

USA Today Bestselling Author

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A Little  
FATHER'S DAY  
FAVOR

🌀 HOLIDAYS AT RAWHIDE RANCH 🌀

# A LITTLE FATHER'S DAY FAVOR

*A Holidays at ~~Ranch~~ Ranch Story*



MAREN SMITH



**A Little Father's Day Favor**

***Rawhide Ranch Holiday***

**By**

**Maren Smith**

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Holidays at Rawhide Ranch

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## CHAPTER 1

Hudson paced outside Master Derek's office, his anxiousness at finally being here without first solidifying the plan of action that he'd come up with on his own back in Tillamook, Oregon, finally getting the better of him.

He scrubbed his damp palms on the thighs of his jeans as he tried to anticipate what questions might be asked once he was seated before the intimidating, well-known in Daddy-Dom circles and utterly respected in the BDSM community, Derek Hawkins. Owner of Montana's infamous Rawhide Ranch. Hudson had heard of him, but never met the man before. And here he was, wearing tracks in the crimson and gold-gilded area rug in the waiting area outside his closed door. He knew what he was asking for and he knew it was exactly what he needed, but he also knew if he were Derek, no way would Hudson have agreed to what he himself was asking.

He had one shot at this. Derek was a busy man, known for his fair and just handling, not only of the Littles under his care, but the Daddy Doms who came to visit and perhaps even take home their very own Little boy or girl. If Derek said no, Hudson had every confidence that Rawhide Ranch's stalwart owner would not change his mind. Not this visit, anyway. And yet, Hudson needed this, especially at this time of year. He

needed to lose himself in the needs of another. He needed to be totally focused on their care and not his own grief.

It had been over a year since his mother had passed. She'd battled cancer with all she had for two long years before losing the fight. And throughout the duration of that impossibly hard time, Hudson had cared for her. It was a task he'd taken on without asking. She was his mother, after all. No one deserved to die that way, least of all her, and his dropping everything to care for her during those awful years wasn't his duty, it was his honor.

Since he'd lost her in his life, he'd been so focused on his grief that he'd pretty much lost everything else that had once mattered to him. His girlfriend and Little—Elsie, who had finally tired of always being second place during his mother's care—had left him three months after his mother passed. She'd never said a word to him. He simply came home one day to discover his house completely empty and Elsie gone. She'd even taken his clothes, leaving not so much as an empty hanger in the closets.

That had hurt, too. But once he understood the why and what of it, it was hard to blame her. In fact, he was a little surprised that she'd hung on for as long as she had.

So far, he hadn't gone on a single date. He felt no inclination for it, the wounded pain that cut through him every time he thought about her had yet to relinquish its hold on him. He wasn't ready to welcome anyone new into his life. However, the thought of going through another June with nothing to occupy his thoughts and his time except the unbearable sadness of the last three years—he couldn't bear it.

His chest was heavy and tight already, and he hadn't yet talked to Derek or been told unequivocally no on his request. He knew this was what he needed—to get the hardest, toughest Little case Derek had onsite. He needed to spend the impossible-to-navigate week—the anniversary of his mother's passing—burying himself in the care of someone who really needed it. Someone just as lost as he was. Someone who just wanted to make it through the week without breaking. And, god, did Hudson feel fragile. He didn't mean to be, but somewhere over the last years he'd isolated himself so completely that the loneliness of his life was starting to close in around him.

He needed a distraction.

And so here he was, and instead of his normal confidence in the direction he'd chosen to take his own healing, he was nervous. Vulnerable. A part of him even felt stupid for asking something so intimate from a total stranger. Derek would be in the right to laugh Hudson right out of his office.

And here he came, the Master of the Ranch. Hudson may not have met Derek, but he was a hundred percent sure the tall man in jeans, boots, and Stetson had to be the owner of this place. The man striding toward him, coffee and clipboard in hand, did so with long steps full of confidence and power. Like a man who'd never lost himself in grief, shaking Hudson's inner Dominant all the way to its core.

Derek locked eyes with him, noting his presence from the moment he'd entered the lobby. With every step that cut the distance between them, Derek took his time accessing him, looking him up and down. The quiver that ran down Hudson's legs was weakening, but he ignored it. He just started walking, and by the time the two men met in the middle, he was pretty

sure Derek had come to his own conclusion regarding Hudson. Whatever that conclusion was, he kept it carefully masked behind the sky blue of his eyes.

Derek stuck out his hand a few feet before they stopped in front of one another. “Derek Hawkins,” he formally greeted. “And you are?”

“Hudson Barlowe,” he introduced himself, shaking the other’s hand.

“Ah,” Derek said, a flicker of something flashing through his eyes. It was there and gone so fast, Hudson couldn’t quite read it. “My seven o’clock appointment. Last night’s appointment, specifically.”

“I’m sorry,” Hudson replied. “My flight got delayed. We didn’t touch down until three this morning.”

“Then I must thank you for not waking me up when you got here,” Derek said with a chuckle.

Grabbing the suitcase he’d set down next to a chair while he’d waited, Hudson followed him into his office. “I’m sorry for leaving you waiting. I’d left a message with your front desk.”

Derek half turned, one eyebrow arched as if to say, “Oh really...”

“I swear I did.” Hudson damned near blushed. For the first time in his adult life, he felt as if he were being scolded. “I’m a big believer in common courtesy, and I don’t consider your time to be something I should waste. Especially since what I’m asking of you is going to be a huge favor.”

That made the big man smile. “I appreciate that too. Sit down, Mr. Barlowe. Tell me, what can I do for you?”



\* \* \*

Nikki awoke with a start, banging her head on the underside of her bed's box springs, all four limbs scrambling to push herself away from a danger that wasn't there. Her back hit the wall, throwing her in the deepest shadows underneath her bed. The blankets draping over the side may or may not have actually hidden her from the view of anyone who might walk in, but she felt safer tucked down here than she ever did on top of the mattress.

She gulped for air, closing her eyes as she ran through the mental exercises her Rawhide Ranch therapist, Catherine Denton, had given her for moments like this. That she still had them after nine full years of hiding out here, just made her that much angrier at herself. That much more ashamed, especially since all her nonexistent dream dangers usually faded from her mind faster than she could recall them.

Nikki shuddered. She hated not being able to remember, not in her dreams and definitely not in her real life. But no, there was nothing. Not one memory of her family, her parents, siblings, school, friends; nothing except the vague half-thought, half-maybe-memory of jumping from a train car in the middle of a snowstorm, or of walking a million miles in the deep Montana snow before finally ending up here.

Except, that wasn't quite true, and she knew it.

Or, she thought she did. Those maybe-memories weren't strong enough for her to say unequivocally that she remembered being screamed at, or dragged across the floor by her hair, or thrown into a large dog kennel that smelled of human feces and vomit, misery and despair. But there were no mental pictures that went along with that. It was all blackness

in her head, albeit a blackness full of feelings of being hungry, hurt and terrified.

Footsteps outside her door startled her straight out of those black thoughts. She scrambled to get out from under her bed just before her caretaker, Nanny S, knocked softly and then walked inside with her arms full of clean laundry.

“Good morning,” she said brightly when she saw Nikki standing by her bed in her teddy bear pajamas, a gift given to her by the Ranch’s owner, Master Derek. In fact, everything she had now was because Rawhide had bought everything she needed.

Nine years.

It was hard to believe she’d been here that long, and despite all the ads and the private investigators Master Derek had paid for in the search to find anyone who might know who she was, no one had come forward, not in all that time, and without so much as what her real name might be. “Nikki” just happened to be the name that rushed to her lips when they’d plucked her from the blizzard in which she’d been found, but she had no proof of it. In the back of her mind, she even had doubts.

“Are you excited?” Nanny brightly asked, handing Nikki a pink shirt with a picture of a giant stork on the front. The white and gray bird had a frog in its mouth; the frog had the bird by the throat in a desperate attempt to keep from being devoured. A smiling curve of letters at the bottom read *Never give up!* Shuffling through her laundry pile, her nanny and quite possibly best friend here, finally handed her a choice between sparkle-pocketed jeans and black pants peppered in rainbow glitter. “What do you think?” One at a time, she held each pair of pants up to the shirt in Nikki’s arms.

Nikki hated this question. She'd hated it for nine long years; she rarely ever had a preference, not when it came to clothes. Or food, or activities for that matter. Too many choices set off her anxiety, making her panic first and then get mad because she knew how stupid it was for a grown woman of twenty-eight to have this much trouble just trying to dress herself. She was so embarrassed of her silly inabilities that she never talked about them, no matter how often Master Derek sat her down for another of his heart-to-heart talks. So really, whose fault was this?

Hers, of course. All hers.

Nikki startled when she suddenly realized her long-time caretaker had noticed her prolonged silence. "Yes," she said without feeling. "I'm very excited."

She wracked her brain, trying to remember what was going on at the Ranch this week, but again, she drew a blank. "What's going on again?"

Nanny's furrowed brow relaxed and a knowing, sympathetic smile curved her lips. "Nightmare?"

Nikki shrugged, so tired of burdening other people with her very existence. Why no one had thrown her out of here after all this time was beyond her. At some point, she knew she ought to just leave and relieve them all of the responsibility Master Derek and his Ranch had automatically picked up without so much as a single complaint from anyone. For someone who didn't feel loved or safe, and who couldn't remember a time when she wasn't frantically running away—from something or *someone*—of course, she'd stayed. Their inexplicable acceptance of her had been like a warm balm to her broken soul. So why were her nightmares getting worse? Why did it feel like her world was closing in around her?

Why was she starting to feel like her only option was to start running all over again?

She had no idea, but now she was itching inside her skin so badly she didn't realize Nanny was talking to her until she saw her friend's mouth moving. She had completely zoned Nanny S out.

"I'm sure it'll be a frenzy," Nanny continued. "That's probably why Master Derek has summoned you to his office. To run down your options and solutions, you know... before a problem arises."

And god knows, Nikki had more than her share of problems.

"It's Father's Day again, isn't it?" She rubbed her head and then her eyes. Of all the holidays, the week the Ranch devoted to all the Daddies who came to visit or to play, or to find a Little of their own to take home, was always busy. The place would be packed, every room rented out to guests, and every Little in the place shrieking, laughing, fighting and getting along at the top limits of their vocal cords. She hated the noise. Not because everyone was having a good time—or would be, starting today—but because her overactive brain liked to convert the happy sounds to unhappy ones. They haunted her.

Right now, though, her brain was too busy locked onto what Nanny had said to focus on anything Father's Day related. "M-Master Derek wants to see me?"

A spark of pure panic speared through her chest, squeezing in on her.

Hanging the last of her clean laundry on hangers in the closet, her caretaker gave her a surprised glance. "It's okay,

honey. I can take you there once you're dressed. I'm happy to hold your hand if you want."

Nikki tried to smother the shudder that went through her. This was year five of Master Derek's "hand holding" policy, and to date it had become yet another thing for Nikki to avoid at all costs. Since when had something so juvenile as holding hands become something so confining and threatening? She couldn't remember, but she hated it. And still, Master Derek insisted it become her steady practice. It was on her sheet of daily tasks. Just one more thing she desperately avoided and yet tried to do, if for no other reason than to show all of Rawhide Ranch that she really was trying to live by their rules. She didn't make it very often, but when she did she was praised with ridiculous intensity and given a gold star for the day.

Still holding the shirt and pants she'd been given, she went to look at the chore chart on the back of her door. It was a month-long chart with two weeks' worth of chores and daily to-dos already filled in. She had two gold stars. Her stomach twisted, knotting itself into a tension that made her sick. Last month she'd earned four gold stars, so she wasn't getting better. She was getting worse, and when Master Derek inevitably asked her why, she couldn't think of a single excuse to explain it away.

Her nose began to tingle and her eyes to sting as liquid disappointment swept through her. She wasn't a crier and Nikki refused to become one over a lack of gold stars. She closed her eyes, struggling to breathe as silently as possible through her mouth. Had Nanny S noticed, or was she just being her usual sympathetic self? Nikki couldn't tell, but the other woman came to her, wrapping Nikki in her arms and pulling her into a gentle embrace. One she could easily break

out of and which she already struggled not to do. Fortunately, Nanny kept her show of affection to a minimum.

“Let’s get a nice bath,” she said, letting go of Nikki. “Then we’ll get dressed, have a yummy breakfast, and pay our visit to Master Derek before the day gets started.”

Nikki swallowed back all the bad feelings knotting their way through her. “Am I in trouble?”

“No,” Nanny hastened to assure her. She chuckled. “Trust me, when I spoke to him last night, he was eager to see you. I think he’s just doing one of his check-ins to make sure you’re okay before the place fills up with lots of rowdy Littles and Daddies. Besides”—reaching in to cup the back of Nikki’s head, Nanny pulled her in close enough to kiss her forehead—“Nanny’s kept her eye on you and we both know you’ve been a good girl with nothing in her past that warrants a good paddling.”

Nikki wasn’t so sure of that, but she let her momentary relief run wild and, when Nanny had finally gathered her bath kit off her dresser and held out her hand, she took it and let herself be led to the bathroom.

Twenty-eight should have been plenty old enough for Nikki to bathe herself but, given the choice, she would have done exactly as she had when first she’d come here—she’d have ignored the ritual morning activity and found somewhere quiet to pass the day.

“Time to get all squeaky clean,” Nanny announced, checking the temperature of the water now filling the tub. She kept her back to Nikki out of respect for her privacy when she told her to strip down, but Nikki didn’t move. She never undressed herself. She couldn’t. That level of autonomy had got her beaten in the past. She couldn’t remember the details,

but her dreams had told her so too many times in the past, that she just couldn't make herself obey.

Standing in the bathroom, listening to the running water, Nikki began to shake. By the time Nanny turned to check her progress, her knees were knocking together so badly it was a wonder she hadn't fallen.

"It's okay. Nanny's here," the other woman said soothingly, stepping up to take Nikki's change of clean clothes from her arms and setting them by the sink. "Arms up if you want Nanny to help you undress."

Her heart thundering in her chest, feeling utterly useless and trapped, Nikki raised her arms.

"Such a good girl," Nanny said, pulling her shirt off over her head. "Turn around, honey. Let's get that Big girl bra off."

Nikki looked at the wall and pretended she was a doll. Nanny moved her arms and legs as needed, stripping off her clothes until she was down to nothing but her skin. Nine years of bath help had killed whatever embarrassment she might once have felt at being naked in front of others, but maybe that was only because Nikki shut down at bath times. It was the only way she could make herself stay in this room, stare at that porcelain claw-foot tub, step one reluctant foot at a time into the hot water and sit down—in a very tiny room that echoed every sound and which didn't even have a lock. Anyone at all could barge in at any time... and hurt her.

"Such a good girl," Nanny told her as Nikki trembled. Pulling a short stool up to the side of the tub, she set Nikki's bath kit within easy reach. "Breathe in, little one... good job. Breathe out now... that's it. Slow and steady. You've got this."

Nikki clung to both sides of the tub, her white-knuckled fingers hanging on to the porcelain sides in a death-grip. Staring at the ripples in the water caused by her shaking, she pretended she didn't exist. She was a doll, a mannequin—they could move her arms, pose her legs, but they couldn't hurt her.

No one here had ever hurt her, but there was always a first time, wasn't there?

As Nanny tipped back her head to wash her hair, her shaking intensified. Her toes were curled up tight, her knees drawn up to her chest and her hands dropped to hang on to her shins for dear life.

“Good job,” Nanny said, pouring cup after cupful of hot water and combing it through her medium-length brown hair until every strand was wet. “Nanny's good, sweet girl...”

Closing her eyes, Nikki tried to fixate on the warmth of the water and the gentleness of the hands now soaping up her scalp. She tried to make herself feel what Nanny's comforting voice was trying to lull her with, but dolls didn't have emotions and hers were always so jumbled up these days she'd just as soon not feel anything.

Giggling, Nanny tried to get her to play. She held up a mirror so Nikki could admire her hair piled up on her head in nothing but white shampoo suds. It tickled her to see it, just not so much as to make her smile. She almost never smiled, not even when Nanny filled the tub with float duckies, bath crayons, and a pink plastic clam that sucked up water when the belly was squeezed under water. She liked the clam. If forced to choose a favorite toy, then this was it, even though she only picked it up because, after nine long years, she knew it was expected of her. So was a smile, so she tentatively gave Nanny



one as she squirted at her toes, safely tucked beneath at least two inches of sheltering water.

Nanny S beamed back at her and smoothed the soap bubble back into her hairline far enough to kiss her on the forehead. “You are such a good girl, Nikki. Thank you for not making me wear a wet dress today.”

“I would never, Nanny.” Nikki wouldn’t, either. She’d heard the laughter and squeals of the Littles here who were brave enough to squirt their friends or caretakers. But she had also heard the sharp, wet smacking sounds coming from behind too many closed bathroom doors accompanied by wails of remorse. She shrank from the memory, much as she recoiled from any situation that might end in spanking. In the nine years she’d been here, she had yet to earn a single swat. Nanny S had once presented her with an award with a poetry of praises for the only Little at Rawhide Ranch to go without for so long.

Only Nikki knew the reason for why. Nikki wasn’t like the other Littles here because she wasn’t a Little. She was just a broken woman hiding out among them, by the grace of the man who owned Rawhide Ranch.

“Ready to rinse off?”

Nodding, Nikki dipped her hands in the warm water and washed the soap off her face. When she tipped her head back, Nanny took up her cup and rinsed the shampoo out of her hair, smoothing the brown tresses down her back.

Nikki closed her eyes, letting herself relax as cup after cup was carefully poured over her. Nanny rubbed her scalp, the tips of her fingernails gently massaging conditioner into her hair until she could comb her fingers easily through the foot-long length.

“Ready to get out?” Nanny cheerfully asked, holding up a fluffy blue and white towel.

Time to face down yet another day. Closing her eyes, Nikki took a deep breath and stood up.

## CHAPTER 2

Nanny walked with her from the Littles' Wing toward Master Derek's office on the main floor. Nikki liked the lobby which led to the administrative offices. Once one entered the resort, they were surrounded by warm colors, dark wood and soft leather. If you were a submissive or a naughty Little, the décor wasn't quite as welcoming. If you'd been sent to the office or called there by the man himself, you'd most likely find yourself sitting on the plain wooden bench located just outside Master Derek's door thinking about things that had absolutely nothing to do with the lovely décor.

In order to get to Master Derek's office, you had to check in with Erika, his receptionist and right-hand administrative assistant. Outside the offices there was a sitting area with a half dozen leather chairs. On a large coffee table several magazines and other reading materials were available to read if waiting for an appointment with the owner of Rawhide Ranch. This morning, however, Nikki and Nanny S were greeted by a Little named Lizzie as they approached the open door of Erika's office.

"Good morning. I'm standing in while Erika runs an errand," she explained cheerfully. "You can go right in, Master Derek is waiting for you." She waved Nikki straight to Master Derek's closed office door.

Before Nikki moved forward, she looked back toward the beautifully framed aerial photograph of the entire ranch that hung on the wall above the leather chairs. Instead of seeing the massive map, all Nikki could focus on was the man sitting in the waiting area beneath it. She barely caught herself before she screamed. She did jump though, nearly colliding with Nanny S, who immediately draped a comforting arm across her shoulders and pulled her in close.

Nikki couldn't swallow. She could barely make herself breathe as she stared at the man now staring back at her with the bluest eyes she'd even seen. Did she know him? She had trained herself to keep her expressions neutral. It was safer that way, her face a perfect mask of nothing being wrong while her heart raced a thousand miles a minute.

“Nikki? Nikki, honey?” Lizzie stood up, cautiously coming around her desk until she'd physically blocked that other man out of sight. “Nikki?”

In a blink, Nikki turned from the man to Lizzie. Nikki was breathing too hard to speak, but Lizzie only smiled.

“Master Derek?” the receptionist reminded softly. “He's ready to start whenever you are.”

*But... there was a line.*

Nikki flicked her attention back to the man, who had just stood up so he could see her over the top of Nanny S. There was nothing else going on in the waiting area, so of course he'd be watching her, and yet Nikki could feel herself shaking. Flushing, she quickly looked away, only to find herself staring at Master Derek's closed office door.

She knew that behind the door was all dark walls, an expensive wood desk and floor to ceiling bookcases, and tons

upon tons of books. None of them looked readable. Certainly they weren't for anyone's casual reading fun. As far as she knew, there wasn't a single fairytale, historical novel, or dragon-shifter romance anywhere in Master Derek's office. What she would see were plenty of law and tax books, and tons of everything ranch related, from horses to fencing and even home repair. It didn't matter what the books were about, though. She loved the smell of paper and leather covers. It made her feel safe, and yet knowing that didn't stop her chest from tightening.

Although she didn't move, she felt Nanny's arm drape over her shoulders, pulling her into her caretaker's comforting body.

"Come now," she cheerfully coaxed. "Master Derek doesn't like to be left waiting."

Nanny tried to steer her to the door, but Nikki's feet refused to move.

"Nikki, my sweetling," Nanny said, her voice turning stern as she leaned in and whispered for Nikki's ear alone, "Do we need to talk about this, or do I need to borrow one of Master Derek's paddles and give you ouchie swats all over your poor bottom?"

Nikki shook her head, but her feet still didn't move. She didn't know why her reaction to this man felt so strange. Normally, strangers scared the hell out of her, and yes, she did feel that. But there was also something else, tumbling over and over inside of her, like many-colored stones in a rock polisher. Some were pretty, some were not. Some she wanted to reach out and touch, but she couldn't shake the feeling that if she did, what she touched might very well drag her back to hell. Whether she could remember what had actually happened to

her or not, she remembered the feelings—the terror, fear, the sense of being just so unbearably cold all the time, and the panic of her being naked and running. Running with nothing but terrifying blackness rushing up fast behind her.

Turning to Nanny, Nikki whispered, “But he was here first.” Shyly, she pointed a trembling finger around the receptionist toward the man now watching her with a silent intensity that just made her shake more. “Shouldn’t he go first?”

At least then she’d know he would be gone when she finished her own talk with Master Derek, instead of his waiting here just so she’d have to re-run into him on her way out.

Both Nanny and the receptionist gave her the same look. Interestingly though, the man’s face softened. He almost seemed to melt into a smile, one that made her flush hotter and her shaking intensify. It was a gentle smile. One that beamed approval, despite the frowns of the other two women.

“Young lady,” Nanny S scolded, shaking her finger right at Nikki’s nose. “If Master Derek wants to see you first, then that’s what we do. Who do you think you are, thinking you get to make his decisions for him? Now, I didn’t want to do this, but you’ve got until I count three to get your little behind in that office or you’ll be over my knee. Is that what you want; do I have to spank you right here in front of him before you’ll mind?”

The most outrageous wave of tingles ran up the backs of her thighs, crawling over her bottom like a colony of angry ants. Nikki had never felt that before. Not in the all the time she’d been at Rawhide Ranch.

Spinning on her heel, scared of what she'd find if she examined those feelings closer, Nikki dodged around both Nanny and Lizzie and ran to Master Derek's closed door.

"Shit!" Lizzie declared, racing back around the desk in an attempt to notify her boss before Nikki barged into his office. She didn't make it.

Nikki threw herself into Master Derek's office, had the door slammed and her back pushed up against it just before the intercom on the Master's desk beeped. It was too late and everyone knew it.

Closing the folder on his desk, Master Derek tapped the intercom back. "Lizzie," he drawled. "Did that four-letter word I just heard come from you?"

A very softly whispered, "Double shit," came over the intercom before Lizzie replied, "I-I'm sorry, Sir. I was—"

"You were swearing in front of a Little and a guest, weren't you?"

Little Lizzie audibly grew even Little-er as she stammered, "I-I-I..."

Smiling gently and shaking his head, Master Derek cut her off. "We'll talk about it later. For now, please let Mr. Barlowe know I will see him shortly and be grateful I won't make you stand in the corner until we get our chance to talk."

"Yes, Sir," the receptionist whispered, her tone utterly submissive to his. It struck Nikki as strange whenever she saw them interact like this. Master Derek had a wife, and Lizzie was not her. And yet, for as long as she'd known this place existed, she'd seen Master Derek verbally and once or twice even physically top not only his receptionist, but any Little or service submissive who might be filling in for Erika. He took

his job as the boss of this Ranch very seriously, and everyone—including Nikki—knew within days of their arrival that he had no problem dishing out discipline when he believed it was warranted. Swearing in front of other Littles was a no-no only just slightly less severe than swearing in front of guests. Nikki could all but feel the crazy ants dancing across the receptionist's bottom as well.

Or maybe that was because her own ants were still frantically crawling over her, especially the backs of her thighs. It was everything she could do not to put her hands back and rub the sensation away.

Clicking off the intercom, Master Derek gestured for her to come take a chair across the desk from himself. "Come, let's talk."

Nikki's mouth ran dry and her tummy knotted, her anxiety kicking another notch higher. "Did I do a bad thing?" she asked, clutching her shaking hands tight against her belly, as if she could hide how badly she was shaking. Such a waste of time and energy, she knew. Master Derek was one of those rare few Doms who just knew things. He was like Santa and she always imagined he might have lists in his office—for Littles who were good, and those who took naughty to whole new heights of misbehavior. Like Sadie, Master Derek's Little wife, one of the top three ringleaders for any and all shenanigans that occurred within these log cabin walls.

Nikki didn't know Sadie very well, but she greatly admired the other's courage. Sadie ran towards trouble; Nikki hadn't stopped running from hers for years.

Blinking in surprise, Master Derek folded his hands on his desk and promptly returned her question to her. "I don't know, little one. Have you done something I don't know about?"



Not likely, and honestly Nikki wasn't much of a rule breaker. She didn't like the feeling that ate up her insides whenever she did break one. "I can't think of anything."

"And for my part, I have no intention of spanking you. So please, sit down." He waved to the chair again.

Pushing off the door, she made her way to it. The sensation of crawling ants on her backside did not fade away once she sat. She squeezed her hands as tight as she could as she said, "There's a man outside waiting to see you. If you want to take care of him first, I can wait."

He blinked again, a corner of his mouth beginning to curl. "Thank you, Nikki. But it's actually because of that man that I sent for you. Can you guess why?"

She suddenly knew exactly why before he'd even finished talking. Suddenly, it was as if the ground opened up beneath her, leaving her suspended over a hungry maw of darkness and barely remembered terror. "You matched me? Please don't match me. Please say there's another reason. Please?"

"Oh, darlin'." Standing, Master Derek walked around to seat himself on her side of his desk. "I'm not trying to match you. Personally, I don't think you're ready. Although I do think it would do you good to branch out and see if you might grow comfortable being cared for by someone other than your nanny. *This*, however, is more for *his* sake than yours."

Nikki drew back, her brow furrowing. "*H-his* sake? What does that mean?"

Master Derek beamed. "Well, this is a wonderful surprise, Nikki. We've already gone further in this discussion than I thought we would. That's marvelous. Would you like to hear about the situation?"

“Would I have to meet him?”

