narrowed to slits. "I never did any such thing."

Ray blinked and his face fell. He hadn't expected her to flat-out lie. An unsettling heaviness formed in his chest. *Why don't I ever learn? People aren't to be trusted.* Rubbing the back of his neck, he tried to remember their conversation

about solo hiking. She'd seen the rightness of his standpoint and even apologized for her snippiness. He tried again, "Look. I don't know if you exactly promised, but I do remember you agreeing hiking alone was for experienced people."

She let out a heavy sigh. "True."

*See, I am right.* "So why did you go on your own?" The words came out a bit sharper than he liked. *Damn, she's eating at my self-control.*

Her retort was almost instant. "What makes you think I don't have experience?"

His mind started racing. What did he know about this woman? Did she have experience? The backpack didn't look new, but people used those bags for all kinds of things these days. Would she have... No, no of course not, she was pulling his leg. She was... "You're a city girl."

Her haughty façade broke, and she started to stutter. *There, see, she is talking out of her ass. I knew it.*

But then she threw back her head and burst out laughing.

*What the hell?* His mouth falling open, he parked the Chevy Express on the curb and waited as she laughed and laughed until she was clutching her belly and tears were trickling down her face.

Despite his annoyance, Ray couldn't prevent himself from noticing how gorgeous Joy was as she let go of her control. His jeans tried to imitate a boa constrictor as he imagined how she would look in the throes of passion and what it would take to drive her out her mind with pleasure.



When Joy finally calmed enough to inhale sufficient oxygen, and she had the control back over her body, she wiped away the tears and turned to the clueless man beside her. “A city girl?! Mister, I moved to DC after graduation. I grew up in Guff’s Hollow, West Virginia, population four hundred and sixty-three souls. When I left, they had to repaint the sign. From where I’m sitting, you’re the city boy. At least Chesuncook has a paved High Street. And while we’re at it, what makes you think city people don’t hike?” She noted he’d parked his vehicle and maybe concentrating on their conversation was for the better.

“Well, I...” He didn’t seem to know how to answer that, and after making a few false starts, he gave up, his hand moving to the back of his neck. She softened, recognizing the gesture now.

Taking pity on him, she reached behind her, pulled her backpack onto her lap and opened it up. While unpacking her new topographic map and her old compass, waterproof matches, knife, and repair tools, she told him about camping and hiking trips. How her mother taught her how to navigate and identify edible plants and how her father taught her to spin a fire and clean water along with roasting smores.

She showed him the extra clothing, the first aid supplies and insulation blanket, and the emergency shelter as she related her first solo trip where she was caught in a summer storm.

When she started packing everything back to their allocated places, a warm, callused hand landed on her forearm, and she snapped her head up. Deep dark pools burning with sincerity, he said, “I’m sorry for doubting you and jumping to conclusions.”



The tension left her shoulders, and for the first time since he carried her away from the river, she relaxed. “It’s all right. Honestly, I’m doing the same to you. I guess we’re just very different.”

“That’s true.” He nodded. “It seems like we’re doing a one step forward, two steps back dance since the moment we met.” He lifted his hand and held it for her to shake it. “I’ll try to shelve my assumptions about you from now on, but I’ll undoubtedly put my foot into my mouth before the day ends.”

She took his offered hand. “And I’ll try not to lose my temper with your overprotective caveman ways.”

“Caveman?” One bushy eyebrow crept up his forehead. And damn if that didn’t make her hormones go crazy.

“I also called you a mountain man in my head.”

“Hmm.” He released her hand. “Maybe that suits me a bit more, although I don’t actually live on a mountain.”

“Where *do* you live?”

He pushed the vehicle into gear, and for a moment disappointment slammed into her ribs like a sledgehammer, but then he answered her question. “I inherited a cabin with a few barns on some acres at the other end of High Street from my grandmother. I’ve lived there for over fifteen years now.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“I breed and train Alaskan Huskies.”

“Oh wow. I found some pictures in Doctor Cavanaugh’s desk from the 2015 Iditarod Sled Dog Race finish. That’s quite an accomplishment.”

He grunted.

Joy grinned. “You aren’t more comfortable taking compliments than talking about yourself, are you?”

He came to a stop in front of a crossroad and shot a glance her way. He licked his lips, and she stupidly wondered how his mouth would feel on her skin. *Will the hairs of his beard be bristly or soft?*

“Not really.” Without further elaboration, he turned right on High Street instead of toward town. She’d expected him to bring her straight back to the clinic.

She cocked her head and pointed behind them. “My home is that way.”

“Thanks for telling me,” he retorted.

*Yeah, all right, of course he knows.* She shrugged. As it seemed, they still weren’t all that great at communication. “Are we going to your place?”

He hummed his assent.

The light fluttering in her stomach was part confusion and part excitement —confusion won. It wasn’t that she genuinely minded. Returning to her empty apartment didn’t appeal to her in the least, and while he wasn’t the most social company, he was a person to talk to. Joy was genuinely a social person and didn’t do well in solitude at all. “Why are we going there instead of the clinic?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure. I tend to act out of character when around you.”

“Oh?” Her heart started to race, and if she’d been standing, her knees might have given out.

“Yes, ‘oh.’ Listen.” The moving vehicle slowed as Ray eased off the accelerator “If you want to go back to the clinic, I

understand.”

Joy placed a hand on his bicep and tried to ignore how deliciously the muscles under her hand bunched. “I would love to see your home and meet your dogs. How many do you have?”

His face softened into a smile. “Fifteen, including seven pups.” They picked up speed again.

“Puppies?” A wide grin took over the lower half of her face, and she all but bounced in her seat.

## CHAPTER 7

Joy sank against the backrest. *I must be insane. Letting him take me home with him.* She didn't know him. But on a subconscious level she trusted him.

*You trusted another man... well, a boy. And you remember how that worked out...*

Joy frowned.

“What is it?”

He had either caught her mood or her expression. It showed her he wasn't bulldozing all over her without thoughts or concerns for her feelings. Some of the tension seeped from her body. “I was just berating myself for going with you. I mean...” She didn't know how to finish that sentence, so she made an all-encompassing gesture with her hands.

“You don't know me and you don't know my intentions, you mean?”

“Yes, that.” She shrugged. “It's a bit late for that. If you're an axe-murderer, I'm probably doomed.”

He snorted. “Princess, there are a lot of things I would like to do with you, but killing you isn't one of them.”

Tingles ran over her skin and her nipples pebbled against the padding of her bra. The temperature of the van seemed to

increase by several degrees, and a throbbing started in her lower half.

*Bad body!*

She shifted restlessly.

Before she had a chance to respond, let alone formulate a witty comeback, the road just came to a stop. He slowed the vehicle to a snail's pace as they bumped over the rutty path and into a clearing surrounding a charming and well-tended log cabin, a large barn, and a few smaller sheds.

On the ride to his place, she'd tried to envision how he would live. The real thing was a little bit like she imagined it and nothing like it at all.

"Please stay seated." He killed the engine and hopped out of the vehicle.

Her eyes roamed over the cabin. She'd expected the wraparound porch, but not the cleanliness and the tiptop state the building was in. She glanced over at the barn and sheds. Even those were in better shape than many houses she'd seen in this area. Faint sounds of dog growls, not-quite barks, chuffs and howls drifted toward the car.

As she stared, her mouth dropped open when he rounded the hood of the van and opened the door for her. Stunned silent, she let Ray help her out. The dogs' vocalizations became even louder.

"I, um." She tipped back her head and stared into his strong face. "I didn't figure you for such a gentleman."

"Even a caveman can have manners."

*A joke? The man has a sense of humor?*

“Apparently so do mountain men.” She grinned. He was fun to tease.

To her surprise, he put an arm around her. “Stay close to me. It’s getting darker already and this morning I found a few rabbit holes I need to take care of before someone breaks an ankle.”

She elbowed him in his side. “Oh please.” She might have protested a bit more or stepped away, but after the strange ride, her synapses weren’t all firing. The cold wind had picked up, a light rain drizzled down on them, and the sun had retreated behind dark grey clouds. The temperature had dropped considerably. The contrast with the cold after the warm interior of the vehicle was abrasive, but the warmth blazing from him was welcoming. Right now, there was nothing *sunny* about Chesuncook, but *cooking* up inside her was a storm of emotions that she wasn’t yet ready to address.

Oh, yes, Ray seemed to be a nice man, but Richard had also seemed nice before he turned into a dick. *No, no, I best stay clear of developing any feelings for him or any other man.*

She stiffened a bit and he immediately let go of her shoulders, although he kept a hand curled around her upper arm. Trying to ignore the way his knuckles grazed the side of her breast, she let him lead her to one of the smaller sheds, but away from the sounds of the more agitated dogs.

Pine needles crunched beneath their feet, and crisp air wafted around them as they neared the wooden shed. The dogs in the barn settled, letting room for other sounds to penetrate the otherwise quiet countryside.

“Ready?” Ray let go of her arm and reached for the door handle.

Joy nodded.

After opening the door for her, Ray gestured for Joy to enter the small shed. A light dog musk, clean straw, and the undefinable scent of pups rushed up her nose, and she gasped. Her first instinct was to rush to the pups, but she knew better, especially when the female dog tensed.

Glancing over her shoulder at Ray, she whispered, “They are adorable.”

The normally stoic man flashed a grin. “I haven’t seen an ugly puppy in my life, but I must admit Kyana’s litter is gorgeous. Of course, I’m totally biased when it comes to her.”

Joy’s gaze returned to the beautiful adult Husky and her pups. “The mother’s name is Kyana?”

“Yes.”

Kyana lifted her head and sniffed the air. Warmth spread through Joy’s chest. “Beautiful name for a beautiful dog.”

“Thank you.”

Moving sideways to the mother and for now ignoring the little creatures, Joy offered her hand, keeping her fingers curled toward her palm. As she made sure it was the dog’s final decision to make first contact, she almost prayed for the Husky to accept her.



*The little vet knows how to approach a dog.* It was not surprising, given her occupation but it pleased him more than it perhaps should. Warily, Kyana looked from him to her pups and to the stranger. Then she dropped her guard and her nose engaged.

After a good long sniff, Kyana relaxed more. *Yeah*, Ray thought, the city girl smells good— no cigarette stench, no clinging perfumes, just a hint of soap or laundry detergent, clean sweat, and the fresh scent of the outdoors.

After receiving the doggy approval, Joy sank to her haunches and gave Kyana a hearty scratch under the chin.

*More points to the vet.* Most people would start by stroke a dog over the head, which was plain threatening to the animals. Most people would also go for the little ones, but Joy had focused on the mother dog, who lapped it all up.

As Kyana cozied up to the little veterinarian, Ray leaned a shoulder against the wall and stood back. Joy had a way with the dog, and he could easily picture the little vet working and healing different kinds of animals. Strange how *city girl* didn't sound right in his ears anymore.

Ray joined her and Kyana, as Joy unhurriedly won the reserved Husky's trust and gave the pups some attention and a thorough examination. Soon, they were both seated on the floor while the pups tried to climb in their laps, talking about the best ways to introduce the pups to the other dogs.

Although Ray had done this often enough, it was fun to talk about his dogs with Joy and she had some insightful suggestions.

They settled on the idea of bringing the adults in one-by-one, starting with Aga, since she was the oldest dog and pack-leader. All the while Ray tried to ignore how Joy's body brushed against his as she reached to stroke Kyana's flank, and how beautiful her face lit up when she laughed about the pup's antics.



## CHAPTER 8

After spending time with Kyana and her pups, Ray made her delicious scrambled eggs for dinner after which they returned to the dogs, and Joy met the other adult Huskies.

She'd formed an instant fondness for Suka. The female Husky with the soulful and intelligent expression was exceedingly independent and clearly adored Ray. Unsurprisingly, Suka made Joy work for the dog's approval, a challenge she gladly accepted. Respecting Suka's boundaries, Joy quietly and calmly talked with Ray about the dogs and his experiences with sled races. With the warmth emanating from the dogs, and her multiple layers of clothing, Joy was comfortable. Surrounded by the animals, she was in her element and Ray created the same impression.

The man oozed a calm strength that not only appealed to her, but made the dogs respect and follow his every command. She could totally picture him ushering a pack of dogs through snow and ice.

She settled more comfortably and stroked Laila's flank as she and Ray discussed animal welfare and sled races. Suka inched closer. Tamping down her excitement, Joy concentrated on Ray. Joy was sure that once in the Husky's good book, Suka would fight a polar bear to keep her human safe. But

touching the dog now or making eye-contact would be the worst beginner mistake she could make, undoing twenty minutes or so of patience and caution. The Husky's muzzle rose, her nose twitching as she took in Joy's scent. Gingerly, Suka came close enough to be in touching distance.

Joy forced herself to keep her breathing even.

The sun lines beside Ray's eyes crinkled as he watched both Joy and Suka.

*Great, I'm not only working to win the dog's approval and affection. I'm also proving myself worthy to a man I can't stop thinking about.*

A wet nose touched the side of her neck. Joy didn't move.

A couple of sniffs later, she had herself an armful of Husky and made a new friend. With Suka leaning against her, Joy suppressed a yawn. She was enjoying herself, but was also tiring really fast. Around them, the world was pitch dark and the wildlife around them stirred.

Too early for her likings but deep into the night, Ray stepped forward with an outstretched hand and a, "Come, I'll take you home before you fall asleep." *Of course, the perceptive mountain man had caught on to her waning energy.* As Ray helped her out of the dogpile, Joy had as much difficulty ignoring his strong and appealing masculinity as she'd had Suka's cautious moves earlier.

Joy gave the dogs each a final stroke, reserving the last for Suka, then followed Ray outside.

Scuffling in the underbrush and an occasional eerie screech mingled with the dogs moving around, and a gust of wind made Joy shiver, but not with alarm. Being used to the outdoors from a young age, she wasn't intimidated by her wild

neighbors. Nature's creatures make noises at night, whether prey or hunter. But once her dad taught her night sounds had a source, they were not nearly as scary anymore.

She pulled her lightweight jacket more closely around her. After the warm barn, being out in the open was jarring. And there was Ray – warm, male and muscled – drawing her against his side as he ushered her to his van parked beside the cabin.

They didn't speak much on the short drive, but it was a comfortable silence now and as different to the ride to his cabin as Chesuncook was from DC.

Seated on the passenger side, Joy stole a glance at the strong man competently handling the vehicle over the dark, bumpy, and narrow road. Like everything else, even cooking, he exuded a calm, confident competence at what he did with a singular focus. It made sense. No whimsical whoosh would finish the world-famous Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, but did he have to look so captivating while doing whatever he did?

Little by little, Joy was coming to... like the gruff man. A man who worried enough about a stranger's safety to come and look for her. Oh, it had been totally insulting and chauvinistic of him to assume she couldn't hike, but it had also been sweet and thoughtful. Exactly what she'd been missing in DC, where people genuinely minded their own business and no one would bother to help someone who'd fallen. No, they'd rather use the faller's back as a steppingstone to gain more power, money or prestige.

Ray might be a caveman, but he was a sensitive caveman who took time to stroke a dog's fur if the animal needed attention, helped the woman in his presence find her way in the dark, and made sure she was fed before he saw her safely

home. Maybe this might have been small things to anyone else, but the thoughtfulness of the gestures did something to Joy.

She'd known love, kindness, and thoughtful gestures from her parents but not from others. Her high school sweetheart betrayed her in the worst way possible and, well, Richard...

Used to being treated like a money machine and housekeeper by her ex, who would never do anything without groaning and whining and making her feel guilty, Joy was impressed and touched by the obvious ease in which Ray performed all those little things, as if he had some instinctual drive to take care of those around him. Which made her wonder who took care of him.

As he rounded the curve and turned into the clinic's driveway, the motion detection lights sprang into action, piercing the black night and pulling Joy from her musings.

The quick learner that she was, Joy stayed seated as he rounded the van and opened the door for her. Gingerly, she accepted his outstretched hand as she exited the vehicle.

The lights in front of the clinic cast a soft glow over the empty parking lot, illuminating his strong features and impressive physique.

When she lifted her gaze, he was uncomfortably close. Close enough for her to see his eyes weren't pure brown. Up close, those brown pools were as multilayered as the complex man before her.

She let out a tiny gasp when he pulled her flush against him. Unable to look away from his face, she watched as an array of emotions flashed over his features. She recognized the

wonder and the lust because these were emotions she could relate to, but there was also something she couldn't quite...

Grabbing a fistful of her hair, he dragged her face closer to his. "You have about three seconds to object."

*Object? To what?* It didn't matter, though. She wasn't sure if she could have, because her vocal cords didn't seem to belong to her. Before she had time to process or to count the seconds, his mouth covered hers and he claimed her lips in a searing kiss.

For a moment, she froze before sliding her arms around his neck and kissing him back.

A groan rumbled up his chest, and he tightened his grip on her hair. The little pinpricks of pain added to her arousal as he feasted on her mouth. He kissed a path down her exposed neck, making her gasp, before returning to her lips and boldly sinking his tongue inside.

Her knees buckled and he pinned her between the metal of the van and his equally unyielding body as the sensual assault on her senses continued. Aware of every rippling muscle, she pressed her body against him as he kissed her hard, deep and demanding.

Never in her entire life had Joy been kissed like this. Hell, she got more out of this kiss than out of all Richard's love makings combined. Panting, Joy tried to understand. *I thought Richard was a good lover.*

Richard might have been the first man to get her off, but Ray was in a different league when it came to kissing. Contrary to her ex's nighttime efforts, there was nothing hurried or ham-fisted about Ray's kiss. He didn't just kiss with his mouth, he engaged his entire body, demanding a response

from hers as well. While he mashed their lips and licked and consumed her mouth, his hands roamed over her shoulders, arms and hips. His strong fingers explored, shaped and squeezed her with an almost proprietary intent, without ever touching anything that could be called an erogenous zone. He was just... enjoying himself and learning the shape of her body as they made out like teenagers after prom night.

She wanted it to never end. At least, she didn't until her sensible brain engaged again, and she stiffened.

Ray didn't let her go, but he loosened the hold on her hair now cradling the back of her head and lifted his mouth from her lips, resting his forehead against hers.

They were both breathing hard. Joy swallowed, half cursing herself for shattering the moment, and half congratulating herself for keeping this from going too far. Nothing would come from it. She wasn't ready for an affair. Hell, she wasn't even sure what he envisioned. Maybe the man just wanted to get laid and fuck her out of his system.

For long moments, they just stood there, panting. She tried to create some distance between them and only managed to rub against his straining erection. "Um. If you don't mind. I... I should go inside," she finally stuttered out. Remembering her manners, she added a lame, "Thank you."

His lips twitched in amusement. "For what? Kissing you, saving you, or letting you see the pups?"

She pulled her eyebrows together. "You didn't rescue me."

"Maybe not." He stepped away and retrieved her backpack from the backseat.

She'd almost forgotten about her stuff.

“Let me walk you to the door.” Ignoring her protests and her attempts to take the bag from him, he gripped her above the elbow and walked her to the side entrance to her apartment above the clinic.

## CHAPTER 9



WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 2022. 9:00 AM.

CHESUNCOOK'S VET CLINIC

“My neighbors think I’m crazy going to you, but Eloise has been my companion for over fifteen years. How can I not try to help?” The pet owner, who’d introduced herself as Mary Winthrop shrugged and struggled to keep the oversized bag on her bony shoulder.

Joy smiled at the older woman on the other side of the exam table and stroked the old tabby’s mottled fur. “How long have you noticed fur loss over and above normal shedding?”

Mrs. Winthrop pursed her lips. “She has been scratching herself and leaving hair everywhere for maybe three months now. I would have gone to Martin with her, but he was already cutting down hours and I wasn’t willing to bother him with something minor.”

Joy hummed and bobbed her head, as she listened to the elderly pet owner and quizzed Mrs. Winthrop about stress, changes in diet, and daily habits. “It’s good you came. Conditions affecting your cat’s fur are often symptoms of an underlying problem.” Joy paused a moment as she gathered her thoughts. “How about I do some tests on Eloise and we discuss how to move on from there?”

The wrinkles moved as Eloise’s owner gave Joy a tentative smile. “That would be wonderful, dear.” The smile dissolved. “I hope those tests won’t cost me top dollar, because I have a rent payment coming up.”

*Ah. This is something similar from being a vet in DC.*  
“What do you do for a living, Mrs. Winthrop?”