“Ideally, yes. If you do not want to hear more, no matter what your reasons, I will respect that boundary and this conversation can peacefully end.”

He got off his desk as if it were already a foregone conclusion that she would run and hide from this. Not that that wasn't exactly how she felt right now—nervous, scared, growing increasingly more overwhelmed the longer she thought of a man trying to do for her what Nanny did, not just this morning, but every morning. No, that wasn't right. It wasn't every man who freaked her out, but a man she didn't know? Her face flushed hot even as her chest constricted so tightly that it hurt. A stranger, picking out her clothes, giving her a bath, running his hands through her silky brown hair still sleek with conditioner...

She shivered, but she couldn't figure out exactly what emotion had caused it. Fear, she had an ample amount of that right now, but fear had been a constant companion for her since the day she'd arrived. Anxiety was another companion, and it could be so bad at times that she had her own set of medications, scheduled throughout the day to keep her from cowering in corners, like she'd done practically since day one. She buried her face in both hands, so mortified by how much work she was and how no one had said one cross word about her, not in all the time she'd abused their hospitality.

“It's all right,” Master Derek said, seating himself in his proper chair once more. Opening the file folder, he took his pen and began to write. “There is one of the guest cabins available which is far enough away from all the Father's Day activities, it should be fairly quiet. You and Hudson can stay there together all week long if you like. He has specified no

sexual contact. All he wants to do is take care of a Little so he can feel like a Daddy again. How does that sound?”

It sounded like he was used to having to make special arrangements for her. Like she was a pain in the butt that he had to squirrel away before the rest of Rawhide Ranch could host a fun holiday event for Father’s Day. Allotting her one of the newly constructed guest cabins which she knew were very popular among the Ranch guests was yet another example of how he went out of his way to accommodate her needs. Just like he’d done for her over Easter, Valentine’s, New Year’s, Christmas, and every other holiday, year after year for almost a decade now.

Such thoughts were as close to worthless as she’d felt in quite some time. “Sounds like you’d be well shut of me. I’m sorry for causing you problems. I should have left a long time ago.”

The light scratching of pen on paper ceased. Nothing but his eyes moved as Master Derek pinned her with a disapproving look. “Would you like to expound on that, please?”

Another shiver wracked her. She knew that tone of voice. By now it was unmistakable, and she also knew, regardless of his words, his tone said clearly, *go on, dig yourself deeper.*

Her bottom tingled. Not that anyone had spanked her here. Not Nanny, though she sometimes still threatened it. Not since that first time when two swats had sent her into hysterics, and Master Derek spent a good hour holding her, rocking her, petting her hair and kissing her forehead, telling her she was a good girl and forever establishing in her mind that he wasn’t a threat. In fact, he’d become her safe space. Just like hiding underneath a bed.

“I’m scared,” she corrected herself anyway. “But I think I’m tired of being so... helpless all the time.”

“You’re not helpless,” Master Derek told her, his tone gentler now but still with a hint of sternness. “You are doing so much better now than you used to.”

*Lies.* She didn’t feel better at all. She felt burdensome to the people who, if they hadn’t taken her in, could have left her to die in the snow. There were way too many apathetic people in the world, and although she couldn’t remember a single instance in which she’d been hurt by that, she felt it like a certainty all the way into her bones.

“Thank you, Sir,” she said, wanting to be polite but not believing a word of it.

Master Derek knew it too. “Mm hm,” he hummed, lowering his head over his file, his pen busily scratching out a line she couldn’t read from here.

She could guess what he was writing and she doubted it was “good girl”.

“Would you like to know the situation?”

She nodded, which probably made her look far more eager than her first instinct, which was to shrug. As if it didn’t matter at all, and it shouldn’t. Except perhaps to prove she could at least consider it, if only to herself.

“His name is Hudson Barlowe. I’ve only met him today, but he supplied references and I know three of the five to be knowledgeable Daddies in their own right.”

“Okay.” She nodded when he glanced up at her, so he would know she was paying attention.

“His mother passed last year. He was her caretaker throughout her prolonged illness. This is the time of year when he lost her, and perhaps it’s not unfair to say, he lost part of himself too.” Setting his pen aside, Master Derek leaned back in his chair and watched her directly. “Before I tell you what he asked me, may I ask you a question?”

Nikki swallowed, pinned under the Ranch Master’s knowing eyes. What kind of question? “O-okay?” she said again.

“Remember, this is a safe space. Your answer will not change anything unless you want it to, all right? You will not be asked to leave, and there will be no consequences whatsoever, no matter what you decide. Understand?”

Nikki swallowed harder. “I understand.” Her breath tried to choke her, making her whisper barely audible and her hands clamp each other in her lap so hard her knuckles turned white.

“I’ve asked you this before...”

Her mind went immediately to the worst possible scenario. “Do you want me to leave?” Her shaking legs popped her right up out of the chair. “I don’t want to be...”

“If you say ‘a burden,’ I will put you right over my knee,” Master Derek warned, his now totally stern voice sending shivers through her. “What did I just say I would not do?”

“Make me leave?”

“Have I ever given you reason to think I am *not* a man of my word?”

Quickly, she shook her head. “Never. I’m sorry. What was the question?”

She couldn't tell if he was just clearing his throat or trying to unruffle all the feathers she'd just riled. Rolling his shoulders, he got comfortable in his chair, while her trembling legs dropped out from under her. She flopped back into her chair.

“Look at me.”

She locked her eyes on him and braced herself not to look away again. “Yes, Sir?”

“Nikki, darlin’”—he cleared his throat again—“are you a Little?” He quickly held up both hands before she could react. “I’m asking only because Hudson is asking for a Little. Now, I don’t care how you identify. Nor do I care if you never feel safe enough to sleep on top of your bed, rather than under it. I don’t even care if you know for certain yourself. I guess what I’m really asking is, do you enjoy spending time with Nanny? Do you like the things she does with you?”

“You mean, because I don’t like to play with the others?”

“Or with toys, it seems,” he gently agreed. “Is she still your safe space?”

For the first time since walking into his office, Nikki didn’t hesitate. “Yes. Does she not want to help me anymore?” Her eyes stung, tears rising up in the back of her throat until they overflowed her lashes and dripped down her cheeks. She quickly dashed them away, embarrassed to be caught crying.

“No,” he assured her. Pulling a legal pad of paper from his desk, he chuckled and Nikki had to crane her neck to catch a glimpse of the caricature of Master Derek someone had drawn in the form of what she at first thought was a horse. But no, the longer she stared, the more the ranch owner’s cartoon drawing appeared, well, donkey-fied—complete with a long

tail, bucked teeth and even a straw hat with a flower in the band and holes in the brim for his long ears. In the thought bubble directly above the donkey's head, someone had written, "*I'm a big ASS!*" And below the donkey's four hooved feet was that same "someone's" hastily-written: *Daddies who don't believe in second dessert are DONKEYS!*

"Sadie," he chuckled, shaking his head. He flipped the page and picked up his pen. "So tell me, Nikki, what do you and Nanny do that you like the most?"

## CHAPTER 3

*So, that was Nikki.*

Hudson was already intrigued.

Hudson had watched the intensely nervous twenty-something woman enter Derek's office with sparks of pure electrical excitement shooting through every inch of him. He'd watched her right up until Nikki's nanny companion made herself as imposing as possible and stood sentry at the door, as if to keep people from interrupting the talk going on inside.

Hudson wasn't a fool. The only "people" who might interrupt was himself, and the way Nanny looked at him said clearly she thought the same thing. She rarely looked away from him as the minutes began to tick away. He tried to be patient, jiggling his knee up and down while trying to envision the best way to take care of the woman Derek had very bluntly told him all about—her arrival, her bruises, the shadow of a woman that she had become over the last nine years. He'd been incensed, sitting across from Derek at his desk, listening as the Ranch Master listed off quirks and needs.

She had mental blocks that kept her from regaining her independence, like her anxiety attacks when forced or even just coaxed to dress herself—hearing that had hurt his heart.

There was also her inability to bathe herself.



“Left to herself,” Derek had told him, “she’ll sit in the tub until you tell her to get out. She doesn’t soap herself. She doesn’t wash her hair. My gut tells me someone trained her that way. Not out of love and affection, but out of fear.”

That’s what Hudson’s gut had begun to whisper too.

“She couldn’t feed herself when she first got here, and when her anxiety is high, she reverts back to that. To be honest, it’s like taking care of a one-year-old.” Derek had studied him closely as he’d asked, “Are you up for that?”

God, yes, and frankly, he would be doing the exact same things for her that he’d done for his mother, especially there toward the end as the illness carried her steadily on to death. It would be hard, but that’s what he’d asked for. It would take patience and kindness, and it would consume his mind until the only thing he could think of from minute-to-minute was what more he could do to help. Which was exactly what he’d come here to do—to lose himself in the care of another so he wouldn’t have to dwell on his own loss.

The litany of what she could and couldn’t seem to do was longer than Hudson’s arm, but he wasn’t overwhelmed. It just made him want to spend the next week with her all the more intensely.

Hudson checked the time. So far, Nikki and Derek had been shut in his office for twenty minutes. The desire to hunt down whomever had hurt her was killing him. But then, so was the wait.

Needing a distraction, Hudson tried a smile and wave to Nanny, still standing at Derek’s door. “Hi, how are you?”

“Fine,” she said politely. “And you’re not going inside no matter what you say.”

The receptionist started, swiveling abruptly in her seat to whisper-hiss, “Susie!”

“Well, he can’t, can he?” Nanny S insisted, folding her arms across her chest. She frowned at Hudson, but he only reinforced his smile.

“It’s okay,” he told the receptionist, and then turned back to Nanny. He stood up so he could see her better but did not approach. Hooking his thumbs in his jeans pockets, he did his best to be as non-threatening as possible. “It’s good to know Nikki has such good friends here.”

Nanny S wasn’t buying it, and maybe that should have upset him, but it didn’t. He was glad Nikki was so well protected here. It must have been terrifying for her, running away the way she had, but she’d landed in a good place. From what little he’d seen and heard, Rawhide Ranch definitely got his inner Daddy’s seal of approval.

He just hoped he could live up to those standards. And if—just if—he left here with Nikki feeling a little bit safer in a world full of people, and perhaps with an artistic Little’s picture to put on his fridge and remember her by, then so much the better.

Stepping away from the door, the suspicious nanny crossed the waiting area, coming to stand right in front of him. “I don’t find myself disagreeing with Master Derek very often, so I’m not going to stand in your way if he decides to match you with my Nikki—”

Hudson didn’t like threats and he could see exactly where this was going. For some reason, this particular one didn’t bother him like he thought it would. Rather, a swell of pride rose through him. Nikki had really good friends here. “I swear,

my intent is not to damage her further. I just want to take care of her.”

“You better not hurt her,” the nanny hissed, Lizzie gasped, and suddenly the door to Derek’s private office swung open.

Nanny S immediately walked away, returning to her post and probably praying Derek wouldn’t notice where she had just been standing. Hudson wasn’t about to betray her.

Derek did notice. He stopped in front of Hudson, turning to give Nanny a suspicious frown.

“You have a great system set up here,” Hudson spoke up. “I apologize if I was supposed to wait for you and not talk to her.”

Derek turned back to him. “Nanny S may talk to anyone she likes. So long as she says appropriate things.”

“She was just telling me how special Nikki is,” Hudson assured.

Seeming not to believe him, especially when the nanny blanched and looked to the ground, the Master dryly agreed, “I’ll bet she did.” Dropping that discussion, at least for now, Derek gestured to the seat Hudson had vacated and when Hudson sat, Derek took a seat beside him and opened up the manilla file folder that he’d brought with him. “Nikki is willing to try, but I want to confirm a few things before I introduce you both.”

Hudson did his best to contain the surge of excitement that tingled in his veins. “Sure.”

“First, I want your car keys and your driver’s license. I’ll promise to not make copies, so long as you promise to do nothing to harm that girl.”

“I swear it,” Hudson promptly returned. “On my mother’s grave.”

Nodding, Derek accepted that. Or, at least he didn’t pursue it further. Instead, he turned the page, revealing a handwritten list on bright yellow legal paper. “Second, no spanking. It terrifies her and I won’t have you doing that.”

“No sex, no spanking. Got it.”

“No interrogations about her past. I promise you, she’ll bolt at the first opportunity. I don’t know how much she actually remembers, but the strangest things tend to trip her anxiety. If she has a panic attack, give her time, but coaxing her back into her usual routine sometimes helps. Particularly, a warm bath and hair care has been known to do that.”

“Plenty of cuddles coming her way,” Hudson agreed.

“She might not accept them from you,” Derek cautioned. “She submits to Nanny S more readily than anyone else. Rule Number Three for you, don’t push her if she pushes back.”

Hudson kissed the backs of two fingers, then crossed his heart. Derek studied him, no doubt thinking how silly that had been.

“I’m sorry,” Hudson said, a flush of heat rising to his face. “It’s something I’ve done with a Little from my past. It just popped out.”

“I kind of like that,” Derek confessed. “It’s a lovely way of bringing yourself to their level. Littles love that.”

“If it helps Nikki relax, then so much the better.”

Grunting, Derek returned to his list. “She gets a bath in the morning to help her start her day on comfortable footing. She gets anxious if she’s made to pick out her own clothes, so

you'll need to do that for her. You'll also need to pick her foods and give her things to do. If you don't, she'll just sit there and wait until you do. Almost as if she was trained to behave that way."

He nodded. "I can do all that, and happily. That kind of concentrated dedication is exactly what I'm hoping for."

"If Nikki has a bad reaction to you, it'll probably happen within the first hour. Just know, I'll be keeping a close eye on you both. If I see signs of stress, I'm going to remove her from your care, with or without notice, but I will also provide you with another Little. We're booked almost to full capacity, which is also going to be a problem. Strangers terrify her, and so do loud noises. Frankly, I'm shocked as hell she even agreed to this."

"Should the need occur, what do you suggest if correction is required?"

"Corner time, but do not leave her alone or she'll panic. Writing lines is good. Removing a privilege works—she enjoys the library. You can also curtail fun activities, but I'll tell you now, I'm honestly not sure how Little she is, or even *if* she is. But I do know it can be calming for her to be treated as if she were. Gentleness and patience should be the keywords you live by for the rest of this week."

"Understood," Hudson promptly agreed. "Everything you've told me so far isn't a deal breaker for me. In fact, it's exactly what I was hoping for."

Master Derek studied him for one of the longest minutes of Hudson's life. Finally, he nodded and closed his file. Holding out his hand, he and Hudson shook on the arrangement. "Let's go meet your girl."

\* \* \*

Her leg jiggled up and down as Nikki did her best to wait until Master Derek summoned her again, but it was harder than she expected. Before he'd left to speak with Daddy Hudson again, he'd told her to stay right where she was sitting in her spot across from his giant desk and she needed to obey—needed it like she needed air—but the longer she stayed in her seat, the more it began to feel like she was sitting on a hot potato. Not that her pants were on fire, but her anxiety was building. She tried to distract herself by looking out the window, but all she saw was one of the pastures and a corner of the stable where she knew people she didn't recognize would soon be lining up to wait for the horse rides to start.

The world was a big place, but what if one of them recognized her? She was being ridiculous, of course. The last thing she'd ever do would be to go outside and join them. She already wanted to hide.

And now, just thinking that, she wanted it even more.

She rubbed her face. Unable to sit still, she violated Master Derek's order and her own need to obey. Jumping up, she paced the room, hugging herself for comfort. She closed her eyes, repeating over and over in her mind what Master Derek always told her. *No one knows I'm here. I'm safe. I'm protected. No one will ever hurt me again.*

It was a silly thing to think, and it didn't give her comfort. Everyone got hurt at some point in their lives. Why was she supposed to be special? Because she'd lost her memory? Because she'd been beaten up? Even she knew that wasn't how the world worked.

Releasing her stomach, she hugged her shoulders instead. It was not out of the realm of possibility that someone out there *might* know her. She hadn't sprung full-formed from a winter cabbage. Someone somewhere *had* to.

Pushing those thoughts away, she shivered and forced herself to think about the man Master Derek had told her about. "Hudson," she whispered, unsure if she liked the way his name rolled off her lips. She tried again. "Daddy Hudson. Daddy?" That wasn't terrible. "Daddy," she practiced. "Yes, Daddy."

That felt better.

She glanced at Master Derek's computer. Already there was a small army of open tabs in rows across the top of the screen, just above the week's daily list of expected guests. Then she noticed it: one of the open and waiting tabs had the word "Facebook" at the top. Her stomach cramped, but the lure of checking a computer just sitting there was a convenience she didn't know how to resist.

"I-I can be a good girl," she whispered, as she rolled back Master Derek's leather chair and sat down. "I can be a g-good girl. For Daddy."

She certainly wasn't being a good girl for Master Derek. She didn't know of anyone—except maybe Sadie, Master Derek's Little wife—who was allowed to use his computer. It was private and personal stuff, and totally off-limits, and yet her fingertips still came to a shaky rest on the keyboard. She toggled between tabs until Facebook popped up to fill the screen. Sitting, her mouth gaped in shock as she found herself looking at her own account. Her picture crowned the most recent post with the words, "Girl with amnesia seeks family and friends. Do you know me?"

She struggled to comprehend why that most recent post was seven years old and yet it only had three responses. Master Derek had never told her he got any responses. When she scrolled down, she noticed why. Two were from random people simply wishing her a speedy recovery and good luck in her search. The third was from a man declaring himself a P.I. and willing to pick up her case at a discounted price. *I've got the skills. I just want to help*, was the response he'd posted. Nikki had no way of knowing if Master Derek had ever responded to him, but that was when she noticed the Facebook account was closed. Not deleted, just closed. When had he done that?

*Why* had he done it?

Her back stiffened, and then she got mad. He'd *promised* her! For nine years, he'd promised he was doing everything he could to find out who she really was, where she belonged, whether anyone out there loved or missed her. But he wasn't. Why had he shut off her Facebook page and then lied to her?

Everything in her screamed not to do it, but Nikki was too upset to obey herself either. With just a few clicks, she not only reactivated the account, but reloaded the picture so once again it would potentially circulate in the feed of the millions of people who made Facebook their social media platform.

Jumping up from the computer, she fled back to her chair. Struggling to calm herself down, it wasn't until she heard the door behind her open that she realized—too late—she hadn't put the screen back on his admissions spreadsheet. Master Derek was going to know she'd been bad the second he looked at his computer.

She freaked, a cold sweat breaking out all over. The panic must have shown on her face, because the second he looked at



her, a mere three steps into the room, Master Derek suddenly stopped.

“What’s the matter, sweetie?” her Daddy Hudson asked, startling both her and Master Derek. They both looked at him, but Hudson kept his gentle, welcoming gaze only on her.

He really was a handsome man. His blond hair slightly longer on top than the sides, which were shaved. It was his eyes though that drew her, making it a smidge better when she had to confess, “I-I didn’t stay here.” Her hand shaking, she indicated the chair.

“No?” Daddy Hudson gently asked, as if it didn’t matter.

He wasn’t mad at her. He didn’t even look as if he *could* get mad. Talk about snappy assumptions made on the spur of a moment.

“Where did you go?”

As if leaving them to discuss this on their own, Master Derek slipped out from between them. He rounded his desk, took one look at his computer and stopped again. “Ah,” he said, giving her a knowing glance.

She bowed her head and rubbed restlessly at her fingers. If she looked at him now, she didn’t think she could keep her frustration from showing.

“Did you ask permission before you got on my computer?”

Cornered, with not only Master Derek waiting for her to explain herself, but Hudson now as well, Nikki’s face flamed hot. She squirmed in her seat, rubbing at the backs of her fingers until her reddening skin began to hurt. Had she asked permission—no. Had he lied to her—yes. So, which of them was in the deeper wrong?

Confrontation was terrifying and it spurred out of the blackness of her past a bleak flash of a fist slamming into her stomach, doubling her over before dropping her to the ground to cough and retch as she fought to bring air back in her lungs...

*Watch your fucking mouth,* growled the phantom from her past.

She struggled to breathe now too, and there was no stopping the full body shakes that had taken hold of her.

“Nikki?” Master Derek prodded. “I’d like an answer to my question.”

No, she hadn’t asked, but that didn’t seem half as important as the accusation now bubbling so unwisely up and out of her. “You lied to me.”

Blinking, Master Derek stood a little straighter. “I beg your pardon?”

“You. Lied,” Nikki accused again, her voice as soft as a whisper, but with a ferocity behind her words that terrified her.

“About what?” Master Derek asked, his brow furrowed, clearly perplexed.

Raising her head, she locked her gaze on his. “You deactivated my account. You said you were still looking for me, but you shut my Facebook account down years ago. And you never told me.” Tears stung her eyes. “You didn’t even tell me.”

Grabbing his chair, Master Derek scooted himself up to his keyboard, snatched up the mouse, and immediately brought the blackness his screen had become back to life. He stared at the social media screen she’d left up. Had he noticed she’d reactivated it?

Master Derek swore softly under his breath. “Darlin’...” He clicked the mouse several times. She didn’t need to look to see he was shutting the account down all over again. Rubbing his face, he then leaned back in his chair and frowned his disapproval at her. “This right here, is the closest you’ve come to getting your bottom spanked in a very long time.”

*You should be spanked!* She wasn’t stupid or angry enough to say that out loud, though. She’d already said more than she meant to.

She looked at her hands, folded so tightly in her lap that her fingertips were turning white.

Sighing, Master Derek bent and opened a lower drawer of his desk. He pulled out a manila folder and passed it to her.

It was not a thin folder. At least half an inch thick, she pulled it onto her lap and grudgingly opened it. Nikki No Last Name was written at the head of the police report she vaguely remembered filling out way back when she’d first arrived. She flipped a few pages, but all the same empty spaces she hadn’t the knowledge to fill in at the time were still blank. The report just underneath it, though, now that was new.

“What is this?” she asked, pulling the thick packet of faxed paperwork out for a closer look. Closing the folder, she set it back on Master Derek’s desk.

“That was sent to me by the private investigator I hired to try to find out who you are and where you’re from. It was upon his suggestion that I removed you from Facebook, and I only did so for your own safety. Anyone on Facebook could have claimed kinship with you, including whoever had hurt you. I wanted to prevent that, and so I closed down the Facebook page. However, I did not lie to you. The P.I. has been working your case this entire time. Do you understand?”

Swallowing hard, Nikki stared at the packet, not wanting to open it again in case there was something written within that she'd later wish she hadn't seen. "Did he find anything?"

"Well," Master Derek hedged, "so far, he's located about 23,000 missing Nikki's across the U.S. and Canada. He's also looking at all missing women with or without photos in the hopes that we might find you under a different name. He's going state by state, eliminating people who obviously aren't you. So far, we found one that might have been a perfect match, but then some hunters discovered her positively identified body in a state park, so... obviously that wasn't you."

Still upset and now feeling bad because of it, Nikki folded her arms across her stomach. His tone made her feel very small.

"I promise," Master Derek told her, "I will never lie to you. I know how important this is."

She didn't think it was possible to feel any worse about her accusation, but that did it. "I'm sorry."

"You're forgiven. I'll also give you a Hail-Mary pass on your misbehavior since this is your first matching, and I don't want that starting off on a negative footing." He looked at Hudson, who lay a warm hand on her shoulder.

Notorious for not liking being touched, with anyone else she'd have shrugged it away. For some reason, that inclination didn't hit her when he touched her. Because she was upset, she told herself. Not because she wanted his comfort or affection.

Well, maybe his comfort was okay.

"Nikki?"

She looked to Hudson—Daddy Hudson, the man who wanted to be her Dom for a week just so he could feel normal again.

“How about we find someplace quiet so we can negotiate what we’d both like to do this week? Maybe we could get a little breakfast while we discuss it. How does that sound?”

It sounded like he wanted to get started right away. And then it hit her, this was that do-or-die moment where all talk became all action. Her anxiety kicked up, but nowhere near as badly as she expected it to.

*Wait for it*, that dark voice inside her hissed.

Daddy Hudson held out his hand, palm up, giving her all the choice and all the control over what happened next.

*Either put your hand in his or crawl back to your room and spend the rest of your life hiding from ghosts under the bed.*

She stared at his fingers, hating her own reluctance, but despising the fear that made that second option so appealing. Hiding under the bed was easy; taking his hand, knowing she would then be led off into completely unknown territory, was beyond hard.

Either shit or get off the pot, as the saying went.

Closing her eyes, Nikki gathered her courage and then watched as his larger hand slowly and loosely closed around hers. Tiny thrills she wasn’t at all sure could be recognized as fear shot through her when he brushed his lips across the backs of her fingers.

And just like that, she worriedly allowed herself to be trapped.

## CHAPTER 4

His heart hurt.

Standing at his desk, Derek watched as Hudson took Nikki by the hand and left the room. Just as he was closing the door again behind them, he tossed Derek a comforting wink. One Dom to another, letting Derek know without words that he had this and Nikki would be okay.

It was the first time since she'd arrived that he wouldn't be at least indirectly involved in her care. He was already second-guessing himself, and yet at the same time, he'd never really thought this day would ever come.

*It's much too early to celebrate this as a successful match,* he told himself.

Then the door closed, and his moment of immobility broke. Dropping back into his chair, he grabbed the mouse, giving it a wiggle to “wake up” the computer screen. Shit. Already seven people had liked her photo and there was a comment down below that read: *d in Eugene, Oregon. Isn't your brother Nicholas Palmer?*

In a series of quick clicks, Derek deleted the post. He deleted the entire account next, something he should have done seven years ago.

*Nicholas Palmer...*

Covering his mouth with his hand, he stared at the social media page without truly seeing it. Plucking his phone from its cradle, Derek dialed a number he—after all these years—still knew by heart.

From all the way on the west coast, retired policeman and now private investigator Mac Kincaid answered, “Hello. What can I do for you or am I doing it already?”

“You’re doing it. It’s Derek Hawkins from Rawhide Ranch.”

The brief silence that followed was just as quickly broken by movement. Derek could hear the shuffling of papers and files before Mac said, “What have you got?”

“In all the research that you’ve done for us, have you run across the name Nicholas Palmer out of Eugene, Oregon?”

Another brief silence that broke into the sound of paper shuffling and keyboard clacking. “No. Bet I can find him, though.”

“Please do, but don’t make contact if you can help it.”

“Will do. Talk to you soon.” All business and bad at chit chat, both things that Derek personally liked about the man, Mac hung up the phone.

Leaning back in his chair, Derek rubbed an idle finger back and forth across his bottom lip as he stared out the window. It was going to be a busy Father’s Day week. Rawhide was at record capacity and already he could hear the excited bustle of Littles eager for the fun to begin.

No one could wait for the holiday event to start, including Derek. So why couldn’t he seem to kill the growing unease

now filling him up inside?

\* \* \*

*Eugene, Oregon*

Nicholas Palmer wrapped a gray towel around his waist and stepped out of the shower. Grabbing another towel, he scrubbed the excess moisture from his blond hair as he wandered from the luxurious master bathroom that used to belong to his parents into the bedroom. His bedroom now, since they were dead and the sprawling two-story, 4,000 square-foot house that had once belonged to them now belonged solely to him. So was the two hundred million in cash that he'd collected after he sold all his father's residential and commercial properties. Fresh out of college, having never held a job better than pizza delivery driver, he was wealthy. Set for life.

Wandering past his king-sized bed, he paused long enough to shake both of last night's distractions awake. One was a model, all long legs and dark chocolate skin. The other was someone he'd picked up off the sidewalk as he'd been cruising in his cherry-red Tesla. Collecting his wallet from the nightstand, he tossed them each a couple hundred.

"The maid will see you out," he told the sleepy women. Crawling out of bed, they obediently picked up their discarded clothing and dressed.

His cellphone buzzed.

Ignoring it, Nick removed his towel as he stepped into his walk-in closet and faced the mirror. His short blond hair was



damp and sticking straight up in places, but those weren't the kind of flaws he constantly examined himself for. And frankly, he liked the blond far better than his natural muddy-brown color. It was worth the money he paid once a week to make sure his roots never showed.

He was physical perfection, and that was satisfying to finally see. Lean, trim in ways that only two hours a day at the gym with his personal trainer could make him, he turned first to one side and then the other. Running a reassuring hand down his flat belly, he stared into the brown of his reflection's eyes. He looked calm, fit, handsome, and one-hundred percent completely in control of any and everything that might touch his life.

His cell buzzed again, this time irritating him with its insistence. All right, fine. He picked it up, looking at the number. Whose head did he need to bite off before people learned he did not take calls until at least ten o'clock?

Zach Rodgers, his best friend in high school but not since Nick inherited his parents' fortune. After all, the rich did not go slumming with the poor regardless of how close they'd been through school or how many promises they'd made to conquer the world together. He'd risen in life; Zach still worked for his dad at that hole-in-the-wall grocery store in Eugene, the next town over.

Nick almost didn't pick up. Damn his curiosity. "Hello, Zach. How the hell have you been?"

Ignoring the greeting, Zach blurted excitedly, "Dude, have you seen the message I sent you on Facebook?"

Nick had people to manage his social media accounts; he rarely ever looked at Facebook himself these days. "Nope. What's up?"

“Dude, I think they found your sister.”

One would think after nine years of his thinking she was dead that he'd have had a bigger reaction. He almost did, but swallowed it back and instead stood frozen, the news ringing in his ears and souring in his gut. He also got on Facebook and immediately found the screenshot Zach had sent him. Sure enough, there she was, his twin sister, born only seconds before him, staring back at him through haunted brown eyes and looking exactly the same as she had the day he'd hired that bumbling idiot who was supposed to get rid of her.

“I don't ever want her found.” Those had been his instructions. So why was he looking at her likeness on the internet?

“Do you know me?” Zach read as if Nick wasn't already doing it. “I think my name is Nikki. Found at a remote ranch in Montana, I have no memory of my past, I am looking for my friends and family. I'm glad I got the screenshot. The page shut down, like, two-seconds after I did.”

*Shit.*

That sickness in his gut closed into a squeezing fist.

“That's her, isn't it?” Zach asked. “I mean, if it's not, the resemblance is uncanny.”

“That's her,” Nick said slowly. Staring at her was like looking into his own eyes, only without the shuttered coldness that kept him aloof and above everyone else in his life.

“My God,” Zach breathed. “What are you going to do?”

*Kill her myself, like I should have done in the first place.*

Nick did not say that out loud, but he felt it. All the way down to his toes. What did escape him, though, and he could

have kicked himself for it, was his softly growled, “I need to see her.”

“No kidding,” Zach agreed, as if he could possibly understand. “Here everyone is thinking she’s dead, and all this time she’s been hiding somewhere in Montana. Without her memory? You must be frantic to get her home again.”

Oh yeah, Nick was frantic all right. But once he was off the phone with Zach, he intended to catch the first flight to Montana and find her. And when he did, he was going to make damn good and sure, if this woman even was his twin, that this new threat was neutralized as fast as he could.

Had she really lost her memory? If so, chances were good that nothing he’d done to attain his parents’ wealth came back to haunt him. The problem was, what was lost could always be found again. And if she remembered—*if*—he could end up spending the rest of what remained of his life on death row.

Anger bubbled up inside him and in one fiery burst of violence, he threw his phone across the bedroom. Grabbing the lamp off the nightstand, he flung it through the giant picture window overlooking the distant city of Portland, and his rage abruptly ended only after he’d punched the wall half a dozen times.

Closing his eyes, he breathed in, willing the anger in him to calm. His hand throbbed. He looked at it, wondering if he’d broken the fragile bones, but ultimately decided it didn’t matter. He pulled on some clothes and combed his hair into place with his fingers. Retrieving his phone, he barely acknowledged the completely shattered screen as he dialed a number he knew by heart, even though he hadn’t called it in over nine years.

“Dude,” Ryan Jessup said, half laughing as he answered the call. “Thought I’d never hear from you again.”

“Are you high?” Nick coldly inquired.

“Not yet. Why? You got a line on something good?”

“Meet me at the bridge, and I do mean now.” Nick hung up without waiting for confirmation or, considering his old college roommate, argument. Changing out of his suit, he put on something far less likely to attract attention and then collected the gun hidden in the ceiling near the attic access. Strolling downstairs, he exited the house through his ten-car garage.

Forget the Tesla, Aston Martin, or even the 1969 Firebird Mustang that he’d rebuilt himself from damn near scratch. No, what he was doing now demanded he not attract attention. He headed for the far end of the garage where the car he wanted waited under an old color-splattered painter’s tarp. Pulling it off, he wadded up the tarp and tossed it against the wall. For a long time, he stood looking at the 1980 Oldsmobile his father had bought him for his sixteenth birthday. It used to be white, but the paint had been deteriorating on him since even before he’d received this “gift”.

All the millions his dad had had, and *this* was the car he’d bought for his son. *This* was how much he’d cared about Nick or the fact that even the poorest kid at his premier private school had better cars than this. He’d made Nick a laughing stock.

And now he was dead. So, the issue was moot.

Served him right, especially since the car he’d given Nikki had been a 2000 BMW. Not only was it two decades newer

with all its paint still intact, it had a motor that had been gone over by his father's personal mechanic.

"You can fix that car," his father had said when sixteen-year-old Nick complained. "Stop being a screw-up and learn how to take care of yourself and you'll never be stranded. Your sister, on the other hand, could be killed, raped or, god forbid, trafficked should she break down. She needs a reliable car that I can depend on getting her back and forth from school, to work, and safely home again. You don't want this car? Then get a job and buy your own."

And that right there had been the end of the conversation and just another resentment for Nick to add to the mounting list of insults his parents had piled on him practically from birth.

All of which were water under the bridge... unless that Facebook girl really was his sister, still alive despite his orders. He gritted his jaw against the resurgence of anger roiling in his gut. He should have known better than to trust Ryan to take care of it. Ryan was the screw-up, not him.

Grabbing the keys from the neat row of hooks on the garage wall, he got into the old beat-up Oldsmobile, glad for the first time that he hadn't destroyed this car the very night he'd shot his parents. When the engine turned over on the first twist of his key, Nick was doubly glad for ordering his own personal mechanic to keep the Oldsmobile running as if it were the finest among his array of sportscars.

He backed up slowly until the motion-sensor in the garage triggered and the door directly behind him opened. It would take him forty minutes to get to Hawthorne Bridge, the oldest vertical-lift bridge still in operation in the whole of the United

States. He'd be lucky if Ryan was sober enough to find his shoes and keys in the next forty minutes.

On the other hand, in the mood Nick was in, Ryan would be lucky if he was still alive five seconds after he stepped out of his own ride. It was what he deserved.

*Screw-up*, his father still whispered in the back of Nick's mind.

Shaking his head, Nick tightened his grip on the steering wheel and forced himself to focus on the road. He was successful now, rich beyond his ability to spend. Yes, Ryan *was* the screw-up and Nikki *was* a dangerous loose end in desperate need of tying. As much as he'd love to pull the gun tucked in his waistband, grudgingly warming against the skin at the small of his back, it would do absolutely no good right now to teach Ryan the ultimate lesson, not just for failing to follow Nick's instructions but also then for lying to him about it.

*If I didn't love you*, his father's voice whispered, *I wouldn't be so hard on you. Sometimes the tough lessons are the hardest to teach. That doesn't make them any less important.*

Nick didn't have a problem teaching "hard" lessons. After all, he'd taught his parents one, hadn't he?

Now all he had to do was teach his sister.

## CHAPTER 5

“Would you like to pick a table?” Hudson asked as they entered the cafeteria. He watched her face, picking up the spark of panic that lit her eyes a half second before her face shuttered into a mask of damn-near perfect blankness. She glanced around them but made no other move to obey.

Instead, he held out his hand and she lay her fingers into his palm, allowing herself to be led around the perimeter of the room until they reached an empty table, surrounded by more empty tables and as far away from what few diners were still enjoying their breakfasts as possible.

“How’s this?” he asked.

She looked at the table, glanced around to their nearest neighbors more than twenty feet away, and finally looked to him again. She didn’t say a word.

“Yes?” he coaxed. “No?”

She glanced at the seat in front of her, then at him again. Still, she was quiet.

Bringing her hand to his lips, he brushed another soft kiss across her knuckles, noting how she stiffened at first, but almost as quickly, her shoulders grudgingly, inch-by-hesitant-inch relaxed again. She stared at his mouth while he stared at

her, not missing a single twitch of her hand or the hitch in her breath as his thumb caressed her fingertips. Her expression might be masked, but her body said everything her mouth refused to.

She was scared to be touched, surrounded or boxed in. She was scared of him, but he knew he wasn't special and hadn't done anything to earn it. Everyone they'd encountered in their short walk here had been treated with the same measure of avoidance. He wished he knew exactly what had happened in her past, and yet at the same time, the swell of protective Daddiness that accompanied that wish was all he needed to know he'd probably choose violence if he did know. Perhaps it was best they both were in the dark.

“Nikki, sweetpea,” he said, startling her gaze up from his mouth and back to his eyes. He kept his expression gentle and as accepting as he knew how to. “When I ask a question, I'd like a response. Perhaps this is a good place to start our negotiation. What would you like to call me?”

Derek's assessment of her reluctance to choose became Hudson's solid truth in all his future dealings with her when that spark of panic flashed again through her eyes. She didn't speak, but her shoulders did lift in the smallest of shrugs. He almost smiled. She'd followed his command to the letter; it was a response.

“My apologies for not phrasing myself clearly. I would like to hear you call me Daddy. So, perhaps instead of shrugging, you could say ‘yes, Daddy’ or ‘no, Daddy’. Even ‘I don't know, Daddy’ would be acceptable. How does that sound?”

Her fingers were fidgeting with the hem of her pink shirt. “Y-yes... Daddy.”



Her brow furrowed slightly, as if she wasn't sure she liked saying the word. Well, he'd give her a day or so of using that address before he checked in with her to see if she might prefer a different title. He could probably handle "Sir," but he did not see himself as any kind of "Master". Hopefully, she wouldn't want that instead.

*If she even knows what she wants,* he mused.

Unlike the other Littles here that he had so far seen, there was nothing about her clothes that screamed "Little" to him. She had a stork and frog embedded in the soft pinkness of her shirt and sparkles on the pockets of her jeans, but that said funny more than it did anything else. And that was a shame. Derek had said he wasn't sure if she was Little, and he obviously hadn't been pushing the issue. Hudson, on the other hand, wasn't inclined to follow that trend. If she wasn't a Little, that was fine. He wasn't going to force the issue, but if she was, then in his experience, nothing brought a Little out of her shell like dressing her for the part. He wondered if she had coloring books, or a favorite stuffie back in her room. Or hell, toy cars and trucks or games she liked to play. He would dearly love to see her relaxed enough to play and, if he got his way, he made it a goal of his to see that happen before he left.

"Let's go get something to eat," he said, motioning her to follow. "Do you have any allergies I should be aware of?"

"No, um, Daddy."

He headed for the long line of buffet-style service tables, covered by their protective glass shields that fogged slightly from the steam rising from each metal container of hot food. He only got a few steps before he realized, she wasn't following.

He looked back to see her standing frozen where she was, watching him go. Was it his imagination or was that a hint of wistfulness in her doe-brown eyes?

Instantly, her face shuttered again, but he'd have to be blind not to notice the way her breathing had quickened. She was anxious, he recognized. Just like Derek had said she'd be.

Hudson held out his hand, beckoning. The set of her small shoulders tensed, but in small steps, she came to him. Her eyes never left his. Did she expect him to punish her, scold her, be even the smallest bit upset by her reluctance? She was in for a surprise, and it was his delight to give it to her.

She blinked and her hand twitched but never once pulled away as he kissed her knuckles. Had he not been paying close attention to her reactions, he'd have missed the tiny shiver that wracked her.

“Come on, sweetpea.”

This time, when he headed again for the waiting buffet, she moved with him. Careful not to touch him, she followed right at his heel as he led her by the hand to where stacks of clean plates and cutlery were set out for their use.

“Follow me, please,” he told her as he took a tray, set napkins, two plates, and all the silverware they'd need on it. This time when he walked to the head of the line of serving tables, she crept along right beside him. Checking for those tiny shifts in her neutral expression, he began to fill their plates.

\* \* \*

Nikki's stomach wouldn't stop clenching, but unlike when she was afraid, this felt different. Like Hudson who seemed as if he couldn't help himself, only Nanny ever took her hand to lead her about.

It was because she didn't know him, she thought. Without Master Derek there to supervise them, leaving his office with a stranger had been one of the scariest things she'd done in a long time. Master Derek would never let anyone hurt her, and she knew that. He'd proved it over and over again; so had Nanny, but neither of them were here. It was just her and Daddy Hudson, and what few stragglers hadn't made it to breakfast on time. Most were guest Littles she didn't know, along with their caregivers—strangers every one. They made her nervous, and yet, weirdly, although she was scared he might change at any second, Hudson's constant gentleness was starting to sneak in under her guard. She didn't know why, but she actually kind of liked it.

She liked the way he took her hand too. And lord, when he kissed her fingers, tiny sparks of something she didn't know how to identify flared to life deep inside her. It felt... nice, and that made her nervous but not in the scary way that just walking into the cafeteria usually caused. These days, Nanny just brought a tray to her room. Daddy Hudson seemed to prefer her to participate with the others.

“Would you like your eggs scrambled, hard boiled, poached, or over medium?” he asked.

She hated choices. She always felt as if she were being judged or tested, and if she picked the wrong thing... punished.

Nikki wrung her hands, careful not to so much as glance at the scrambled eggs. Nanny was always so careful to pick a

wide variety of foods, cooked in multiple ways, but if forced to have a preference, Nikki really liked scrambled eggs with cheese and maybe a dollop of ketchup to dip it in.

Further on down the line of tables, she glimpsed an assortment of pancakes. Her mouth watered, but it was just one more thing to avoid looking at in case it made Daddy mad.

“Sweetpea?”

Her face flushed. She didn’t know why, but she kind of liked his term of endearment too. Nanny called her nicknames too—honey, little girl, baby, that sort of thing. But then, she called all the other Littles that too, so it wasn’t special. When Daddy Hudson said it, it felt very special.

*She* felt special.

“Nikki.” For the first time, Daddy Hudson’s voice dipped low into tones of attention-getting disapproval. Her breathing quickened and her fingers fidgeted, but he definitely had her attention.

“I-I don’t know, Da... Daddy,” she lied, then peeked at him, wondering if he’d noticed how badly she’d stumbled over his preferred title. Just saying that word did things to her stomach that were even more dreadful than his hand-holding and endearments. A touch of heat flared into her face. She dropped her gaze to the eggs so she wouldn’t have to look at him.

“Eggs are eggs,” he inquired, “or are you afraid I might get upset if you pick the wrong thing? Because I’ll tell you right now, nothing you choose from these tables will be the wrong thing. Okay?”

“Yes, Daddy.” This time she didn’t stumble over the word. Fairly certain she shouldn’t be pleased over something that

came to everyone else so naturally, but she was still kind of proud of herself for that.

Picking a serving spoon out of one of the egg containers, he held it over the poached eggs. “Do you want this one?”

Weird eggs dripping in water? God, she hoped he didn’t put one on her plate. She’d eat it if he did. She might even be able to do it without gagging.

*—cold stone beneath her aching knees, her head gripped between hurting hands while a man stabbed his cock so deeply into her throat that she vomited... that backhanded slap that hit so hard pain exploded through her jaw—*

Her breathing quickened. No matter how hard she tried not to move, she couldn’t stop the backward step that immediately parted her from Hudson’s side.

Dropping the spoon and moving slowly, Hudson reached for her. His warm hand gently clamped onto the back of her neck, sending the need to run itching up the backs of her legs. One knee tried to buckle; she barely managed to keep from falling.

This wasn’t even a yes or no question.

“Who’s my good girl?” Hudson softly asked.

*Control your breathing, she ordered herself. Show no fear or you’ll get hit.*

“I don’t know, Daddy?” she asked.

“You are,” he answered. Cupping her chin in his palm, he tipped her face upward and, giving her plenty of time to pull away, he leaned in to press his warm lips against her skin. Her forehead this time instead of her fingers. Her eyes drifted closed as the warmth reignited in her cheeks. She trembled in

his hand. She couldn't open her eyes again, not until he let her go and picked up the serving spoon once more. One at a time, he gestured through the egg selections. She didn't think she allowed her expression to betray her, and yet it was the scrambled eggs he chose.

He didn't ask her preference again. He just moved them down the line, pointing to things with spoon after tongs after spoon again. Two crispy strips of bacon were added to her plate while he took ham, bacon and sausage links for himself.

“Oh my, look at this,” Daddy Hudson said as he moved them down to stand in front of the pancakes. There was French toast too, and a pot of oatmeal with nuts and raisins. She hated raisins. Oh, they were fine if eaten by themselves. But baked in food, to her they looked like dead flies.

*—maggots squirming in watery oatmeal slop, served up in a dog dish on the hard packed ground... her head shoved down into it until she thought she'd drown—*

Nikki shuddered.

“No? Hmmm.” Daddy Hudson pointed through the assortment of pancakes—plain, strawberry, blueberry and chocolate chip—and the French toast. She held her expression frozen, and yet, something was definitely giving her away. After a brief pause, he dished her up two strawberry pancakes. When it came to syrup, he didn't even ask. Ladling fresh strawberries in lightly sugared juice over the top, he crowned her pancakes with a dollop of Chef's fresh whipped cream and a rainbow of sprinkles.

It looked very pretty, and yummy. Her stomach rumbled.

Daddy Hudson must have heard it because he smiled. Nikki quickly hugged her stomach, squeezing in to prevent

any further betrayal. It didn't work. It grumbled again when he ladled up some fresh fruit salad into a little half-cup bowl. Next came drinks. He got a coffee for himself, then asked, "Do you like coffee in the mornings?"

*—hot coffee forced down her throat until it burned—*

She hugged herself tighter. "No, Daddy."

Picking up two glasses, he didn't go through the remaining options. He simply poured her a tall glass of milk followed by a half glass of chocolate milk.

"Off we go, then," he said cheerfully, leading them back to the table he'd chosen.

For their negotiation.

She knew what that was. Master Derek had mandatory classes all Littles had to attend and negotiations were one of them. As far as she knew, she was the only Little here to date who'd had to take the class three times... and who had failed all three times. All she did was answer yes, no matter what was asked. Needle play, yes. Golden showers, yes. Hard core BDSM, yes, though the idea of being hit terrified her. The thought of saying no, though, terrified her more, because that could get her hit even worse.

The world was a very scary place. Beatings always lurked just around the corner.

*Except here*, a little voice whispered at her. No one had ever hurt her here. Or hit, for that matter. Oh, she'd gotten spanked once, but after the startlement of being taken across Derek's knee and paddled by his hard right hand passed, honestly it had surprised her more than it had hurt. And afterward, when she'd scrambled to hide under his desk, fully expecting that session to get dangerous at any second, Derek

had felt so badly that he'd sat on the floor for over an hour before she could finally make herself crawl back to him. That was when he'd pulled her into his lap and that's where they had sat, for another good hour at least, while he hugged and rocked her and said he was sorry.

It was that feeling, the comfort of being held and hugged and rocked, that stayed with her whenever she thought of the Master who ran the Ranch.

Hudson wasn't Derek, and yet, here she was, feeling the same kind of comfort but in a completely different way. This felt deeper, more intimate. Scarier too, but not with the same element of fear that her nightmares left her in.

Hudson laid the tray of their foods on the table he'd chosen, then pulled back a chair. "Sit," he offered cheerfully.

Nikki eased herself onto the chair, only to quickly grab the table when he moved her chair for her. He didn't scoot her in closer as much as he turned her chair, forcing her to face him as he seated himself beside her. Once he was settled, he caught the front legs of her chair and pulled her that much closer. Her knees were now inches from his. Her body trembled, but her nipples stiffened, the brush of her shirt and bra as she hunched her shoulders bringing her nipples to instant peaks against soft cotton that suddenly felt far too scratchy.

Not that Daddy Hudson had anything to do with that, she told herself. But it was a whole lot easier to lie to others than it was to herself.

"So"—snapping out a napkin, he lay one across her lap before doing the same for himself—"tell me about yourself. What made you decide to spend the week with me? Don't get me wrong, I love that you did and there is no wrong answer to this. I'm just curious."



Because she was insane. Because she was tired of being scared and a burden, and maybe even because what Master Derek had told her about him had struck a nerve. She'd felt badly for him and his need to take care of someone so he wouldn't have to think about what he'd lost. And truly, there wasn't anybody at the Ranch more needy than she was. That made her feel bad too, and although Master Derek hadn't said as much, that did make her a good match for Daddy Hudson's requirements.

None of that was probably what he wanted to hear, and she wasn't about to say it out loud. But that was when he reached across the minor distance between them, cupping her chin in his warm hand again. Every thought went straight out of her head when he did that.

"Sweetpea," he said, his tone still light and friendly. "We're negotiating now. That means I want to hear your answers to the questions I ask. Again, there are no wrong answers. Nothing you say while we sit right here at this table will land you in trouble. I promise, okay?"

She nodded, but stopped when he arched his eyebrows. Abruptly switching tracks, she answered, "Yes, Daddy."

"Just give me the first thought that jumps into your head." He set her plate and silverware in front of her.

"Because I'm crazy," she whispered, her stomach tightening because no one wanted to hear that as the rationalization for being matched.

Daddy chuckled and handed her the glass of milk. "I don't think there's a one of us in this lifestyle who doesn't think that occasionally. I promise, it's no more true for you than it was for me when I first started. I just kept thinking, 'who's going to want someone to take care of them like this. Who won't feel

smothered by all this?” Cutting into his slice of cooked ham, he popped the bite into his mouth, staring slightly off into the distance as he chewed. “And to be honest, my first Little only proved to reinforce my fears. But”—he held up a staying finger—“my second Little, now she was everything I could have hoped for. Sadly, we just weren’t that compatible in any other aspect of our lives. That was, oh, I don’t know... five years ago, I think. My last Little gave up on me just after my mother died.”

Holding her glass of milk, Nikki listened carefully, as if there might be a test later. She kept her gaze locked with his, not wanting to get caught eyeing her breakfast. Her stomach growled, her mouth already watering.

He studied her a moment. “Drink,” he said softly.

She took a drink. If anything, the cool slide of liquid falling into her stomach only amplified her hunger.

“What about you? What sort of things do you like to do now that you’re at the Ranch?”

Her mind instantly blank, Nikki struggled to find an answer. “I like helping in the nursery,” she finally offered. “Sometimes Nanny J lets me help pass out juice and snacks.”

“Oh, yes? You like helping?” He took a bite of his eggs.

Her eyes kept trying to track the path his fork took up to his mouth. Little tingles lit up her hungry stomach just watching the slide of the fork passing back out through his gorgeous lips. “Sometimes it helps with the noise.”

“The noise in the nursery?”

“Sometimes they cry,” she admitted. And squealed or screamed or fought, just like Littles do, as Nanny J liked to say. And then she’d say it was okay, but the noise a roomful of

emotional Littles could make rarely failed to bring different screams, and sobs, and all the other sounds that women as trapped as she had been right out of the darkness of memories she didn't want to remember.

“Sometimes Littles need a good cry,” Daddy accepted, just like Nanny J also said. “It’s a stress release, and afterward they’re usually right back to their happier selves. Crying isn’t always a bad thing.” Pausing, he studied her again. “Do you want a bite of your eggs?”

Nikki couldn't stop herself in time. She looked at her eggs, her stomach growling the loudest now of all. She was pretty sure every Little in the nearly empty cafeteria could hear it.

Daddy definitely did. “Go ahead.”

The milk in her trembling hand sloshed precariously, tiny drops spilling over the open top onto her leg.

“Oops,” Daddy said mildly. Taking the glass from her hand, he set it on the table. Picking up her fork, he put that in her hand instead. “There you go.”

She looked at her eggs, her trembling turning to shaking as she tried to make herself eat. He'd given her permission, but she couldn't make herself do it.

*—kneeling on cold earth, a plate of once hot food now cold in front of her, and that fist in the darkness ready to swing at her if she so much as twitched—*

Her breathing hitched, quickening. Her whole body shook even as the stinging prickle of tears she knew better than to cry burned her eyes. She wanted to do this; she *couldn't* do this. Her legs vibrated with the need to bolt, to get her as far away from this new stressor until she felt safe again.

Daddy reached for her and she flinched, jerking back just as his gentle fingers stroked a stray wisp of brown hair back from her cheek. “Shh, shh,” he soothed, his touch trailing from her face, down her arm, to take the fork from her shaking hand and discard it on the table. The clatter of it rattled her, giving her the spark she needed for her will to utterly break.

She jumped up from her seat, nearly tripping over his foot in her scurry to get away.

As fast she moved, Daddy was still faster. Half rising as his arm hooked her waist, he pulled her around until she crashed into his chest. When he sat, she followed, plopping down to sit stiff as board in his lap.

*Don't cry... don't cry...*

So disappointed in herself that she could barely see straight, Nikki broke down. Her dam of tears cracked so hard she could feel it, splintering through her chest. She sniffled and squirmed, and sucked ragged breaths through her open mouth, but she didn't dare fight his hold.

*Please don't hit...*

“Shh, sweetpea, it's okay,” Daddy Hudson whispered, pulling her snuggly back against his chest. She closed her eyes, fighting not to relax her guard, something that just happened the second her head came to rest on his shoulder. Shushing turned to humming and holding turned to rocking. “There's my good girl,” he murmured, until finally, she opened her eyes.

She snatched her hands off his arm, the one she hadn't even realized she'd grabbed. Little red crescents dotted his forearm where her nails had dug into him in her franticness. The sight of them broke her all over again. She was really

going to get hit now, but she couldn't stop. The need to bawl scalded her. Useless sobs coughed up the back of her throat, choking her when she struggled to swallow them back again.