“I’m retired, dear. I’ve been a teacher all my life. But now I have a small pension and get a little extra cash by tutoring. Some of the kids here are homeschooled and I help out when they have problems.” Eyes pale with age cleared. “Do you have kids? I could tutor them for free in return, maybe?”

“No, ma’am, just me.”

“What, no husband or boyfriend, either?” Mrs. Winthrop tsked when Joy shook her head. “Pretty young woman like you?”

Joy had to laugh. She liked Mrs. Winthrop. “I’m sure we can work something out.” She chewed her lip. “Anything else you like to do besides teaching?”

Judiciously examining the cat, Joy listened. When Mrs. Winthrop’s eyes began to sparkle as she talked about cooking and baking, it reminded Joy how empty her refrigerator was and how she missed the takeout options from DC.

She placed her palm over the wrinkled, bony hand that was stroking the feline’s head. “I’m sure we can work something out, Mrs. Winthrop.”

“Call me Mary, dear.”

“All right.” Joy nodded. She had met her first patient and a friendly face today. Her mood brightened. “Let’s fix Eloise’s problem, Mary, and maybe you can make me a meal in return?”

The sunlines beside Mary’s eyes crinkled. “That I can do.”



*SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2022. 9:00 AM. JOY'S  
APARTMENT ABOVE THE CLINIC*

Joy pulled the covers up to her ears and tried to go back to sleep. She wasn't a morning person at the best of times, and this was not a good time. Her week had been busy, with getting to know people, their pets and farm animals, and driving around memorizing the roads, landmarks, and scattered houses and farms. Some of the people had been distant and even a bit hostile, but after dealing with Raymond Redington, she had been prepared for animosity and suspicion. The people here weren't used to newcomers, and Joy wasn't just a stranger, she came direct from Washington DC, whose citizens were not renowned for honesty or integrity., Joy expected to need a little more time and hard work to let the locals warm to her. She didn't mind, but she did feel lonely. She'd also barely seen Ray, just caught glimpses of him at the gas station and the grocery store and hadn't talked to him.

On top of difficult days, her nights had been restless too, ever since the time Ray kissed her senseless. If she hadn't lain awake with the way his mouth and tongue felt on hers playing on repeat in her mind, her dreams had been far from peaceful. No, they had been carnal and erotic, featuring one particular gruff mountain man and making her wake-up with her hand between her legs and her body on the verge of coming.

The shrill, jarring buzz from her alarm turned annoying and the blankets didn't cover her ears enough to block out the repetitive sound.

Not just the alarm irked her. Although mostly sunshine and, well, joy, she needed at least twenty minutes, a shower

and breakfast to fully wake when she rose. Normally a person to appreciate life, she couldn't muster any enthusiasm for it in the early morning. In fact, it didn't matter how much sleep she got. The process of getting out of bed was still a difficult one for her. In the summer, she got a bit of help from the sunlight seeping through the curtains, but right now the dusk still held this part of the earth in its grip.

She swallowed and grimaced at the offensive taste in her mouth. Grumbling, she reached for her phone and, with unseeing eyes, fumbled for the snooze button on the screen. The alarm stopped.

Joy snatched back her arm under the covers. *Brr, it's cold.* Cold enough for smarter species –like birds, whales and bats– to migrate south to warmer areas. *And this dumb-ass human moved up north.*

She snuggled deeper under the covers. The room was still and black. Outside the wind picked up. Another reminder why she was better off beneath the blankets.

Again, the obnoxious blaring from her cellphone began.

Her stomach rumbled a protest. *Enough procrastination, Bennett!*

Almost viciously, Joy kicked off the blankets and sat on the edge of the bed. Even if it was Saturday, she needed to get up. Last week, her focus had been the clinic, but she needed to unpack her personal belongings and make this apartment her own. But not before she had her first caffeine fix of the day. And she wouldn't get that before she made some. Shivering, she made her way to the bathroom and went through her morning routine.

When she stumbled to the small kitchenette about forty minutes later to get some liquid energy from the small Keurig she brought with her, a loud banging on her front door made her jump.

Heart pounding, she rushed to the entrance to her apartment and unlocked the deadbolt.

“Ray?”

Wordlessly, he stepped over the threshold, bringing with him the scent of ozone, pines and virile man with a hint of wood smoke.

## CHAPTER 10

*SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2022. 9:30 AM. OUTSIDE  
JOY'S APARTMENT*

Ray stalked from the little vet's parking lot to her apartment with a churning in his stomach. He hadn't heard from fellow Iditarod musher Campeau in over a week and his Husky, Groza, should have had her pups days ago. Jason should have contacted Ray by now and he was not going to wait anymore.

What didn't help his mood was how he'd avoided Joy the last couple of days. Their kiss had unbalanced him, and the strange pull the woman had on him unnerved Ray.

The demanding prick in his pants didn't care about his worries. It saluted the gorgeous woman living above the vet clinic even before Ray caught sight of her. *Yeah well, my cock is a singular and callous asshole. It doesn't care about much other than getting wet.*

Scowling, he marched to the side entrance.

Ignoring his dick, he hammered on her door loud enough to make the wood rattle. The flimsy door didn't worry Ray. They were in fucking Chesuncook, where a woman alone in an apartment would be safe.

A scuffling sound came from the inside. Despite his worry for the Canadian Musher, his anticipation of seeing Joy grew.

The door opened and he shouldered past her and into her living space.

“Ray?”

Ignoring the question that rang through the way she spoke his name, he scanned the room and spotted her jacket. “Put on your shoes.”

Her eyebrows drew together.

“Please.” His plea was as surprising to himself as it showed to be on her face.

Joy opened her mouth as if to ask something, took a look at his face and seemed to think better of it.

Pleased with her acquiescence and impatient to get to Jason, he asked, “Where are your supplies?”

Down on one knee and putting on sturdy shoes, she looked up at him. “Huh?”

“Your vet supplies, bag, stuff you take on a house call.”

“House call?” Her entire attitude changed at once, from surly and surprised to all business. “I’ve set up my car as a mobile veterinary care unit. It has everything we need. What are you waiting for?” She plucked her jacket from the coatrack, grabbed a bag from the hallway side table, and hurried to the door without a glance at Ray.

Which was actually for the best, since he couldn’t stop himself staring at this amazing woman who was a skilled hiker, a sexy temptress, and a passionate veterinarian, all in one gorgeous package. The speed with which she leapt into action mesmerized him.

Then her words registered, and he snapped out of it. “Your vehicle will be useless where we are going. Let me get your bag from your car.”

That made her stop and cast him a put-out look over her shoulder. He kind of liked her attitude but there was no time to explore that now.

One eyebrow hiked up to her hairline. “Dude,” she said, ignoring his scowl, “I have got all the necessary items in that



car. A scale to weigh pets, a bag with physical exam tools like a thermometer, stethoscope, otoscope, and ophthalmoscope but so much more. That doesn't fit in one bag. Besides, I know where everything is in my car, and I don't want to waste precious time if needed on finding supplies. We're taking the Prius."

"And I'm saying that toy-automobile is useless."

The woman skidded to a halt and braced her fists on her hips. "My *Toyota* is not a *toy* and definitely isn't useless!" She emphasized the car make with an eye-roll, and if he wasn't so worried about the Canadian musher and his pregnant dog, Ray would have gladly put her over his knee to spank her for that.

Instead, he tried for patience and replied, "It *will be* where we're going." *Maddening woman!*

"Yeah, you keep saying that. But I have yet to reach a place where I didn't get because of the performance of my car. I've been driving around for weeks in it."

"You need all-wheel or four-wheel drive, if you want to gain traction on the road during winter." He gestured around. "As you might have well noticed, we don't have neatly asphalted roads like the big city here. Really, an all-wheel drive has three differentials in different parts of the car. This way your four tires can get traction independently of each other, allowing the car to handle all types of weather situations. You'll need that, especially when the roads get muddy, and snow starts to fall."

Eyes sparking like embers, she lifted her stubborn chin. "Dude, did you just mansplain all-wheel drive to me?" Her glare told him what she thought of that, then she shrugged it off. "Well, I don't see mud or snow, so today—" She gestured to her car and started walking. "—we can take mine."

Ray halted her with his hand around her elbow. “Sorry, Princess.” He inhaled and exhaled deliberately before continuing, “We’re going to check on a friend of mine who lives off the grid in a dry cabin with his dog and not much else. The path going up to his lot is tricky enough in my Chevy Express, and the van *has* all-wheel drive. Trust me on that.”

She studied him for a few heartbeats, then nodded. “Call me weird, but for some strange reason, I do trust you.”

It could have been she was talking about more than his assertion about cars and roads, but Ray didn’t give himself time to think about that.

After they moved what looked to him like an entire veterinary clinic from her Prius to his Chevy, they both hopped into the cabin and started the long and difficult drive. “Didn’t you work in a clinic back in DC?”

“Huh?” She had been staring out of the passenger side window and slowly turned her head his way.

Ray thumbed over his shoulder. “The supplies.”

“Oh that.” She rubbed her forehead. “Sorry, haven’t had coffee yet and my brain hasn’t kicked in.” She visibly held back a yawn. “Since pets are often stressed by travel and they don’t like the sights, sounds, and smells associated with a busy veterinary clinic, I offered a mobile veterinary practice for the owners who wanted to spare their fur babies the distress. I also used it to reach the homeless and the elderly.”

Ray slowed to cross a narrow bridge. “Homeless?”

“Homelessness in DC is two times the national average and about ten percent of them have pets.”

The road widened a fraction, and he increased his speed again. Trees whizzed by as Joy explained further. “There are

many reasons for the homeless to have pets. Homeless people are often ignored, but passers-by will often interact with the dog or cat and in extension with the pet owner. Pets, especially dogs, can act as an alarm and deterrent to theft. Also, the responsibility of caring for an animal can give them a purpose in life.”

“Hmm, I can see how a pet might benefit the owner, but is it fair to the animal?”

She crossed her arms over her chest, and Ray swallowed as the movement drew the attention to her breasts. He focused back on the road. *The woman was more distracting than a cellphone and God knew how many accidents came from handling those while driving.*

“Contrary to what you seem to believe, I didn’t experience widespread animal abuse or neglect from the homeless pet owners. On the contrary, they take better care of their pets than they do themselves.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Okay?” Disbelief was edged in her voice.

Ray raked his hand through his hair. “I can’t say I’m an expert on the subject and you have first-hand knowledge.” Wanting to get off the subject, he pointed to the steep uphill path up ahead. “We’re going to take that dirt road. Jason’s dog should have had her pups by now. I’ve been trying to call him, but he isn’t answering, which isn’t like him at all.”

Joy threw a skeptical glance through the side window. “He might not have stable cell service up this mountain.”

“There’s no service at all actually, but he has a ham radio.”

“Oh.” Understanding filling her, she bobbed her head and rapidly blinked. “I guess a radio makes more sense in remote

areas. But he hasn't replied in days?" Her expression became one of concern. "That would have me worried, too. How do you know him?"

They left Pine Stream Road, the tree branches scraping against the van as they bobbed over the mud and the tires crunched over gravel, sticks and leaves. "Like me, Jason participated in the 2015 Iditarod and ended only three places below me." Ray glanced over and saw that Joy had braced her left hand on the dashboard and clutched the grab bar with the right. He didn't take it for a wordless way to criticize his driving skills but couldn't help wanting to tease her. "Glad you took my advice?"

"Huh?"

"Aren't you happy we took my Chevy instead of your car?" The screech of a rather thick branch against the side of the van punctuated his question.

Joy winced. "I can't say I'm not."



Ray cursed when he pulled up next to the shabby cabin where his friend lived.

"What?" Uncurling her hand from the 'oh shit handle', Joy peered out of the windshield and tried to see what had the mountain man upset.

He pointed to the chimney. "No smoke."

Joy glanced at the dashboard, catalogued the twenty-eight degrees outside temperature and nodded. "That's not a good sign. You go check, I'll get the supplies."

He stayed immobile for a few seconds, then huffed a laugh. “Bossy little vet aren’t you?” He didn’t wait for her to answer but hopped out of the Chevy and strode to the cabin. He didn’t run, didn’t rush, but somehow he was at the door before Joy had reached the back to gather her stuff.

She was maybe two minutes behind, but before she had collected all she might need, Ray was already back outside. “Need you in here. It’s bad!”

Without bothering to close the van, she rushed to be at his side.

Beneath his beard, Ray was pale, and he looked like someone had punched him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Jason is... he is—” Ray stopped, inhaled deeply, and continued, “Can you check the dogs? I need to—” Again he broke off and looked behind him and inside the cabin as if had no clue what to do next.

“Ray!” Gripping his arm with her free hand, she pulled his attention back to her. “What’s the situation?”

“What? Oh, sorry.” He raked a hand through his hair. “Ehm, you have a female dog with four pups. They look about a week old or less.”

She squeezed his arm, and forced herself to ask, “What happened to your friend?”

“I think he’s dead.”

“Have you called it in? Oh blast, cell phones don’t work up here.”

“No, they don’t. But I ... I can radio it in. I have to go take care of things. Can... can you check the dogs? I’m not sure if

—” Again he didn’t finish his sentence and stared into the distance.

Understanding how upset he was, Joy took over. Raymond Redington might be a tough alpha man, right now he was someone in need and hurting. While she did not always know how to deal with his dominance, she sure as hell knew what to do with someone in need. “Okay. Let me check if you’re right about your friend and then take a look at the dogs. You call for help.”

He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed one hand over his mouth.

“Ray!” She let go of his arm and gave him a push. “Call. For. Help.”

“What? Oh, yes, right. Radio. I’m going.”

Shaking her head, she followed him inside. To her relief, since she had no clue how to use the strange device, Ray seemed to pull himself together enough to engage the radio and call for help. Satisfied, she ignored him and checked the cabin owner. It didn’t take her long to confirm Ray’s assessment. His friend was very much dead, had been for a couple of days from the looks and odor of it.

Since there wasn’t much she could do here, she followed the mouselike squeaky sounds into what appeared to be the bedroom. In the corner, a black and white Husky lifted her head and let out a low whine.

“I know, mama, I know.” Feeling the urge to check the dog and the small bodies pressed against her, Joy controlled her breathing and approached the adult dog, adhering to canine etiquette.

Joy deliberately ignored the dogs and tried to get a feel for the room and the conditions the dogs were in. There were food and water bowls, licked clean and long dry. The pups were squirming and squeaking. No big worries there, but the mother dog had sunken flanks and a dull coat. Luckily this wasn't a very big litter, otherwise the mother might not have managed for this long on her own with the pups.

After filling the water bowl and discovering the kibble, Joy kept her distance from the dog bed and squatted while averting her eyes. Keeping her body loose and relaxed, Joy did a visual assessment of mother and pups. Leisurely blinking her eyelids, she made sure not to get face-to-face with the Husky.

Mama dog, who'd been eying Joy warily, stretched her neck and sniffed the air.

"That's right, beautiful girl," Joy coaxed in a calm, reassuring voice. "I'm here to help."

The dog's relaxed posture didn't change, and her tail pounded the floor. The Husky turned her head and looked at Joy with the softest, most beautiful grey-blue eyes she'd ever seen. Her heart melted for the female dog, who lost her pack leader before or soon after giving birth. Joy offered the dog her hand for investigation and got herself a lick. Digging her hand into the bag with dog food, she offered a handful of kibbles to the adult Husky. Despite having not eaten for a while, the dog took the food politely from Joy's hand and licked her fingers after swallowing the last bite.

While Joy made sure the mother drank some, she did a quick exam of the pups. They were colder to the touch than she liked, but alert with healthy coats, and they showed plenty of energy.

By the time, the coroner arrived, she had put mama dog on a drip, cleaned up the soiled birthing bed, and had set up a heating pad and clean linens for the litter to rest on. The dogs settled for now, Joy went to join Ray and to see what she could do to help.



## CHAPTER 11

*SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2022. 4:30 PM. JASON'S CABIN*

After handling formalities, when everybody but them had left, Ray and Joy transferred the dogs to Ray's truck. Darkness was settling in, and Joy wanted to get off this damn mountain like yesterday.

After he deposited the four pups with their mom in the special travel crate he always carried like they were made of spun glass, Joy assessed the strong man beside her. Grief had deepened the lines on his face and his normal tan had given way to a pasty white that worried her. Her gaze slid down tense shoulders, rigid arms and trembling hands. He was keeping it together, but the shock was taking over his body. "Let me do the driving."

"No. No, that's okay." He stuffed his shaking hands in his pockets and shook his head. "You're not familiar with these roads or with my Chevy."

"I'm sure I can handle both the van and the roads. Come on, give me the keys." She held out her hand, like the stubborn man would just hand over his keys or give her the control.

"My keys?" He pulled one hand from his pocket, holding them. "I can drive. I just need a moment to—" He closed his eyes for a few heartbeats. When he opened them, the grief in those dark orbs hit Joy like a punch.

"You don't need to do anything, and you shouldn't drive, trust me." He didn't move and she took the keys from his hand as cautiously as she would remove a muzzle from an angry Rottweiler. He let her. "Come on, Ray, we have a mama dog and her pups to take care of."

The reminder of the dogs seemed to snap him out of his daze, and he let her close the back door and usher him to the passenger side seat.

After sliding behind the wheel and adjusting the seat, she familiarized herself with the controls. “Has your friend been ill?”

“Nothing I knew about. He’s a few years older than I am, but –you know– fit.”

She started the vehicle and began the slow descent from the mountain. She wouldn’t confess this to Ray, but she gave a little thanks to the heavens there wasn’t any snow. “I guess you have to be fit to finish the Iditarod.”

She concentrated on controlling the van and let the silence after her statement linger. If he wanted to talk, he would. The decision was up to him.

“True. The course of the race is about one-thousand-one-hundred miles, and it takes more than a week to finish. You need to be in shape and have your wits together to work with your dogs. To keep them and yourself safe and healthy during the race.” Some of his color returned on his face as he spoke about his passion.

“Did you meet your friend here or in Alaska?”

“Jason?”

She nodded and winced as a thick branch scraped the side of the car.

If Ray heard the sound, he ignored it. “No, Jason didn’t live here back then. Before you can compete in what we like to call the Last Great Race, you’re required to run three or more approved qualifying races. I first met Jason in 2012. It was the year after I inherited the cabin and the dogs from my

grandmother, and I'd just started racing. We both met at the Percy DeWolfe Memorial Mail Race in Yukon. We learned a lot that year and became friends as well as competitors."

"You liked him."

"Yes, I did." He gave her a sideward glance, and his lips curved in a wry smile. "I don't like many people, but he is, ehm was, one of the good kind."

"How did he come to live here?"

"That's an entirely different story. He's Canadian, pretty well-known up there, but he got some harassment from the press and some animal welfare organizations when he lost two dogs in 2018, outside his control might I add."

She nodded, concentrating on the difficult road.

Ray must have misread her distraction as disapproval because he was silent for several beats, then said, "Look, your sled dogs are your only hope of extracting yourself from the wilderness. In return, the dogs rely one hundred percent on your directions and leadership. You can't imagine what a close relationship that creates. We're with our dogs twenty-four/seven and we train with them for months, even years. Do you honestly think we'd risk those animals for shits and giggles?" He raked a hand through his hair.

Joy waited if he was going to say more. When he didn't, she placed her hand on his forearm. "I've seen how you care for your dogs, and they clearly adore you." Her voice was quiet but assertive.

Some of the starch left his body. Had he been afraid of her rejection?

"Do I think there are some bad mushers? Of course, there are," Joy said. "People can be careless assholes."

He blinked and deliberately turned his head her way.

“What?”

“For a princess, you do have a potty mouth, you know?”

“Ah, but I’m *not* a princess.”

Ray hummed. Maybe in agreement or not, it didn’t matter to Joy. He was more relaxed, more himself, and the driving had gotten easier now she reached one of the main asphalted roads. They stayed silent until they reached the clinic and set about to settle the dogs and return her supplies to the Toyota.

Ray pulled the crate with the dogs forward in the back of the van. “Where should we put Groza and the pups?”

“I was thinking in the kitchen. It has a tiled floor if there are any mishaps, and they are close enough for me to easily check up on them.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He opened the door to the crate. “Hey mama, how are you doing?”

Groza gave a typical Husky answer, a melodic whine, winning a smile from Ray. “Is that so?”

Joy gave the dog a once over. “She’s looking much better. Let’s see if she can stand on her own legs?” She handed Ray a leash.