His big hand rubbed her back, back and forth between her shoulder blades and still it was a minute before she realized he was talking to her, giving her calm instructions, "Breathe with me, babygirl. In... that's it. Slow and steady. Out... there's my good girl. Breathe in... you're safe with Daddy. Breathe out... Daddy will always keep you safe."

She could almost believe him, but no one was ever truly safe. Life had taught her that and she had the nightmares to prove it.

And yet, her eyes still closed when she felt the warm press of his lips against her temple. Against her will, her body inched into relaxation.

"I've got this, sweetpea," he said, wrapping his other arm around her now too. He held her, rocked her, whispered to her and, oh, she knew better than to trust him, and yet her broken will melted in the warmth of his embrace as he told her, "Let's do something different. No, don't tense, baby. It's okay. Daddy knows just how to take care of you."

She knew better. Oh, how she knew, but for once—just one time—she ached to pretend otherwise.

## CHAPTER 6

Hudson's mind worked overtime as he rocked Nikki in his lap. He suspected he knew the trigger to what had sent her spinning into panic, and yet at the same time, he knew he hadn't the slightest clue. Even if he did know her and all her ghosts, what she had been through couldn't be anything but beyond the average man's comprehension.

Whatever had happened to her, it had to have been bad. Truly bad. Minor shit did not create the kind of terror he had glimpsed right before she'd tried to flee.

Frankly, he was glad he didn't know. He was a gentle man, one who firmly believed in conversation and reason over violence. But put the man who had hurt his Nikki in front of him and Hudson knew, gentle or not, he'd hurt the guy.

*His Nikki...*

He cradled her, knowing how ridiculous it was of him to try to lay such a claim this soon—even if only in his mind. They'd barely just met and after their week was over, the likelihood that they'd ever meet again was so slim he might as well term it as none. But for right here and right now, as she breathed in and out with him, the tension in her muscles grudgingly relaxing again—or at least as much as she seemed able to make herself relax—calling her “his” felt right.

*Very* right.

“A-are you mad?” she hesitantly whispered. “It’s not too late. Master Derek can match you to someone else.”

Hudson had to work not to stiffen beneath her. She was tense enough for the both of them. “Is that what you want? For me to find someone else?”

She was quiet for so long, he thought she meant to ignore him. Something he was about to put a sharp stop to before she raised her head to ask, “Isn’t that what you want?”

“No. Not at all, in fact.”

“Oh.”

Was that a tendril of relief he now glimpsed in the depths of her brown eyes? It was shuttered before he could recognize it. Those kinds of survival tricks weren’t created over the span of a week and they surely weren’t fixed that quickly either, but a man could dream.

He patted her hip. “Up.”

Like a marionette on strings, she stood and waited to be commanded for whatever came next.

He moved her slightly so he could stand up too. “Wait right here. I promise I’m not leaving. I just want to try something.”

She swallowed hard, but again, like a puppet on strings he hadn’t plucked, she stayed exactly as she was while he glanced around the walls of the cafeteria. Of course they were all the way across the room, but he finally spotted what he wanted.

He patted her cheek before he left her side, and the entire trek to the neat row of highchairs waiting against the wall, he kept a careful eye on her. He must have allayed her need to

flee for now because she didn't move not even when he returned to her side, carrying a chair he thought would fit their needs perfectly.

He set it down long enough to physically move her to one side, and then repositioned the highchair to where the previous chair had been, still facing his abandoned seat and the two plates of food slowly growing cold. "Here we go," he said, eyeing the tray that moved up over her head and locked for safety. He liked the straps that had been screwed into the arms and legs of the wooden chair, just for those naughty little babies who liked to misbehave at meal times.

He had no intention of using them on her, a feeling that was reinforced when he glanced up to find that frozen mask back on her face. She stared at them, her shallow breaths quickening all over again.

He cupped her chin, redirecting her gaze to his, and smiled. "Who's Daddy's good little girl?"

Shaken, she blinked at him in confusion. "M-me?"

"Yes, ma'am. You. Are you scared?"

Her stare bounced everywhere he wasn't. At her sides, her tiny hands balled into tight fists.

"Nikki..."

She looked at him.

"It's okay to say what scares you," he softly told her. "Everyone is scared sometimes, and when it comes to my sweet girl"—he gave her chin a gentle shake—"I very much want to know when it happens. Daddies can't help when they don't know there's a problem or what it might be. Does that make sense?"



If he hadn't been holding her, he might not have felt the twitch of her right knee as it tried to buckle or the way she immediately stiffened her legs to stop it. "Yes, Daddy."

"Are you scared, baby?"

She swallowed hard. "Y-yes, Daddy."

"What are you scared of, sweetpea?" he gently asked, aching to pick her up and see if he couldn't stop her awful shaking.

Her fingers trembled as her fists grudgingly uncurled. It took almost a full minute of stops and starts and tiny stress-filled furrows on her tell-tale brow before she could make herself point at the waiting highchair straps. He wondered how close he'd come to having her point right at him.

"Good girl," he praised, beaming at her. "Thank you for being brave enough to tell me what's bothering you. Now Daddy can fix it."

She blinked but didn't pull away when he cupped the back of her neck and leaned in to brush a reassuring kiss upon her forehead. It was too soon for this kind of intimacy, and he knew it. But what was this, the third time today he'd kissed her? Still, she didn't pull away and, even better, it was not a trick of his imagination when he felt her trembling soften and ease away just before she leaned ever so slightly into the tender press of his lips.

He pulled away slowly and only far enough to see her face. Her eyes were closed, her forehead wrinkled in the first utterly naked show of uncertainty she'd yet dared to lay bare for his interpretation. Seeing it made his heart soar. He almost kissed her lips.

Her eyes blinked open, and she looked at him.

“Daddy isn’t going to use the straps, and that’s a promise you can take to the bank. But if it doesn’t scare you too much, honey, I would like you to sit in the highchair. Daddy will lower the tray but, again, Daddy will not put you in the straps. All I want to do is feed you your breakfast in a way that won’t be as stressful as it was before. I’m hoping it will help us bond while we talk. Now, don’t be afraid to tell Daddy no—”

The minute twitch of her eyebrows and the corners of her mouth told him plainly she had just braced herself and she would *not* be saying “no”. A dangerous position for any submissive to take, he knew, just like he now knew without a shred of a doubt—Nikki was every bit as submissive as any other Little in this place. Nikki was a Little, he was sure of it, but with a strong slave-like undercurrent that controlled every move she made. Not just on the surface, where she so clearly expected at any moment she would be hurt, but inside her. In the part of her that liked helping Nanny J in the nursery; in the part that had tentatively pressed into his comforting kiss; and even in her defiance of the most basic rule regarding submissives and BDSM: a submissive who couldn’t say no was a dangerous woman to play with.

It wasn’t going to stop him, though. Because on the heels of that realization came another that felt even more powerful: Nikki would never tell anyone “no” unless she was taught. Somewhere in the world there had once been a Nikki who’d happily used that word from toddlerhood on up, but that girl wasn’t here. He didn’t even know if she was still alive somewhere deep inside of his sweet Little. But if she was, he was determined to find her, and not just find her...

He was going to heal her.

\* \* \*

*Don't be afraid to tell Daddy no... don't be afraid...*

Nikki sat in the highchair anyway. That in and of itself wasn't scary, but having him lower the tray over her head and arms, snapping it into place just over her lap, imprisoning her in this contraption until whenever he decided to let her out... well, it was a whole new experience.

Nanny had put her in a highchair once, but that had been years ago. She'd freaked completely out to the point that Nanny S had never tried again. It might even be a note somewhere in her file in Master Derek's office—*do not bind, do not trap*. She waited, but he was all the way back in his seat, scooting in toward her until once more they were knee-to-knee. Well, she was a little higher now, so it was more like knee-to-shin. But still, he was tall enough standing up that, even though he was sitting now, they were practically eye-to-eye.

She liked his eyes. They were warm and blue, and when he smiled like he was now, the corners of his eyes crinkled. It was like the look of a man who never got mad. Which was ridiculous. But *if* it wasn't and *if* he didn't then, oh, she would be so safe.

Which was when Daddy Hudson picked up her plate and pure panic lit her insides, tightening her all over again as he placed it on the tray in front of her. He picked up her fork and her hands immediately fisted.

*—you think you're fucking people... you're a dog... get your face down in that shit—*

She recoiled, but she was already sitting as far back as the wooden backing would allow and there was no allowance for accidental escape. She grabbed at the tray and immediately cracked her knuckles on the unyielding edge. She locked her lips against her involuntary gasp, but her hope that he wouldn't have noticed died brutally when he quickly caught her wrist.

“Ouch,” he said in surprise, tipping her hand into the light. “I’ll bet that hurt. You’ve got a red spot. Kisses to make it all better.” Three quick and noisy kisses landed on her stinging knuckle before she knew what he was about to do. One last caress of his thumb over the sore spot, and then he let her go. “Let’s not do that again, shall we?”

He stood and promptly stripped off his button-down shirt. He wore another underneath it, a plain white tee, but that wasn't what caught her attention and tightened her tummy all over again. Lord, the man was fit. Not that his business shirt had hidden that fact from her, but without it, the breadth of his shoulders seem to amplify. His partially bare biceps bulged as he rolled his shirt up the long way and stuffed it into the crack between her and the hard edges of the surrounding tray.

“There we go,” he approved. Picking up her fork again, instead of offering it to her as she'd feared, he studiously began to cut her food for her. “The eggs are cold, but I’ll bet they’re still good.” Stabbing a piece, he tested the temperature against his bottom lip. “Yup, cold as can be. But—”

They both startled when the large frame of Chef Connor suddenly appeared at their table. It startled the hell out of her that she hadn't noticed his approach until then, but even more surprising were the twin plates of fresh, hot food from the

buffet that he'd just brought them. On each, he'd served up exactly what Daddy had already picked out for them both.

"Littles in *my* cafeteria don't eat cold eggs," the big man growled. Setting down the new plates, he cleared away the old and, giving Hudson a grumpy frown, promptly walked away again.

"I think I offended him." Bemused, Daddy watched him go before turning his attention back to her. Moving the new plate onto her tray, he swiftly cut up a little of everything. Stabbing a piece of egg and then the crispy bacon, he temperature-checked again. "This is much better." He blew lightly on her eggs before offering her the bite.

Only Nanny S had done this for her, but nothing that Nanny did felt the same when Hudson did it. His fingers on the fork were huge. Nanny blew on her food too, but she didn't touch it to her lip first. And never, not at any time, did she do what Daddy was doing right now, flying her eggs and bacon slowly but inexorably toward her watering mouth.

"Let's land this plane in the hangar," he encouraged. "Open. Open! We're going to crash!"

She opened her mouth and in the eggs went. The saltiness of the bacon hit her tongue first, followed by soft, warm, cheesy eggs. It was so wonderful she couldn't help closing her eyes while she savored it.

"There's my good girl." He beamed, then promptly stabbed two small triangles of fluffy pancake goodness into a large strawberry and then dipped both in whipped cream. "Here comes the airplane... brrrrmmmm!"

She opened, almost drooling on herself before he gently tucked the next bite past her lips.

Plucking a piece of bacon too crispy to be stabbed by fork tines, he dipped it into the sugary strawberry juice and the flavor combination brought from her the softest moan.

He smiled, but didn't comment, and so on breakfast went. Between bites, they talked. Or rather, he talked and the stress of having to find the right answers wasn't as bad as it had been before. Half the time he wasn't really asking her anything; he was telling her. Warm comfort rolled through her every time he did it. She liked it. She liked *him* and relaxed even more.

“When we get done here, I was thinking we might visit the gift shop,” Hudson said. “We can pick up a few things for me and a few things for you. Then we'll check out our cabin for the week and figure out which events we most want to participate in. I'll admit, I haven't looked at the list yet. Is there anything you really want to do?”

She didn't want to have to admit that she usually avoided the events. Rawhide Ranch activities were always highly anticipated. Throw a few dozen Littles into the mix, and it was just too much for her.

She shook her head, figuring it might be okay since her mouth was full of food. Struggling to swallow, just in case it wasn't, she quickly said, “No, Da—”

Half chewed pancake fell into the back of her throat, doubling her over with choking coughs.

Jumping to his feet, Daddy clapped on her back with the palm of his hand, knocking the pancake loose again. She sucked for air, her face burning hot and her eyes watering. Belatedly, she remembered to cover her mouth.

“Answers can wait.” Hudson sat back down, watching her carefully. “We need to chew our food all the way before

swallowing. Let's not do that again, okay?"

Scoldings never failed to put her on edge, and often hurt her feelings since she usually worked very hard to be obedient. No matter what was asked of her. But it was hard to feel called out when he used words like "we" and "let's". It was like he was sharing the blame, and somehow that made her feel better.

Wheezing and wiping at her teary eyes, she nodded again, unable to answer and breathe at the same time. Her hacking coughs had hurt her throat and when she was finally able to muster the words, she croaked. "Yes, Daddy."

Picking up the milk, he brought it to her lips, only to pull back when she tried to take it from him. "Let Daddy take care of you, baby."

Her tummy tightened, but not in that perpetually nervous way she was used to feeling. It warmed, the strangely pleasant sensation wending deeper and lower until a slow pulse lit between her clenching thighs. It throbbed.

Lowering her hands to the tray, she leaned in to meet the cup halfway. He held it while she drank.

"Little sips," he told her.

She sipped, the cooling liquid soothing the minute soreness from her scratched throat.

"Good girl."

The throb intensified. She squeezed her thighs, but instead of killing it, the pulse strengthened.

She licked her lips when he took the cup away. He dabbed at her lips with a napkin, and just like that, breezed right back into conversation as if nothing had happened.

Yeah, she liked him all right. With any luck, this week would pass much easier than usual.



## CHAPTER 7

Daddy held her hand as they walked through the gift shop's open doorway. They could not have picked a better time. Only three other people, apart from the counter clerk, were there. They weren't being loud either. Rather, in soft whispers and occasional giggles, a man and woman, with a brightly blushing Little boy standing between them, were perusing the implement section. He looked embarrassed and anything but unhappy when the Mommy picked up a sturdy wooden hairbrush with an overly large, oval business end. Whatever she told him had him covering his face with both hands. The Daddy laughed and patted his Little's bottom.

"Come, sweetpea," Nikki's Daddy coaxed, tugging lightly on her hand until her frozen feet moved her back into step with him. He took her directly to an aisle packed full of every kind of stuffie imaginable.

She wasn't a stuffie person, but Nikki made no complaint as he studied the aisle, picking up a little blue elephant baby in a diaper and bib. After a quick search of her face, Hudson put it back and picked up a pony with rainbow mane and tail instead.

"They'll charge you money for that," she summoned the courage to tell him.

Daddy only smiled and chucked her lightly under the chin. It happened so fast she didn't have time to flinch. It was so gentle, she wished he'd do it again. "Sweetpea, you go on and let Daddy worry about that."

His pet name for her sent a tiny shiver racing through her skin. She hugged herself, wanting to hold on to that feeling for as long as she could.

Putting the pony back, he selected a long, thin, plush ostrich with rainbow feathers and brightly colored bands all the way down its spindly legs to its toes. He looked at her, the corners of his eyes crinkling when he darted out with the stuffie to lightly peck at her ribs. She startled so badly, she jumped, but there was no accompanying rise of cold, smothering fear following it.

Again, the ostrich zipped in at her, this time to nuzzle into the side of her neck, and she almost smiled. She shivered, barely catching herself in time to keep from reaching for it.

"I think it likes you." Grinning, Daddy made the ostrich duck in over and over, faster and faster, landing tickling pecks all over her tummy and ribs. It nuzzled her ear, then pecked a quick kiss to her opposite cheek, catching her so off guard that her hands were moving before she could stop it. She grabbed the ostrich, stopping its funny attacks. Gazing at it, she then looked up at him.

Daddy applied gentle pressure, and it didn't take much before she released her hold so the ostrich could lay its rainbow head in the valley of her breasts, right against her heart.

"Hold," he coaxed.

She hugged it, watching as he backed up a step.

“May I take a picture to remember this moment by?”

Did he want to remember her or his silliness with the ostrich? She wasn't sure, but she suspected it might be her he wanted this memento of. The warmth in her tummy glowed. “Yes, Daddy.”

He gave her a knowing look. “You're not just saying that because you think that'll make me happy, are you?”

Would it make him happy? Suddenly shy, she shook her head and whispered, “No, Daddy.”

His smile made the heated pulse inside her blossom.

Taking out his cellphone, Daddy stepped back again. “Smile,” he said, and she did her best while he snapped at least one picture. It took long enough, he might have snapped more.

“Thank you, baby.” He came back to her, his warm hand cupping the back of her neck as he leaned down to press yet another kiss to her forehead. Was it her imagination, or did his lips linger on her skin just a little longer than one kiss required? His eyes were closed. He was savoring it, just like she did whenever she encountered something unexpectedly pleasurable. That it was her he was savoring tickled her. It made her eyes close too.

“Let's go find you something to wear.” Taking her by the hand, he led her into the next aisle where dresses, rompers, and Little clothes of all sorts crammed together on the sales racks. She followed where he went, stopping when he stopped to sort through the colorful selection. He pulled out a pair of denim coveralls, the short length only extending partway down her thighs and the pockets decorated by glittery red hearts and teddy bears.

He held it up to her, but it was way too big. He tucked it over his arm anyway. Shifting a few hangers down, he plucked out a white onesie with cherries dotting all over it. Made to barely cover, it was backless, with ruffles around the leg holes and along the breast cups, and twin pink ribbons for straps rather than sleeves.

“This is more like it,” he praised, holding that up to her next. She liked the warmth of his eyes as he assessed her approvingly. “You are going to be such a pretty baby in this. What do you think?”

She’d wear anything or nothing at all, so long as he continued smiling at her like this.

Seeming not to need an answer, he tucked it over his arm and down the aisle he went, picking out a pair of black leggings with pink, white and red hearts, a pink shirt with two squirrels hugging, and possibly the prettiest dress she’d ever seen. Like something fresh out of Alice in Wonderland, the smexy version, the navy-blue puffed skirt was too short to cover her pantied backside although the neckline would button all the way up to her collarbones. A white with baby-blue ruffled pinafore completed the Victorian look. Daddy had to ask the clerk, but he even found a pair of white stockings and shiny, black buckle shoes.

“Into the dressing room you go,” he said, dumping all the outfits into her arms. “Hop.”

His hand found her bottom, delivering two of the softest pats right to the seat of her pants. Way too gentle to be hits, she walked into the roomy dressing room glowing. Her happy reflection seemed to welcome her in.

“I’ll be right outside,” Daddy promised. “I’m not going anywhere, okay? So when you’re ready, come show Daddy

how pretty you look. Do you understand?”

She nodded. “Yes, Daddy.”

One last smile, and then he closed the dressing room door.

The tiny dressing room grew quickly quiet as she stood in front of the mirror, watching as the happiness bled out of her own stare. She looked down at the small armload of clothes she was hugging, then at the bench provided for her to sit and the hooks on the back of the door, waiting for her to drape them in her discarded clothes.

Her breathing grew shallow, quickening as her heart raced, growing faster and faster the longer she just stood there, staring at herself.

*—you are nothing but what I make of you—*

Cold prickled up her spine, raising every fine hair on her body. She shook her head, struggling to tune out that nasty voice, but already her knees were beginning to shake and her breath to choke her.

“I don’t hear movement in there,” Daddy Hudson said from the other side of the door.

Tears stinging her eyes, she looked at the Alice dress on top of the short stack of clothes. No longer as pretty as it had been mere moments ago, it had become a source of stress she couldn’t make herself conquer.

*—you make a move without my permission, I’ll fuck you up*

---

She shook and shook, her nose running and her eyes stinging. Her reflection blurred just before the first tear fell. No matter how frantically she tried, she could not blink them back.

“Sweetpea?”

She crept toward the door, her hand coming to rest on the shutter-style wood panels. Pressing her forehead to the rippled surface, she fought to feel his presence through the barrier.

*Please don't be mad... please...*

Her throat closed, choking her. “D-Daddy?” she whispered, unable to tell what she wanted more: for him to hear her... or not.

*... please...*

“I’m right here, sweetpea.”

*... don't be mad...*

“Daddy,” she whispered, ashamed. “I’m scared.”

\* \* \*

Hudson had the changing room door open before she’d even finished speaking. The second he saw her, he knew his mistake. It wasn’t as if Derek hadn’t warned him, how could he have forgotten and, damn it, the damage his error had caused for her had come shockingly fast.

Gone was the smile she’d gifted him with while they’d played with the ostrich. In her eyes now all he could see was devastation, confusion, and a fear so deep that he could feel the razor’s edge of it cutting right through him.

Without a word, he flung his arms around her, hugging her tight and close. She didn’t hug him back, her arms were full of both ostrich and clothes and her eyes too full of tears.

Just holding her wasn’t enough. Bending, Hudson scooped her into his arms and sat on the bench, dropping her into his

lap before wrapping his arms back around her. He rocked her, kissed the top of her head, and god, did it break his heart when, through sniffles and hiccups, she asked, “A-are you m-mad?”

“Never,” he promised and kissed the top of her bangs again. “This was Daddy’s fault. Not yours.”

The tension in her smaller body eased just a hair, and after only the slightest hesitation, she leaned into his embrace. Her head tentatively lay upon his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he said for her and her alone. As if anyone was there to hear them. Not that it would have mattered if someone were. A Daddy who couldn’t admit when he was wrong wasn’t any kind of Daddy at all. And especially not for a Little as wounded as Nikki.

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” she dutifully repeated and sniffled. One small hand came to rest on his embracing arms as she relaxed a little more.

He’d meant him, not for her to repeat what he’d said, and still her assumption struck him as adorable. He couldn’t help the smile now tugging at the corners of his mouth, right up until a sharp knock sounded on their dressing room door. In his haste to get to Nikki, Hudson hadn’t bothered closing the door behind him and with every rap of the gift shop’s sales rep, the louvered door drifted open a bit more.

The man peeked in. “Is everything all right?” He stopped when he saw Nikki. “Oh,” he said, taken aback.

Considering it hadn’t been twenty-four hours since they’d met, Hudson had no business becoming territorial over Nikki, but he immediately disliked the flicker of disapproval with which the rep was staring at his Little.

“I didn’t realize Derek had matched her,” he said, uninvited.

Hudson glared back at him. “Do you know how to size as well as you judge?”

Startled, the rep locked his gaze on Hudson. “I... uh, yes, sir. Let me get my tape measure, but I’m sure we have her correct sizes in all four of those outfits. I’m fairly certain she’ll fit in the cherry onesie perfectly.”

At a gesture of his head, Hudson sent him scampering for a tape measure. Hudson patted Nikki’s hip and she obediently stood up. Tugging a red and white hanky out of his jeans pocket, he tenderly wiped the last of her tears away and then held the kerchief to her nose. “Blow.”

She obeyed without hesitation, and he stroked her hair, comforting her with his wordless approval.

After closing the door securely, he twirled a finger for her to turn around then put her in front of the main mirror. “Daddy’s going to help you change your clothes. If at any point you become uncomfortable or if you want to stop, I want you to say something. This is serious now, do you understand? If you can’t say something, that’s okay. Touch my arm instead.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

Having proof now that he couldn’t trust her to be able to communicate her wants and dislikes, he moved slowly. Gathering the hem of her shirt in both hands. He waited for her body to tense, but from the moment he touched her, she relaxed. There was nothing sexual in this, and that’s what he told himself, over and over again, with every inch of pale skin he bared as he pulled her shirt off over her head.



Lord, but she was so damn perfect. Every part of her from the gentle slope of her neck, the hourglass pinch of her slender waist to the high, pert breasts cupped by the plain white sports bra she wore. The urge to drop a kiss on to her shoulder was as irresistible as it was inappropriate. He barely stopped himself in time. He picked up her ostrich off the bench where she'd dropped her armload of clothes and handed it to her.

“Hold,” he had to say before she hugged it, but that was okay. He knew it wasn't because she didn't want it. He'd seen the way her eyes lit up when first he'd reached for it. “Good girl.”

She didn't so much as flinch when he dropped his hands to the waist of her pants. God help him, but she was every bit as perfectly formed from the waist down, too, and so innocent seeming in her plain cotton panties.

A gentler rap at the door signaled the rep was back with his tape measure.

“One moment,” Hudson called, because no way was he going to allow that man any more of a look at Nikki than he'd already taken. Just knowing he was standing right outside their door was enough to irritate.

Selecting the Alice dress, he slipped it over her head and, just as he'd thought when he'd picked it out, it was ill-fitting. Too long on her torso, too big for her smaller chest and a hair too long in the ballerina-like skirt. He opened the door and let the rep far enough in to see the fit of the dress. He really liked the style of it, and he couldn't wait to see her in it with a proper fit and a pair of ruffled panties peeking out from under the skirt hem.

She needed pigtails in her hair, too. With pretty ribbons dangling to her shoulders and that relaxed, almost smiling look

in her eyes as she peeped playfully up at him from behind her rainbow stuffie.

If it was even possible for her to relax enough to be playful. He hoped so. He never wanted to see that fear on her face again, and especially not because of him.

All business now, the rep eyed her up and down, and the only measurement he took was of the length of her torso from breast to waist. He was careful of where he placed his fingers; Hudson knew, because he couldn't stop watching the other man work. Like a hawk. A freaking, overprotective, highly annoyed hawk.

Excusing himself, the rep vanished back out of the changing room, only to reappear a few minutes later with two copies of the exact same dress. "Try this one," he offered, handing over the smaller of the two dresses.

Closing the door on him again, Hudson took his time stripping Nikki down just to dress her up again. Ah, a perfect fit.

"How's it look?" the rep called.

"Really good," Hudson reluctantly answered. As much as he didn't like the man's initial behavior toward his babygirl, he had to admit, the man knew how to eyeball a person's size correctly. "What do you think, sweetpea?"

In the mirror, her gaze snapped up to his and shuttered. As if she were reluctant to have her opinion known, or worse, as if she didn't think her opinion ought to matter.

"Is it comfortable?" he specified.

She nodded. "Yes, Daddy."

But was it? Was it really?

“Any tightness in the arms? Is the fabric scratchy at all?”

Shyly, she looked down at herself. She shook her head.  
“N-no?”

“Is this something you’d like to wear?”

She looked helplessly back up at him, worry in her eyes.  
“Yes, Daddy.”

He was absolutely sure he couldn’t trust that, and yet her shoulders weren’t as tight as they’d been when he first barged in here and what tension he could see his instinct suggested was still due to her being scared without him.

He hated that she’d been scared at all, but oh how that warmed his soul. He already knew he was going to be sorry when the week was over and he had to tell her goodbye. Maybe he could continue to contact her, phone calls here and there, and possible other visits? Or ultimately, would that do more harm than good?

He stroked her hair. “Let’s try the onseie next. But first, tell me what’s one thing you like about this dress?”

She looked down at herself, and then again at her reflection in the mirror. Her jaw tightened, tiny sparks of concern lighting up her eyes as the silence began to stretch on.

“There are no wrong answers,” Hudson encouraged. “It won’t even be wrong if you change your mind and say you don’t like it. With me, baby, there are no wrong answers. Only open communication.”

She hugged her stomach, still looking mostly at herself, although her gaze flicked back and forth from herself to his reflection’s eyes, then back again.

He smiled. “We can stand here all day long, but we’re not moving until I get a little feedback from you.” He gentled his minor scolding with a one-fingered chuck under her chin.

The stress in her eyes only grew, but the shutters didn’t fall back into place. Still, the silence grew louder in the dressing room, and just as he was about to decide he was pushing too far and too fast for his damaged little one’s ability to overcome, Nikki pointed at her skirt.

It was a delightful surprise.

“Is that a like?”

She patted gently at the foofiness, the many inches of tulle tutu underneath keeping the skirt puffed nearly straight out all around her. Just the tiniest peek of plain white underwear could be seen when she twisted her hips to check how she looked from behind. She patted the fluffy skirt with both hands this time. “I like this. It’s very pretty.”

She quickly checked his face again, the tension in her jawline relaxing under his approving smile.

“I think it’s very pretty too,” he agreed. “Tutus can be scratchy, though. That’s my biggest concern. Is it scratching you?”

She quickly shook her head. He didn’t for a second think her response was anything more than her knee-jerk need to keep him happy.

He kissed her forehead. “We’ll get you nice camisole to wear next to your skin, just to make sure.”

Turning her so her back was fully toward him, he hummed as he unzipped and untied her, stripped the sleeves down over her shoulders and carefully lowered the dress down over her hips to her feet.

She volunteered no movement until he said, “Step.”

Obedience came instantly, but when she tried to step her other foot out, her toes snagged in the tutu ruffles and she almost lost her balance. He was already grabbing for her when her hand clamped on to his shoulder. She snatched it back again as if he were the stove upon which she'd just burned herself.

“Good girl for using Daddy’s shoulder to steady yourself,” he immediately praised. “That’s exactly what you should do.”

She worried her fingers, obviously no more convinced by his assurances than he was whenever she simply agreed with him. He rubbed her back. That was okay; trust took time to build and they still had a whole week to work on it.

Laying the dress over the top of the door, he put Nikki in the cherry onesie next. Just as the sales rep had thought, it fit her perfectly. Neither loose nor tight, the soft white and cherry-dotted cotton clung to her body as only well-fitting cotton could. Three strips of ruffles accentuated her litheness and feminine curves from the leg bands around her thighs, to the strip above her breasts, creating an illusion that they were bigger than he knew them to be, and even behind her, where only her bottom was covered. The rest was backless, with a crisscross of straps added just enough security to keep her top from falling down. The spaghetti ribbon-straps needed some slight adjusting, though, to truly fit her short torso. Determined to do it himself, it took Hudson a moment before his too-big fingers managed to finesse the tiny plastic strap adjusters to move in the right direction. It had been a while since he'd last dressed a Little. Or his mother, there towards the end.

He quickly banished that thought before the anniversary teeth of his grief could take a chunk out of him. Not now, not

here, and definitely not in front of his little Nikki, who would probably misinterpret his emotions as something she'd done wrong.

He wouldn't do that to her. Not in a million years. Not if he could help it.

"There," he announced, running his finger up and down beneath the last shoulder strap to check the tightness. He gave her shoulders a pat before stepping back to admire his work.

She was absolutely adorable, and for the first time, he could have sworn she was thinking the same.

Her gaze softened as she ran the fingers of one hand across the ruffles just above her breasts.

"You should see the back." Hudson grinned. "I guarantee, it's my favorite view."

He wagged his eyebrows, grinning when twin spots of color raced to stain her cheeks. She ducked her head. Smoothing her hands down the stomach of her new onesie, she finally plucked at the pink ruffles around her right thigh. "I like this?" she offered, glancing up at him uncertainly.

He hadn't had a chance to ask what she liked most about this outfit, so it tickled him that she would offer her opinion so soon. He wrapped his arms around her, hugging her back to his chest. She barely tensed in his embrace, and what twitches of stiffness that he initially felt disappeared as he rocked her side-to-side. "I like them too, but I think I must be biased. I can't imagine you in anything that wouldn't look darling."

Or in nothing at all.

He banished that thought. *No sex, remember*, he told himself. *She doesn't need that, and neither did you.*

He needed to stop hugging her quite so much, no matter how badly his Daddy instincts protested that as the wrong approach with her. She fit too neatly in his arms, and it felt too good. Worse, the more he held her, the more her softly feminine scent infiltrated his senses. In spite of all his best intentions, his blood was humming in his veins and his wayward cock twitched.

The last thing she needed to feel right now was his cock stiffening against her buttocks.

Another knock on the door signaled the sales rep was still out there. If he wanted to peek in to check her fit, he was going to have a long wait. Hudson knew he had an overprotective streak, but he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt as proprietary over another quite this strongly. If anyone was going to see Nikki in any kind of state of undress, it would be him and he alone.

"Try these," the rep said from behind the door, and a silky soft camisole suddenly draped itself over the top.

All right, that mollified Hudson's riled protectiveness.

"We'll take it," he said, even as he reluctantly let her go and tossed the undergarment back over the door. A smaller pair of black stretch pants with hearts draped over the door next. It was followed by a hugging squirrels shirt that matched what he'd already picked out.

"Try these," the rep suggested. "I'll give you some privacy."

As much as Hudson hated to admit it, perhaps the man wasn't as bad as he'd initially assumed.

He waited, giving the rep plenty of time to walk away before his arms tightened around his precious Little in an extra

squeeze of a hug. “You’re so beautiful,” he told her, reluctantly letting her go.

Her blush deepened, and her tiny breaths shallowed and quickened. There wasn’t a trace of fear anywhere that he could see in her eyes, but she dropped them so quickly he couldn’t be sure.

He caught her chin, raising her gaze back to him just so he could double-check. “What are you thinking?”

Her breath hitched, but now he was sure. There was no fear anywhere in her, not right now. He saw gratitude, and he saw wonder. He’d be damned if he didn’t just lose a little of his heart to her, and that was before she said, “I think you’re beautiful, too.”

And that right there was when Hudson knew.

He was in so much trouble.





## CHAPTER 8

Nikki couldn't remember ever being in a hotel room before, much less a cabin, but she couldn't imagine any other place on Earth being half as wonderful as the guest rooms at Rawhide Ranch. Modern architecture met old-fashioned western décor in every aspect from the steer horns hanging over the bed, to the brown-and-white cow-hide rug on the floor, and the brightly block-colored Native American blanket on the massive four-poster bed. An adult-sized crib with a long skirt that extended from mattress to floor had been tucked up against the wall next to the window. Painted white, it was made up with a soft green blanket and pillow decorated all around the edges with hopping, happy, diapered frogs, which matched the musical mobile that dangled high above the pillow.

While Daddy was caught up examining the list of weekly activities hanging on the back of the door, she ventured closer to get a better look. Checking to see if she was being watched, she poked the mattress, checking for softness. A quick poke of the bed told her it was just as soft, and her tummy lit all aquiver with butterflies. It felt strange, but not scary. Neither did the realization that he would be sharing the same cabin with her. Not even Nanny did that anymore. Not since her first year.

Bending down, she lifted the bed skirt and looked underneath. Another little bed, unseen behind the draping cloth, had been made up on the floor with its own diapered frog blanket and memory-foam pillow.

“This sounds fun,” Daddy said brightly, still perusing the list. “We’ve got pony rides in two hours. Oh, and cookie baking at ten tomorrow morning. ‘Sugar cookies enough for every Little and their caregivers’,” he read. “‘All colors of frosting, and tons upon tons of sprinkles.’ Sounds like a sugar rush just waiting to happen. Still”—he cast her a smile—“would you like to make a sugar cookie for Daddy?”

“Yes, Daddy.” She’d never participated in any of the cooking classes or activities, but she nodded. If Daddy wanted a cookie, then she’d make him the best cookie she could. It was a small way to say thanks for all his kindnesses, and even if he never did another thing for her from now on, she was still grateful.

Coming to her, Hudson bent down and peeked under the bed. He was quiet and although still smiling when he straightened, there was a seriousness in his blue eyes when he cupped her chin and made her look at him. “If you need to use that bed, you have my permission. But I want you to promise you’ll tell me first. Understood?”

For him, for his kindness, she’d agree to anything. “Yes, Daddy.”

He held her pinned by that semi-stern glare as if to assure himself that she wasn’t lying, and the butterflies in her tummy flew like crazy. She felt so Little when he touched her like this, it made her feel shy and blush and ignited that horribly distracting pulse that seemed to have taken permanent root in her “naughty bits,” as Nanny liked to call them. The closer he

was to her, the more strange and alluring and... and *exciting* that feeling became.

She hugged herself to keep from touching down there.

—*you belong to me*—

No, she didn't, she thought defiantly and swallowed back that ugly voice from her past. She belonged to Daddy now and would for as long as he wanted her. She wished it could be for forever, but she knew better. They only had a week, but already it had been the best week of her life. If only she could tell him so, but she couldn't. She didn't know the words. Even if she did, she knew she wouldn't. She didn't want to make things awkward, especially since it was all so very temporary.

“We've got two hours until the pony rides. How about a nap until then?”

She wasn't the slightest bit tired, but she didn't know how long he'd been traveling or how far he'd had to come to be here with her. If he wanted to make cookies, she'd make cookies. If he wanted to ride ponies, she'd ride ponies. And if he wanted to nap, she'd happily crawl into that crib and watch while he got all the rest he needed.

She tried to yawn, though she doubted she was convincing.

Chuckling, Daddy rubbed her back and didn't confront her about it. If he'd pressed, she'd have told the truth upon command. Fortunately, he didn't, and she was glad. She felt silly enough about her reasons as it was.

“Let's go potty, and then we'll change for bed.”

When he took her hand, she followed him into the bathroom and stood still as could be while he stripped off her shirt, and then her shoes, socks and pants.

“On the throne,” he told her. He turned his back to give her privacy but didn’t leave.

Nikki felt the rise of another burning blush heat her face. Long gone were the days when she would have simply squatted and pissed, or worse, on command. She still remembered Nanny’s gentle scoldings while she’d cleaned up Nikki’s messes, and Nikki had to admit, she felt so much better when she was allowed to use the toilet. It made her feel special.

*—you’re a fucking dog—*

She clutched her hands, turning her face away, not wanting to associate that voice with any part of Daddy’s presence.

“I don’t hear any pottying,” he sing-songed.

After drinking two cups of milk at breakfast, it wasn’t hard to go. It was just embarrassing.

Covering her face with both hands, she pretended she was all alone and finally managed to obey. Turning from the door, he gathered a wad of toilet paper in his hand.

“I can do it,” she blurted. She knew better than to talk out of turn, so if he wanted to hit her for that, she deserved it. But mortification would not let her stay silent.

“And I’m going to let you,” he agreed, handing her the toilet paper. Returning to his place by the door, he turned his back again. Embarrassing as it was, she liked that he wanted to be with her, even during something as private as this. “Do I need to tell you to flush?”

“No, Daddy.” Dropping the paper in the bowl, she jumped up to flush. Funny how her utter nakedness didn’t cause the same measure of embarrassment, but rather when he turned to gesture her to the sink, the warming blush in her face moved

down into her tummy. She went to him, watching as he turned on the water. He fiddled with the faucets until the temperature was right, and then he took her by the hands.

Her breath caught as he washed them for her. Slipping a bar of soap between her palms, he thoroughly sudsed her from the tips of her fingers to her wrists. The water was warm, but his touch was warmer and oh what it did to her. The pulse was back. She tried to cross her legs, desperately willing it to stop.

“What’s the matter?” Daddy asked, noticing her involuntary squirms. “Do you need to go potty again?”

Lord, her reflection was as red as a beet. “No, Daddy.”

He double-checked her expression, then rinsed her hands one final time before shutting the water off. He was just as gentle when he took a clean towel off the provided rack and patted her dry. “Are you hurting somewhere? Is it your tummy?”

She didn’t know how to identify what was happening to her, but she knew it wasn’t pain. It felt too good to be, and yet at the same time it left her feeling... hollow. Incomplete, somehow.

He glanced from her face to her hands, clamped one over the other low over her abdomen, and before she knew what to say, sudden understanding dawned in his beautiful eyes. The corners crinkled as he smiled. “Oh,” he said, and then tipped her head to kiss the very tip of her little nose. “I think I know what that is. Have you never felt this way before?”

If she had, she couldn’t remember it. Certainly, she’d never felt like this about anyone she’d met at the Ranch. Only Daddy.

“It’s okay,” he told her. “It’s perfectly normal. Everyone feels these things once in a while. I’ll let you in on a secret, though.” Bending, he brought his mouth to her ear, his hot breath made her shiver when he said, “You make Daddy feel that way too.”

Taking her hand in his, he then led her from the bathroom to the as-yet unpacked bag of things they’d bought at the gift shop. She stared at the three-pack of binkies he pulled out before breaking one from its protective wrapping. Sitting on the edge nearest to her adult crib, he tugged lightly at her hand and patted his lap. “Sit, sweetpea. Let Daddy hold you.”

Her stomach erupted into butterflies, only half of which were due to anxiety. Half of them had a languid warming effect that had settled into each and every one of her wakening nerves.

She crept to him, half expecting to get her ears boxed as she lowered herself to gingerly sit on his lap.

Catching her up in his strong arms, he adjusted her on his thighs until she was sitting sideways, her body leaning back into his chest and the arm that wrapped her ribs, easing her down until her head was on his shoulder. He was big enough and she small enough, they fit together as if made for each other.

“Such a good girl,” Daddy soothed, easing the binky into her mouth and settling it snug against her lips until she began to suck.

“Rock-a-bye,” he softly sang, rocking her back and forth in his arms and on his lap.

Not tired in the slightest, she smiled as she listened to the nursery rhyme he now sang. Before he was through the first

verse, her eyes grew heavy. It was hard not to close them while he sang, but it felt so natural. And by the time he came to the end, if she weren't so sleepy, she'd have laughed when the bough broke and the cradle fell, down coming baby, "Into my arms," Daddy finished.

She yawned, drifting away when he started the song over. She never felt him pick her up or lay her gently into her crib, but somewhere in the depths of her sleepy mind, as he rubbed gentle circles with his hand on her back, she thought she heard him say, "Daddy's right here. You'll always be safe with Daddy."

\* \* \*

Hudson lay on his back on the bed, hands folded behind his head, staring up at the ceiling. It was dark now, and late. Well after ten, though he had put them both down for bed at 9:30. The light in the bathroom had been left on and the door cracked, just in case she woke up in the night not remembering where she was... or with whom.

If he looked closely, he could just make out the cherry dots on the ruffled bustline of her onesie as she lay on her side, her hands curled into fists just beneath her chin. Her knees were drawn up in the fetal position, and though he'd once had a Little who slept this same way, on Nikki it made him think of defensive postures.

The urge to scoop her out of the crib and tuck her into bed beside him was overwhelming, and yet he knew himself well enough to know he'd never sleep if he did. His cock needed very little encouragement as it was to misbehave. At this point, it was all he could do to keep his hands above the thin sheet and blanket. The cotton of the gray sweatpants he wore for

pajamas weren't as comfortable as he was accustomed to, and the semi erection tenting the front wasn't helping.

“Mm...”

Rolling his head, Hudson looked to her again, but that breathy hum wasn't followed by any other sound. Peeling back the covers, he sat up on the edge of the bed and leaned in close, trying to get a clearer view of her face. Her eyes were closed, with swift little movements that showed she was dreaming. Her brow twitched into a furrow. Was it a trick of the dim light, or had she pulled her limbs into an even tighter ball than before?

“Shhh,” he soothed, reaching between the crib bars to lay his hand on her hair. “It's okay, sweetpea. Daddy's here. You're safe with Daddy.”

The furrow of her brow relaxed, though not the tight curl her body had become.

“Daddy's right here,” he whispered again.

Her head twitched, as if tracking his voice. Afraid he might wake her, he reluctantly took his hand away. Sitting back on the bed, he watched her a while more. Her little body was already relaxing again, the fists of her hands tucked beneath her chin unclenching.

He smiled softly. Today had been nothing like he'd imagined it while he'd been packing for this trip. Not that he was disappointed by how things had turned out. He'd wanted to get lost in the care of another, and Nikki certainly provided that. They'd ventured out to the barn to ride the ponies promptly at two o'clock. He couldn't wait to climb up into a saddle, just so he could pull her up to sit in front of him and they could share the experience. He hadn't been on a horse in



years, especially since Merry-Go-Rounds didn't count. As it turned out, Nikki was scared to death of the horses and every shriek or squeal of laughter from the other Littles lining up for rides had made her jump.

Fortunately, the ranch hand in charge of the event not only noticed, but when Hudson approached him, he'd promptly brought them up to the barn, where a swayback mare—newly rescued out of its own neglectful situation—was led to the mouth of the barn. It took almost an hour of hugs and comfort and showing her how gentle the horse was before she shakily approached it. It wasn't until it nuzzled her hand with its velvety soft nose, looking for treats she didn't have, that Nikki finally relaxed.

She'd even smiled, though he could see the uncertainty in her eyes when a worker from the barn brought her out a carrot and some apple slices.

“Hi, Nikki.” She gave a little wave of the carrot toward his Little before turning to him with a giggle at seeing the green tops of the carrot bobbing in the air. “My name is Wren. I'm the stable-master, Travis' wife,” she said introducing herself. “I thought Nikki might like to try giving the horse a treat.”

So Hudson had held her hand, showing her how to offer the treats without fear of being accidentally bit. He liked that he'd been the one to introduce her to that new experience. The entire walk back to the Ranch house, she'd been silent, but she'd glowed.

“Mmff.”

Her squeak was still soft, but higher pitched now.

Reaching between the bars again, this time he took one of her little fists in his hand and held her until she returned furrow

of her brow relaxed once more.

“Daddy is here,” he murmured softly. “You’re safe with Daddy.”

He ached to bring her into bed with him. He’d be a gentleman and abide by his declaration to include no sexual contact with her, exactly as he’d told Derek during their first meeting. It was the right thing to do, especially since he didn’t know for sure, but he suspected whoever had hurt Nikki might have included rape in their cruel indoctrination. He’d never get a wink of sleep imagining that, but that wasn’t what stopped him.

Rather, he was more afraid Nikki wouldn’t get any sleep, and the last thing he wanted was for any action of his to cause her nightmares.

When her fists uncurled, he slipped two fingers into her loose grasp. She latched on to him, holding his fingers right up next to her chin. She curled around him, and damn if his heart didn’t skip a beat.

It would be the most uncomfortable night of his life, but there were no options. In that moment, he knew when this week was over, letting her go would be every bit as hard as watching his mother slip free of illness and life. He would call her if she let him. Every day if that’s what it took, and maybe someday she’d find another Daddy to take care of her.

He’d let her go then. He’d have to, but he also knew no other Daddy would ever love her.

Not the way he was starting to.

\* \* \*

Nikki jolted awake, her throat locked on the scream she refused to make. She was shaking, tears streaming down her cheeks. She hated crying in her sleep; she really hated crying when she couldn't even remember the dreams that drove her to it. She started to wipe them away but froze when she realized she was holding something.

Raising her head, it took a moment for her to make out the shape of Daddy's head leaning against the bars of her crib. He was fast asleep, braced up against her crib, his fingers tucked into her hand. She was holding them, but really, he was holding her and that realization made her shaking ease.

Ever so slowly, she let go of him. Slipping out from under her blankets, she rose onto hands and knees, trying to see him better. Even with the dim light coming from the crack in the open bathroom door, she could barely make out the gray of his sweatpants, riding low on his lean hips. His chest was bare though, and the thought that he might be cold ate at her. She knew better than to get up. After all, he had told her to sleep in her crib and not to get out without telling him, but she wasn't about to wake him up.

Daddies needed their sleep too, and though they'd only met yesterday, he'd already been so kind to her. Her heart skipped a beat just watching him breathe, his slumbering inhales punctuated by slight puffs on each exhale. She didn't want to think about what would happen at the end of the week when she'd have to say goodbye.

Just the thought of it made her want to run away, to swaddle herself away somewhere dark and quiet where she wouldn't have to face it. Hiding was poor protection, however. They always found her here, and that would only lead to a

stern talking to from Nanny or Master Derek, and then she'd feel bad for being so much extra work for everybody.

And yet, she did climb carefully and as quietly as she knew how, out of her crib so she could kneel down beside him. She was scared to touch him, for fear of accidentally waking him up. He was too big for her to move into his bed anyway, but she could bring the bed to him. Sort of.

Gathering the top quilt in her hands, she pulled it off the mattress and gently draped it around him, tucking the edges in around his bare shoulders, she next stole her small pillow from the crib. Wedging it through the bars right up next to his head, she then braced her hand against the opposite side. As if sensing the softness, he leaned into the pillow. She held it steady for him. Eventually, her arm would get too tired to maintain the steady pressure it took to keep him upright and as comfortable as she could make him. But that was a price she was more than willing to pay just to repay some of what he'd already given her.

The week had only started, and already she missed him.

Tears pricked at her eyes, but she blinked them back. There was time enough for that kind of nonsense after he was gone.

## CHAPTER 9

“Good morning,” Daddy softly sang, his finger stroking the curve of her cheek. “Come on, sweetpea. You can go back to sleep in a minute if you want to, but let Daddy see your beautiful eyes.”

So very tired, Nikki opened her eyes to find herself tucked into Daddy’s bed, rather than her crib. He wasn’t in it with her, though, but standing fully dressed in a pair of blue sweatpants now and a white t-shirt.

“Daddy is going to take his morning run,” he told her. “If you want to sleep in, I’ll be back in about forty minutes. We’ll get our good morning showers and then hop off to breakfast. How does that sound?”

Rubbing her eyes, she sat up nodding. “Yes, Daddy.”

Bemused, his mouth curled and his eyes crinkled at the corners. “That’s not exactly a ‘yes, Daddy’ question, is it?”

Her stomach quivered, but it was hard to be afraid of doing the wrong thing when he was smiling at her like this. Shyly, she tried again, but she didn’t know how to read his gentle face, and she wasn’t sure what kind of answer he was expecting from her. That’s when it hit her: what he wanted was to know what *she* wanted. Oh, how scary that was. It opened a

whole new bucket of worms, all of which squirmed and twisted inside her.

*—the fist coming at her, hard and fast. “Did I say fucking talk?”—*

Except Daddy didn't hit. Not once. So far, he didn't get mad, either.

“There are no wrong answers,” he repeated. “But when Daddy asks a question, it's because I want to hear what you have to say. No matter what that is, understood?”

Twisting at her fingers, Nikki nodded. “Yes, Daddy.” Her fingers hurt she was squeezing them so hard. Summoning all the courage she could muster, she finally asked, “C-can I come with you?”

Not only did he not look surprised, there was still no hint of anger that she could see anywhere in his gentle face. “You want to come jogging with me?”

She didn't want to be alone. Was that the same thing?

“Let's go jogging.” Peeling the blankets off her, he held out his hand and she took it. “I need to get you proper clothes for this, but let's see if we can't make do. At least until the gift shop opens.”

Digging through his luggage, he pulled out a pair of soft black shorts. If there hadn't been a drawstring, and if he hadn't pulled it tight, they never would have fit her. As it was, the waist was still loose and slung low on her hips, but unless she pushed there was no danger of them falling off. Her shirt was the hugging squirrels he'd bought her yesterday. That felt soft too. She stroked the cloth against her chest, liking the squirrels so much more than she had upon first glance in the gift shop. Maybe because it was hers. Not provided to her by the Ranch

but bought by Daddy and given to her. Forever and for always, she'd have something to remind her of him long after they'd parted ways.

The thought made her sad, and she quickly pushed it away.

One quick trip to the bathroom, and they were ready to go. Grabbing the keycard for their cabin, he slipped it into his pocket and then held out his hand. She liked that he couldn't seem to stop touching her. It gave her all the desire she needed to want to touch him back.

"Aren't we going to the gym?" she asked when instead of walking toward the main building where she knew there was a gym in the basement, they were walking in the opposite direction.

"Not today. I enjoy running outside whenever the weather permits it instead of running on a treadmill and basically going nowhere. But, if you'd rather go to the gym, we most certainly can," he said, giving her hand a squeeze before turning back toward the resort.

With all the guests on the Ranch for the weekly holiday celebration, Nikki had a feeling the gym would be very busy. She could easily picture a mixture of men and women working out on the weight machines, treadmills, rowing machines, and stationary bikes. She could almost smell a hint of chlorine from the presence of a nearby pool. Nanny often took her there, hoping to get her to play in the water with the other Littles during their exercise time. But it was always so noisy, and her anxiety ramped so high when she was there, all she could think about was the potential danger lurking behind her.

Funny, how Daddy's hand in hers seemed to keep those feelings at bay. Looking up, she felt a breeze on her face as well as the warmth from the sun just beginning to crest the

mountains in the distance. It was a beautiful day and suddenly she wanted to be out in it with her Daddy.

“Are... are we jogging... out here?” she said softly, cringing a bit when realizing it came out as more of a question than an agreement.

“I think that’s a great idea,” he agreed, turning them back around and walking a bit further to a small clearing that held some beams and a few low bars. “First, we need to stretch a bit so muscles won’t cramp up,” he said, releasing her hand. “Just do what I do.”

She’d never really given much thought as to why people went through different routines before even starting to actually exercise, but as she watched and then did her best to mimic his movements, she did know that Daddy seemed to like it, and Lord, but she really liked watching him as he showed her how to stretch. His muscles rippled, bunched, clenched with every movement he made. Though she struggled to keep her focus on what he was teaching her, she couldn’t stop staring.

“Ready to give it a go?” he asked once the stretching was done as he led her to where a discreet sign indicated the beginning of a trailhead that would lead them through the trees.

She nodded, and off they went. Right from the start, he shortened his steps, making it easier for her to keep up as they first walked along the jogging trail. After a bit, he picked up into a slow jog, and before she knew it, they were really moving. His breaths were steady; hers a little more puffy and huffy, as they jogged up small rises and then back down again, but she wasn’t anywhere near as fit as he was. Still she followed him, and she didn’t complain. She didn’t even mind. She just liked being with him. It felt good, and she felt special.



After all, he could have picked any Little without a Daddy who lived here. He'd picked her instead.

"You're doing fantastic," Daddy encouraged, giving her the steam she needed to keep going. She didn't want to disappoint him, and to be honest, the burn creeping up her legs and infiltrating her sides felt kind of good.

"Around the pond and then we'll be almost there," he encouraged.

The water was calm and she smiled at the sight of a family of ducks paddling out toward the center. It was an actual surprise when he said, "A few more yards. You've got this, sweetpea!"

As if there were a finish line, she raised her arms in happy victory as they hit their starting point, completing the loop.