After a short turn around the parking space, which Groza hurriedly used to do her business, Ray turned over the leash to Joy with a, “Take her upstairs, I have the pups,” and gathered the four little creatures in his arms.

Leaving Ray and the dogs in the kitchen, Joy went to collect a dog bed from the clinic, an electrical heating pad and some blankets.

Less than ten minutes later, Groza was settled in the soft blankets and nursing her offspring.

Joy took a deep breath and savored the moment, as a tiredness that was more fulfilling than exhausting settled over her body. “It’s a relief this is a small litter. Most large dog breeds I know have at least six or seven pups and even more. I’m not sure if they’d survived when there would have been ten or more of them.”

Ray rose from his crouch and leaned his hips against the kitchen counter. “The survival instinct of a wolf –and therefore also for a Husky– is strong. When a Husky is pregnant, she usually gets the number of pups she can handle. In fact, we never see ten or more as you sometimes might experience with other breeds.”

Squatted beside the dog bed, Joy snapped her gaze to him. “No?” *Huh, how about that?* “That’s actually pretty awesome. One of my first days on the job, I helped a four-year-old Golden Retriever give birth to eighteen pups. I can tell you it gave some complications, and two pups didn’t survive. But sometimes, mama dogs can manage large litters fine. As far as I know, the largest litter of puppies ever born is twenty-four. That was also a sizeable breed, a Neapolitan Mastiff. So, it is possible for dogs to give birth to a considerable amount of healthy pups.” She ruffled the adult dog’s fur and received an adoring gaze from stark blue eyes. “I’m not sure if mama here would have done well with more than a handful of pups, though.”

“Hmm, maybe not.” Ray held out his hand to help Joy stand up, and after a short hesitation she took the offered hand. “Although all Aga’s daughters have good mother instincts.”

“She’s one of yours?”

Ray nodded. “She is. Groza is from the same litter as Suka.”

“Wow. I fell in love with Suka almost instantaneously. Aga sure makes great offspring.”

“Hm-mm, she does. Aga is the one I started my Husky breeding business with. Aga is also Kyana’s mother, but she came from a later litter.”

## CHAPTER 12



*SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2022. 7:30 AM. JOY'S  
APARTMENT*

Groggily, Joy woke, curled her fist around the edge of the duvet, and snuggled the fabric under her chin. Barely any light filtered through the curtains, and her bedroom was still plunged in darkness. She wondered what woke her and how late it was. Glancing at her nightstand, she decided checking her phone was too much effort. Cocooned in her bedding, she was cozy and warm and not ready to face a new day. Her alarm would go off when it was time to get up. That was early enough to know the time.

She burrowed deeper into the mattress.

*Did I set my alarm last night?*

Joy engaged her sleep-fogged mind and tried to remember going to bed last night. She drew a blank. Blinking, she inhaled the comforting fragrance of her favorite fabric softener on her bed linens. Then the delicious rustic fragrance of burnt wood, leather, cedar and pine hit her nose. The earthy tones and the breath of fresh forest were invigorating and refreshing and distinctively Ray.

*Ray?*

Trying to keep her breathing even, she stilled.

What had happened last night? One by one, the memories came back. Ray collecting her. Then... discovering the gruesome sight, the horror of the death and the relief when the female Husky and her pups were still alive.

*The dogs!*

“Good morning.” The raspy, deep voice sent shivers over her spine.

Sluggishly she turned around. It was too dark to see, but she could feel his presence now.

“What are you doing here?”

Instead of an answer, she heard rustling of clothing and the mattress moved. A click and the bed lamp came on.

“Hell!” She squeezed her eyes shut against the sudden burst of light.

“Sorry.” His voice was more amused than apologetic.

Squinting, she let her eyes adjust to the lighting and took in all that was Ray.

Stretched on top of the covers, wearing yesterday’s clothing, he had propped his head up on one hand, looking way too good for this early in the morning.

She swallowed, wincing at the dryness of her throat, and croaked, “What time is it?”

“About seven-thirty. You’re definitely not a morning person, are you?”

She grumbled something unintelligible. Despite her mood, her heart did a little boogie-woogie dance and sang, *He stayed, he stayed, he stayed*. She cleared her throat. “The dogs?”

“I fed mom about twenty minutes ago and checked the pups. The heating pad is working very well, and the little ones are doing fine.”

Her lips parted and she started to reach for his hand, caught herself and instead pressed her hand to her heart. Joy closed her eyes and pointedly nodded as she let the relief sink

in. A suppressed part in her wanted to be held, but she didn't dare to ask. In fact, she didn't seem to be able to formulate an appropriate verbal response. Her head felt light and her throat clogged up.

“Hey, hey.” His words were soft and comforting.

Joy let out a sound of distress and suddenly she was in his arms. She wasn't sure which of them made the first move, but she couldn't care, not when he cradled her against his warm and solid chest. Being in his embrace released something inside her and the tight grip she was holding onto her emotions snapped like an overstretched elastic band. A sob escaped past the lump in her throat. He rubbed her back. Another sob found its way up. The dam broke and tears trickled down her face and into his shirt, leaving a wet patch. It didn't bother him, or if it did, he didn't show it. He just held her and allowed her to let out all the pent-up stress and emotions. She cried for Ray's friend, she cried for her parents, and she cried because of the mother dog and the four tiny creatures, who stood a chance of survival because of what Ray and she'd done yesterday.

Gradually, her tears slowed, and Joy became more aware of her surroundings. She was in bed with a sexy man she was becoming to appreciate more and more each day. A man with a tough exterior and a steel core to guard a heart of gold. But also a man who turned her on like no other. Beneath her ear, his heart beat a comforting and steady lub-dub, and beneath her hands, his muscles were hard and rippling as he stroked her back in a slow, soothing rhythm. The air thickened and her breathing changed.

Ray stilled.

Reluctantly, Joy lifted her head from his chest and craned her neck to check his expression. His cheeks were flushed and

his eyes had darkened.

The corners of her mouth tipped up when she became aware of the direction of his gaze. She looked down. Her comforter was puddled at her waist and her chest was bare. She swallowed. The sensible part in her wanted to cover up. The more daring part in her wanted her to thrust out her breasts and entice him to do... more.

He uncurled one arm from behind her back. Their gazes reconnected.

Without breaking their eye contact, he lightly stroked the tip of his index finger over the top of her left breast. "Soft." His finger circled the areola. The skin around her nipple puckered when the sensitive bud stiffened. "Fuck, that's sexy."

Still keeping his eyes locked with hers, he lowered his head slowly, giving her time to protest if this wasn't what she wanted. She'd never wanted anything more. Joy pressed her thighs together as her core clenched and her pussy dampened. His lips closed over the hardened bud and wet heat engulfed the sensitive flesh. Sensations bombarded her as he sucked on one breast, fondling her bottom with one hand and her free breast with the other. Joy closed her eyes and threw back her head, absorbing his touch that seemed to be everywhere on her body at the same time. Her own hand slid behind his head, and she entwined her fingers with the strands of his hair, holding him against her chest as he feasted on her nipples and the soft mounds of her breasts.

"Oh, Ray," she moaned.

He lifted his head, his lips wet and slightly swollen and his eyes half-lidded and filled with lust. "God, Princess, you have gorgeous breasts, and I could feast on them for hours. But at

the same time, I want to see, lick, and kiss the rest of your delectable body.”

She hummed her pleasure. “I have no objections.”

“Hm-mmm.” He lowered her to the mattress and stripped off the covers. A disturbing moment, she was flooded with insecurity and doubt, then he groaned.

“All that soft skin and toned muscles. You’re absolutely gorgeous, Princess, and utterly sexy.”



Ray stared at the beautiful woman stretched out beneath him like a pagan sacrifice. Her breasts heaved with every breath she took, and her nipples were a deep red from his ministrations. Like a Sarcodes flower in the snow, they stood out against the creamy white of her soft mounds.

First, he thought she’d gotten under his skin because he hadn’t been with a woman for a long time, and this pull was just his libido playing up. The more she revealed from herself, she pulled him under further.

So, as well as enjoy the chemistry between them for a while, he was going to help Joy sort things out and help her to stand on her own two feet.

His gaze slid down her body over her flat stomach and lightly flaring hips. His gaze riveted on the apex of her thighs where a neat strip of trimmed hair led the way to her core. “Open your legs.” His voice was deep and guttural. He didn’t care.

Instead of obeying, she pushed up on her elbows and ran a heated look over his torso. “Why am I naked and you still fully

dressed?”

“Well now.” He blinked, then gripped the back of his T-shirt. He ducked his head, pulled the fabric over his head and off.

“Oh my.” Her eyes roamed over his upper body, taking in every inch of his skin, and heating his flesh with her obvious enjoyment and approval.

A masculine pride akin to what he felt when finishing the Iditarod filled his chest to bursting. He sent her a mock glare. “Now stop making me horny and let me continue on my mission.”

“Your mission?”

“Absolutely, I need to savor every inch of your skin.”

“Oh?”

“Hm-mmm. After that little appetizer, I’m going to settle in for the main course.”

“Is that so?”

“That’s right. I’m going to eat your pussy until you scream my name so loud my dogs will hear you.”

“I’m not much of a screamer.” She started to sit up and reached her palm out to touch him.

Ray intercepted her hand and shook his head. “That’s not how we’re going to do this, Princess.”

Her delicate brows drew together.

“When we’re in bed, when we’re like this, I call the shots.”

“W-What?” The expression of utter confusion on her face was priceless.

“I’m a Dominant man, Princess.”

“Oh, yeah, I noticed you’re a bossy bastard sometimes.”

He grinned. “You haven’t seen half of it.”

She huffed and muttered something beneath her breath he couldn’t quite catch.

It didn’t sound like a compliment, but he didn’t want to start their physical relationship with a punishment, so he chose to ignore it, for now. He lowered his voice to rumble of warning. “You don’t have permission to speak.”

“B-but...”

He narrowed his eyes at her, and her mouth snapped shut submissively. His cock, already half-mast from the moment the atmosphere between them changed, was rock hard and throbbing in a blink of an eye.

“In fact, all I want to hear from your lips until, hmm, maybe breakfast, is moans or my name, with one exception. If there’s something you really don’t like, say ‘stop’ and we’ll talk.”

On her forehead a small line appeared, but she didn’t protest.

Ray rose from the bed and rummaged through the room for a few moments before he found the perfect object. She hadn’t moved from her spot on the bed and looked puzzled at the silken scarf he found in her closet. Walking back to her, he formed two identical loops, overlapped them, then threaded each loop through the other and tightened them.

Wonder, a bit of trepidation, and a bucketload of curiosity slid over the little vet’s face, and he reminded her, “Say ‘stop’ and everything ends.”

She nodded.

“Good girl.” He set one knee on the bed. “Now offer me your wrists.”

For a few beats she just stared at the scarf, then she lifted her arms and did as he told her.



As she allowed him to cuff her with her own damn scarf and tie her to the headboard, Joy wondered if she'd gone insane.

She couldn't stop staring at the man who had tied her in knots and not just literally.

“Remember, no talking.” He finished the ties and now rested his hands on her shoulders.

She wanted to squirm. She wanted him to move his hands lower. She needed. He bent and took her mouth in a demanding kiss. The moment his tongue slid inside her mouth and dueled with hers, she tried to wrap her arms around him, to hold him to her, and discovered she couldn't. The sexual tension inside coiled tighter, and more wetness gathered between her legs. Her inner walls clenched painfully around the emptiness inside.

Joy wanted to scream. But she wouldn't, couldn't, let go of her control so easily.

He broke their kiss and hummed his satisfaction.

Every nerve on her skin came alive as he danced his fingers down her collarbone and over her breasts.

Gah, the infuriating man was starting all over again. And she couldn't speak. Couldn't give directions. How would he



know what she liked, how she liked it? Hell, Richard had been in her bed for months and still needed guidance.

Hands moved up again, and a fingertip teased over her cheek, down her neck, and over the shell of her ear.

*Wrong direction, buddy. Do you need a map?*

His face came into view, and she pressed her lips together and tried to convey her message with her eyes. The jerk grinned.

“You’re not very patient, are you?”

He caught a fistful of her hair and angled her head so he could nibble on her neck. His lips were warm, the air was cool, and the mattress beneath her was soft, helping her to sink down and soften as well. His fingers untangled from her hair, and a warm hand stroked over the tops of her breasts.

Her nipples tightened - the points turning hard and aching. A soft moan escaped her lips before she could stop it.

“That’s it, Princess, give me those sounds.”

Her mouth opened to tell him to move on, but he reminded her, “No speaking. Only moans or my name.”

She moved her head against the pillow in an affirmative.

“That’s a good girl.”

Her muscles relaxed as pleasure from his approval washed over her. Good girl, such a condescending phrase, but no, it wasn’t. She liked being good for him. There was no shame in that. There was no shame in a woman liking it when her man called the shots. It didn’t make her weak.

A nasty pinch on her hip made her gasp. Her eyes flew open and met his dark pools of desire and determination.

“I’m not sure what is going through that head of yours, but I can make an educated guess. A professional woman like you brought up in a world where women are expected to be tough, leaders, measuring their skills with men. Submitting in the bedroom doesn’t make you weak, Princess. Only a strong person can truly hand over the reins and let go.”

Her head spun. “I…”

Ray shook his head.

*Damn it. I’m not supposed to speak.*

Joy sighed and gave in to what he wanted, to what she needed.

“That’s it.” Pure male satisfaction oozed from the words.

Warm lips, callused hands and a roaming tongue explored her entire upper body. Her pussy throbbed for attention. Taking his time, Ray kneaded her breasts, suckled on her flesh, and even dipped his tongue in her belly button, making her giggle.

Cupping her mound, he slid a finger inside her slick heat and licked a circle around one nipple, then the other. He pumped his finger in and out, added another.

Arching into his touch, she let out a whimpering, mewling sound.

“Oh, is it like that?” He shuffled down the bed and placed his hands on the insides of her thighs. Her control wavered a bit more, like she stood on the slippery slopes of desire. “Open your legs wide for me. What a fucking gorgeous pussy.” He ran a finger over the sensitive crease between her upper leg and outer lips. “Puffy, pink and wet. Already primed to take my cock to the hilt.”

*Oh yes, yes please.*

He chuckled when her muscles spasmed. “Oh, you’ll get my cock, but first I want to eat you until you scream. I need to drive you insane with my mouth, until I’ve removed every single doubt in your mind about what you want and need.”

She wanted to yell at him and tell him she knew exactly what she needed.

Unhurriedly, Ray settled between her legs. His hands ran over her thighs and pressed her legs even farther apart - far enough for her hip muscles to protest a bit.

Before the unpleasant sensation could overwhelm her pleasure, his mouth was on her and, oh God, forget trail sled dog racing, this man was a pussy-eating champion.

Her entire body seemed to revolve around her pussy and clit. Every cell in her body ached and demanded for more. Her muscles began to tremble and his fingers around her thighs pressed into the soft flesh as she struggled to reach the powerful orgasm building inside her. A long moan, a drawn out, “More” reverberated from deep inside her and bubbled to the surface. He gave her more. His tongue danced over her folds, dipped inside, withdrew, and circled her clit. He drove her insane with his mouth. The man had some serious skills. Strong hands kept her open for him, as she strained and bucked against the impending climax. His lips closed around her clit and the sensations increased and overwhelmed her common sense as he sucked lightly, then harder.

Everything inside her coiled, ready to burst. Her muscles turned rigid as he wiggled the tip of his tongue on top of her clit. Like an avalanche, her orgasm crashed over her, first moving slow, before spinning her world out of control as the maelstrom of sensations took over.

## CHAPTER 13

She was gorgeous when she came.

Bringing her down from her orgasm, Ray watched the little vet as her breathing slowed and her muscles relaxed. She responded like a dream to his touch, the bondage, and his dominance.

Reveling in her soft skin, he stroked a soothing pattern from her hip to her knee and grinned when her pussy spasmed with little aftershocks.

“That was... wow.” She lifted her head from the pillow. “T-thank you.”

He shifted so he covered her with his body, without crushing her under his weight. “It was my pleasure.” And it had been. He enjoyed the flavor and scent of an aroused woman. If that woman was submissive and responsive, he loved it even more. He covered her mouth with his and kissed her gently, then harder when she kissed him back with an ardor he hadn’t expected. Some women were squeamish about their own tang. He preferred it when a woman enjoyed the flavor of sex and sin.

“I, um... May I, um... Can... Can I return the favor?” she asked, almost shyly.

It took a few heartbeats for him to understand what she meant. Then warmth filled his chest and blood rushed south as he comprehended. “There’s nothing I’d like more than to feel that beautiful mouth around my cock, to come down your throat and see that slim neck work as you swallow all I have to give. But right now, I want to come when I’m balls deep inside you. I want your hot, wet, tight pussy squeezing me as I fuck you until we both come.”

Shuffling from the bed, Ray made quick work of his clothes and inwardly cursed when he almost forgot to cover up. She tasted so damn good and looked so tempting spread out and tied to the bed, it almost made it impossible to think.

All he wanted was to cover her delectable body with his and sink into her inviting heat. He also wanted much more than a quick fuck.

Settling on the bed, he took her mouth for another searing kiss, and fluttered his fingers over her pussy and clit. His touch teased a moan from her and a tremor to ripple over her belly and upper legs.

Carefully, he parted her slick folds and slid one finger through them, then two.

Another gasp. “Please, Ray.”

Teasingly, he plucked at her clit. “What, Princess?”

“I need you in me.”

“I *am* in you.” Leisurely, he pumped his fingers, and turned his wrist so he was tickling her G-spot with his blunt fingernails.

“Not your fingers,” she protested weakly.

“Not?” He withdrew his hand and licked her cream from his fingers.

She pulled against the bindings.

“What do you want? You don’t get it before you say it, Princess.”

“I want your cock. I want your cock inside me. In my – my pussy. Fuck me, Ray. Please.”

Before she finished her plea, he’d settled between her thighs and lifted her knees. Her eyes were dazed, but her mouth was curved into a pleased smile. Holding her gaze, he positioned himself at her entrance. “I love how wet you are for me.”

Ray hooked her legs over his shoulders and pushed into her. His eyes almost rolled to the back of his head as her pussy rippled around him and squeezed his flesh almost to the point of pain.

Her back arched and the tendons of her neck stood out as she accepted him into her body.

“You can take it,” he told her before swooping in for another long, languid kiss.

*She enjoys kissing as much as I do*, he thought as she relaxed and some of the strangle-hold she had on his dick subsided. Experimentally, he withdrew from her body and pushed in again. “You feel amazing, little vet.” Amazing was a too tame word for it. Her cunt was a hot, tight fist around him. With each passing thrust, her pussy softened, and her muscles relaxed, accepting him. Gripping her hips, he began a smooth rhythm, making her moan with each plunge. He moved faster. She was so fucking hot, tight, and slick around him, he

worried he might embarrass himself by coming in under a minute like some untried, horny teenager.

Her pelvis rose, matching his every thrust. The carnal sound of sex joined her moans and his grunts as they moved to the ancient beat of coupling. As he drove harder, her blush deepened and her nipples bunched tighter.

Ray gritted his teeth as his balls drew up. No, no way. Not without pushing her over the edge with him.

Letting go of her hip with his right hand, he locked their gazes and licked the pad of his index finger.

Her eyes widened and she shook her head. “No, no, please Ray, I can’t.”

“You can and you will.”

Strategically, he placed the digit on top of her clitoral hood and used the rocking motion of his hips to wiggle her clit with each forward thrust.

Her head tipped back, and her eyes closed. “Oh Ray, oh God, Ray. Yes, Fuck. Yes. Ray, Ray, Raymond, Raaaay!” As she vocalized her pleasure with gorgeous abandon, he pounded into her like a man possessed.

The heels of her feet dug into his shoulders as her legs tightened in impending orgasm. His release was hovering beneath the surface, and hot tingles rushed up his spine. “Come for me, Princess,” he ordered and slid his finger from the clitoral hood right on top of the sensitive bud, and she stilled, hovering on the pinnacle. Her body was tight as a bow, but she didn’t climax.

*She needs more.* “Let go, little vet, I got you.”

On a scream that spoke of repressed passion and pain, her pussy rippled and clamped around him. The fantastic sensations around his cock shoved Ray into the mother of all orgasms. With a harsh grunt, he jammed himself as deep inside her as humanly possible. Come exploded from his dick in almost painful jets as her cunt milked every drop he had to give.

Letting out a shuddering breath, he lowered her legs from his shoulders. He collapsed forward on his arms and struggled to get her out of the bindings. Before he could roll away, she wrapped her arms and legs around him like a vice and held on to him. Her pussy still gave little aftershocks around him. Keeping most of his weight on his arms, he brushed his thumbs over her shoulders and allowed his body to come down from the force of his release.

As another ripple from her pushed his cock from her body, he kissed her temple. "Let me get rid of the condom." He had to grin at her pout as she relinquished her clinging hold. "I'll be right back."

But as he returned only a minute or so later with a warm washcloth, she was curled to her side and sound asleep, a soft smile still lingering on her lips. Despite his sorrow over losing an old friend, Ray had never been this content in his entire life.



## CHAPTER 14

*SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2022. 11:00 AM. JOY'S  
APARTMENT*

When Joy woke the next time, it was to a rumbling stomach and the delicious scent of Ray on her bedsheets. She did a languid stretch and stilled. The mountain man scent she associated with Ray, and a pleasant soreness at the apex of her thighs were the only reminders of him in her bed. The man in question had vanished. Disappointment rushed up her body, until her ears picked up the sound of running water from the bathroom.

As her insides did a happy dance, Joy sat up, glanced at her phone for the time, and yawned.

She'd forgotten to close the curtains last night and a weak late autumn sun did its best to cast a cheery light on the world, illuminating the bedroom. Imagining the water droplets running over his sleek skin and hard body, her inner muscles clenched and Joy pulled the blankets up to her chin. She contemplated going into the bathroom but before she got the nerves to put her thoughts into action, the object of her fantasy walked into the bedroom with only a towel riding low on his hips.

Almost swallowing her tongue, she propped herself up on her elbows as he rounded the bed to her side and bent in for a long, hot kiss. He smelled vaguely of her pine shampoo and his very masculine personal scent, heightened by the hot shower.

Her stomach growled again, and he broke free with a laugh. "I guess I have to feed you before I can have you again."

“Feed me?” Her mouth dropped open. *Have me again?*

He hummed. “Is it all right if I use your kitchen while you shower?”

He sauntered around the bed and began pulling on yesterday’s clothes. She gawked. There was no excuse, or maybe just that she hadn’t had coffee yet and the man scrambled her brains.

“Joy?”

“Huh?” Guiltily, she snapped up her gaze and met twinkling dark, dark eyes. He had one leg in his jeans, looking over his shoulder to catch her ogling his ass and thighs in body-hugging navy-blue boxer briefs.

Ignoring the heat in her cheeks, she strived for nonchalance, shrugged and mouthed, “What?”

“Breakfast. Can I use your kitchen while you shower?”

“Sure, sure.” A little embarrassed and a lot self-conscious, she waited for him leave the bedroom. He hadn’t buttoned his checkered shirt, but wore it loosely around his shoulders, allowing her a glimpse of tantalizing abs and the slight smattering of chest hair.

Joy scrambled out of the bed, slid in her bathrobe and was on her way to the bathroom, when a, “What the fuck?” reached her from the kitchen.

*Uh oh. That doesn’t sound good. Was something wrong with the dogs?* Without bothering to pull on real clothes, Joy rushed to the kitchen.

Groza gave her a surprised look from the dog bed and a quick count told her all the pups were with mom. Heaving a sigh of relief, she turned toward the man, who was gaping at

the contents of her refrigerator: dozens of containers in different sizes and colors, stacked like children's blocks, completely filling all available shelf space.

*Oh shit.*

She moved beside him and gave an innocent smile. "How about taco casserole for breakfast?"

He tore his gaze from the packed shelves of her fridge and opened the freezer to stare at the rest of it, more colorful containers crammed wherever they would fit. "What is all this?"

"Ah." Joy bit her lip. "Homecooked meals."

"Why are there so many homecooked meals in your freezer?"

She shrugged. "My clients like to cook."

Blinking, he repeated, "Your. Clients. Like. To. Cook," putting emphasis on every single word.

"Uh huh." She kept her gaze firmly directed to the tiled floor.

"Seriously?" He moved closer and tipped her head up with a finger under her chin. "Don't tell me, you let them pay in meals?"

She squirmed under his scrutiny. "Ah. I don't have a truthful answer that you will like."

"Explain." A 'V' formed between his eyebrows.

"Well." Restlessly, she went up onto tiptoes and shuffled from side to side. "Mary Winthrop came over with her elderly cat, but she couldn't afford the fees, so I let her pay for the medicine only. In return, she made me a pot roast."

“Okay, that’s kind of you, but how about the rest of this? You’ve got enough here to feed an army. They can’t all be from Mary, are they?”

“Well.” Her face was so hot, it felt like she was about to explode. She jerked out of his grip and tried to turn away from him.

He gripped her shoulders and slightly shook her. “Joy Bennett, how are you supposed to run a business if you let people pay a hundred-dollar bill with a five-dollar meal??”

“I—I don’t know. It’s just, the information spread fast and before I knew it, people were coming here with containers of food. I couldn’t turn them away, could I? I—” She halted abruptly when she spotted his expression.

*Oh shit.*



She had to be fucking kidding him. Why on earth would such a competent, skilled woman allow people to pay her with leftovers and scraps? The moment the thought popped in his head, the answer occurred to him: *because she’s a sweetheart and she cares for people and animals alike. She had to be the most generous and giving person he’d ever met.*

She was also neglecting her own needs in favor of those of others and that behavior wasn’t acceptable to him.

With one hand curled around her bicep, he donkey-kicked the freezer closed, and started to steer her to the bedroom. At first, she let him, her submissive nature overpowering her common sense, but about four steps from the door, she jerked to a halt.

“Where are we going?”

“I’m taking you to the bedroom.”

“Why?”

*Teaching time.* Keeping his face stern, and his grip on her arm firm but gentle, Ray turned her so they were facing each other. The confused expression on her face was priceless. “I want you to take better care of yourself and I think you need a little incentive to do so.” He inched closer, purposefully looming over her.

Her throat worked as she tried to swallow. “Ah, I *do* take care of myself.”

“Do you now?” He raised one eyebrow as she opened her mouth, and she closed it faster than a dog pack devoured their meal after a run. “Helping an elderly lady with a small pension with her expenses is kind and Mary makes a hell of a pot roast, but some of those dishes were clearly just leftovers. You are letting people pay for their pet’s treatments with table scraps.”

Weakly, she tried to argue. “They’re mostly just coming in to meet me, you know. They get a flea treatment or a bag of special food.”

“Mostly,” he said, “but not always, right?”

She had no answer for that.

“Tell me something. Have you made any money since you started working here? Have you set the boundaries for other clients? Or have you been letting people take advantage of you?”

“When you put it like that...” Her shoulders slumped, and she let out a defeated sigh. “But you’re right. I’m such a stupid cow.”

“That’s enough!” he snapped. “Even worse than letting others disrespect you is the name calling you just did.”

“How so? I have been stupid, you just told me.”

“No, I didn’t. I told you what you did right and what you could have done better, and we’re going to discuss how you can improve so it won’t keep happening.”

Refusing to make eye contact, she frowned and shook her head.

“No?”

“It’s no use. I’m stupid and hopeless.”

“No, you’re not. And I’m going to drive you out of your head and set things straight.”

She didn’t resist this time as he escorted her into the bedroom and toward the bed. Without letting go of her arm, he sat down on the edge of the mattress, using the momentum to pull her forward and face-down over his knees.

She landed with an “Oomph,” then kicked, squirmed, and tried to push back to her feet, but with their difference in height, she had no leverage.

“What are you doing?” she asked shrilly.

“What does it look like, Princess?”

She didn’t answer but continued to struggle. Her side grazed his growing erection and she bucked again. He ignored her attempts and hooked his leg over her ankles, while using his left hand to press her down between her shoulder blades. “You will calm down and accept your punishment like a good girl,” he told her in an even voice, resting his right hand on the curve of her butt.

Her head came up, and she stiffened as his intent seemed to seep into her. “You *wouldn't*.”

“Won’t I?” Idly, he stroked over the terrycloth of her bathrobe and enjoyed how perfectly the round globe fit in his palm. “Did you or did you not call yourself nasty names?”

“I–I did.”

“Did you or did you not let others determine the worth of your labor?”

Her head dropped, and her voice was a mere whisper when she replied, “I did.”

“Therefore, I’m going to punish you with a spanking, after which we’re going to discuss what you can do better next time. Okay?”

Slowly, the stiffness left her body and although she didn’t speak, she lay still, submitting. Still, he felt the need to mention, “I think this is something you need, little vet, but if you can’t stand the spanking, you can call out ‘stop’ and we’ll just talk, all right?”

“All–all right.”

Ray peeled back the bathrobe and nearly groaned as he got a glimpse of her perfect, creamy white, heart-shaped ass in the mirrored closet doors. He clenched his teeth and he let escape the air from his lungs slowly. Damn, the mirror gave him an excellent view of the pouty lips between her legs. He waited until his voice steadied. “Four swats for trash talking yourself, six for accepting leftovers as payment.”

“O–okay.” The word shuddered from her mouth.

He almost gave up then and there but backing off now would be the wrong choice. Joy had to learn he didn’t take her



wellbeing for granted and neither should see. Testing the waters, he gave her a light slap on the right globe of her ass. “On a scale from one to ten, where one is barely any pain and ten is intolerable, how much was this?”

“Probably a three.”

“When the sting reaches an eight, call out ‘mercy’ and I will ease up on you.”

He slapped her other cheek with equal force and followed it up with a quick one-two at an estimated force of five. Pausing, he stroked the heated flesh as he waited for her to call either ‘stop’ or ‘mercy’. She did neither, but her body seemed to melt over his lap. The next two he landed with the same force, but a bit closer to her sit-spot where the skin was more tender. Again, she didn’t use any of the safewords he gave her. Next two slaps he landed over his first handprints and that earned him a little squeak. The last two, he precisely placed on the tender crease between bottom and legs, making sure not to hit too hard.

His hard cock throbbed like it had a heartbeat of its own, and his palm was warm as he kneaded and stroked her ass, giving her time to process her spanking. She hissed when his fingers grazed the tender underside where the buttock met the backside of her legs, and in the mirror, her engorged pussy was pink and open.

With a sigh of regret, Ray lowered the terrycloth over her bottom and helped her to stand up. Muddling the water with sex was not what either of them needed now, no matter that they both wanted it badly. He opened his legs and maneuvered her, so she stood between his spread thighs.

Although tears had left streaks down her face, her eyes were clear, and her face was more relaxed than downstairs.

He gave her a soft, non-sexual kiss on the lips before resting his forehead against hers.

“I. That was—” Her hand started to reach behind her, but he intercepted and clasped both her wrists in his hands before she could rub her butt.

“Now, are you going to call yourself nasty names?”

She averted her gaze and muttered something.

Transferring her wrists to one palm, he curled the fingers from his other hand around her chin and connected their gazes. “I didn’t *quite* catch that. Can you please repeat?”

Her shoulders crept toward her ears. “I said, I would make damn sure I wouldn’t do so in earshot of you.”

Ray pressed his lips together as he forced a bellow of laughter back. “Bad Princess. You’re not going to badmouth yourself whether or not I can hear it.”

“Why?” She swallowed and the question was clear in her eyes. “Why does it bother you so much?”

His fingers around the bottom of her face relaxed, and he stroked her cheek with his index finger. “Because when you don’t have any regard for yourself, how can you expect others to respect you?”

She let out a surprised sound between a squeak and a sigh. “I guess you’re right. I never considered it that way. Also, my parents taught me to be strong, self-reliant, and self-confident. I wonder when I started to doubt myself this much?”

Her belly rumbled, letting Ray know there were more pressing issues than to delve into her question. “That’s a very good question, and I suggest you ponder it a bit over the next couple of days.” He pulled her in for a hug. “Let’s discuss

what I can do to help fix the issue with non-payment and what you can do yourself, during breakfast.”

## CHAPTER 15

In the kitchen they reheated a casserole and brewed coffee, before settling in the breakfast nook. Joy dreaded the conversation they were about to have, and her bottom hurt something fierce.

Gingerly she lowered herself to the uncomfortable kitchen chair. *If Ray sticks around, I need cushioned seats.* Despite the oncoming chat and the discomfort, her lips curled.

“Something amusing?” One eyebrow slid up in that sexy way he had.

“I was thinking about remodeling.”

He gave her an incredulous stare.

“These are hard chairs.”

For a few heartbeats he was quiet, then he burst out laughing and she joined him. It took them several moments to quiet down, then Ray prompted, “Did you always have difficulties setting boundaries with others?”

Joy shoved a forkful of food in her mouth and chewed deliberately. After washing it down with a swig of coffee, she stated, “Maybe this is strange for breakfast, but it tastes good.”

He dipped his head and gave her a, ‘I spanked you once, I can spank you again’ stare.

“I think I’m what you could call a people-pleaser.”

“Asserting and expressing yourself should be instinctive. When you lack this reflex, you might have learned that your needs are less important than those of others, or that to have needs at all is bad. Did you always have troubles with expressing your wants and needs or has something happened which created the behavior?”

She stiffened, opened her mouth, and closed it again as she considered the question. “My ex-fiancé wasn’t a very nice person.”

“How long were you with him?”

“About six months.”

He narrowed his eyes. “How recently?”

“I left him two weeks before I moved here.”

“Okay, that’s a fresh scar, so to say.” Humming, Ray stroked his chin. “This seems to be something deeper, more profound than a recent breakup.”

Getting up from the table, she started to clean the table. “What do you mean?”

He rose and carried his plate and mug to the kitchen counter. “I’m talking about your ‘I’m not good enough’ martyr complex. A toxic relationship might have formed that interaction, but usually behavior like that takes years to settle in. Dry or wash?”

“Huh?”

“Do you prefer to do the dishes or dry them?”

“Dry, please.” She handed him the dish soap and a sponge.

Ray ran the hot water tap. “How was your relationship with your parents?”

“I loved them very much and I miss them every day.” She watched how Ray lowered the first mug in the suds and bit her lip. “My parents had a great marriage, but they had trouble getting pregnant. They gave up on having a child and were considering adoption when my mother conceived. I was their miracle, they said. I always felt loved and cherished.”

He gave her a quick glance and handed over the dripping knives and forks. “I’m happy you had a loving childhood.”

Something in the tone of his voice made her pause, but before she could question him about his upbringing, Ray started to speak.

However, Groza chose that moment to rise with a low whine. Thankful for the distraction, Joy said, “I think she needs a walk.”

“Yes, she does. Let’s finish this first.” He gave her an intense stare. “Don’t think you’re off the hook, Princess.”

Joy sighed. “You’re right about standing up for myself. I just find it hard. It seems just easier to go along with what other people want.” Joy chewed her bottom lip and rested her hips against the kitchen counter. “I don’t know.”

“First, tell me some more about your parents.”

“My parents?” Grief pierced her heart like an arrow. “Like I said before, they were wonderful.”

“Wonderful how?”

She blinked. “Well, just, you know. Loving, supportive, proud of my achievements, whether it was mastering a new

skill, like making a fire when camping or academic accomplishments. Just normal parents, I guess.”

Ray hummed and kept scrubbing the by now squeaky-clean mug.

Her brow furrowed. “How about you?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you barely speak of your parents. Are they still around?”

“I don’t speak with them.” His tone was brisk and didn’t broker any opening for further discussion. “Now stop changing the subject.”

She gave a tiny growl and had to smile when Groza cocked her head in response.

“So, it wasn’t your parents then.” He placed the mug in the dish rack and drained the sink. “How about your other relationships? Tell me more about that fiancé of yours.”

This time, the physical sensation of his order was more like a fist to the gut.

“I need more coffee for that discussion, but I think Groza needs a walk.” She slapped her hand over her mouth. “Damn, Ray, what about your dogs?”

“I took precautions when I left yesterday morning, they’ll be fine.” Ray gave the Husky and the now sleeping pups a once over. “She’ll be fine for a while, too. Now stop distracting and start talking.”

Deliberately, she moved to the coffeepot and didn’t speak.

His guttural, “Princess,” was a warning growl that sent tingles down her spine.

She pressed her lips together.

“So your last partner was a bit of an asshole—”

“Understatement,” she mumbled.

“Okay, he was a big asshole. How about before him?”

She swallowed as the spittle dried in her mouth. “Just a high school boyfriend. Nothing special.”

Ray hummed and showed a ‘give me more’ gesture.

“Fine, fine.” She busied her hands with drying the mug. “Before I came here, I was engaged. I broke it off after I lost my parents in a car accident. He didn’t—” She halted, sighing deeply as she gathered her thoughts. “He wasn’t supportive. In hindsight he never was, but when he decided to go to a sports bar with some friends instead of going with me to my parents’ funeral...” Joy swallowed as the bitter taste of betrayal and rejection burned the back of her throat. She shrugged. Her nose started to prickle and her eyes stung.

Warm, strong hands curled around her shoulders, and ignoring her stiff posture, Ray pulled her against his chest. “That was a shit thing to do.”

“It was. He was a shitty fiancé.”

“Why did you accept his proposal?”

“Well, he was a great boyfriend at first— romantic, caring and charming.”

“Hm-mm.” His callused hand stroked her back in a soothing rhythm. “When did that change?”

“First, he moved in, which was maybe a bit fast, but fine. Proposed, which I thought was even faster, but he made it like the logical step after living together and I went along with it.



Still, everything was okay then, except he didn't do much in and around the apartment, and we got into fights over hiring help and such. It became worse when he either lost or left his job, I'm not sure which. Anyway, he was at home all day, every day, and became increasingly demanding of my time and energy."

"He was gradually chipping at your confidence and pulling you under his control without your notice."

She lifted her head from his chest and tipped her face up to him. "That's exactly it. Huh, I never considered it that way before."

"That's because assholes like him are like stealth attackers, eating at your confidence until there's not much left. A real man supports his woman and makes her strong and independent. He's proud of what she achieves without letting it minimize his own self-esteem. You have an academic degree and a steady and respected job. He failed in his, whether on purpose or not, so he needed to make you small to feel big."

"I think you're right."

He pecked the tip of her nose, making her insides melt with the tender gesture. "I know I am. I also know you have a submissive nature, which makes you more vulnerable to controlling asshats like that."

"Submissive? Like in the bedroom?" She wrinkled her nose in distaste.

A grin flashed over his face. "Oh, you absolutely are in the bedroom. But contrary of what you're undoubtedly thinking, submission isn't a sign of weakness. It's a sign of trust and affection, of respect." He bent forward and nipped her ear before whispering, "I happen to like you submissive in the

bedroom.” His tone grew more serious. “I also want you to be strong and self-confident in the outside world. You’re *not* a doormat!” He steered her to the kitchen table. “Now let’s discuss how you’re going to say ‘no’ if someone brings food you don’t need.”

She settled gingerly in the chair, he pulled out for her, and lowered her gaze to the shining surface of the table. *My butt still hurts from his spanking, damn it.* “It just feels so disrespectful and wasteful to say no to the food they made.”

“Just say, ‘No, thank you, I have enough food right now, but we can discuss a payment plan if you want that,’ or you can ask them to do something useful like clean your parking lot or paint the walls or something you need done. Offer them an alternative.”

“An alternative,” she repeated as if tasting the words. “I like that.”

“Look, I know how it feels to be the new kid in a small town. Hell, I’ve been here a long time and my grandmother was born here, but I still get some of that myself. And I know that if you hurt the wrong person’s feelings, whether you meant to or not, you can turn the whole community against you.”

“Yes!” Relief at hearing her insecurities in his strong voice overwhelmed her almost to tears and she sipped at her coffee to ground herself again. “That’s it exactly. How can I say no? And it’s not like I asked them all for food, they just show up with it and it’s like they think *they’re* doing something good for *me*. How can I reject that?”

Ray grunted through a thin smile. “You can’t, always. Jason, now. Jason never had any use for small town politics and look how that turned out for him.” His gaze grew

unfocused, dark with grief for a long moment before he cleared his throat and shook his head. “I’ve taken some hits myself, just being his friend.”

“And mine?” Joy guessed.

“No. Word seems to be getting around that you’re a good person to know.” He lifted a forkful of casserole and gave her a meaningful stare before eating it. “Because of gestures like this, maybe, but it’s still time to stop.”

“I’d love to stop it. I don’t even know how it started!”