"Woo hoo!" Daddy cheered, unexpectedly scooping her up off her feet. He twirled her around and around. It was so silly, and so wonderful. She "woo hooed" with him and then clapped her hands over her mouth as she laughed.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed, or felt silly, or wonderful. It was all Daddy that did this to her.

He stopped twirling, setting her back on her feet. His arm lingered around her back; his other hand settled hot against her hip. She tried to give back, putting her hands lightly on his chest and hoping he felt at least as much as she did when he touched her.

There was a warmth in his lovely blue gaze that didn't vanish, not even when his smile did. He looked at her mouth and her pounding heart stumbled all over again. Her tummy tightened. Her breath hitched, and fear did not play any part in any of it when he hesitantly bowed his head. The warm caress

of his lips as they brushed against hers made her eyes close. His nose ever so slightly caressed her own, giving her Eskimo kiss after gentle kiss until tremors took hold of her knees. She shivered, warmth tumbling inside her, rolling in her stomach, tightening her nipples into achy little peaks, and sending that pulse between her legs into all-new heights of pleasure that she couldn't bear.

Moaning, she kissed him back, first repeating his Eskimo kiss with her nose and, unable to stop herself, then with her suddenly dry mouth. The pulse swelled, engulfing every part of her as he folded her in gentle arms. His mouth moved with hers, his lips parting when hers did, the tip of his tongue teasing the bow of hers until she followed suit. Her knees buckled, but his embrace kept her from falling. Until he suddenly gripped her bottom with both hands, heaving her back up off the ground and deepening the kiss. Her senses swirled, just like they were still spinning around and around all over again. His hands squeezed and a flush of hot wetness flowed through her core, spilling through the furrow of her aching sex and making her burn.

If only they could stay like this forever, kissing, flicking at one another with their tongues, his hands holding her up into his affection without ever letting her go. All too soon, though, it ended. A tremor ran through him when their lips parted. She opened her eyes, instantly losing herself in the burning need of his gaze, even as he reluctantly lowered her to stand on her own.

He exhaled. "You have no idea, Nikki, how truly special you are," he said huskily.

She soared, riding the lovely tails of his compliment. Covering her lips with her fingers, she savored the lingering

tingle of his kisses. How she summoned the bravery, she didn't know. But one minute she was basking in the fire he had ignited inside her, and the next she knew, she had his face cupped in her hands. She tugged, trying to bring him back to where her waiting lips needed him.

“Nicholina! You fucking whore!”

Nikki jumped, pleasure vanishing in an instant and cold seeping every trace of fire back out of her veins. For a moment, the whole world turned black, filling with a nightmare of flashing images that brought only feelings of terror. Just as fast as it had come, the visions passed into forgetfulness, but the horror it had brought with it stayed.

Nikki had no memory of the blond man stepping out from the tree line into the clearing. He glared first at Hudson and then at her, and she began to shake, a rush of phantom sounds and flashes of memory filling her mind. *The flash of a gun, the sound it made when it fired... her own scream, shrill and full of panic.* Her knees knocked so badly she dared not move.

The man pointed at her, and just like that, the memories faded into nothing but the phantom thunder of gunshot after gunshot. Nikki jumped back, as if hiding now could somehow keep her safe and away from the stranger charging across the small clearing where they'd stretched earlier.

Daddy had her tucked behind his back in an instant, putting himself between them and holding up a staying hand though the blond man did not stop coming. If anything, his steps quickened.

“Code red. Security to the Sapphire Trailhead,” a woman's calm voice came over the Ranch speaker system, the words clear despite the trees and the open space of the outdoors. “Code red at the Sapphire Trailhead.”

Nikki stumbled backward, her panic rising with every step the man took. Her vision tunneled. All she saw was the chill in his blue eyes as he came at her.

“One more step and I will knock you right the fuck out,” Daddy Hudson growled. “I will happily spend the night in jail if you keep coming.”

Snapping his gaze from her, the other man stopped not ten feet away and locked eyes on her Daddy. As if noticing him for the first time, he jabbed a finger at her and she almost collapsed. “That’s my sister.”

“Oh yeah?” Daddy returned, just as dangerously. “And this is how you greet her after ten years?”

Mouth flattening, the blond man flushed all the way to the roots of his hair. He was saved from answering when a rush of four security guards and Derek came charging across the grass toward them. Another security crew led by the chief of security, Lawson Berringer, came out of the trees behind the guest cabins, long strides eating up the distance. Before she could even take another breath, she, her Daddy, and this terrible stranger were surrounded. Master Derek stepped forward, assessing the situation.

“My office,” he belted out, slicing through the silence. Even the birds and squirrels had stopped singing and chattering. Everyone was staring at them... at her. She clutched her stomach to keep from being sick. She couldn’t stay here. She just couldn’t. Already her feet were moving her, creeping her away from everyone until the sign posted at the trailhead bumped up against her back.

*Run*, every instinct inside her cried.

*I want my Daddy*, her heart begged.

Her instincts were harder to resist.

Absorbed as they were in corralling the angry blond man, no one seemed to notice when she darted away. As quietly as she could, she fled down the trail and paused at the first bend to look back. No one was looking at her, not even Daddy.

Tearing her gaze from his broad back, she ducked off the trail and ran through the trees, as hard and as fast as she could.

She didn't know where she was going, but there was no stopping until she'd found a place to hide.

\* \* \*

"But where has he been?" Hudson demanded from one side of Derek's office.

"Fuck you," Nick Palmer snapped from the other. "I don't owe you any explanations."

"No?" Drawing himself stiffly upright, fists clenched at his sides, Hudson growled, "You've got two fucking seconds to explain why she ran from you as if the devil was snapping at her heels."

Derek held up his hands, silently ordering both of them to silence. Neither paid him any attention.

"I've got a better idea," Nick threw back. "Why don't you explain what you were doing molesting my sister? How do I know she wasn't running from *that*?"

"Enough." What hand gestures had failed to accomplish, Derek's thundering command achieved. Falling silent, the two men glared at him instead of each other.

Running his hands through his hair, Hudson turned toward the window, struggling to calm down. It didn't help that he had no idea where Nikki was. He didn't care if Nick was her brother, as he'd claimed from the second Derek pulled them both into his office. He had a bad feeling burrowing deep into his gut. What he couldn't tell, though, was if that feeling was caused by this "Nick" fellow, or if it stemmed by his not knowing where Nikki had gone.

His gut constricted so tightly, for a moment he thought he might be sick.

Okay, well... that answered that. He needed to find her, if only Derek would just let him go.

"Sit down," Derek ordered. Stepping behind his desk, he jerked his chair out as well. His movements were quick, denoting irritability, and there was a tightening around his mouth that was all Hudson needed to confirm the Master of the Ranch was every bit as upset by Nick's arrival. Although the first words that fell out of Derek's mouth surprised Hudson. Turning on Nick, he demanded, "*What the hell* makes you think you can just walk in and tour yourself around the place?"

"What makes you think you can keep my sister from me?" Nick shot back, his face reddening with all the fury his expression otherwise suppressed.

"Why'd she run from you?" Hudson snapped.

"Says the man who put hands on her." Swiveling in his seat to face him, Nick snapped, "My sister has always been a runner. It's how she disappeared on me the night my—our parents died. If I didn't know better, I'd think her responsible for their murders."

Hudson barked a hard laugh. “You’re lying. I’ve known her barely twenty-four hours and there’s no way she’d ever knowingly harm anyone. It’s just not in her.”

“Barely twenty-four hours and you’re already snogging on her like it’s going out of style?”

“What I do with my—” Hudson stopped when Derek interrupted him, saying, “What murders?”

Nick glanced at him. “The ones that took our folks. Look, I’m not saying there’s a great fondness between my sister and I, but that doesn’t mean I’m not taking her home. Today. Right now. In fact, you’ve got ten minutes to locate her and bring her to me, or I call the cops.”

“You think for one minute—” Hudson started, but Derek interrupted him again. This time by doing nothing more than picking up his phone.

“Good morning,” he calmly said, once he’d dialed and whoever on the other end picked up. “Yes, it appears we need police...”

Startling, Nick looked at him, his face darkening with every word he overheard.

“Yes, ma’am,” Derek politely said. “He’s threatening myself, my guests, and a young woman who took one look at him and ran...” Tucking the phone slightly away from his mouth, Derek asked Nick, “Are you refusing to leave?”

Nick erupted from his chair. “You bet your ass I am! You can’t keep her here against my will! You either get her down here, or I’ll find her myself!”

Over his dead body, Hudson seethed, but Derek had full control over the conversation now.

Adjusting the phone to his mouth again, he said, “Yes, he’s refusing to leave... I appreciate that. What’s the ETA?”

“Fucking pimp!” Nick lashed out. Both Hudson and Derek startled when he furiously kicked the front of Derek’s desk, like a tantrum-throwing five-year-old. “I’ll find her myself.”

Snapping around on his heel, he stalked to the office door and threw it open so hard the handle bashed into the wall. He pulled up short, a veritable wall of security guards three men deep and stretching farther than the threshold allowed Hudson to see prevented his escape.

Let it not be said the Ranch’s security was anything but first-rate. Hudson couldn’t remember when or where Derek had summoned them from, but just like they’d appeared out of nowhere in the clearing, they were here now and their attention was locked solely on Nick, who turned slowly to give them both a strained smile.

“You can’t hold me against my will,” he smirked. “It’s called unlawful detention. Anyone lays a hand on me and I’ll sue this whole place right out from under you.”

Hudson took two steps toward him but stopped when a man stepped through the guards to plant himself directly in Nick’s way. “That a fact?”

“This is Chief Berringer”—Derek paused as an older man joined Lawson—“and this is

Detective Forrester,” he said brightly. “I was hoping you got my text, Dan.”

“I’ve been wondering when we’d get to the bottom of all things Nikki,” Dan replied, not taking his eyes off Nick. “I wasn’t about to miss this for anything.”



Glancing between the two newcomers to Derek, Hudson recognized the security chief from the encounter at the trailhead but had no idea who this detective was. From the way the man presented himself as well as his rather cryptic statement, he had the feeling he'd just met another important piece to the puzzle.

“Who the fuck are you?” Nick asked, as calm as calm could be. His face was still dark, but his tone had completely changed.

“I’m the one who found your sister nearly ten years ago, all beat up and without a single memory apart from her name. So, she ran from you, did she? I’m afraid I’ve got questions for you to answer. How about we step outside and have an exchange of information. I know that sounds like a question, but it really isn’t.” The salt-and-pepper haired detective beckoned. “Let’s go.”

Nick folded his arms across his chest. “I think I’ll wait for the real cops. I mean, do you even have a badge?”

Reaching into his jacket pocket, Detective Dan pulled out his wallet and flashed his badge. “I’ve got real handcuffs too. Want to see those?”

Hudson startled when a hand touched his shoulder. He looked at Derek.

“Go,” the Ranch Master softly told him. “Find her and then get her out of sight. I’ll find you later.”

Nodding once, Hudson waited until the detective stepped back and motioned Nick to accompany him. Outside, Hudson assumed, just as the officer had already said.

The second they vanished from sight, Hudson was off like a shot. He ran all the way back to the trailhead, but a quick

glance around followed by a few steps off the trail told him she wasn't hiding among the trees—at least not here. Rawhide Ranch was huge, and he had no idea where to start looking.

*Her room.*

Swinging around, Hudson ran back down the path toward the resort. Crossing the lobby, he almost ran over two Littles skipping hand-in-hand as they rounded the same corner a little too close to the wall.

“Sorry,” Hudson excused, dancing around them just in time to keep from knocking them down.

“You’re s’posed to say excuse me!” one called grumpily after him.

“He’s not supposed to run in the hallways, either,” the other added. “He’s going to get a spankin’.”

Seeing the pair of Littles, he knew Nikki wouldn't have sought a hiding place where she'd have to dodge other people.

*The crib.* And more specifically, that small dark hiding place Derek had already confirmed she preferred.

Hudson didn't slow his step, he simply did an about-face and ran back the way he'd come. As he rounded the last corner that separated this hall from the front door and then outside, he blew out a massive sigh of relief. He was pretty sure he cursed at the two Littles as well, but that wasn't important. Nowhere near as important as the moment he spotted Nikki, huddled up as small as she could make herself against the trunk of a tree on the path to the guest cabin. Her knees were drawn up tightly to her chest and her head covered by both arms.

A woman with a shy Little boy hiding partway behind her stood over Nikki, one hand on his vulnerable Little's shoulder. “Are you okay?” she asked. “Where's your caregiver?”

“I’m here,” Hudson called, hurrying toward them. “I’m here.”

Head snapping up off her knees, Nikki gaped at him before leaping to her feet and racing toward him. She flung out her arms, throwing herself into his. Though he caught her tight, she damn near climbed straight up him.

“I’m sc-cared!” she wailed, wrapping both her arms and legs around him.

“I’ve got you,” he whispered. “Daddy’s got you.”

His own relief was like a tidal wave. He couldn’t hold her tight enough. When she burrowed into his neck, he grabbed her butt and hefted her higher, holding her so much more securely.

“Oh, thank goodness,” the woman said, her hand coming to rest on her heart as she sighed. “I’m sorry to interfere, but Blake and I were on our way to the stables when we saw her. I’ve never seen a Little look so... lost.”

“Thank you for staying with her,” Hudson replied, struggling to get his keycard out of his pocket without letting go of Nikki first.

“Of course.” The woman smiled, then took her boy’s hand.

“Is she going to be okay?” the Little asked, his eyes wide and concerned as he looked between Nikki and his Mommy.

“Yes, honey, her Daddy is here now. I think she’ll be just fine.”

“I promise, she’s going to be okay,” Hudson said, patting Nikki’s back as he tried to allay the Little’s concern.

Blake gave him a long look and then nodded and loosened his hold on the blue stuffie he had clutched to his chest.

Evidently satisfied, the Little looked back to his Mommy. “Can we go look at the horsies now, Mommy?” Blake asked, glancing back at Nikki in concern once as off they went.

Rubbing Nikki’s back, Hudson jiggled the key out of his back pocket. As soon as he one-handedly wrestled the door opened, he stepped across the threshold. The back of his neck prickling, he only paused once to check behind him. Half afraid he might see Nick Palmer stalking angrily after him, his gaze instead locked on a tall dark-haired man in jeans and black leather jacket standing in the shade of a large tree. Hudson didn’t recognize him, which meant nothing. He could have been a security guard although he wasn’t in the same uniforms that he’d seen the others in, or he could have been a guest like the woman with her Little.

Or he could be with Nick.

The two men stared at one another, and Hudson stayed exactly where he was, glaring as he rubbed Nikki’s back while she cried into the side of his neck.

A corner of the other man’s lip curled. Touching the brim of an imaginary hat, the man strolled around the tree and out of sight.

The urge to follow was powerful, but nothing like the urgency he felt to get Nikki safely inside their private cabin.

“It’s okay, sweetpea,” he said, carrying her inside, one hand on the door until it was shut. He locked every lock on it before taking her to the end of his bed. Swinging her around in his arms, he sat, dropping her to sit on his lap. He hugged her close. “Shh, it’s okay. Let it out.”

She squirmed, as if trying to meld herself into him. Every breath she took was a gasp; every exhale, a braying sob that

tore right through his heart. He rocked her, rubbed her back, and stroked her hair. Kisses on top of her head turned to kisses on her forehead when she lifted her face, drowning him in the tear-filled darkness of her traumatized eyes. Her shaky hand came to rest on his cheek when he tried to kiss hers, but at the last second, she turned into him. Their lips met, and then he was lost.

Blame his relief at having found her again, or the effect her tears had on his inner Daddy Dom. Blame his libido as it snapped to attention for the first time since his last Little packed up and left him. Blame him, Hudson knew because, for all his best intentions, the instant their mouths met, sparks lit up in every cell in his body. It was electrifying... exhilarating... it robbed his brain of every good reason he had not to fall down this rabbit hole into the heat of her trembling arms.

Too late.

She mewled, an echo of pleasure so fragile and uncertain that he couldn't help but roll them both over on the bed. She tucked so innocently beneath him, her legs wrapping his hips and her hands tracing his cheeks and jaw. She finally gripped the back of his head, pushing his mouth more firmly against her own.

Blame him, yes. But blame her too. Every time his will cracked and his self-control bellowed to let her go, she arched beneath him, catching his lips in deep, urgent, exploring kisses of her own. She stroked his shoulders, hugged his back, hooked her heels behind his ass, naughtily digging into his buttocks as if trying and yet not quite certain how to get...

“More,” she shakily whispered. “Please, Daddy? More?”

God help him because he sure couldn't help himself.

Her lips parted and in swept his tongue, lashing and caressing her own. When she caught his shirt, tugging and pulling him closer still, he captured her wrists, pinning them to the bed above her head. Her small, perfect breast fit in the palm of his hand, her nipple a tight little nub that stiffened as he teased it with his thumb, caressing back and forth just to feel it pucker that much more.

She never once said no, but he knew better.

She *never* said no, stop, yellow, or red, and knowing she wouldn't made this oh so very dangerous. She not only returned his kisses, but her passion spiked his own, nudging it hotter and higher. She was the one who pulled his shirt up over his head, and then attacked his sweats, shoving them down over his hips with clawing fingers that grabbed his ass and nails that dug into his flesh. She was bucking, arching her hot little pussy to rub his high-standing cock, her needy whimpers saying louder than words what she wanted.

Oh, yes... he knew better all right.

But there was no stopping her, and for sure, there was no stopping him either.

His rock-hard cock ached and throbbed for her. His too-tight balls were drawn up tight. Her breast was in his hand, her hot little mouth consuming every kiss he gave her, and, god, her breathy whimpers...

She grabbed at her own shirt, and he drew back far enough to help sweep it off over her head. Her sweats came next, and the only difficulty there was in trying to get out of their shared bearhug so he could strip those away too.

Capturing her wrists again, he pinned them to the mattress and then he was in her. One long slide sank his balls deep into

the impossible tightness of her welcoming sheath. Her back arched, pure bliss in every nuance of her darling face.

“Look down,” he growled, fighting his every instinct not to simply pound her into the mattress until they both came to shouting release.

Opening her eyes, she reached up to cup his face before obediently following the slight space between their bodies to the thick, hard jut of flesh that joined them together.

“Oh,” she breathed as he slowly pulled out, slick and glistening from the sweetness of her arousal.

“Nikki,” he murmured, every twitch of her body clamping around his cock so fucking tight. As tight, he suddenly realized, as any woman who hadn’t had anything—or anyone—inside her for at least nine years. Bending back over her, he braced his weight on his forearm, tucking a finger from his other hand under her chin, tipping her eyes to better meet his. “Hold me,” he whispered.

A hesitant smile curled her kiss-flushed lips before she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Locking her ankles behind his ass, he didn’t need anything more than an eager flex of her legs to spur him on. With slow and gentle thrusts, he rocked them both, keeping a steady rhythm that neither slowed nor stopped even when she threw back her head with a muffled cry as her whole body shook with the force of the orgasm he could feel hugging and flexing all down the length of his cock. He stopped, holding himself frozen above her, enduring her ongoing pleasure with everything he had. He didn’t want to come. Not yet, and only when her orgasm finally eased into latent shivers did he finally judge himself calm enough to move again.

Slow. Steady. Gently, he made love to her. Bringing her to the next sweet peak just to hear her cry out and feel the constricting pressure of her pussy until it tightened like a glove all around him.

It was her gaspy whisper that finally pushed him into the hardest orgasm of his life.

“I love you, Daddy.” She clutched at his shoulders and the back of his neck, and when he dipped down to touch his forehead to hers, there was no holding back. Not when she repeated those beautiful words, whispering them right against his cheek. “I love you.”

He was so damned lost.



CHAPTER 10

Nick paced in front of a sea of flashing lights and police cars. Despite all Detective Dan had said, he doubted he was going to be arrested, rich people didn't have to worry about that. And Ryan was here... somewhere. So even if he did get booted off the property, that wasn't going to change anything. He'd found Nikki, and she wasn't dead. Amnesia, his ass. Amnesia could be reversed at any time, and there was no way in hell he was about to welcome that kind of rattlesnake home and share his fortune with it. He'd worked for his fortune. He'd killed for it. Every penny of that inheritance was his, by god, and it was going to stay his.

Where the fuck was Ryan?

That the Ranch's security crew hadn't yet dragged him out to the circling police was a thread of positivity that he clung to.

"I'm not leaving without my sister," he said uselessly to the officer standing guard right beside him. They'd taken his I.D., and now were running down the original police report covering both the accident and his sister's "disappearance".

*Please don't reopen the case...*

Shit. He didn't like the look on Detective Dan's face as he came walking back through a group of four cops to talk to him

again. Nick's I.D. was in his hand and, with two fingers, he passed it back. "Are you here alone, Mr. Palmer?"

"Yes," Nick lied, putting it back in his wallet.

"I've spoken with Detective Meinrod, back in Oregon. He'll be sending me the details on your sister's disappearance. I've still got a few more questions for you, though."

Folding his arms across his chest, Nick did nothing to muffle his irritated sigh. "Such as?"

"Such as why you didn't notice when news of your sister's re-appearance at the Ranch hit the news?"

"Like anyone gets your local media reports all the way back in Oregon."

"It was on the national news for two weeks."

"I never saw it." He hadn't either. Or he'd have been here nine years ago with a rifle and a scope to take care of it.

"And you're sure you're here alone? You didn't bring a friend or two with you?"

"No," Nick said flatly. "Why would you ask?"

The detective shrugged. "Only because there seems to be another guy skulking around the Ranch. Two guys entering the resort with or without Littles doesn't raise any red flags. But one stating he was alone when there is definitely a second person in the photo taken at the security gate definitely does. Now would you care to try again?"

*Shit.* They did know about Ryan.

"What the fuck is a Little?" Nick asked, buying himself some time.

“I don’t think we need to go into that,” Dan breezed. “Are you a Daddy Dom, Mr. Palmer.”

Nick blinked once, slowly. “A what?”

“I guess we don’t need to go into that either.” Pulling out a small notepad, Dan flipped it open to a blank page. He licked the tip of his pen and prepared to write. “What exactly is the reason for your visit, Mr. Palmer?”

“Montana has just earned every stereotype it has,” Nick drawled, swallowing back his rising frustration. Like he had time for this bullshit. “For a detective you’re incredibly slow. I already told you, I’m not leaving without my sister. Despite whatever that cowboy told you, I do have a reservation and I’ll be staying right here.”

“I’ve still got those handcuffs,” Detective Dan reminded with a thin smile.

Jerking back the sleeves of his business coat, Nick offered his wrists. “Try it,” he challenged. “My lawyers will eat you, your department, and this entire ‘Ranch’ alive. You have no right to keep her from me.”

“You need to read the agreement that came with your so-called reservation form. If you had, you’d know that the owner, who happens to be that cowboy you are speaking about, has the absolute right to deny access to every single inch of Rawhide Ranch to anyone he deems a threat to his guests... even if that means tossing another guest out on his ass. You, sir, have no right to take her. That’s called kidnapping.”

“That’s my sister!”

“And she has rights too. One of them guarantees she can stay wherever and with whomever she wants to stay with. So

long as she's not being hurt..."

"She has amnesia. She doesn't know what she wants."

"Well, she sure doesn't want to go with you."

"Have you talked to her?"

Dan stared at him without answering.

Nick smirked all over again. "Talk to her. I don't know what they've told her about me, but if she's scared, then that's on these assholes. Who knows what poison they've been filling her mind with. If I could just talk to her—"

Dan's thin smile returned. "I don't think that's a good idea."

Nick barely caught his temper before exploding again. Shifting his feet, stuffing his involuntary outburst back down out of his tight throat, he growled, "Why not?"

"Because I know these people," Dan replied. "I know exactly what they're doing, and what they're not. Filling anyone's head with poison just isn't in their curriculum."

Nick snorted, and stepped in closer, all but leaning into the detective as he softly asked, "Are you a Daddy Dom? Is that what this place is, a resort where kinky fuckers come to get their rocks off? How many times have you fucked my sister, because that's the first thing I'm going to ask your lieutenant just as soon as my lawyer gets here."

Dan didn't answer. He just stared, his unblinking eyes never leaving Nick's. He wasn't backing down, and he sure wasn't scared. It almost made Nick take a step back again.

"Question number two," Detective Dan said, returning to the topic at hand.

The detective took a step closer to Nick, forcing him to retreat. He hadn't retreated from anyone, not in years. For just a moment, it felt like going toe-to-toe with his father.

“Granted, all I've got to go on is what Meinrod told me on the phone, but I'm curious as to why you never helped look for your sister after she... vanished.”

Nick stiffened. “What do you mean I never helped?”

“You never hung a flyer. You never contacted the media.”

“I was grieving!”

Dan shrugged one shoulder. “If it were me and I'd just lost my parents, and then my sister disappeared, I'd be organizing search parties, begging the news to run the story and helping with the search. I'd have been making all kinds of noise, and I wouldn't have stopped until I found her.”

“I'm here now,” Nick said flatly.

“You sure are.” Dan pinned him with another assessing stare. “You sure are.” Snapping his notepad shut, he said, “Well, I guess that's all I need from you right now. I'll have an officer drive you to a hotel in town and another will follow with your car, though I recommend you not leave the hotel until I give you the go ahead. Unlike you, I don't stop looking for people I want to find. That includes whoever it was in the car with you.”

Nick believed him. And although he didn't want to examine it too closely, that ugly feeling permeating his stomach was beginning to taste like fear. He shrugged. “What do I care if you waste your time looking for ghosts? While you do that, I'll be calling my lawyer.”

Dan winked. “You do that. I'd like his name and number too.”

\* \* \*

The cafeteria was bustling with happy, bouncing Littles collecting their trays of sugar cookies to decorate. A sign on the cookie table read: Take one for you and one for each caregiver only. Only was highlighted and underlined twice. It made him smile. Not so much at the Little directly in line in front of him and Nikki, but because she was jumping up and down, pointing at all the different shapes.

“I want that one! And that one! And those three on the back! What do you want, Daddy?”

“Whatever you want to decorate, but not eat. And you only get two. Read the sign, babygirl.”

The Little immediately pouted. “But... I want all of them.” She folded her arms. “Stupid sign.”

Trailing along in his shadow, Nikki was just as excited, albeit a whole lot quieter about it. She wasn't bouncing, but she was trembling. So, he collected a tray for them and as soon as those ahead of him moved on, he lined them up in front of the sugar cookie display. They were all big, easily filling the palm of his hand. Some were round, and some were shaped like hearts, stars, kitty-kat faces complete with ears, Christmas-like bells, mermaid tails, baskets, and flowers.

“What shape do you want?” he asked, fully expecting the answer she immediately gave.

“What shape do you want, Daddy?”

“Hmm.” He studied his options, before picking out a big cookie heart.

She copied him, taking another heart for herself, and he promptly slid their tray down the side of the table to the big crocks of frosting options. If they didn't have all the colors of the rainbow set out, both in bold and pastel shades, then Hudson had no idea what color was missing.