“Well, word travels fast in a small town, but it doesn’t always travel true. All it takes is one person asking Mary why she walked into your clinic with a crockpot and before the hour’s out, you’ve got a brigade of do-rights wanting to feed the poor city girl who can’t cook for herself.”

“I can too!” she insisted with a laugh.

“Well, I’ll do my part,” he promised. “I’ll drop a word in the right ears that you’ve got enough dinners to last ‘till Easter, and that’ll take care of the ones with good intentions.” His brows lowered into a severe expression. “But the ones looking to rook you over for soggy broccoli and last night’s meatloaf? Princess, you’re going to have to handle those yourself.”

While the coffee machine huffed and puffed and the delicious aroma of fresh brew filled the room, they played out a few scenarios, with Ray in the role of a pushy local, letting Joy try out different ways to say ‘no’ until she began to feel like she could say it in real life, too.

They were at their second cup when Joy’s phone rang. A glance at the caller ID made her stiffen before she realized how this would be a great chance to practice assertiveness. “I have to take this.”

“Sure.” Ray gathered the mugs. “I’ll walk Groza before I go home and check on my own dogs.”

Nodding, Joy rose and walked into the hallway for a little bit of privacy. “Richard? What can I do for you?” Halfway done with closing the door to the kitchen behind her, Joy rolled her eyes. *What on earth made me answer the phone like that?*

“Hi, it’s, um, Richard.”

*Yeah. Duh.* “I know. Why are you calling?”

“Well, we haven’t spoken in quite some time and I wanted to know how you’re doing. Have you settled in, in your new place?”

Joy pulled the phone from her ear and stared at the screen before pressing the device to her ear again. “Seriously, Richard, *why* are you calling?”

He blew a sigh into the phone. “Jo-o-oy,” he said, in such a disappointed, impatient tone that her gaze dropped and her shoulders hunched until they touched her ears. “Why shouldn’t I be interested and concerned for you? You left almost overnight without so much as a forward address. I worry about you, baby. I would love to come and see you sometime,” he said with something like genuine concern.

“Come and see me?” Joy squeaked and started a restless pace up and down the hallway.

With a loud bang her backdoor slammed shut. After she processed the sound and deduced Ray was taking Groza out, she returned her attention to the man on the other side of the line. “I’m confused why you want to do that.”

“Why *wouldn’t* I want to visit my girl?” he asked, just like they still were an item.

“Richard, I’m *not* your girl –not anymore.”

“But babe,” he whined, “we were so good together. I understand I did wrong by not helping with the funeral and stuff, but I just couldn’t handle it. You know how I can’t stand blood and gore and stuff.”

Her brow furrowed. “What does being squeamish about bodily... You know, never mind. We’re over, Richard and that’s about more than just what happened in October.”

“So, you have moved on already?” His voice rose and turned shriller than a Chihuahua in distress. “Do you have another man? Is that the reason you won’t come back to me?”

*Un-fucking-believable.*



*Richard?* His hackles rose and like a feral dog he wanted to bare his teeth and growl. He didn’t want to eavesdrop on her private conversation, but was rooted to the spot.

“Seriously, Richard, *why* are you calling?” Her tone wasn’t as assertive as Ray liked but she stood her ground. *That’s good.*

But she didn’t hang up on the guy, and when they seemed to make plans to have the asshole to come to Chesuncook, Ray couldn’t stand it anymore. He snapped his fingers at Groza. “Come on, girl, I’m going to take you for a walk and then I’m leaving.”

Picking up on his mood, the Husky whined and rose from the dog bed, vigilantly stepping over her babies.

He didn’t bother with a leash, since a mama Husky would never wander too far from her pups. Ray opened the back

entrance, let the dog outside, and followed her.

A cold gust of wind gripped the door. Ray allowed the exit to slam shut behind him. The banging door reflected his foul mood perfectly. He shivered in the morning cold and turned up his collar.

The dog's nose rose. With her thick coat, she wasn't bothered by the cold, and she clearly enjoyed being outside.

Ray was used to Maine temperatures and a biting wind, but today it seeped into his bones, penetrated his skin, and left his heart and soul cold.

His boots crunched on the gravel and his grinding teeth imitated the sound. *Fuck*. How could the woman sleep with him and even consider having her ex over next? Just like his mother, she'd used him.

Ray stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets against the cold. Groza whined. Considering the dog's comfort more important than warm hands, he gave her a reassuring pat on the back. "Nothing wrong, girl. Just do your business and I'll return you to your babies."

Something gnawed at the back of his brain. Joy wasn't the kind of person to betray another. Contrary to his mother, she was selfless, caring, and kind. If Joy resembled anyone from his past, she was like his grandmother.

And her voice had been... off.

He halted and closed his eyes. Her 'Come and see me' had been a question, rather than an invitation –her tone unhappy, not a cheerful 'I'm happy my friend is coming over.' Was the guy bothering her? Trying to pressure her into coming back? A recent break-up, she'd said, just two weeks before she'd moved. Just long enough for a shameless leech to run out of

couches to crash on and decide to try and get his doormat back.

A solid, warm weight pressed into his upper leg and Ray opened his eyes. Groza was leaning her head above his knee and looking up at him with intelligent eyes, so much like her mother's. "Are you ready to return to your pups?" He pulled his hand from his pocket and ruffled the dog behind her ear.

Groza let out a breathy huff that sounded remarkably like, "Yeah," and gave him a doggy grin.

His mood lifted. Who could be around the clownish breed and be grumpy? He certainly couldn't.

## CHAPTER 16



*MONDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2022. 8:30 AM*

Joy held the Vet Clinic's door open to allow the pet carrier wielding client to leave, while balancing yet another food container.

“Goodbye, Doctor Bennett, and thank you for your understanding,” the woman called with a smirk.

“Bye, Mrs. Delany,” she answered automatically and stared at the tuna casserole in her hands. Another dinner in lieu of payment.

“Good morning, dear,” a familiar frail voice said, at once lifting Joy's mood as did the loud purr coming from the oversized bag in the smiling old woman's arms.

“Well, hello, Mary. How is Eloise doing?”

Mary Winthrop stepped inside, and Joy closed the door, still holding the meal given by her last client, where the old woman's gaze lingered for a moment and her smiling lips pursed.

“If I have to guess from your expression, my cat is doing better than you,” the old woman observed and raised a brow invitingly.

Joy sighed and her shoulders slumped. “I'm being stupid *and* a doormat.” She slid the meal on the reception desk and turned to her patient. “How about I check out Eloise for you.”

“How about—” Although struggling with the bag, the elderly woman gripped Joy's forearm with surprising strength. “—you sit down with me and explain to me what that comment was about?”

“But—”

“No buts, young lady. Does Raymond know how you talk about yourself?”

Joy could almost feel his hard hand against her bottom and winced.

Mary smirked. “Thought so.”

“What?” Mouth gaping open, Joy allowed the other woman to usher her to the bench, and she sank down. “How do you...”

“Know about you and Raymond? Girl, I see how he watches you. I might also have grilled him a bit on your relationship when he helped me last Thursday to mend my fence. Last spring some deer ate all my crops. While I like deer, I like fresh veggies more.” Mary giggled girlishly, adding, “And I enjoyed watching him work. I only wish I’d thought to ask last summer. Maybe he would have taken off his shirt.”

Somehow it didn’t surprise Joy how Ray helped an elderly villager with repairs. He might come off as a grumpy mountain man at first sight, but inside that ridiculously muscled chest resided a heart of gold.

“I don’t think I told you about my late husband, did I?”

Pulled from her musings, Joy’s eyebrows puckered. “Um, no.” *Where is she going with this?*

“My Tom was a sweetheart, but stern and very protective of me. Maybe you would call it old fashioned nowadays, but there’s something to say for the way we lived, you know.”

Still confused but curious where this was leading, Joy hummed.

“There’s something about Raymond that reminds me of him –my Tom. He has an aura of quiet strength about him. I also think he won’t let you get away with putting yourself down.”

Joy shifted on the hard wooden bench. “You’re right, he showed me yesterday how little he appreciates me trash talking myself, but he also doesn’t approve of me accepting stuff I don’t want or need as payment.”

“Ah.” Something akin to humor gleamed in the old woman’s eyes. “From the way you shift in your seat, I can imagine how he expressed his displeasure.” Her features turned serious. “Was it consensual?”

Joy’s jaw almost hit her lap.

Mary chuckled and patted Joy’s hand. “I might be old, but I’m not dumb, deaf, or blind. I read books and see movies. While Tom and I might not have used fancy safewords, I guess you can say we lived a D/s lifestyle in our days. Now, answer my question.”

Picking her jaw from the floor, Joy gave the senior a sideways glance. “Who was the submissive in your relationship?”

Mary cackled again. “Definitely *not* my husband, but teaching teenagers for over three decades gave me a lesson or two on being the top dog. Now stop deflecting.”

Joy heaved a sigh. “Yes, it was consensual. I knew why I was punished, and I agreed to the discipline. And while my bottom still smarts, it did feel good to be held accountable for my actions and words.” Her forehead puckered. “However, I don’t seem to be able to shake the habit of going along with

other people's wants and needs." She nodded at the food container.

Mary squeezed Joy's fingers. "Practice makes perfect, dear. Don't be too hard on yourself. Accepting you have to become better at something is the first step in the learning process. And as for Lucy Delany, shame on her. She knew better." Mary lifted her chin with a sniff of disapproval, giving Joy a brief glimpse of the never-say-die fire of a high school teacher. "And if I have anything to say about it, she'll know better than to ever try that again."

"What are you going to do?" Joy asked.

Mary patted her hand with a reassuring smile and a steely gaze. "I'm going to go get my hair done."



The rest of the day at the clinic was a quiet one, so quiet that she nearly closed early, which would have been a mistake, as ten minutes before the doors were due to close, a rather flustered Mrs. Delany drove up. Through a strained smile, she apologized for the 'misunderstanding' as she counted bills into a startled Joy's hand, claiming that she simply preferred to pay in cash and had to go to the bank first. As she watched the other woman drive away, Joy felt cautiously optimistic that her leftover troubles were finally, fully over.

To Joy's further delight, and not just because she had too much food to eat herself, Ray showed up at dinner time, bringing with him the scent of outdoor activities. They had a light meal, with Ray doing most of the talking. He wasn't an innate chatterbox, but he shared a little about the funeral arrangements and asked her opinion on the songs he'd

selected. Joy was too preoccupied by the day's proceedings to come up with a comfortable topic herself and mainly listened.

After finishing their meal, she stacked the dirty dishes in the sink and tried to come up with a way to share about today and not get spanked again.

A six foot plus muscled frame pressed against her back, and strong arms boxed her in against the kitchen counter.

Joy stilled.

Hot air ruffled the hairs at her temple and tickled the shell of her ear, as he whispered, "Now tell me what has you in a bind."

"Wha-what?"

"Princess, you barely spoke and only when I prompted you to answer a question. That's not you. Something is bothering you."

She closed her eyes. "You're right. I'm just..." She lifted her head and gave herself a mental kick. "I'm afraid you'll be disappointed in me."

"Oh?" His voice didn't give her any indication of his mood. "Why is that?"

Awkwardly she turned in his embrace and tipped up her face at him. For a moment, she didn't say anything.

He didn't speak but patiently waited for her to gather her thoughts. *God, can he be any more perfect?*

Standing up straighter, she cleared her throat. "Okay, so today I accepted another container of food as payment."

"I see." His expression didn't change.

Joy fought the urge to drop her head in shame but managed to maintain eye contact. “I’m sorry.”

Thoughtfully he bobbed his head. “I can see you are. Why didn’t you object?”

“The truth?”

“Yes, of course. Princes, I’ll never punish you for being honest. I ask you not to tell me lies, though, I won’t stand for that.”

Words raced through her mind, but she wasn’t able to voice them.

“Princess.” His voice dropped. “Just tell me how it happened.

“Okay, okay!” She held up her hands between them. “So, this morning. I... Well, I had a client with a Bernese Mountain Dog that had a bad ear infection.” Curling her hands around the kitchen counter behind her, Joy braced herself for Ray’s disapproval. “Before I was aware what was happening, the dog was in the rolling crate, I was holding a food container and the client was out of the door. She came back and paid!” she added hastily, then dropped her eyes again. “But it was Mary who handled her. I didn’t say anything. Not even when she came back and paid.”

“All right. What would you have liked to do instead?”

“I don’t know.”

“Of course, you do. What would you have done in DC?”

“Um, moved on to the next client. After consultation, people went to the front desk to pay and arrange a follow up if needed.”

“And how about the homeless people you helped?”

“They didn’t have to pay.”

“Not even for supplies and medicines?”

“No, those were from donations.”

“So basically, you don’t have experience with defaulters on top of your issue with asking for what you need.” He pulled his bottom lip between his teeth, and his eyes turned pensive. “There are some tips and tricks I can share with you about making people pay their bills, but I want to focus on your apparent inability to acknowledge your needs.” He gripped her upper arm and began to steer her to the bedroom.

She dug in her heels. “I’m having déjà vu and I don’t think my bottom can handle another spanking.”

He halted and squatted to bring them at eye level. “I’m aware of that, but I’m pleased you’re able to voice your concern with me at least. That will help with the next exercise.”

Curiosity piqued her interest. “What kind of exercise?”

“One of pleasure and pain.”

She frowned. That answer didn’t help.

“Ever heard of orgasm denial?”

Joy shook her head.

“I’m going to teach you to ask for what you want with pleasure, Princess.” He turned her and swatted her still tender bottom. “Now start moving and get that spankable ass in your bedroom.”

She jumped, hissed and rubbed her smarting backside, before rushing forward. Pleasure sounded much better than

another spanking and the guy was way too interested in her butt.



“Kneel on the carpet beside the bed.” Ray pointed to the spot and walked around the apartment to find items he could use. From the bathroom, he collected a handful of wooden clothespins, from her closet came a wide belt and several scarfs, and after consideration, he collected a wide spatula from the kitchen.

When Ray returned, Joy was kneeling on the floor and biting her lip. A quick check in the bedside table rewarded him with not one but two vibrators, and he took both. After dropping the items on the bed, he cupped the back of her head and gave her a lingering and deep kiss. “You look beautiful.” With careful hands, he adjusted her position so her butt was resting on her heels, her knees were spread and her hands rested on her thighs with the palms facing up. “When I ask you to kneel, this is the position I expect from you.”

A frown formed between her eyebrows, but she held the pose. Ray sank onto the bed. “What’s going through that mind?”

She lifted her head, and her beautiful eyes held a mix of confusion, trepidation and curiosity. “I’m wondering how kneeling for you will help me stand up for myself. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Ah.” Leaning forward, he cupped her cheek. When she leaned into his touch, it pleased him immensely. “Submitting in the bedroom isn’t a sign of weakness, Princess. It’s a show of trust and strength. You trust me to take care of your wants



and needs when we're together like this. By putting the care for your wellbeing, pleasure and pain into my hands, you also show strength, because letting go of control is one of the hardest things to do." He angled her head and pierced her with his gaze because she needed to hear his next words with her heart, body and soul. "Allow yourself to be vulnerable with me, trust me to build up your confidence and strength, and remember you can always stop me if things get too intense. Ultimately, you have the power."

Against his hand, her head moved up and down. "I trust you, Ray."

*Thank fuck!*

Still holding her head, he meshed their lips together in a kiss that went from sweet and soft to deep and dizzying, and Ray slipped his hands under her arms and pulled her onto his lap. She straddled his hips, and her hands went into his hair. She was a touchy-feely person, his little vet, and she ate at his control. But Ray didn't mind for this moment. They both needed the reassurance and the connection, because what he had planned for her would be difficult.

Indulging in of the feel of a soft and willing woman in his arms for a few moments, Ray kept his control by plotting the upcoming scene. He also took advantage of her distraction by peeling off her clothes one by one. By the time she lifted her head, they were both panting, she was topless and he had unbuttoned her jeans.

Her gaze dropped to her chest and Joy burst out laughing. "You're sneakier than I thought."

Ray grinned. "I have mad skills and I can't wait to show you more. Lose the rest of your clothes." He did a visual check for the items he collected, but they weren't disturbed by their

little make out session. Ditching his boots, socks and shirt, Ray kept on his jeans. His cock pressed against the zipper, but the impatient prick would stay confined until Ray was ready to let him out to play.

He pulled a naked Joy forward and wrapped the wide belt around her waist, buckling it loosely. Getting two scarfs, he created slipknots and urged her to step into the loops. After pulling them up and tying them around her thighs, he ordered, “Lie down on the bed, on your back.”

Her gaze flicked to the belt and scarfs around her lower half, but she didn’t protest and followed his order.

Pressing a knee to the mattress, Ray pushed her legs up and knotted the scarfs to the belt, forcing her legs up and out. “Can you hold this position?”

She wiggled her butt. “It’s okay.”

His cheeks creased. “Okay works for me.” He stepped back and admired the playing field before him. Her pretty pink pussy was open for his gaze and touch and already engorged, and her bottom nicely available.

He considered her arms. “I like to feel your hands in my hair, so I’m going to let them free for now.” *She will also need the comfort of holding on to me, but I’m not going to say that to her.*

“I’m going to enhance your senses a little bit more, Princess.” He picked up his checkered shirt and folded it three times before placing the fabric over her eyes. Her breath hitched. Stroking her thighs, he waited for her to complain. She didn’t.

*All right.*

“The game tonight is, ask for what you need, whether it’s to be untied, to come, to go the bathroom, to sleep. Whatever you need. Is that clear, Princess?”

The shirt on her face moved, and he could imagine her frown, but she replied, “I do.”

He highly doubted she did, but she would eventually. Just to be on the safe side, he added, “I want to use the stoplight system with you tonight. It’s just like driving a car, green means continue, yellow is caution and red is a full-blown stop. Do you understand?”

“I do.” Her breathing regulated.

“What’s your color now?”

“Green.”

He collected the first vibrator. Flicking through the options, he settled on a deep buzzing and placed the device just above the clitoral hood. Joy jumped in surprise. She might have expected slow from him, but today was about driving her to orgasm fast. The intense buzzing didn’t take long to have her straining against the binds as her legs tried to straighten. Her breathing sped up, then hitched. Her nipples tightened as a flush crept down her arched neck from her loosely-covered face. She sucked in a gulp of air, held it, and Ray pulled away the vibrator.

A little sound of protest escaped Joy’s lips.

“Do you have something to say?”

She shook her head.

“Not? I guess I have to punish you for not telling me what you want.” He took one of the clothespins and pinched the skin at the side of her left breast together and placed the open

wooden beak over the flesh. “One chance to change your mind.”

Her lips clamped shut, he almost laughed and let go of the clothespin. She gasped.

“What’s your color?”

Her “Green” took so long, he almost didn’t expect her to answer at all.

*Okay then.* He repeated the circle of driving her to the brink of orgasm and withdrawing just before she came several times. Both breasts had a semi-circle of the wooden pins when a small “please” escaped her lips.

“Please what, little vet?”

Her thighs beneath his hands were trembling. “Please make me come.”

“With pleasure.” Ray bent forward and gave her pussy a long lick from her perineum to her clit. Ray grinned as her hands flew to his hair, almost yanking the short strands from their roots. Letting her hands free had been a good call. He wiggled the tip of his tongue over the bundle of nerves that was begging for his attention. Primed from all his teasing, her body went rigid. Carefully he pushed a finger inside her pussy and flicked the spongy G-spot in time with licks of his tongue until her climax tore from her and a hoarse scream escaped her throat.

*Nice.*

Stretching out beside her on the bed, he gave her a few moments to come down from her orgasm.



*Oh my god, the man is a sadist.*

Her breasts throbbed around the nasty pinching things and her clit hurt from all the times he used the vibrator on her. *If he's a sadist, I must be a masochist because I like what he's doing to me, and so does my body.*

“Please, Ray.”

One side of her body was cooling down, on her other side a warm, muscled male body pressed into her.

She wiggled her hips.

He didn't move.

In her head she screamed at him to fuck her already, but her lips stayed immobile.

A callused hand stroked a comforting path from her cheek over her neck to her shoulder and back up. “Talk to me, Princess. I'm not a mind reader.”

Her lips firmed.

“No?” There was a teasing note in his voice, and his hand left her face.

A pulling sensation on her left breast made Joy gasp. Her breast seemed to swell even more. Then the same feeling came on the other breast— left, right, left, right.

*He is removing whatever he put on my breasts— and fuck, that hurts!* She released her death-grip on the bedsheets to cup her breasts.

Before she could cradle the aching mounds, Ray intercepted her and pinned her arms beside her. “Take your punishment like a good girl.”

*Punishment.* Her befuddled brain tried to process the meaning. “Can...” Joy swallowed. “Can you take off the blindfold?”

“Sure, little vet.”

Joy squeezed her eyes shut as even the dim light in the room was too bright. Blinking, she gave her pupils time to adjust. Slowly, Ray came into view. She expected a smug expression, but his face conveyed a serious note of concern. She flexed her fingers before cupping his face. “Are you trying to teach me how to ask for what I want with sex?”

His sensual lips curved. “Smart little one, aren’t you?”

The lines beside her eyes crinkled. “Genius level smart actually, but apparently I’m a bit slow catching on today.”

He hummed. “It seems like you’ve suppressed your needs and wants for a long time.”

Actually, she had. She had stopped asking for what she wanted at seventeen, because she hadn’t been prepared then for what she asked for— at all.

## CHAPTER 17

*SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2022. 2:00 PM.*

*MILLINOCKET, MAINE. LAMSOM FUNERAL HOME*

The funeral director was a tall man in an immaculate blue suit wearing wire-rimmed glasses and an appropriately serious expression. He murmured his condolences as they entered the low white building. A strong wind made the Stars and Stripes wave proudly on top of the roof, and Joy pulled her coat tighter to ward off the cold.

As the weak autumn sun did its best to warm the bleak afternoon, people gradually made their way inside, and Joy was hit by the stark contrast between her parents' funeral and this one.

Her parents had been surrounded by people their entire life and even at the large Congressional Cemetery Joy had been engulfed in a group of loved ones. The air had been filled by crying and sniffing, people speaking in low voices, and whispered prayers.

Today, the tastefully designed chapel looked overly large with only a handful of black-clad mourners gradually filling up the first two pews. The space echoed with shuffling feet and rustling clothes as they stared at the casket. All were outwardly occupied by their own thoughts.

Seated in the front row, Joy glanced sideward at the tall, broad man beside her. He'd shaved and put on a dark navy suit and tie. He wore the formal clothes well, but what stood out to Joy was his drawn face. As appointed next-of-kin, the burden of arranging the funeral had landed on Ray's shoulders. From an outsider's point of view, he carried the weight without any hardship. He held his shoulders square and pulled back and his



features even and calm, but she knew this gruff mountain man better now. She recognized the tight lines beside his eyes and the firm set of his jaw. Piano strings filled the room and a soft female, “Oh”, before a clear male voice began to sing about the light of hope shining through the world’s eyes. From helping Ray with selecting the songs, Joy recognized *Hard to Keep Faith* by Damian Wilson, a song written during the COVID pandemic lockdown. She closed her eyes and listened as the song built from calm and sensitivity toward a great guitar solo part. As the tones died away, Ray rose, halted in front of the black casket and respectfully bowed his head, before stepping behind the pulpit. He didn’t consult the notes in his pocket, just scanned the audience and locked eyes with Joy. He held her gaze for a long moment before sliding his gaze to the gleaming black wood that held his friend.

Ray cleared his throat. “Jason Campeau was a spiritual man, a hard worker, an excellent musher and the best friend I ever had.” Ray paused and took a sip of water from the glass on the dais. “I met him in 2012 when we both were competing in the Percy DeWolfe Memorial Mail Race in Yukon. This was the start of our friendship.”

Ray stepped away from behind the stand. “The circle of dog sled racing isn’t a big one and we were bound to run into each other, and we kept in contact over the years. For me, the highlight was the Iditarod of 2015. A difficult race we both managed to finish.” His mouth flattened, but his voice was strong when he added, “I can’t imagine how empty and strange it will feel to return to a race, knowing Jason will never step on a sled again. Our friendship was built on the trails and evolved to him moving from Canada to Chesuncook, where we trained and bred dogs together. With his passing, Jason is leaving behind a gap the size of Alaska in my heart.”

Ray bowed his head and for a moment Joy wondered if he would be able to continue, but when he lifted his head, his face held a determined expression and his eyes burned with intensity.

“Jason had a giving nature and shared his kind heart with everyone he met,” he said. “Even when people turned against him and falsely accused him of animal cruelty, he stayed positive, filled with hope and faith and his love for others. I admired that in him and envied his ability to see good in humankind even when roads were rocky at best. He taught me to never doubt yourself, to rely on your dogs, and never to give up your dream. He was the kind of person to make something positive from every situation.”

He turned to the closed casket beside the dais again. “Jason...”

As his voice cracked for the first time, Joy’s eyes filled with tears.

“I wish you good trails and a safe journey onto better pastures. I’m honored to have been your friend. I’m sure you’ll be united with some amazing dogs. And hopefully you’ll be waiting for me when I’m at my final finish line.”

Stepping forward, Ray nodded at the funeral director. The guitar intro for *Something to Remind You* by Staind filled the chapel, and as Ray sank down on the chair beside her the charismatic, gravelly voice of Aaron Lewis sang about the final chapter of his ever-changing life. As the song continued, Ray stared at the coffin like he could make his friend rise from the death with pure willpower, and Joy let the tears fall her strong mountain man wasn’t able to shed.



After thanking the guests and making arrangements for them to collect the ashes in a week, Joy drove them back to Chesuncook. He couldn't give two shits about letting her drive, even if his father would have concluded Ray was supposed to hand over his man-card for it.

Blinking hard, Ray kept his burning eyes on the road. He couldn't imagine the even-tempered and uncomplicated Canadian being dead and soon to be returned to him as dust. A man in his prime with no history of illness, having a heart attack just made no sense to him. One of the first responders had taken him aside at the funeral to tell him Jason was probably dead before he even hit the ground, that he hadn't suffered, that even if Ray had been there, there was nothing he could have done, and Ray supposed that was some kind of comfort, but still, Jason had died alone and lain dead for days. It was just... wrong. And like his grandmother, Jason was another person Ray cared for that left him too soon.

Ray's chest hurt and he inhaled air as if his heart was as fragile as a bunch of broken ribs. It *felt* like broken ribs.

He couldn't say how long they drove or what direction they were going. He couldn't care. He wished he'd never befriended Jason. If he hadn't, Ray would be at his cabin, oblivious to the fact a good man had died.

Keeping his spine rigid, Ray stared out of the window. He was aware of patches of forest rushing by, but he didn't see the trees. All Ray could see was darkness.

Despite his pitch-black mood, Ray was aware of the woman beside him. The previous days and today, she'd been

his anchor. At the dais, he might not have been able to speak today. But locking eyes with her, experiencing her silent strength and her utter confidence in him, unlocked his throat and helped him through.

To him, it was huge. Joy hadn't known Jason, but she had helped him with the funeral as if she'd cared for him as much as Ray did. Had...

His gaze slid to the woman handling the wheel with competence. Like his grandmother, Martin, and Jason, she was open, honest with an almost endless lake of compassion and understanding.

Without her knowledge, he studied her. Joy concentrated on driving and didn't bother him with idle chit-chat she knew he wasn't in the mood for. It was another tick in her *good* column.

Taking a bend in the road, she slammed on the brakes.

"Son of a..." Ray's hands shot out as he braced on the dashboard and the seatbelt dug painfully in his shoulder, as a moose with enormous antlers ambled in the middle of the road as if he had no care in the world.

"He's magnificent," Joy whispered reverently. There was no irritation or fear in her voice –just admiration for the majestic animal.

"And deadly," Ray added. "Keep your distance."

He studied the bull. The moose's ears flicked this way and that, a clear sign he wasn't agitated, and the hairs on his shoulders were flat. Ignoring them completely, the large animal dawdled to the shoulder of the road and began munching on a young birch that surprisingly still held green leaves.

“Cocky bastard.” Joy grinned.

“With antlers like his, I might be cocky too.” The chuckle he released was a little bit forced. At least, the near collision had pulled him from his dark thoughts.

“It’s good there isn’t much traffic on these roads.” She glanced in the rearview mirror. “We’re standing at an awkward spot. Can I go around if I drive slow and give it space?”

“Not if you don’t want an up-close encounter with those antlers, you don’t.”

And so, they waited as the moose ate and ignored them.

“Do you want to talk about Jason?”

His heart squeezed. “What’s there to say?” He rested his head back and closed his eyes. “I told you how we met.”

“You did. You also told why he moved. But for him to follow you to Chesuncook must mean you were good friends.”

“I guess so.” Ray contemplated her words. “I never got why he moved to a dry cabin in such a remote area. Jason told me on several occasions that people are social creatures and not meant to be alone for a long time.”

Joy laughed. “I don’t understand why anyone would like that. I, for one, like my comfort and modern amenities.”

Jumping on the opportunity to deflect, Ray asked, “Is the apartment to your liking?”

“Since the apartment has running water, electricity, and phone service, I can’t complain.”

“But?”

“Um, it doesn’t have character like your cabin does.”

For the first time this day, a genuine smile broke through.  
“I like my cabin. It was my grandmother’s –the first person to  
show me unconditional love and affection.”

## CHAPTER 18

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2022. 7:30 AM. RAY'S CABIN

When Ray woke, it was to an armful of soft, fragrant woman. Curled up against his side, Joy was still in a deep sleep. He reveled in the comfort of having someone at his side. Ray had gotten used to being alone with his dogs and hadn't thought he needed people –a woman in his life. And here he was, holding a woman all night. Not after sex, but just for comfort and company.

She'd driven him home but hadn't tried to get him to talk, had just... been there for him.

His mother would have made demands of him, resenting him giving anyone else his attention, even the memory of a dead friend. His father would have scoffed at Ray's weakness and told him to “man the fuck up” and go on with life. Joy wasn't at all like them, she was sweet and caring like his grandmother.

Thinking about the woman who taught him to love and live brought back a pang of grief and pain and was an all too close reminder of the other big-hearted person he lost. *I'm not going to cry, damn it.*

Ray rolled to his back and blinked up at the ceiling. Next to him, Joy mumbled something unintelligible, smacked her lips and resumed sleeping. Ray didn't think he'd ever met a heavier sleeper than her.

After she'd driven them to the clinic where they took care of Groza and her litter, she brought him home. Somehow knowing what he needed, she ushered him to the barn and they both took care of the dogs, saving Kyana and her pups for last. The Huskies had been restless, without a sliver of a doubt



picking up on his grief, but spending time with the dogs and losing himself in the mundane chores helped settled him.

After they both checked up on the mother and the pups, she fixed him a light meal, and without much discussion or thoughts on his part, she followed him to the bedroom.

He hadn't even thanked her properly.

Well aware of her sweet and rounded ass against his hip and the throbbing bat and balls between his thighs, Ray decided to remedy that omission the best way he knew.

Stealthily, he made his way under the covers, rolled Joy to her back and peeled off her panties. She didn't wake.

Settling between her legs, Ray inhaled her feminine fragrance and grinned. He liked to take his time when going down on a woman and couldn't think of a better way to wake her up. Teasing his tongue around her vagina and grazing her inner thighs with light licks and gentle tickles he settled in for some good times.

In his mind, there were few things better than having a gorgeous woman above him with wide-spread legs. He inhaled. She smelled good, a combination of tangy and sweet. He licked her entire slit. *She tastes good, too!* It baffled Ray that some men didn't like the scent and flavor of a pussy or didn't get a thrill out of going down on a woman. To Ray it was one of the most exciting and rewarding parts of sex. But even if he didn't enjoy cunnilingus, he would have done it for the woman he loved simply in the spirit of reciprocation. If a man wanted a blow job –and honestly not many guys didn't want to have their dicks sucked– they should do something equally pleasurable for their women.

As he licked, stroked, and teased, Joy stirred. He lifted his mouth and licked his lips. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” she croaked and lifted the covers to peer down at him. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” He gave a teasing flick over the clitoral hood, and his heart almost jumped when she let out a moan and dropped the covers, plunging him in the dark.

“I want to make you feel good. I want to have you writhing and moaning and coming all over my face.”

He opened his mouth and dove all the way in. He used his stubbled chin and cheeks, the soft wetness of his tongue and his fingers and hands to drive her up and up.

Her hands roamed his shoulders before settling into his hair and yanking on the strands, giving him an idea. “That’s it, Princess. Tug on my hair when it feels good.”

Her fingers tightened and her nails pricked his scalp. Taking his time, he spotted and catalogued each moan and wiggle, allowing her sounds and body language to clue him in to the things she liked and what didn’t work well for her, and where her sensitive spots were.

The skin inside her folds were incredibly smooth and slick and so very enjoyable to kiss and suck. He ran his tongue over the seam and found the bundle of nerves at the top. It stood proud and erected like a little cock, another sign she was turned on and into what he was doing to her body.

He curled his lips around the shaft and hood and moved his mouth up and down from her entrance like someone would bob on a cock.

She stiffened and her thighs locked around his ears. Her thighs squeezed his head.

*Bingo!*

Like a long-distance race, sexual pleasure wasn't about starting and finishing fast and furious, but needed a slow and steady approach. Ray kept up the gentle suction and rhythm, going back and forth in a sucking pattern.

Her zesty scent and tang intensified and became spicier. The fingers in his hair pulled so hard, he might have a bald patch later. His brain lit up like the Northern Lights, and then Joy came with pulsing vibrations, chanting, "oh, oh, *oh!*"



Panting for air, Joy watched as Ray emerged from beneath the blankets and stretched out beside her. For a moment, she felt very vulnerable. However, when Ray pulled her in his arms and whispered, "You're like a goddess when you come," she let out the breath she'd been holding and went willingly into his embrace. She rested her head against his shoulder and brought her leg over his and snuggled, enjoying the slow sweep of his hand over her back and hip.

Without moving her head, she drew circles on his chest and drew in his scent mingled with the underlying musk of her orgasm.

She pushed herself up on her elbows on his chest and stared down into compelling brown eyes. A wealth of love warmed her chest and engulfed her heart as she studied his strong features. Unlike Richard, her strong mountain man wasn't pushing for sex. Ray didn't seem to view going down on her as mere foreplay. He looked... content.

She straddled him.

His hands curled around her hips.

She leaned in for a long kiss, not bothered whatsoever with her own aftertaste on his lips. “Thank you.”

His teeth flashed white in the dim room. “You’re very welcome, Princess.” His hard cock jumped between them, reminding her he hadn’t gotten off.

She wiggled her hips and tried to align their bodies.

Ray stilled her with a firm grip on her hips. “Stop making me crazy.”

“Please, Ray.” Distracting him with another kiss, she gripped his shaft and positioned the head at her entrance.

Against the insides of her thighs his quadriceps bunched, and his grip on her hips tensed. A current of delight ran through her body and her nipples bunched.

Slowly, she lowered herself an inch, and another, then rose and gave a teasing kiss. He didn’t move, but the muscles beneath her went from concrete to steel.

As much as she liked his control, she also wanted to drive him crazy with lust and letting loose.

She berated herself. *Doesn't that make me a bit crazy and ambiguous? How can I like and want his domination and at the same time want to have control myself?*

She swallowed, closed her eyes, and focused on the sensation, as she lowered herself, lifted, lowered again.

His fingertips dug into her hips, but he didn’t take over.

She stilled. “Is this okay?”

“Princess—” His right hand left her hips and curled around her neck, pulling her closer as his eyes burned with desire,

lust, and an undefinable emotion she couldn't describe. "— there's nothing I love more than to have you riding me, but I want you to know you can stop. I don't have to get off every time you do."

She laughed out loud. "Hate to tell you, dude, but as often you make me come, I think that's physically impossible for any man."

His startled laugh pushed his cock deeper inside, making her suck in a breath and bury her face in the crook of his neck.

## CHAPTER 19

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2022. 10:30 AM

After making love in bed, taking her again in the shower and having breakfast, Joy had decided it was time he taught her how to lead a dog team.

Ray was pretty convinced she'd asked for it to distract him from his sorrows, but since he had no other plans and there wasn't anything he loved more than training dogs or spending time with Joy, he went with it. Because teaching her the basics of sled dog racing was a way to combine his two favorite pastimes, he was probably going to enjoy the hell out of it, too.

Almost bouncing with eagerness, Joy pulled on her hiking boots. "What dogs am I going to mush? Is Suka one of them?"

Ray's hand shot out to steady her as she almost toppled over. "You will mush one dog and certainly not Suka." He had to grin at her pout. "Believe me, you will thank me later. Leading a pack isn't as simple as you appear to think, and all mushers start with one dog— a mellow dog, not a willful, dominant female like Suka."

"Oh okay, and what do you use when there's no snow like now?"

"We use dryland race carts, bikes, trikes, scooters, etcetera."

She followed him outside and helped him clean up the food bowls in the shed. It pleased him immensely how she always was ready to pitch in and do the work. Her ethics were similar to his and she had the makings of an excellent musher. *If she dared to be on the cart.*

From around the shed, he retrieved the dryland race cart with the single seat. Several dogs started to bark, whine and howl.

“They’re getting excited.”

Ray nodded. “They are. Huskies are working dogs; they need the exercise, but they also need the connection with their human.”

“Why do you keep them in a shed and not with you?”

“For two reasons, the cabin is too small to have all the dogs inside and also I like it to be warmer in my home than the Huskies enjoy,” he explained. “Also, I’m with them a lot and mostly only use the cabin to eat and sleep.”

“Ah.” Understanding gleamed in her eyes.

Ray held up a stiff, padded pole about the length of a child’s arm. “This is the antenna, also known as bikejoring noodle. We use it to prevent the line from getting tangled with the wheels.” After letting Joy help with attaching the noodle to the cart and showing her how to lay out towing line with four carabiners, Ray went to fetch his dogs one by one.

Joy ruffled Qornoq’s ears as Ray pulled on Finn’s harness. “How do you handle the dogs if you’re at a race?”

“We have a chain with side chains, called the stake out, used to secure them.”

“Ah, okay. By the way, can I help you?”

“You can later help me taking the harnesses off, but right now—” He gently pushed Finn away as he tried to jump on him. “—They are much too excited for easy handling. The most important thing to remember when putting on or taking



off harnesses is that paws stretch forward or backward, but can't move sideways."

She smiled and nodded her understanding. "Yes, Ray," she said patiently. "They taught me a little about how paws work in veterinary school."

"Of course they did. Sorry." Ray rose and held out his hand for Joy. "My Princess, your chariot awaits."



Her cheeks ached from the grinning, and her body trembled with the adrenaline. It was official. Joy loved everything about mushing— the speed, the dogs, being outside, the challenge, and yes okay, Ray in pack leader mode was a total turn on!

"Whoa." The dogs came to a smooth halt in front of the shed.

When Ray came around the cart, Joy literally jumped from the seat and into his arms. She ignored the mud on them both and peppered his face and mouth with kisses. "That was amazing." More smooches. "So exciting." She bounced on her toes and the next kiss missed his mouth and landed just below his nose. "I love, love, loved it!"

Strong hands circled her waist. "Whoa, slow down."

But she didn't she couldn't. She had to move, had to do something.

"Oh, oh," he teased, "I think the musher's bug has bitten you."

"Absolutely." Her head bobbed up and down like a parrot on steroids.

“Come on, let’s take care of these dogs. Then you can have your own try.”

“Really?” She beamed.

“Yes.” He grabbed her face and kissed her mouth.

Taking care of the dogs was as much fun as the ride and Joy lapped it all up as they freed the Huskies from their harnesses, checked their paws, and gave them a sort of soup with plenty meat, for both the calories and hydration.

The dogs wolfed down the food. Joy laughed at the funny sounds of crunching and chewing. “It’s almost like I can hear them say ‘yum, yum, yum’ while they eat,” she marveled.

Ray cocked his head. “It’s true that Huskies are very vocal dogs. They’re also very good in mimicking sounds, but I think you’re imagining this.”

She gave him a mock glare. “They do. Listen.”

“Woman.” He slung an arm around her shoulder. “They’re not. Now come on. It’s time for your own ride.”

She turned, pressed her hands against his chest and craned her neck to stare into his face. “Really?”

“Yup.”

They both cleaned off the cart and replaced it with a kickbike with fat wheels –the front wheel larger than the one in the back. “Take it for a spin.” Ray gave her a few moments to get used to the bike.

After getting an All-Terrain Bicycle for himself, he showed her how to connect the noodle and lay out the towline.