“All right,” he said, bracing himself for what he already knew her response would be. “You pick the frosting. You can have one color per cookie, or you can have two colors per cookie. What looks good to you?”

Already her fingers were fidgeting with the apron hem of her Alice-in-Wonderland dress.

He knew where this was going. He just wanted to make sure, before he took over and made her choices for her.

“What's your favorite color?” he asked instead.

Her gaze flicked somewhere over by the blues and greens. Hands squeezing into fists, she softly asked, “What's your favorite color, Daddy?”

“Yellow,” he replied without hesitation. And since that color was at the opposite end of the table from the blues and greens, he felt sure she was going to copy him just so she wouldn't be “wrong”.

And he called it.

“I like yellow,” she said.

Little paper cups had been set up sporadically amongst the crocks of frosting. He picked three, and with the disposable wooden spoons provided, he scooped up a small amount of pastel yellow, blue and green. She relaxed beside him. Rolling the tray further down the table, he picked only one of the toppings provided: sprinkles. For sure, that was more than enough sugar for either one of them. If sprinkles weren't her

jam, then he'd learn something new about her and hopefully remember that for future fun, games and cookies.

Future... as if it were already a foregone conclusion that they'd have one.

Hudson froze in the act of picking up the tray. He stared at it, his gut and shoulders both tense. Every single expectation he'd had in coming here had flown straight out of every window in this place. So much for no complications; so much for no sex, too. So much for walking in and out of here, with his Daddy Dom side finally sated and his heart feeling a little less lonely.

How was Nikki going to get along after he was gone, though?

How was he? That was the bugger of it. He didn't think he could.

"Daddy?" she nervously asked.

Flashing her a smile, he stopped holding up the line. Leading her to a table set a little apart from the most crowded area of the cafeteria, he set down the tray and left her there, if only long enough to fetch a highchair from the wall.

As soon as he raised the highchair's table tray, she hopped up onto the seat and didn't even need to be asked. Threading her arms through the hole, she leaned back so he could drop the table tray over her and lock it into place. He passed her a cookie and set the other down on the tray. The same disposable spoons had been provided as frosting spreaders, and he gave them both one before setting all three frosting cups and the sprinkles cup on her tray as well. They could both reach them now.



Knowing she wouldn't touch anything until he did, he took his cookie and began to load the top with half the yellow frosting. He pretended not to watch her as she also bent her head to decorate hers. Out of his periphery, he saw her hesitation as she glanced at him before tentatively dipping her spreader in the blue frosting. He hid his smile.

Unable to help himself, he stood high enough to lean over her and press his lips to her forehead. "Good girl, sweetpea. Daddy's so proud of you for picking the color you like the best."

She shivered under his kiss, but there was a gratefulness in her returning smile that said her reaction had nothing to do with fear and everything to do with his touch.

Decorating side by side, he spread a small circle of yellow frosting onto his cookie, and then circled the outer edge of yellow with pastel blue. Which seemed to be all the encouragement Nikki needed to add green to her own. She had copied his pattern, but he was more than pleased to see her expressing herself in this small way. Now he wished he'd selected more than just sprinkles.

"Hold on," he told her. "I think I want to get a couple more toppings? What about you? What do you think about colored sugar crystals, crushed peppermint candies, Hershey kisses or...?"

She nodded happily. "Yes, Daddy."

Smiling, he kissed her forehead again. It was his own character flaw that made that feel so inadequate, but there was no stopping himself. Cupping her chin, he tilted her willing face up to his and followed that chaste Daddy kiss with something far more intimate.

Her lips molded to his, opening without being asked the second his tongue teased the corner of her sweet mouth.

“I’ll never get tired of kissing you,” he murmured, giving her another smile.

She didn’t respond, but the way she licked her lips, rolling them under as if savoring his taste, said everything he needed to hear.

She was precious.

He chuckled her lightly under the chin. “I’ll be right back.”

Her smile died the second she realized he was about to leave her sitting there.

“It’s okay. Deep breath. I’m not leaving the room, I’m just going right over there.” He pointed to the cookie bar. “Close your eyes and slowly count your way to sixty seconds. I’ll be back before you open your eyes again, all right?”

Her worried gaze did not share his optimism, but she nodded and closed her eyes.

Not wanting to make himself a liar, he hurried to the decorations and gathered three more paper cups. Taking less than a spoonful of each, he loaded up on two differing colors of sugar crystals, two Hershey kisses, and dried, sweet coconut shavings. Though he knew he was well within his promised minute, when he turned around, that new but familiar overprotectiveness crashed through him.

That same dark-haired man from this morning was standing right by Nikki’s highchair. He was bent over, whispering in her ear. Whatever he was saying, she was stiff as a board, her eyes open, fixed and staring straight at Hudson, panic turning them every bit as dark as they were brown.

Abandoning his toppings, Hudson stalked swiftly back to his table and his Little. “Excuse me,” he snapped loud enough to draw attention from the surrounding tables. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

The man looked at him, wary but not so guarded he wasn’t smirking. Straightening slowly, he held up staying hands and even backed up a step. “Just admiring her cookie. Surely that should be allowed, in a place like this.”

“It’s not,” Hudson corrected, not only marching up to him, but forcing him back several more steps to put more space between him and Nikki. “You don’t talk to her. You talk to me. Who are you?”

Smirk slowly fading, the man said, “Someone you probably don’t want to take this tone with, my friend.”

“I am not your friend.”

“Is there a problem here?”

Hudson hadn’t heard anyone approach them from behind. It was the same chef he’d met the day before.

The brawny man gave Hudson a stern look before glancing down at Nikki. Frown darkening, he then turned his glare on the other man. “Name?” he demanded.

No longer smiling, the other man sniffed. “I don’t think this activity is a good one for me. Too much attitude in the room.”

He turned to walk away.

“Walk away from me, and I’ll have you jettisoned from the property so fast it’ll make your head spin,” Chef Connor announced. “What is your name? Where’s your Little?”

Turning, the man walked backward toward the door, smiling all over again. Spreading his arms wide, he damn near twirled. “Fucking find me.”

Hudson ached to chase him down, but he wasn't about to leave Nikki for even a second. Even if he had charged after the man, he was pretty sure the heavy hand the chef clamped on to his shoulder would have stopped him.

Shrugging him off, Hudson quickly cleared off her table tray, unlocked it and was about to draw it up over her head when he paused. He hadn't noticed until then that she'd crushed her cookie in one clenched fist. It was nothing but white crumbles and a lot of blue and green frosting squished between her fingers.

Fury hit him, but he pushed it aside. Raising her table tray, he picked her all the way up. She jumped just before her feet left the chair, and she wrapped herself around him. Her head on her shoulders, her legs around his waist, she clung to him as he sat back down, cradling his most precious girl in his lap. He hugged her, but no matter how tightly he held her, she squirmed to get closer. Her breasts flattened against his chest, and her breaths were frantic hitches and hiccups that took a lot of rocking to even back out again.

He could feel her shaking, and he shook along with her, wondering who that man was and positive that he had to be connected to Nick. “Do you remember that guy?”

Nikki shook her head.

“And you don't remember that Nick fellow?”

“I”—she hesitated—“I-I don't know.”

He gave her a bear-hug squeeze, gentle enough not to hurt her but strong enough to let her feel just how solid and stable

he was. Protective, his brain whispered. Possessive, his gut corrected. Because she was his. Not for a week, but for life. For as long as she would have him. None of which had been his plan from the start, but it didn't matter. People plan; God laughs. Hudson could all but hear His laughter all the way down into this cafeteria, but none of that mattered. His gut had spoken. He was leaving the Ranch. Today. And he was taking Nikki with him.

## CHAPTER II

“Hey,” Daddy Hudson called down the hall to Master Derek, who was just coming out of his office, preceded by two police officers and the detective she remembered once having carried her in his strong arms. Detective Dan Forrester, the man she’d come to think of as her savior. He was the one who’d found her in the horse barn and brought her into the Ranch’s main building, holding her in his lap while he’d rocked and held her, and waited for the ambulance and police to come. That had been when she’d first arrived, back when the darkness of her lack of memories was at its worst. To this day, she had no idea why she’d gone with him without a fight. With her hand now held so tightly in Daddy’s, she was grateful she hadn’t run again.

“Hey,” Daddy called again. “I want to talk to you.”

“And I to you,” Master Derek grimly replied, then turned to shake Detective Dan’s hand. “Thank you.”

“Not a problem. Keep your cellphone on. I’ll be in touch. Hey, there, pumpkin!” Dan greeted as she and Daddy reached them. “You look so pretty in your dress. Is that new?”

She looked down at herself, then up at Daddy, who nodded. “Daddy bought it for me.”

Dan's smile didn't quite reach his eyes when he glanced to Hudson. "I see that." By the time he shifted his stare back to her, his smile brightened again. "I'm so glad you found someone to take care of you."

Heat flushing her cheeks, her free hand reached for Daddy's hand so she now clung to it with both of hers. She checked Daddy Hudson's expression again, making sure it was okay to keep talking before answering. "He does."

Dan ruffled her hair. "He'd better." He winked at her and, as he walked away with his two back-up officers in tow, said, "Tell him to keep his cellphone on too. I've got a feeling I'm going to have a lot of questions for a lot of people before the day ends."

Reaching into his back pocket with his spare hand, Daddy pulled his cellphone and switched it on. "At your convenience," he promised the detective, who waved his acknowledgement and then they were gone, walking across the lobby.

Outside his office door, Master Derek gestured for Hudson and Nikki to join him. A man in a suit stood beside Nanny S. Another Little, her arms loaded down with coloring books, two stuffies, and an electronic Simon Says, was also there.

"This is my wife, Sadie," Master Derek said by way of introduction a mere moment before the Little cheered, "She's here!"

The greeting startled Nikki. She clung to Daddy's hand, drawing closer to him, but evidently there was no such thing as dampening Sadie's energy. The Little bounced up to her, throwing her arms around Nikki's shoulders and pulling her into a tight hug. "Come play with me. Look at all the games I've got!"

Nikki panicked when Daddy let go of her hand, but one quick glance at his face told her that no matter how badly she wanted to be with him, playing with Sadie was exactly what she was going to do. “Do I have to?”

“Yes, sweetpea. And we don’t say things like that when someone is offering to play with us. We say, ‘yes, please’.”

Sighing, Nikki reluctantly folded in around herself, hugging her stomach as she turned to Sadie. “Yes, please.”

“I’m not leaving this area,” Daddy said, but her back was already turned as she followed Sadie to the chairs where visitors waited for an audience with the Ranch owner. He could have been talking to her, but she knew it far more likely he’d been speaking to Master Derek. Which was a little alarming. If anyone else she knew had spoken to Master Derek like that, they’d have been in trouble.

Of course, most of the people she knew here were Littles, so...

Glancing back she saw that Master Derek had drawn Hudson’s attention to where the suited man stood. “This is Jared Stark, he’s the Ranch’s lawyer,” Master Derek said softly.

Hudson shook Jared’s hand, as Nikki noticed that Master Derek was talking so softly the Littles couldn’t hear them. Especially not over the Simon Says toy that Sadie set on the floor between them. Dropping to sit cross-legged in front of her, she turned it on, filling the quiet of the area with a beeping that was far more cheerful than she was.

\* \* \*



“Why were you kissing her?” Derek demanded in a whisper. “What happened to no sexual contact? You *swore* to me *no sexual contact*.”

Chagrined, Hudson tried to brush that aside. In the big picture right now, it was far more important to get to what was starting to feel like real danger than any harm his kiss might have done. He really wasn't looking forward to admitting they'd made love. “It was just something that happened. And frankly, I don't regret it. It felt right at the time, and it still does.”

“Feels right?” Derek echoed, still whispering. “What do you know about what's right for Nikki when you've only just met her?”

“What makes you think *you* know?” he challenged back.

Eyebrows arching, Derek drew a deep, calming breath. “I'm her protector—”

“Not anymore you're not,” Hudson told him bluntly. “If it hadn't been for me, that Nick guy would have taken her right out of here and you all never would have known he was here. And then *she'd* be gone,” he whisper snarled, not daring to raise his voice over a whisper either. They both glanced over their shoulders to where the steady song of the Simon Says kept Nikki and Sadie occupied. Sadie seemed to be having fun, distracting Nikki with cheerful chatter as they played. Nikki didn't have the same tension in her shoulders that she'd walked in here with. Hudson took comfort from that.

“Are you going to do the Daddy/Little gunny-sack races?” he heard Sadie ask. “I want to, but Daddy has to work. Today is being weird or something.”

Nikki looked at her while Hudson rounded on Derek again.

“You didn’t see her reaction to her so-called ‘brother’—”

“He really is her brother,” Jared interrupted. “He claims she vanished after their parents died, but if he looked for Nikki, it wasn’t very hard.”

“Can the trauma of losing your parents give you amnesia?” Hudson asked dubiously.

“I’m sure there’s a lot of grieving people in the world who wish it would.”

Frustrated, he stabbed his fingers through his short hair. “What the hell is going on here?”

“Not business as usual, I assure you,” Derek replied. “I’ve never, *ever*, had someone just walk into the place like they owned it. Nothing like this. I’ve upped the security. Believe me, I’m every bit as upset as you are.”

Now it was Hudson’s turn to arch skeptical eyebrows. “So, who’s this other guy?”

Both Jared and Derek startled. “What *other* guy?”

“The one who just walked right up to Nikki in the cafeteria not twenty minutes ago. You think she was scared of Nick, that’s nothing compared to how freaked out she was over that guy.”

Swiveling on his heel, Derek charged into his private office. “Come in, shut the door. What did he look like?”

Though Jared stepped into the room, Hudson followed only as far as the open threshold, not about to obey. “I told her I wouldn’t leave her. That’s the only reason she’s here instead of in our cabin, waiting for me. That and my fear she might not still be there when I got back... of her own volition much less someone else’s.”

Derek softly swore. Grabbing the company phone, he dialed. “I need Lawson in my office immediately, and sometime today call a mandatory meeting. There’s a hole in our procedures that need to be fixed, and I mean yesterday.”

He hung up and searched through his desk until he found Nikki’s file folder, and Hudson considered it his greatest achievement in patience that he waited that long before declaring. “I’m leaving, and Nikki’s coming with me.”

Head jerking up, Derek charged back around his desk, coming toe-to-toe with Hudson. “You can leave whenever you want to, but Nikki is staying right here where I can make sure she’s safe.”

There was anger and impatience in both their words, and yet neither raised their voices above whispers. Especially not Hudson, who felt the first brush of calm since before Nikki had taken off running. “Two guys who scare the piss out of her just walked through your security and back into her life. Nikki’s not safe with you, but she will be with me. Also”—in for a penny and all that—“we had sex this morning.”

Rolling his eyes, Derek tossed the contract in his hand up in the air, sending loose papers scattering all around him. “Does no one respect the sanctity of protocol anymore?”

“I want to take her with me when I go,” Hudson finished, his tone flat.

“You’re out of your mind if you think you can walk into my office and announce that like it’s non-negotiable.” Derek stiffened, drawing his large, muscular body fully upright. “Nikki is under my care and will continue to be right up until *I* decide she’s ready to leave.”

“She’ll never be ready under your care,” Hudson returned, stiffening himself now too. “Do you know why?”

“Enlighten me.”

“Because you aren’t giving her what she needs.” Hudson quickly held up a staying hand when Derek’s face darkened, his stony eyes flashing with anger. “I’m not saying you’re not doing everything you can. It’s obvious you sincerely care for her well-being. But she doesn’t need a Nanny following her around. She needs a Daddy, someone who knows she needs a toddler’s care, someone who accepts she may never be able to make a decision for herself. Someone who’ll move at her pace, giving what she needs when she needs it, and who would rather cut off his own arm before he takes anything further than she’s ready to go.”

“Says the man who couldn’t keep his dick in his pants for more than two days,” Derek said, unimpressed.

“I love her.”

The Ranch Master snorted and covered his eyes with one weary hand.

Stepping in closer, Hudson repeated, “I *love* her. Yes, I lust for her too. But she’s the one who caught my face and deepened what I had intended to be comforting kisses into something much deeper and more meaningful. She’s the one who grabbed me by the pants, grinding her hips up into mine and begging me for more.”

Derek held up his own hand. “I really don’t think I need the details.”

“Then how about this? I love the feeling of holding her hand in mine, while she follows me about like a little duckling following its mother,” Hudson pressed anyway. “I love picking

out the clothes she wears, the stuffies she hugs, and where she sleeps at night. I love being there to soothe away her nightmares, and feed her at meal times. I am doing everything I have ached to do my entire damn life, and she eats it up because that's exactly what she's been needing. Not Nanny S, but a Daddy who understands that the trauma she's undergone has left her in a slave-like mentality she may never shake. I'd rather treat her as a well-loved Little than a slave. In the wrong hands, though, she could easily suffer abuse and no one would ever know. Including the Dom who isn't reading her cues right. I guarantee she'll never, ever be placed in the keeping of anyone else. She was meant for me. She's mine, and I am taking her home when I leave."

The muscles of Derek's jaw jumped as he glared at Hudson before turning to look at Jared who stood in front of a bookcase, arms crossed over his chest, standing silent but communicating with a long look that had Derek drawing a deep breath, his jaw unclenching as he picked carefully through his next words. Ultimately, he couldn't do it, because all he ended up doing was turning to stare at Jared again.

The lawyer calmly said, "It might be best to table this discussion while other issues are handled."

Derek sighed and ran a hand over his hair. "Okay, let's save this topic until the rest of this... nonsense is taken care of."

Hudson blinked twice, a crack of a smile breaking through the grim set of his own jaw. "Tell me you're human and instead of 'nonsense' you were going to say something you'd spank a Little for saying."

Derek snorted. "One does learn how to censor oneself. But right now, my biggest concern is her safety. I'll deal with your

inability to keep your dick zipped up later.”

Fair. As much as he wanted to argue, Hudson couldn't help stepping back far enough to see the conversation from the Ranch Master's perspective. As it was, he could all too easily see how, were their roles reversed, he'd have taken Derek's same stance. He'd promised no sex, and he'd honestly stepped into this position fully expecting himself to hold his word. But Nikki... there was so much between them that felt right. Especially the sex. She'd wanted him. God, how he'd wanted her. And he still did. Leaving here with Nikki right by his side had in so short a time become his only major life goal.

All he could do now, apart from keeping her safe, was hope she felt the same way.

They were joined by Chief Lawson whose expression said he most likely felt the exact same way Hudson did. After he and Derek exchanged a few words, Lawson turned to Hudson and pulled a pad and a pen out of his pocket. Flipping the book open, he said, “Give me a description of this guy. Make it as detailed as you can as there are dozens of men here this week.”

Hudson nodded and proceeded to do just that. He was positive he'd never forget the man's face for as long as he lived. He detailed what he looked like as well as what he'd been wearing down to the color of his shoes. “Chef Connor also saw and spoke to the man. You can double-check to see if he has anything to add,” Hudson offered, nodding to the pad in Lawson's hand.

“That's good,” Lawson said, flipping the pad closed. “I'll do that and then get this out to the men—”

“We'll alert all the staff and call Forrester. Tell him that the shadow on the film is confirmed. There was another man in Palmer's car.”

Lawson nodded and he and Stark stepped out of the office to handle their boss' instructions.

Derek watched them go, then turned his gaze to where his wife and Nikki were sitting. Turning back, he met Hudson's gaze. "Take her out somewhere," Derek suddenly decided. "Not here in the main building, but do not leave the grounds either." He leveled his sternest look at Hudson. "I'm going to take security all through this place, and I'm going to make damn sure Nick doesn't have anyone else skulking my halls. So visit the horses, dig for gems, return to your cabin and do whatever for the rest of the day. But until you hear from me again, I want her guarded and safe."

"Got it," Hudson said, in full agreement. "I'll have my cellphone on me at all times."

"You're too good at this game," Sadie announced from across the room. "I haven't won one game yet."

Followed by Nikki's automatic apology. "I'm sorry."

Glancing briefly at them, Hudson and Derek exchanged nods.

"Let's go, sweetpea," Hudson called, abandoning the Ranch Master and heading back across the room to stand just behind his little girl. "Let's go do something fun. Hey, Sadie," he asked, "what's the next fun activity scheduled, do you know?"

"The Daddy/Little races!" Sadie said with a grin and an excited clapping of her hands. "I want to do that so badly, but"—her face fell into a pout—"I have to work, cuss it."

"Sadie," Derek warned.

"I said cuss it," the precocious Little primly replied. "I didn't actually swear."

“I’m not giving you that loophole, angel. Put away your game, and then I have a very specific Big assignment that I need your help with.”

Forgetting both the game and the swearing loophole, the Master’s Little stood up. Her entire countenance changed. “What do you need me to do?”

Not wanting Nikki to hear anything that might scare her, Hudson reached out his hand for hers. “Come along, sweetpea. Let’s go strut our stuff at the races.”



## CHAPTER 12

Something was definitely up, and the pressure in her tummy let Nikki know it had something to do with the man who'd come up to her in the cafeteria. Try though he did to put on a happy face, Daddy Hudson felt... different, somehow. His hand in hers was every bit as warm and gentle as ever as he led her over the Ranch grounds and out to the area where at least a hundred Littles and their caretakers had gathered in a field cordoned off in brightly colored flag rope, but she knew something was wrong. What she didn't yet know was whether Daddy might still be upset because she'd panicked and run from him, or if she'd done something else?

Whatever she'd done, she tried now to make up for it. She had no interest in the races. There were too many people out here. She could barely hear herself think with all the laughter and calling, bickering and squalling from naughty Littles too ramped up on excitement and sugar to want to play nicely with others. That bothered her. It was hard to hear who might be sneaking up behind her with all the rowdiness of gunny-sack races, egg-and-spoon races, and caretaker vs caretaker as well as Little vs Little races.

This one field had been cordoned off into six mini race tracks, and with so many people scattered around her, all she could think was maybe that was why she felt so on edge. She

felt like she was being watched, but no matter where she looked, she couldn't see anyone at all staring in her direction. They were too busy enjoying the Father's Day events.

Was the guy who claimed to be her brother still out front with the police, or had they let him go? Was he lost amid this crowd somewhere, or worse, was he hiding in it, those wood-brown eyes that matched her own so unnervingly fixed on her as he searched for a way to get closer without her Daddy noticing?

"What do you think?" Daddy Hudson said much too brightly for it to be real. "Do you want to gunny-sack race with Daddy?"

Would she get in trouble if she won? Did she even want to win? If she gave him a good race and tripped at the end, maybe he'd give her one of his handsome smiles? Maybe he'd have fun.

That decided her.

"Yes, Daddy." She nodded. His grip on her hand tightened as he peered over the top of the crowd, picking the path he would take through all these people so they could reach the right mini section. She used his distraction to take another look around, searching for a blond-haired man who looked so frighteningly similar to herself despite the difference in their hair color. She had no memories of him, and yet the darkness that had stirred inside her when he'd come stalking toward her that morning and started yelling... even now, as it had back then, her body clenched, wanting to run.

She couldn't see him though. Nor did she see the dark-haired man who'd scared her even more than her brother had. She couldn't remember him any more than she could Nick, but his voice when he'd leaned down to whisper, "Remember

me?” in her ear had sounded just like the voice in her nightmares. Pinned in her highchair and unable to run, with her Daddy nowhere near her, her instant freak-out had been terrifying.

Even so, she already knew that terror was half as bad as she'd suffer if she had to face that man on her own out here.

“What’s wrong, baby?” Daddy startled her by asking.

She instantly squeezed his hand, hoping it might still the trembling she couldn’t hide. Pasting on the smile she knew he wanted to see, she said, “Nothing.”

He gave her a knowing look. “Are you lying to me, sweetpea?”

She flushed, both liking and not liking how his tone and words never failed to make her feel small, scolded, and yet safe all at the same time. “I-I meant, I don’t see anything, b-but...”

When her explanation trailed off as she looked around them again, Daddy Hudson gave her smaller hand a light squeeze back. “It’s okay, Nikki. You and me, honey. We’re going to have a good time today. No more nightmares, all right?”

Breathing out slowly, she tried to make herself feel as calm as he sounded. “Yes, Daddy.”

He squeezed her hand again, bringing her eyes immediately to his own. “All right?”

Forcing herself to relax, not wanting to be too needy especially when she already knew she was, Nikki nodded. “Yes.”

When he smiled, she made herself smile too. Stuffing uncomfortable feelings way down inside herself, she forced herself to pretend she felt just fine. She didn't want to ruin Daddy's chance to have fun. After all, this was his vacation time. He'd chosen this specific weekend, so surely these games had to be something he really wanted to play. Just because she didn't need or really want to participate in silly race games didn't mean others shouldn't or couldn't. She was being selfish not letting him have his fun.

“Do we share a gunny sack?” she asked, shoving all her bad thoughts way down deep and letting the sneaky Little hiding inside her peek out in her tone. She honestly hadn't known she'd had any Little inside her back when Daddy first stepped into her life, but she did now. A little bit of a Little anyway, one who liked sleeping in the crib beside him, and being hand fed by him in a highchair that locked and held her, and especially who liked being held on his lap while he rocked and comforted and told her she was a good girl.

Told her she was *his* good girl.

Daddy led her through the crowd toward the gunny-sack races. The crowd was dense in this section and the line to play long, but if Nikki stood up on tiptoes, she could just make out the racers currently waiting to take their turns.

The game had been set up for ten contestants at a time, and those waiting to start their race were a mix of caretakers and Littles all lined up in the green grass behind a white chalk starting line.

“Here,” Daddy said, suddenly hunkering down beside her. “Up on my shoulders. You're going to have the best vantage to watch the races from.”

He tapped the back of her right thigh, directing without words for her to straddle his shoulders and neck. Thrills of titillation raced through her veins, just like it had done this morning when he'd rolled her underneath his rock-hard body and sent her heart and soul racing its way to heaven. His kisses... his caresses... she shivered just remembering how good it had felt when he'd slid himself inside her, rocking not just her body but the whole of her world. She had no memory of feeling anything that felt as good as what they had done together, and she couldn't wait to do it again. So long as it was Daddy she was doing it with.

Adjusting himself under her, Daddy gripped her thighs and heaved her straight up into the air.

His strength was magnificent; so was the view. She could see all around the grounds, at the egg and spoon races and the dunking tank where either Daddies or Littles could take turns dunking the other for stuffy prizes and gift shop cards. The crowd looked even bigger from this vantage, and so many were looking at her.

“Daddy, she's riding piggy back!” a Little near them cried, pointing.

Nikki didn't look at her, she was too busy looking at the Little who just crossed the finish line as she was scooped up in her Daddy's arms and twirled around and around.

Just like Daddy Hudson had done with her at the end of their morning jog, before her brother appeared and everything suddenly went scarily south.

She shivered, not because of her brother, but because in that moment, she felt like she was back in Daddy's arms and that alone made her feel safe.

“Who’s ready for the next race?” the ranch hand presiding over their race called out above the crowd.

The energy was high, making everyone around her clap and cheer.

“Woo hoo, Nikki!” a familiar voice cried out.