“Lesson one is ‘never let go.’ If you do, your dog is gone, your means of transportation is gone, not to mention the

danger both you and the dog will be in. So don't let go!"

Joy nodded as he showed her how to break.

"Next you need to know are the commands. If you want your dog or dogs to move, use 'Hike!' and if you want to let them speed up you make a kissing sound."

A smile played around her lips but one look at his face made her clamp her mouth shut.

"Pay attention."

Now she did grin. "Yes, Sir."

"Wench. What did I use for slow down?"

"'Easy.' And you use 'Whoa' to make them stop."

"That's right, the last two are a bit more difficult but as important. If you want them to turn to the right, you use 'Gee!' and 'Haw!' tells them to turn to the left."

"You also used 'On By!' when we passed those horseback riders."

"That's right. We use that one, if we pass another team or have some other distraction along the track." He gave her an approving nod. "You're observant. Now let me introduce you to Kelcy— one of my older and more placid dogs."

## CHAPTER 20

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2022. 10:00 AM.

CHESUNCOOK'S VET CLINIC

*Damn, why is saying no is so difficult?* Joy closed the door behind another customer and leaned her forehead against the cool glass. But she was getting better at it and this customer had paid. She should be proud.

*Than why do I feel like an ungrateful bitch rather than like a strong and competent professional?*

She could only hope it would become easier over time. Ray's stern reminders would certainly help her to take better care of herself and stand up for her wants and needs. Inconspicuously, Joy rubbed her butt.

She was just about to return to her desk and continue with digitalizing the files the previous owner left for her when Mary Winthrop walked past. The elderly lady was probably on her way to the mom-and-pop store a few buildings down the road that catered to the locals' basic needs.

Joy waved and received the same gesture from Mary, who trotted on. *I guess she's not in the mood for a chat.*

Half turning, Joy was about to return to her desk when she spotted three teenaged boys coming from the other direction.

She frowned and checked the time. Why were those boys hanging around on the street instead of studying?

Mary seemed to say something and the boys halted, their stance threatening. Joy's lizard brain went on high alert and she yanked open the clinic's door.

Before she could act or intervene, the largest boy was already in Mary's face and yelling obscenities.

Joy rushed forward.

Mary put her hand out, creating a barrier between her and the boys. “I want you to stop right now,” she said firmly. Mary didn’t turn away or look down. Holding her head up high, she faced the bullies like she wasn’t facing three opponents.

But Joy still worried for her friend. Three to one were not great odds and when the three were boys coming into their prime and the one a frail old woman, there wasn’t a question in Joy’s mind who would win a physical altercation.

At least, Joy could balance the score a bit. “Hey! What do you think you’re doing?”

Three belligerent heads turned her way. Mary didn’t so much as stiffen. She stood straight and looked through them.

“What’s it to you, bitch?”

“Does your mamma know what language you use, boy?” Joy lifted her chin. “You don’t know me. You don’t have a clue about my personality.”

“That’s right, Bobby-George.” Mary advanced on the lead boy, who backed up, flustered at being singled out by name. “Instead of hanging around, harassing other people and calling them names, you could be studying. Then you wouldn’t have a reason to complain about the grades I gave you.”

“Studying!” he spat. “What use does that do me when there’s shit-all to do in this dump? I can’t make no money here anyway— with or without a fancy degree.’

“It’s true that a degree does not guarantee a fortune,” Mary allowed, “but I think you’ll find that a strong education will take you much further than loitering about on street corners to insult old women ever will.”

The boys flushed and shuffled back. Their leader scowled, but even he backed up, muttering, “Education, my ass.”

“You’re a smart boy, Bobby-George. You just need to apply yourself—”

The boy spat on the sidewalk. “You’re just like my folks, telling me I ain’t trying. I’m trying! You think I want to repeat the year? I stayed up half the damn night and I still flunked the test! Stupid workbook don’t make any damn sense!”

“Perhaps if you had someone to help you—”

“Yeah, sure!” the boy interrupted scornfully. “My folks can’t afford no tutoring, Miss Winthrop.”

“Hmm.” Mary cocked her head like a bird. “How about you come and help me with turning my flower beds this afternoon?”

“Why should I? You going to pay me?”

Joy stiffened as she remembered the old woman’s small pension.

Mary pulled her oversized bag higher on her shoulder. “I’m sure we can work something out. How about an hour of labor in return for an hour of tutoring and dinner?”

The lead boy let out an incredulous laugh. “Wait, I’m going to do your yard and you’re going to pay me in *homework*?”

“And a make-up test in one week,” Mary added. “Show me some effort and I’m confident we can turn your grades around.”

The boys exchanged looks and the one in the back thoughtfully started to nod.

Joy silently sighed when the atmosphere turned. “If you’re looking for some extra cash, I can use some strong boys to help me with the weeds on my parking lot and maybe a paintjob.”

The nodding boy hanging in the back took a tentative step forward. “You’re the new vet, right?”

“I am.” Joy smiled and nodded. “I’m Joy, and you?”

“I’m Gordon, he’s Bobby-George and this is Ezra.” He pointed at his friends. “And I know how to paint.”

“You do?”

“Uh-huh.” For the first time, Ezra spoke, “He helped his pops with the barn last year.”

“Well then, I guess I have myself a painter. And how about you, Ezra?”

Bobby-George turned her way. “You are going to give us jobs? Even after I called you a bi... ah, called you names?”

“Yes, Bobby-George, since clearly you have time to spare and I’m in need of some fixings, I figure we can work together.”

His face split in a grin, and Joy blinked. Minus the scowl, the boy was a looker. She hoped the first impression he gave was a one off and he and his friends turned out to be decent people.

“Now, why don’t Ezra and Gordon go with Joy and discuss what needs to be done at the clinic?” Mary turned to the largest boy. “Would you mind helping me with the groceries? I can use some strong arms to carry back the heavy bags.”





*FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 2022. 5:30 PM*

Leaning against the lamppost, Joy surveyed the parking lot and exterior of the clinic. The boys had done a wonderful job and they'd been delighted by the money she handed them about half an hour ago. Each day, after finishing their schoolwork, Gordon and Ezra showed up to help fix and clean the lot, yard, and building.

*Hard little workers.*

Her life had changed drastically over the last couple of days. Not only did more people find her clinic, she now had two Huskies with cute puppies sharing her home. Yes, both Kyana and Groza now lived with Joy, so the moms had company, the pups got socialized, and Ray could focus on his training business, since the race season was starting soon, and people came for his advice from all over the country.

Each evening, Ray would come to her place for dinner and some sexy times. *And how sexy those times are!*

It actually surprised her she wasn't walking bowlegged by now. Aside from being creative... *The. Man. Has. Stamina!*

Speaking of the man, she lifted her head when the rumbling of an engine announced the arrival of a car. She straightened away from her perched position and frowned. *That isn't Ray's truck.*

Figuring it was a late patient, she took three steps toward the unfamiliar car and came to a dead halt when she recognized the person exiting the vehicle.

Her mouth gaped as she stared at the man, and before she had her wits together, he gathered her up in his embrace and

was pressing his mouth to hers, boldly slipping his tongue between her lips.

The sexually aggressive move pushed Joy out of her stunned daze, and she wiggled her hands between them and shoved against his chest.

With a wined, “Babe,” he let go of her and stumbled back. The expression on his face one of hurt.

An arrow of guilt pierced her chest, but when he tried to crowd her again, Joy called onto her inner Mary and held out her hand like a traffic brigade. “What are you doing here, Richard?”

“Isn’t that obvious? I came for you.”

“Why?”

Richard stumbled to a halt and his mouth flapped open and closed like a goldfish before uttering, “Why? Because I love you, baby.”

“No, you don’t,” she said matter-of-factly.

He blinked and took a step back. “Of course, I do. I need you, baby.” His voice adopted that wining quality that grated her nerves. Before, this tone would appeal to her nurturing side, but now she saw it for what it was; a weak man manipulating her.

She straightened. “Please leave, Richard. There’s nothing here for you and I’m here to stay.”

“But why? You had a good job, a nice apartment. You had *me!* Why did you have to leave like that?”

“That fact that you have to *ask* is answer enough for me, but I’m going to share something I learned over the past couple of weeks. We’re not right for each other. Couples

should strengthen each other, encourage the other to become the best version of themselves in the process. What we had wasn't a healthy relationship. You became lethargic and I became stagnant. We fed each other's worst traits."

"We can try again and do better now." He gave her his best 'lost puppy dog' eyes. "Come on, babe, you know you can't make it without me."

"Yes, I can," she said firmly. "And if you can't make it without *me*, well, that's not my problem."

The mask of manly concern he wore so well slipped slightly, giving her a glimpse at the sullen little boy beneath. "You're not being fair," he whined. "You owe me another chance!"

"I don't owe you anything." Emboldened, she took a step forward, still holding her hand out, forcing him to retreat off the porch. "No, Richard. I'm sorry you came all this way for nothing, but like I told you over the phone, there is no *us* anymore." She gave him a resolute stare. "We're *over* and if you still don't understand, I will happily call the police to explain it to you. This is a private business. You are trespassing. Go."

His shoulders slumped and he turned around.

Without another glance at her, he got into the car, gave her one last angry glare and drove away.

Staggering, Joy braced herself against the fence. If coming to Maine and her experiences with Ray taught her something, it was how toxic her relationship with Richard had been. Until this moment, she had been stuck in the middle, because she hadn't dealt with Richard in a way that would keep him away.

Now she was starting to build a life in Chesuncook, and she just severed another leash tethering her to the past.

*I'm a submissive and a competent woman. She pushed away from the fence. Richard might have conditioned me to believe his lies, but the other vets in DC treated me as less as well, which makes this a character trait that is deep seated, and I need to deal with that somehow.*

And there was Ray and his dominance. *Is accepting his control setting me up to depend on another man?*

The worries cast a shadow on the not so small victory of seeing Richard leave without a fight. *People deserve to be loved for who they are. I deserve to be loved for who I am, and I'm also allowed to love myself.*

“I will love myself.” Not caring it might be strange to talk aloud, she went to go to her apartment. Ray would be arriving soon.

## CHAPTER 21

*FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 2022. 5:40 PM. HIGHSTREET  
CHESUNCOOK*

Ray tapped on the steering wheel to the beat of Coffey Anderson's *Mr Red White and Blue*. He was looking forward to the get-together with his little vet, and not just because of the sex, although thinking about the warmth of her body gave him an instant hard on. But he longed even more for her smile, her easy company and her willingness to listen. Joy had a way about her that set him at ease and when he talked she turned her complete attention to him, like he was the only person on the planet.

She filled his life with love, laughter... and joy. He grinned at his inadvertent joke.

Unfortunately, some bastard in a black Ford Escape going way too fast on the Maine country roads came up on Ray's tail, blasting his horn, then passed on a corner, narrowly missing hitting both Ray and a startled Mrs. Polinsky on her way to town before careening around the bend and out of sight.

*Motherfucking asshole!* Ray slammed on his brakes and hoped he wouldn't find a heap of metal curled around a moose or a tree across the bend.

Taking the curve with more care than usual, Ray noticed the driver kept speeding and was already well ahead of him.

After shaking off his annoyance, Ray rubbed his chin. Before meeting Joy, he would have catalogued the asshole as a city boy, but while the car didn't belong to a local as far as Ray knew, he no longer assumed everyone who lived in the city were bastards by default. People were just people. Some

lived in cities, some did not. Some might be assholes, but city or countryside residency didn't make for better or worse people.

*Joy has changed me, but in a good way,* Ray thought.

Unwilling to let the road hog destroy his good mood and ruin an excellent evening, Ray eased back on the accelerator as the road stretched out before him.

The trees made way for open terrain, and he could see the green rooftop of the clinic appear. Ray narrowed his eyes. In the parking lot in front of the building was the black Ford haphazardly parked. Was there an emergency? That might explain the man's crazy driving.

Then Ray braked hard as he saw the couple on the porch, locked in a passionate embrace.

His breath stuttered, his world tilted on his axis, and the time seemed to slow down – his Joy was kissing another man. Something behind his sternum burned and Ray clenched his teeth against the betrayal. Lifting his foot from the brake, Ray had to force himself not to stomp on the gas, but he still drove away faster than he meant to.

*Fuck, that hurt. How could she?*

He cursed and slammed his hands on the steering wheel. *Fuck that!* Continuing on High Street he was contemplating how to reach his cabin. Because he was sure as hell not taking the short route that would lead him past the clinic again. *Would they be inside by now?*

“Fu-u-uck!” he roared toward the truck's ceiling. He was not going to think about Joy with another man. He. Was. Not!





*FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 2022. 7:00 PM. JOY'S  
APARTMENT*

For what must have been the tenth time, Joy tried to call Ray and again got only the terse, “Hi, this is Raymond Redington. I can’t answer the phone right now, but if you leave me a message with your name and phone number, I will return your call as soon as possible.” Having already left three messages, Joy refrained from leaving another, and disconnected the call.

“Where *is* he?” Despair laced her voice.

Snuggled with the pups from both litters, Groza lifted her head with a soft whine while Kyana padded over and rested her head on Joy’s thigh. Two beautiful eyes, one light-brown and one ice-blue, lifted up at Joy’s face, and Kyana’s forehead wrinkled like the Husky was in deep thought.

“I’m worried, girl.” Joy stroked the soft fur at the back of Kyana’s head and tried to ignore her trembling fingers. Memories of her parents’ car crash bombarded her senses and she shuddered.

The Husky cuddled up against her made soft sounds as if to reassure and comfort Joy.

Joy buried her face in the dog’s coat and tried not to cry.  
*Oh Ray, please, please, please, be all right.*

## CHAPTER 22

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2022. 10:00 AM. RAY'S CABIN

Joy wandered from the barn to the cabin and back. After a week of searching, calling, and dropping by at his cabin, she needed to face the fact and admit defeat. *There's no way around it, he's gone.*

Pain sliced her soul as the realization of his abandonment sank in. The dogs were missing, the cabin was locked, and the cart and Ray were absent as well. He hadn't said a word to anyone, just left.

Just like the night with Luke all those years ago, and with the death of her parents, she hadn't braced for the agony, hadn't seen it coming. *I'm just so fucking naïve. Will I ever learn?*

Joy rubbed her sternum, as if she could wipe away the searing pain.

Her shoulders slumped and she trudged back to her car. Tears began to fall.

Her mind went back to the night of the prom.

*Unease crept up Joy Bennett's spine as she watched her boyfriend getting more shitfaced by the minute. People were dancing to Cyndi Lauper - Girls Just Wanna Have Fun. But Joy wasn't enjoying herself at all.*

*Despite the endless mocking and goading from him and her other classmates she refused every alcoholic beverage they tried to force on her. She wanted to go home, but if she left now, she would be the laughingstock of the whole class.*

*Luke slung an arm around her. “Come on, baby, you’re making me look bad.” His alcohol laden breath wafted in her face as she tried not to gag. “Really. You need to loosen up a bit.” He swayed, and she staggered under his weight. “Relax. School’s over and in a couple of weeks you’ll be at the university with no time for fun. Let’s party while we can.”*

*Joy considered his words. He was right. She worked hard to get a perfect GPA score. This was a night to let go.*

Shuddering Joy returned from the past and used her long-sleeved shirt to wipe away the tears. How foolish had her seventeen-year-old self been.



*SUNDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2022. 7:30 AM SOMEWHERE IN  
ALONG MOOSEHEAD LAKE IN NORTHWEST  
PISCATAQUIS*

Ray tossed back the rest of his tepid coffee and went to check on his dogs. Flipping up his collar, Ray hunched his shoulders. The temperature might be above average, but he couldn't shake of the cold. The realist in him figured the discomfort had nothing to do with the outside weather, but came from his insides.

Several days of isolation hadn't improved Ray's mood one bit. Oh, he enjoyed spending the time outdoors with his dogs and relished the challenge of leading the pack even without the snow, but something important— or better *someone* was missing from his life.

After distancing himself from the clinic, Ray had aimlessly driven around and found himself ending up at Jason's cabin. Ray hadn't entered his old friend's home but sat behind the steering wheel staring into the woods. Nature there had been quiet and peaceful. The tranquility hadn't suited his mood nor eased his mind, and Ray soon returned to his own home.

Back at his grandmother's cabin, there were small reminders of Joy everywhere and after a sleepless night, he gathered all the dogs and —thankful Kyana and her pups would be safe with Joy— he'd taken off with no destination or plan.

The first three days, he'd barely eaten. Everything he saw reminded him of her. The color of a passing car, the same color as the sheets on her bed, rumped around her naked body. A cloud, blown thin into the shape of her wispy hair spread over his chest. And especially the dogs. In their voices, he

imagined he could hear her laughter, her sighs. Several times per day, he wished he'd never met her. But at least as often, her beautiful smile when working or caring for the dogs, her delight at seeing Kyana's puppies for the first time, her supple, compliant body under his, and her countless acts of care and kindness toward him and others came to mind.

So, how could she have betrayed him in such a spectacular fashion?

He rinsed his now empty cup. The mundane chores reminded him of doing the dishes with Joy.

He forced her image out of his mind. "If I don't let people in, they can't hurt me."

Aga's almost inaudible, "ooh, ooh, ooh", made Ray realize he'd spoken the words out loud. The older canine always had been sensitive to his moods.

Ray went to one knee beside her and ruffled her fur. "Nothing's wrong, girl, I'm just a moron, that's all!" But even as he spoke, he knew the Husky could hear the lie. He tried to firm his spine, almost able to feel his father's strap on his back for being a pussy. He cleared his throat. "From now on, it will be just me with you guys. How's that?"

Kelcy, Qornoq, and Finn tried to snuggle closer as if to comfort Ray. As he stroked and patted the dogs, and Aga stared at him with soulful eyes, he was almost ready to speak his next thought. *I'm pretty convinced that just isn't enough anymore.*

## CHAPTER 23



*SUNDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2022. 7:00 AM JOY'S  
APARTMENT*

After tossing and turning all night, Joy rose with bleary eyes. On autopilot she went through her morning routine and took care of the dogs. First, she fed the pups their gruel, then she took Groza and Kyana on a walk. The Huskies picked up on her mood, because they stayed close to Joy and didn't pull on their leashes like they were towing a sled.

Her mind was still boggling to understand what had happened. She returned the two mothers to their litters and went to fix breakfast for the adult dogs while the pups drank greedily.

Scooping up some high protein kibble from the thirty-pound bag and pouring it into Kyana's food bowl, Joy stopped and frowned. Ray would never leave his beloved dog behind – none of them, but especially not Kyana.

She sank on a kitchen chair and tried to engage her muddled brain. *What do I know about Ray? He's not comfortable with most people. Has been taught to distrust them. But he trusts me –or does he?* Chewing her lip, her gaze wandered to the dogs. Kyana stared back as if imploring, 'Woman, use your brains.'

"You're right girl, Ray would never leave you and your babies with someone he didn't trust. So, what made him leave? Where is he?"

Kyana blinked. The only sound in the kitchen was the suckling and sniffing from the pups.

Joy rose and returned to her dog feeding duties. “You know, when I turned Richard away, I was so relieved, not just because he was finally gone, but because I knew I was ready to embrace a new life with Ray. I knew I wasn’t happy with Richard... I guess I’ve known that for a long time now... but I might not have been able to tell him to go if Ray hadn’t helped me find my inner strength. No. And even so, I still froze when Richard—”

A thought occurred and she almost dropped the feeding bowl. “No, no way.”

Her eyes burned. “I think I know what happened.” Tears began to leak from the corners of her eyes. “Ray must have seen me in Richard’s embrace and thought I brought him here.” Frustrated with herself for allowing Richard to touch her like that and with Richard for ambushing her, but also with Ray for that matter, Joy used a paper towel to wipe away her tears. By now she understood her old beliefs about always being nice and helpful weren’t healthy. While the subservient role suited her character and mental makeup, she didn’t have to be nice to everyone. “He must have rushed off like a pack of Huskies at the starting line, because I came to my senses pretty fast and pushed Richard away.” She winced. “But not before he shoved his tongue down my throat. Oh, Ray.” New tears threatened but now for the strong but emotionally vulnerable man. “Why did you have to see that part and not the part where I pushed him? You... You hot-headed caveman, why do you always have to jump to the wrong conclusion? It’s you I love! It’s you I want to spend my life with! Where are you? Come back...so I can talk some sense through your thick head.”

Now understanding how hurt and upset he must have been, Joy gave the adult Huskies their food and settled on a kitchen

chair to watch them eat. Ray would come back to the dogs and subsequently her, and Joy would be ready for him.

No one, not even Raymond *Mountain Man* Reddington would prevent her from loving and obeying him for the rest of their lives.



*MONDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2022. 7:30 AM RAY'S CABIN*

Back at his cabin, Ray wondered what to do next. After using the morning to indulge in an excessive contemplation of himself, Ray had challenged his old beliefs. Were all people indeed untrustworthy and would they always betray him? Joy showed him with her phone call with the asshole ex, that the little vet was willing to stand up for herself and she hadn't shown any signs of wanting the bastard back in her life. With his mind almost as clear as Moosehead Lake's water, he was pretty certain the man with the black Ford had been dickhead Richard. While this realization didn't erase the sight of Joy kissing another man – or had she? Had she kissed him or had she been grabbed and pulled into an unexpected kiss?

Reluctantly, Ray had to admit he didn't know because he hadn't stuck around long enough to really see what was happening. He caught a glimpse – a fraction of a second – and took off without even bothering to find out if it was an embrace or an assault.

*Why didn't I confront the bastard there and then?* Ray knew the answer to that question and didn't like it. “Because I'd rather walk away and pretend something doesn't hurt me than admit to being vulnerable.”

He should have given Joy his unconditional trust and have empowered her to stand up to Richard. Instead, he left her to fend for herself and maybe even cave in with the bastard.

Although he might be opening himself up to a world of hurt, Ray was ready to face her –with or without the sonofabitch ex-fiancé. Maybe he would find Richard firmly embedded in Joy's life, but somehow Ray doubted that.

Besides, being alone with his dogs and surrounded by nature, he had come to a conclusion. The departures of his grandmother and Jason and also Martin Cavanaugh moving away might have hurt, but he wouldn't have missed their presence in his life for the world.

Ray filled the last water bowl and gave Finn a firm side scratch that had the male dog wiggling in ecstasy. "You know, buddy, even if I'm about to lose her completely over my idiocy, I'm going to fight for her."

Finn panted little huffing sounds.

"However, I don't think she will turn me away, and I'm ready to grovel if she needs me to."

Finn opened his mouth to almost a yawn, and his vocalization sounded like, 'Get Joy.'

"You're right, buddy. I'm going to get, Joy." He winced. The Princess might not be too pleased with him. "Wish me luck, buddy."

## CHAPTER 24

*Monday, December 4, 2022. 8:00 AM. Chesuncook's Vet Clinic*

Joy's breath caught in her throat as she went to open the clinic's doors and spotted a very familiar Chevy in her parking lot. Her heart seemed to still for a moment, then began to pound like a drumbeat in her chest.

The driver's side door opened. Frozen to the spot, Joy saw him unfurl himself from the seat and step onto the gravel. Her heart squeezed at the sight of his gaunt face, that even a week's old beard couldn't disguise. She knew her own face didn't look much better.

Fighting the urge to rush to him and throw herself into his arms, she turned instead to open the front door and stepped aside to beckon him inside. "Ray." Her tone was reserved, but her voice was steadier than she felt.

Without a word, he stepped over the threshold, bringing with him the familiar scent of dogs, pine needles and wood.

She closed her eyes and swallowed the lump in her throat, making an effort to keep her voice even. "Why did you leave without a word?"

“I saw you in the arms of another man– the one driving the black Ford Escape. Richard?”

“I thought you might have.” They stood in the waiting room with about two steps of distance between them. The mental distance between them was as wide as the Grand Canyon, and Joy struggled with how to breach the gap. “I turned him away, right after he completely waylaid me and shoved his tongue down my throat.”

The air whooshed from Ray’s lungs with an audible gush. “I’m an asshole.” He sank down on the waiting room wooden bench.

Joy let out a contemplative hum and crossed her arms. “I can’t say I disagree with your assessment, but why are you an asshole?”

He lifted his head, let out a frustrated grunt, and before he dropped his head, his gaze turned inward.

Joy scrutinized him for a few seconds before turning to the coffee machine. When she returned with two steaming mugs of coffee, he hadn’t moved.

Wordlessly, she handed him one of the mugs and sank down next to him.

“I can’t understand how you can tolerate me and not hand me my balls on a platter.” His facial muscles were taut when he turned his face her way. “You are much too sweet and forgiving, Princess.” He took a sip of the brew and let out a sigh.

Knowing him well enough not to prod for answers, she leaned back. Using techniques learned from handling scared, hurt and angry animals, Joy projected calmness, drank her

coffee quietly, offering her company and nothing else. Ray would talk when he was ready.

Ray downed the contents of his mug, held it between both hands and stared as if the well of wisdom was at the bottom of the cup. Suddenly, so quietly that she almost missed the first words, he started talking: “My mom is a drug addict and my dad is a self-absorbed asshole. She made my life hell and he was too busy having affairs to care about helping her or me.” His hands moved restlessly around the ceramic. “I can’t remember how many times I had to clean up after her or call an ambulance. And she’d get all sloppy and cry and call me her sweet man.” He paused. “Any time I tried to see my friends or, hell, even if I was home and just not paying her enough attention, she’d act up or fall down or...OD. So I’d have to be there, you know. All the time. To keep an eye on her, make sure she didn’t hurt herself, make sure she got something to eat or took a shower..”

“Basically, you were the adult.”

He swallowed and for the first time made direct eye contact. “I was. And I hated it. She called it love, but...it didn’t feel like love. Maybe it was love for her, but having to prove you love someone by sacrificing everything else, by *hurting* all the time... “

“How old were you?”

“I can’t remember a time she wasn’t a mess, until I moved out for college at seventeen. My only periods of peace and happiness were the times my mother was in rehab, when I was with my grandmother. She loved me. Really loved me. The real kind of love, the kind that doesn’t ask and doesn’t take, that just is. She died when I was just twenty. Slipped on the ice in front of the grocery store, hit her head just right. No one’s



fault, just one of those things, but it wasn't fair, losing her so soon like that."

Her heart squeezed for the lonely, little boy he must have been.

"Don't pity me." His mouth tightened.

*Oh, for goodness sake!* She stared at him. "I don't, but I do feel compassion for a parentified child." She reached out and squeezed his forearm. "Thank you for sharing. I can only try to imagine how your childhood must have been for you." She contemplated how to phrase her next question. "How does your experience affect you now?" She had a pretty good idea, but he needed to tell her anyway.

"Well." He let go of the mug with one hand, placed his palm over hers and squeezed carefully. "I don't trust many people and sometimes I behave like a goddamned idiot. Like I did last Friday. I'm sorry I jumped to conclusions without giving you a chance to explain. Hell, you wouldn't have had to explain if I hadn't run off so fast."

No prevarication, quibbling or beating about the bush from him, just a simple, sincere apology. Her heart melted and her stomach clenched.

"Do you still speak with your parents?" She leaned her cheek against his shoulder, hoping the warmth she felt for him would seep into him through their connection.

His shoulders moved. "Haven't in years. I don't even know if they're still alive or not. I'm not sure if I really care one way or the other. They were just my parents, they're not family."

Joy swallowed. From his standpoint she could understand the sentiment, but she would have given her right arm for a

few more years with her parents. However, she had a more pressing matter on her mind. “What made you decide to come back today?”

His gaze drilled into her. “Once I gave myself time to think about it, I realized the Joy I know would never do that to me. And it made me face something about myself, the way I keep pushing people away. Thinking if I don’t open my heart to anyone, I won’t be betrayed and hurt or left behind.”

She held his gaze and cocked her head in a ‘go on’ gesture.

“After walking away from you, I went back to my cabin and there were all these little reminders of you. I couldn’t stand it, so I collected the dogs and went for a ride. But even outside, small things kept returning my thoughts to you. It made something clear.” He cupped her cheek. “I wouldn’t want to have missed those memories for the world.” He leaned forward, his lips hovering an inch from hers. *Waiting for her to retreat maybe?* “It’s infinitely better to love and lose than to never have loved at all, Princess.” He closed the distance between their mouths.



After they came up for air and Joy got them another drink, she confessed, “My high school boyfriend died the morning after prom night and I feel responsible.”

If her revelation shocked Ray, he didn’t show it. “What happened?”

It was her moment to fall silent and stare into her mug. “We were young and we were stupid.” The bitter, nutty scent of the coffee made her nauseous, and she placed the mug on the table in front of them. “It was our first time celebrating

without our parents looking over our shoulder. We didn't see any harm in it. Drinking and hanging out are common ways to relax, right?"

He nodded.

"At first, I didn't want to drink. I didn't like beer all that much, but people kept nagging and pushing for me to 'let go' and so did Luke." She swallowed. – "My boyfriend. I didn't know how dangerous high-intensity drinking could be– how deadly."

Tears burned her eyes, and Joy pressed a hand to her mouth. "By the time I decided to have a drink myself, Luke was having significant impairments, but I ignored the obvious signs of alcohol overdose."

Tears started to drip down her face, and suddenly she was yanked from the wooden bench and cradled into strong arms. His embrace gave her the strength to continue. "Together, we drank more, and every time I got a drink, he'd tell me to get him one too, and I...I did. By the time the party ended, Luke was unconscious. I thought he'd just passed out. I had no idea. I just sat him up so he wouldn't choke if he had to, you know, throw up, and I put his coat over him so he'd be warm, and I... I sat down on the couch next to him and went to sleep. I went to sleep, right there beside him. I was sleeping when he... He had so much alcohol in his bloodstream that his basic life-support functions just shut down. And I didn't know. I didn't." She was now crying in earnest and almost choking on the words.

"Of course you didn't, how old were you? Seventeen, eighteen maybe?"

She sniffled. "Se-seventeen."

“You were just a teenager.”

She nodded against his chest. “But one who should have stayed sober. If I had, I might...”

“Prevent your boyfriend from drinking?”

She lifted her head and shook it. “No, no, I couldn’t have done that, but I might have been aware enough to call 9-1-1 before it was too late. By the time his parents found us and called for an ambulance, his brain was too damaged. They kept him on life-support for a little over a month and never allowed me to see him.”

He cupped her chin and turned her, so she faced him. “They blamed you?”

“They did.”

“That was a shitty thing to do.”

“What?”

“You heard me. You can’t hold a seventeen-year-old responsible for anything and you can never hold someone responsible for the actions of another person.”

“Oh.” Worrying her bottom lip, she contemplated his words. “Maybe not.”

“Most certainly not!” he said with conviction, then landed a soft, chaste kiss on her lips. “So, tell me, how did this experience form you?”

She gave him a wry smile, recognizing how he used almost the same words on her as she had on him. “I think it pushed me into trying to be perfect and to take care of anyone else.”

He hummed his agreement. “Which brings us to your relationship with Richard.”

“I think it does.” She nodded. “But I don’t want that kind of life anymore. I’m done paying penance for what happened with Luke. I want an equal relationship with a man who respects and supports me. Not a man who lives off me and puts me down all the time, just to make him feel better about himself.”

“What you need is a man you can relax and let down your guard with, without having to worry he’ll take over your life.”

She nodded again. “I don’t want to be liked by everyone. I don’t *need* to be liked by everyone. Some people’s opinions are important, others... well, I don’t give a rat’s ass what they think of me.”

He squeezed her tighter.

“I need to start believing in my own decisions and judgements, and stop letting other people’s beliefs stand between me and happiness. I find it still hard to explain the difference between a Dom and a domineering asshole, but I know I feel safe with you. Just—” She tipped back her head and stared into his rugged face. “—don’t leave me again like that. You can walk out, hike away, take a drive to clear your mind, but please, please let me know where you are.”

“I will, Princess, and for what it’s worth, I *am* sorry for doubting you and taking off like that.”

“I forgive you, as I will try to forgive my younger self for being stupid.” *I paid a high cost for that and have been paying ever since.* “I can see now that I don’t have to be strong all the time.”

“Submitting isn’t a sign of weakness, it’s a sign of strength. Letting go of control, trusting your Top to be responsible for you, that’s probably the hardest thing to do.”

Ray kissed her nose. “I’m in awe of you, Princess, and I’m honored you gave me your trust. More precisely for giving it to me again, after what I did.”

## CHAPTER 25

She sat on his lap for a long time, and once again Joy didn't mind her clinic wasn't as busy as the one in Washington DC.

Although she'd been established in Washington DC, she had also been unhappy without knowing. Building up a new life in Chesuncook had been terrifying, but also exciting, as was the grumpy mountain man she kept running into. Joy snuggled closer, determined never to let her grumpy man go.

They talked for a while and delved a bit deeper into both their pasts and the beliefs their experiences forced into their brains, until the first patient called for that day, and Ray went upstairs to reacquaint himself with Kyana, Groza and the pups.

When Joy came upstairs for her lunch break, Ray had warmed a can of tomato soup and made grilled cheese and ham sandwiches. When they settled at the kitchen table, both adult dogs nestled beneath the table and the pups were playing and yipping, venturing out and sniffing everything that snagged their attention.

Ray spooned some soup and grinned. "I swear they seem to have doubled in size while I was gone."

Joy laughed as one of Groza's pups pounced on Kyana's tail. "Probably not doubled in size, but they do grow fast!"

“You know we have to put them up for adoption soon, right? Between eight to nine weeks, they are capable of forming strong bonds and I want them at their forever homes by then.”

“I know, and the longer they stay, the more I will grow attached to them, but it will hurt to see them leave.”





*TUESDAY, JANUARY 3, 2023. 10:45 AM. BANGOR  
AIRPORT, MAINE*

Her bottom lip trembling, Joy watched as the Dutch couple, Roderick and Anita, left with the last two of Kyana's pups through the gates. Last week and this week, all the pups left—one after another or in couples.

The four from Groza's litter all found places in the US but Kyana's pups had attracted attention from all over the world and her offspring found new homes in Canada, Norway, and the Netherlands. Now they were fifteen weeks old and ready to travel.

Ray had vetted all the new owners and assured Joy they were experienced mushers, and the pups would be well loved and attended to. His guarantee didn't lessen the heartache of seeing the small dogs she'd come to love, leave. At first, they considered keeping one or two, but decided against it since with Groza adding to the group, Joy's clinic was picking up more and more patients and Ray's business was thriving, they had enough dogs of their own.

Roderick and Anita were super friendly and no-nonsense, and Joy immediately liked them. But now, as the pups were in their crates and the Dutch couple showed their passports and passed through the airport security gates, her heart seemed to drop into her shoes.

Without a word, Ray swung an arm around her shoulder and kept her close. Her steady mountain man always knew what she needed, often even before Joy recognized it herself. She went onto tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "I love you, Ray Reddington."

He caught her mouth with his and kissed the breath from her lungs. When they parted, they were both panting. “This is how you kiss your man, Doctor Bennett.”

“I’ll make sure to remember.” Playfully she twirled out of his arms and squealed when his concrete hand connected with her butt.

Next to them an older couple stepped away from them. The woman wrinkled her nose as if she smelled something foul. Joy restrained herself from sticking out her tongue at the sourdough.

She didn’t care if people approved of her and Ray’s dynamic. As long as it worked for them, Joy was happy, and if it ever started to feel like something wasn’t working, she trusted Ray to listen if she wanted to talk it out. He was her Dominant, not her warden; she was his submissive, not his doormat; and together, they were whole.



Ray barely contained his laughter as Joy gave the cranky old woman the stink eye, and marched past her with as much dignity as the princess he liked to call her.

Starting this month, Joy had rented her apartment to Mary. The former schoolteacher was happy to move out of her big house after Eloise peacefully passed away in her sleep at the end of December. Occasionally, the elderly woman helped out in the clinic, which provided her with some much-needed puppy and kitten fix.

Now that she had someone to keep an eye on the clinic, Joy made it official and completely moved in with Ray. Preferring his cabin over her residence over the clinic, she

stayed most of her time with him anyway and it had been the most natural thing for them to do.

With Joy firmly in his life, Ray had gotten more involved in the small community and was even working with Ezra, one of the three boys who had confronted Mary, but who turned out to be eager to work with the dogs.

With positive attention from Mary and Joy, the three boys were working hard on their studies as well as doing odd jobs here and there to make some money for themselves. To everyone's surprise, Bobby-George was proving to have a knack for studying and had proudly boasted a perfect score on his last test. That boy might end up on a scholarship somewhere after finishing his online classes. Ray was sure Mary and Joy would do everything in their power to make that happen.

Joy hadn't just changed his life for the better, her kindness and positive outlook on life had influenced so many lives, even in their small community.

## EPILOGUE

*Sunday, January 22, 2023, Frost Mountain Sled Dog Race,  
Brownfield, Maine*

Clamping her numb fingers around the handlebar— because no way she was letting go of that thing— Joy inwardly cheered as she saw the end of the woods ahead.

Groza and Suka were working together like a well-oiled machine now and they made her so proud. The two alpha females hadn't submitted easily to her, but after months of training, Joy had come out as top dog.

Joy grinned, her cheeks stiff with cold and her eyes leaking tears as the harsh wind battered against her face.

Dark trees whooshed past as the dogs raced the final part of the one point nine miles.

Joy knew there was a sharp turn left out of the wood and only a few hundred yards before she would finish her first race. "Easy," she warned the dogs, and they slowed down a bit for the turn.

"Haw!" The Huskies made a smooth turn left.

Cheers reached her ears as the first spectators at the finish line saw her approach. Joy made a kissing sound, although the Huskies didn't need her encouragement to lay on more speed. Bodies in sync, paws battling snow, both females bolted into the clearing and straight toward the finish line.

The cheers turned to a roaring in her ears, as Joy spotted Ray at the finish line, a proud smile splitting to lower half of his face.

Groza and Suka threw their bodies over the finish line. As soon as the sled passed the line, Joy ordered, "Whoa," and threw back her weight, stepping on the brake.

Before Joy had secured the sled, Ray was at her side and helped with the snow anchor. They both went to the dogs for their praise and snuggles, and to take off the harnesses.



After taking care of the dogs and celebrating Joy's first finish of what was probably many more races to come, because his woman was bitten by the dog sled bug as much as he was, Ray pulled his little vet in his arms.

Molding her body flush to his as much as their bulky clothes allowed, she stared up at him with excitement and love in her eyes. Ray leaned down and –mindful of her chapped lips– gave her a careful peck on the lips before leaning their forehead together. "Ready to go?"

"Yes, let's go home."

Warmth flooded his chest. "I love it that you call the cabin your home."

Standing too close to actually see her face, he could feel her smile as she said, “You and the dogs are my home, but I do love your cabin, too.”

And Ray agreed. By accepting Joy into his life and allowing her to invade his safe place –believing the cabin would stay safe– it became a better place with her living there.

Ray stilled when he spotted something red at the border of the woods. The male cardinal bird quietly watched them for several heartbeats, then he inclined his head as in greeting, and flew away.

A smile curved around his lips and while he sent a silent ‘thanks’ to the bird for delivering his message, Ray hugged Joy closer to him.

“What?”

“I just remembered a conversation with Jason, ah, maybe six months ago. He pointed out to me that people were social beings and not meant to be alone.”

Her head bobbed. “Yeah, you told me after the funeral. And how you couldn’t understand why he said that when he lived even more remotely than you did.”

“I did?” He scrubbed the back of his neck. “Huh, I can’t remember.”

She squeezed his waist through the thicker layers of clothing. “You did. You also were deep in grief.”

“True,” he admitted. “Jason and I had a similar lifestyle, and I didn’t take him very seriously at all that day. But although comfortable, my cabin was cold and empty in a way a warming fire couldn’t fix. You are brightness and sunshine even on a rainy day.”

“Oh Ray.” Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

Ray had to swallow. “Today, I think Jason is looking down on us and is pleased for us both.” He bent to kiss her, mindful of her sensitive mouth. “Thank you, Princess, for being my Joy in life.”

**THE END**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Karen Nappa](#) is an Amazon bestselling author of Seasoned BDSM romance with HEA. Her books are available at popular retailers and include series such as *Small-Town Submission* and *Savage Billionaires*.

Immersed in the D/s lifestyle herself, she writes realistic albeit romantic stories. When not dominated by her cats or her Master (in that order—even if it earns her a spanking!), she loves going places to discover the stories waiting to be written.

She resides in the Netherlands with her dominant husband, two adult-ish kids and whoever they might drag home with them—and, of course, her two Chausie cats. If she isn't writing or texting with friends, she's probably reading, running, or listening to heavy metal.



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