Nikki searched the crowd, and suddenly spotted Hayleigh, another of the Littles who, like Sadie and herself, lived here 24/7. She was jumping up and down, waving her arms and grinning from ear to ear.

“You have a Daddy!” she shouted gleefully.

Nikki flushed hot in a way that had nothing to do with the sun beating down upon her shoulders.

She nodded, her throat too choked to speak.

Hayleigh just grinned and clapped, and soon disappeared into the crowd.

At the ranch hand’s urging, ten new people lined up behind the starting line, a mix of Tops and Bottoms so excited they hopped both in and outside of the gunny sacks they were given.

Nikki liked how inclusive it made her feel when she clapped for them. So... this was what she’d been missing in the last nine years. She’d been so afraid on her own, she hadn’t even considered the love and acceptance she so obviously already had, because she could have had more if she’d just been able to open herself up to them. But she didn’t and she hadn’t, not until Daddy Hudson had come along and showed her how.

She hugged his head.

Chuckling, Daddy looked up at her. “Yes, sweetpea?”

Blushing, she said, “I love you, Daddy. Thank you for picking me.”

His smile softened. Reaching up to cup her face, he brought her down far enough to brush her lips with his. “Thank you for accepting me.”

Who wouldn’t accept him? He was the Daddy of her dreams before she even knew she wanted to dream this way.

The shrill cut of a whistle redirected her to the start line where all ten racers vaulted themselves into a fury of hopping. Doms called to their Littles, urging them to keep up, catch up, and even to go faster. In the middle of the field, rows of barrels had been set out as the easiest obstacle course she’d ever seen. As each racer reached them, they hopped around the barrels twice and then continued on to the finish line. All except for one who got turned around and frantically hopped all the way to the start.

“Wrong way! Wrong way!” Nikki shouted along with the crowd, trying to get the Little to turn back around. Her Daddy crossed the finish line first, spotted where she’d gone to and then started laughing. When he opened his arms, shouting for her to come to him, she dropped her embarrassed pout and hopped across the field for her hug. She was dead last to cross, but the hug she got for finishing made Nikki wish that was her and Daddy Hudson. She wouldn’t even mind being last over the line. There wasn’t a competitive bone in her body. But she would do anything, play any game, just to see her Daddy smile.

“Two more games,” Daddy said, bouncing her on his shoulders while she squealed and grabbed his wrists for support. “It’ll be our turn soon, I think.”

Nikki clapped again. “Do you want to win?”

He glanced up at her and then, his smile turning slightly stern, he smacked the side of her hip. “Don’t you dare let me win. In fact, now I expect you to put everything you have into crossing that finish line first, or...”

Her heart was fluttering, her pussy throbbing at the back of his neck. “Or I get a spanking?”

Just the thought of it both scared and titillated. Daddy wouldn’t hurt her, she knew that all the way deep in her soul. But he’d made no effort to do that with her and wasn’t that what Daddies did when they got Littles of their own?

Daddy’s eyes darkened with an expression she could only recognize as a mix of hot lust, caring, and love. “Maybe. We’ll have to wait and see.”

Another game started and then another, and after the third game was announced, they reached the third and fourth spots in line for the game after that.

Being this much closer made it easier to hear what the announcer kept saying at the start of each new race.

“Who’s ready to have some fun?” he shouted to cheers from everyone watching. “We’ve got two more spots for the Turbo version of the game. The winner of this race gets one of those spots and a ten-dollar gift card to the gift shop. The winner of the Turbo games gets a free three-day stay at the Ranch! Now, who’s down for that?”

The crowd went wild, cheering and applauding such a fine prize.

“Let the games begin. Into your gunny sacks!”

The scramble for Doms to get excitable Littles in their racing sacks was almost a challenge of its own. One, a Little named Katie, who Nikki knew didn’t live here but often paid



visits to the Ranch, kept wanting to put the sack on her head, insisting to her Auntie, Uncle, and Daddy that being able to run but not to see was every bit as fair as being able to see but not run. A stern whisper from her Auntie eventually changed her mind, though she did pout some.

Eventually, all racers were hugging their gunny sacks about their waists and eyeing the finish line.

“Don’t let me win,” Katie squealed, “but I’m gonna win!”

The shrill whistle sounded and the contestants took off, hopping with all their might.

“Are you going to win?” Daddy asked.

As absorbed as she was in the racers, Nikki shook her head. Most people didn’t win the new games they tried, and this certainly felt like a new game to her.

A low growl issued from his throat, catching her attention. “You’d better at least try,” Daddy said in a semi-scary tone. “Or the Daddy Monster will *get you!*”

Lightly pinching fingers nibbled up her right thigh, around her hip, and latched onto her bottom.

Nikki startled, then laughed. She was free and light, and she couldn’t wait to see how big and mean of a Daddy Monster he might make later tonight when they retired to bed.

Katie did not win. Her Daddy and Uncle both spent most of the race trying to keep her running forward once she spotted another Little eating freshly popped corn and cotton candy. It was her Auntie who crossed the line.

Leaping out of her sack, Auntie threw it to the ground, made muscles and shouted, “Ha!” In the most proudly aggressive tone Nikki had yet heard.

Giving Katie a big hug, the quad of Bigs and their Little walked off to join those waiting for the next Turbo race.

And then it was their turn. They took their place at the end of the start line, and Nikki trembled, her nerves and excitement getting the best of her while they waited for a helper to distribute their gunny sacks.

Her first startlingly awkward moment came the instant the helper laid the gunny sack in her hand. She held it, looking back down the line to watch as everyone else climbed into theirs.

“Let Daddy help,” Hudson told her as he took the sack from her hand. It wasn’t that she didn’t know how to get into the silly thing. She knew, just like she knew how to dress herself and take care of herself. All the things that felt shameful when she had to do them herself.

“It’s okay. You’re okay,” he soothed when tears started to gather and she sniffled. All the tension raced from her body when he added, “You know better than to do this yourself when Daddy’s right here.”

Hunkering down so she could step into the sack without tripping, he stood, pulling it all the way to her waist. He kissed her forehead.

“Look around, sweetpea,” he coaxed. “No one’s judging you, and even if they did, yours and mine are the only opinions that matter. Right?”

She cast a side-eye glance to the couple next to them. True to Daddy’s word, they weren’t judging her. They weren’t even looking at her.

They were too excited about their own upcoming game to notice her or her hang-ups.

Cupping her chin, Daddy turned her wandering gaze back to his. He arched an eyebrow. “Right?” he asked again.

Relieved, she nodded. “Yes, Daddy.”

“Who’s crossing the finish line first?” he reminded.

“Me,” she said automatically, hoping Daddy’s “Monster fingers” would come out pinching and tickling her all over again.

He was too busy climbing into his own gunny sack. Just, apparently, not too busy to ask, “Are you lying to Daddy?”

She didn’t hesitate. “Yes, but... I *might* do it.”

His stern frown melted into a smile again. “You know what? I can accept that.”

“Ready!” The ranch hand shouted, having already finished his spiel on what the winner would receive.

The racers lined up beside her hunkered into hopping position.

On her other side, Daddy growled in a deep demonic voice, “Here comes the monster. Nom nom nom.”

Nikki grinned, checking to see where his fingers were.

“Set!”

“I’m going to get you,” Daddy Monster warned, and she laughed and squirmed as nibbling fingers tickled her on the tummy.

The shrill whistle sounded and Nikki leapt into the game with the Monster landing two out of three quick pats to her bottom. The third missed her entirely, but then here he came, leaping after her.

It was as if they were the only two people in the game. The only two on the field. Her mind was so fixated on him, she forgot everything else. Every Monster growl of “nomnomnom!” made her laugh and jump harder, faster. She never even noticed they had taken the lead until she’d made her first round around the obstacle barrel. On the second, she laughed even harder when she and Daddy almost collided. He nipped at her bottom and thighs, his “Yummy for the Monster’s tummy!” calling after her, and on to the finish line they went. Her in the lead, him right on her heels.

Not three bounces from the finish line, Nikki tripped. Not paying attention, she’d let her gunny sack sag until it tripped her. And the only reason Daddy didn’t trample right over the top of her was because his reflexes were so much faster than hers.

“Nikki!” he shouted, leaping over both her and the finish line before whipping around, kicking out of his sack as he dropped to help her up. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

Between the soft grass and hard ground, she could feel the sting of having scuffed her chin, but she wasn’t hurt. So why did she want to cry? She covered her chin with her hand, feeling the scratches against her palm. It felt wet. Pulling her hand back, she noted the blood.

“Uh oh,” Daddy said, relatively calm again. He tipped her face to get a better look at her wound. “It’s bleeding, but only just a little bit. Are you okay?”

She nodded, but her eyes were starting to tear. She blinked to keep it back, the heat of embarrassment already burning up her face.

“Don’t cry,” he soothed and wiped her eyes with the pads of his thumbs.

“I’m not,” she sniffled.

Chuckling, he helped her out of the tangle her gunny sack had become around her feet. “Come on. Up we go.”

“And we have a winner and our next turbo contestant!” The ranch hand announced to the good-natured whistles and claps from the surrounding audience. “Who’s ready to win a free weekend at the Ranch and a stuffy from the gift shop for their Little?”

Nikki perked at the same time Daddy Hudson did.

“Free weekend?” he said at the same time she said, “Free stuffy?”

Before she could stop herself, Nikki blurted, “Can I have a teddy bear next? Or a kitty cat?”

He looked at her surprised, and then blossomed into the biggest smile. “You bet you can, whether I win or not. Good girl, Nikki! This is the first time you’ve ever asked me for something you wanted. I couldn’t be more proud of you!”

Her face burned hotter, but his pride in her made her happy.

“I guess this means I’ll be joining the next race. Will you be comfortable waiting for me over there?” Daddy pointed to the encircling audience crowding near the finish line.

Nikki didn’t think twice. Basking in the glow of his praise, she went where she was bidden and then stood watching while he returned to the starting line. Six daddies and three Littles—two boys and a girl—joined him, all climbing back into their gunny sacks alongside her Dom.

He wasn’t the biggest or the strongest looking among them, but he was the fastest. Of that she had no doubt.

“Ready?” the ranch hand called above the woots and hollers of onlookers. Not knowing if it was okay to make noise, Nikki took a chance. Clapping loudly, she called, “You can do this, Daddy!”

Gathering up the edges of his sack, Daddy Hudson grinned and blew her a kiss.

“Set!” the ranch hand shouted, the whistle coming up to his mouth.

The sharp tweet cut the air and the crowd went wild as racers hopped off the starting line as fast as they could go. Daddy immediately hurled himself into second place, and she would have cheered again except that was when she felt it.

The unmistakable jab of a metal gun pushing into her side. She’d never seen the dark-haired man approach, but just like the first time, there was no mistaking his voice when he said, “Come with me quickly and quietly, or I start shooting everyone here. Including ‘Daddy’.”

Everything inside of Nikki died under a wave of cold terror. She couldn’t breathe; she couldn’t move. All she could do was stumble into step beside him when the man grabbed the back of her neck and, in front of at least a hundred people, marched her toward the woods.

No one made a move to stop them.

\* \* \*

Ryan had been just as shocked as Nick to learn Nikki was still alive. When approached by Nick almost a decade ago to take care of his twin, he’d accepted without question or hesitation. Not only would the money come in handy, but when he was

given the opportunity to settle the large debt owed to his drug dealer, he'd seen no reason not to double-dip on the assignment.

Instead of using the money to pay his debt, he'd "sold" Nikki and walked away without a single thought to the horrors he'd known awaited her. He'd seen what his supplier and his dealers did to the other women who were unfortunate enough to land in their laps. The head honcho lived out in the country and kept his "bitches" in a huge dog run at the back of his property. Nude and very seldom fed, the women either survived or... well, didn't. So when the next time he'd had cause to return to the filthy enclave, his question of what happened to the girl had been met with a shrug. He'd taken that to mean Nikki wasn't the survivor her brother was and figured he had actually completed the assignment he'd been hired to do.

When he'd met Nick a few days ago, he'd seen no reason to offer his employer anything other than the fact he'd "left" Nikki for dead out in the country and express his own disbelief she'd somehow survived. Now, he watched as Nick stepped out of the trees.

\* \* \*

"You have been the biggest pain in the ass, I swear," Nick growled, marching up and down between the towering evergreens in front of his wide-eyed, shaking sister and Ryan, who stood just behind her with his gun in his hand. There was a ton of reserve reflected in Nikki's frightened eyes, but zero recognition. Not for either of them. He was starting to wonder if she really did have amnesia. That she would dare not

remember made him mad enough to pull his weapon and put a bullet in her head.

As if he wasn't absolutely screwed as it was. He'd been pacing the carpet in the crappiest hotel room he'd ever been in. If that hadn't been cause enough for his fury, the fact he'd had to knock out some country bumpkin of a cop certainly was. It had stretched his self-control to its limit but he'd managed not to kill the man. After dragging his ass into the horrendous bathroom of his room, he'd retrieved the keys to his car the man had been returning and drove back to the place that had kept his sister hid from him for nearly ten damn years.

"I-I d-don't understand," she whimpered.

"You may not remember how you were constantly the princess they held up to prove how big of a cluster fuck I was, but I do," he spat. He flung out his arms as wide as they would go. "Water under the bridge, right? Except now, the cops are looking at me... because of you. They're going to reopen the case... because of *you*! I'm going to go to *jail* now, and that's because of you too! All because you didn't fucking die when you were supposed to, and why is that, I wonder? Oh yeah, Ryan..."

Nick turned on his one-time friend, standing smugly behind his sister. "That's because of you."

Before anyone could react, he pulled the gun from the back of his pants and shot his friend between the eyes.

Ryan fell over backward, making Nikki jump and scream. She quickly clapped both hands over her mouth when he turned the gun on her next.

And that was when Nick finally saw it. A flicker of recognition scampered through her eyes, turning bewildered



terror into horror. Horror was deeper than terror. Horror was understanding.

And she definitely understood him now.

“Y-you killed our parents,” she whispered, staring at him. “I saw you. You were playing with that stupid gun and then they died.”

“I knew you’d put it together.” Cocking the gun again, Nick pointed it right at her head.

“I don’t want the inheritance,” she blurted. “I won’t ever go home again, I promise!”

“No, you won’t,” Nick mused, amused by her growing fear and her desperate attempt to save her own life. “And do you know how I know? Because I’m going to make sure of it.”

And how sad, really. Looking at her now, it wasn’t hard to see how perfect she was too. At least physically. She was lean and svelte, soft in all the right places. Where he had to practically kill himself at the gym, here she was, just like his parents had always called her. A golden child without any perceivable flaws.

“Close your eyes,” he coaxed. “Don’t look at me.”

It surprised him how easily she obeyed and without a single word of protest.

“God,” he mused, adjusting his aim. “This is easier than I ever thought it would be.”

“Police!” a man’s voice belted out. “Drop the gun, Nick! Drop it now!”

Nick’s body froze. He closed his eyes, shaking his head once, before turning to find Detective Dan coming up through the trees with his handgun drawn, four equally armed officers

flanking him. It was damn-near a delicious thrill to so quickly go from hunter to prey.

“Hello again, detective,” he called out, not taking his own weapon off Nikki. It was the only measure of safety he had left and it didn’t work. When he glanced back to make sure his steady aim was still locked on her, his sister was gone.

*Bitch.*

Lowering his arm, Nick shook his head again. He was much too good-looking to have to spend the rest of his life in prison.

“Fuck,” he said under his breath.

“Don’t do it,” Dan warned.

“Sorry,” Nick told him, almost cheerfully. “I’ll never be arrested, and certainly not by you.”

“Fuck,” Dan echoed.

Swinging around, Nick did his best to get the first shot off, but they both fired.

Nick missed by a sliver.

Detective Dan didn’t, and Nick fell back dead into the moss and sticks of the forest floor.

## CHAPTER 13

Hudson paced wildly, the only thing keeping him in Derek's office were the militia of local police taking everyone's statements. Hayleigh the lifesaver was there, recounting for the second time how she'd noticed Nikki leaving the gaming grounds with someone who was not her Daddy. She'd been the one to run that tale straight to Detective Dan, who still hadn't left. It was as if he'd known something might happen and was sticking around until it did.

Hudson had no objections to that. He was grateful for the senior officer's help, and for the accuracy of his aim, and the timing that had allowed him to get to Nikki before her brother could kill her, just like he'd killed his associate. He understood the need for Derek and his security team to be handling the nightmare that having two men invade the sanctity of the Ranch. The only thing keeping him from tearing the men from limb to limb was the fact that they were both now dead.

But understanding and being grateful didn't help his growing anxiety. The longer he waited, the more his nerves kept whispering that something could be happening to his Little. He had to get to her. And he had to get to her right this minute!

“I’ve gotta get out of here,” Hudson said for the he didn’t know how many times.

“We’re looking for her,” Detective Dan soothed without looking up from his paperwork. Each time one of his other officers finished taking a statement, they brought him the paperwork and whoever had filled it out.

As far as Hudson could see, the Detective was looking over all the new statements, but he wasn’t letting anyone go. Which had to be frustrating for everyone who visited just to take part in the Father’s Day events. It was frustrating for him too, and the longer Nikki stayed out of his sights, the more his franticness grew.

“I’ve got to go, damn it!” Hudson growled again.

Sighing, Detective Dan lowered his sheaf of reports and glared at him. “We’ll find her. You don’t need to go. You need to stay right here so we can do our job and make sure the place is safe. Once we know there’s no one else we need to remove from the grounds, then we’ll let everyone go.” He paused, his expression softening as he said again, “We will find her.”

Facing him full-on, Hudson dropped his volume. It was all he could do to keep himself from yelling as he said, “I already know where she is, sitting huddled right outside the door to our cabin. Waiting for her Daddy so she can feel safe again. If you were a Daddy with a Little of your own... if you had the slightest comprehension of what that kind of dynamic means”—Hudson shook his head—“you would have let me go the first time I asked. You haven’t the slightest clue what she’s going through right now.”

The detective swiveled on his heel, nothing in his expression soft anymore. His face darkened, and he dropped his volume too when he said, “Nine years ago, I pulled that

little girl out of the dark when it was freezing cold. Unlike you, I saw her condition. Her skin and bones, her bruises, her terror. I carried her, held her in my lap. And I do have a Little of my own—”

“Then you have *no* excuse for holding me here,” Hudson interrupted, and the two men stood staring at one another in barely controlled anger.

The detective lowered his gaze first. Then he sighed. “You’re right. Were I in your shoes right now, I’d be losing my shit too.”

“Some favor this turned out to be,” Derek offered with a sigh as he joined them.

It didn’t alleviate his anger, and yet, Hudson felt for the man. “If you hadn’t allowed me this chance,” he told Derek, “I never would have found the woman I was meant to be with for the rest of my life.”

Derek sighed again and softened. “Go. Get your Little and stay in your cabin until my investigation is done. You’ll hear it from my mouth, no one else’s, got it?”

Hudson couldn’t believe his ears. For almost a full minute, he stood frozen, fully expecting this to be the trick the officer would use to arrest him and just get Hudson out of his hair.

But no, nothing about the detective’s stare said this was a trick. It was too full of sympathy for that.

Hudson took off running, barely remembering to call a hasty “thank you” back over his shoulder as he fled the room. His heart was pounding, right up in the back of his throat as he raced down the halls, making his way to the cabin he called home, if only temporarily.

“Oh Jesus,” he shouted, as he came out of the trees and across a small clearing and there she was, exactly as he’d imagined. Sitting on the porch against the cabin’s door, her legs drawn up to her chest, tears streaming down her face.

He spun in a full circle of absolute relief, his hands clapping onto the porch railing as he sucked a deep breath and tried to swallow back the anger now surging up through the depths of his relief to burn in his face and chest.

“Daddy!” she shrieked, spotting him. Launching back to her feet, she ran to him, flinging herself off the porch, and throwing out her arms just in time for him to catch her.

Snagging her out of mid-air, he spun her around as he hugged her tight. He couldn’t hold her close enough, not even as mad as he was. Because it wasn’t her that he was mad at. It was everyone else without exception that his anger tried to blame. This was the closest he’d now come to having her ripped away from him forever. He couldn’t bear it, and he wasn’t about to ignore it.

“I want to take you home with me. I want to be your Daddy forever. Please say that you want the same thing, but only if you mean it. Can you do that for me, sweetpea?”

She began to cry. Burrowing into his neck, she nodded. “Yes, Daddy. Yes, please.”

He’d be damned if he cried now too, but he couldn’t help it. His relief was too overwhelming, and his fear had been too real.

Collapsing to his knees, he grabbed her bottom, heaving her hips right up to his. Folding her in his arms, he bowed over her, pinning her briefly between himself and the ground in a

cage of love, caresses and kisses that he would never get tired of giving her.

“God, I love you,” he whispered.

Her shoulders shook with renewed tears. Softly, she whispered back at him. “I love you too. With all my heart.”

He held out his pinkie, and once she noticed, they swore without words, turning fantasy into reality.

She sniffled again, looking at their joined fingers. “Daddy?”

He caressed her hair and back. “Yes, sweetpea?”

She burrowed into his neck. “Daddy... I’ve been so bad. Spank me.”

\* \* \*

Nikki’s mind was reeling. She couldn’t believe she’d actually said that out loud. She didn’t like spankings. After the one she’d received from Master Derek, the ultimate Daddy in this whole place, she’d tried hard never to earn another. But in this moment, as disappointed as she was in herself, she couldn’t think of a worse or better-earned punishment to have to endure.

Daddy was being very quiet. In fact, other than answering her request with, let’s talk, he hadn’t said anything at all. Not until he’d unlocked their cabin door and tucked them both safely inside its walls.

Taking her hand in his, he led her to the end of the bed. Sitting, he pulled her to stand at his knee.

“Look at me,” he said calmly, and she dragged her gaze up off the floor to obey. Her tummy was all a-buzz, both from his tone and the sudden realization that he might actually be about to deliver what she’d crazily asked for.

She held her breath, losing herself in the warm understanding of his eyes.

“Do you understand that what happened outside is not your fault?”

No. Yes. Maybe? A part of her understood she couldn’t control what her brother or the man he’d called Ryan did. But if she wasn’t at fault, then why did she feel so bad?

She nodded, hoping that was the right answer.

“Do you?” he stressed. “Because I’m not sure why you think you should be spanked when nothing your brother did reflects on you.”

Nikki could have cried all over again. When her eyes flooded, she covered her face with both hands only to have him grip her wrists and gently pull them down again. He held her hands in his.

“What are you thinking, baby? Why do you think you were so bad?”

She lost it. She tried to pull her hands away, but stopped when he didn’t let her go.

“Don’t fight Daddy,” he chastened. “Talk to me.”

“I don’t know what to say,” she wept.

“Yes, you do,” he countered. “You know your reasons and they make sense to you. Help Daddy understand.”



Now she didn't feel just bad, she also felt silly. She tried to shrug, but he cocked his eyebrow and gave her that stern look that never failed to make her want to be good for him.

“Do you need to spend some time with your nose in the corner before you're willing to be honest with me?”

Her tummy buzzed harder, the butterflies running rife. She sniffled. Wanting to be good. She nodded.

“All right,” he finally conceded, and the next she knew, instead of pulling her down across his knees, he stripped her out of her clothes. Goodbye went the Alice dress, her shoes and her grass and dirt-stained white stockings. Hello came her cherry onesie, up off the rail of her crib where Daddy had left it when he'd dressed her for the day. He held it so she could step in, and then pulled it up over her narrow shoulders. She cried the whole time, but even as he finished and began to march her into the nearest corner, she was already starting to feel better. Calmer. Maybe she wasn't a Little like the others who came here, but she liked her onesie. And she really liked when he put her in it. When she was his Little, it always made her feel so safe and cared for. Like she was the only one he wanted, and that fit. He was better than she could have dreamed for.

“Hands on your head. Daddy is going to get ready,” he said once she was in place. “Don't you move an inch until I say so.”

Nodding, she put her hands on top of her head and studied the wall.

He went into the bathroom, but he didn't close the door. From her peripheral vision, she saw the light on and even glimpsed as much of his shoulder and arm as he seemed to confront himself in the mirror. It felt like a long time before he bent over the sink to wash his hands, and then his face.

Patting off with a towel, he finally came back out into the main room and she realized if the point of her standing here was to reflect, then she'd lost her chance. She'd been paying too much attention to him.

He sat back down on the foot of the mattress, but he didn't call her to him.

Because she wasn't done reflecting, and somehow he knew that.

She tried to pull her scattered thoughts together. Why couldn't she just say the thought that was burning a hole right through her? That Daddy had told her twice now and she still kept doing the wrong thing.

“Why do you need a spanking, sweetpea?”

She bowed her head, the feelings rolling through her at an all-time low.

When she sniffled, he patted his leg. “Come here, baby.”

She went to him, every reluctant step dragging the time out longer. She was going to have to tell him, and nothing felt worse than having him know she'd done the wrong thing.

He brought her down to sit upon his knee, folding his arms around her.

“Why?” he softly demanded.

She buried her face in both hands, summoning all her courage and trying not to drown in the embarrassment of her confession. “Because I ran away from you. Again.” She burst into tears. “I tried. I wanted to run to you, but I didn't. I came here. And you already told me twice, and I still did it, and I'm sorry, Daddy. I'm so, so sorry! I ran away from you,” she forlornly repeated.

His arms came up from her waist, hugging her shoulders as he rocked her, letting her cry her bad feelings out until only weariness remained.

He kissed her forehead, then gently corrected her. “Nikki, you never would have found me on that field. God knows I couldn’t find you.”

She sniffled, trying to get her nose to stop running. “But you said no, and I did it anyway,” she said sadly. “I wasn’t good, and I’m sorry.”

“You weren’t bad either,” he told her, a little sternness creeping into his tone again. “You did the best thing you could think of at the time.”

“But I didn’t,” she wailed. “I wasn’t thinking at all and look what happened!”

“What happened was that I found you.”

“But what if you hadn’t?”

He tipped his head, staring deep into her watery eyes. She felt so bad she could hardly meet them.

“Oh, sweetpea,” he finally said. Cupping her face in his hands, he brought her down until their foreheads touched.

She closed her eyes, melting into his touch. She loved it when he did that.

“You’re right,” he murmured, though he didn’t sound upset with her at all.

She nodded anyway. Deep in her heart, she knew she was too. And she felt horrible.

“You didn’t run to me, and while I do believe you don’t deserve a punishment for that, I do think there’s a hurt Little

inside you who believes otherwise. Stand up. Daddy's going to spank your bottom exactly as you need to be spanked."

Relief as she'd never felt it washed over her. Throwing her arms around his neck, she hugged him tightly. "Thank you, Daddy."

He kissed her forehead and then let her go. "Stand up, please."

She stood up and stood watching as he stripped her cooperative body out of her onesie. Funny how she didn't find this nerve-rattling at all. She relaxed, liking all the ways in which he took care of her. Even this one.

Folding the onesie neatly, he dropped it on the bed out of their way. "Over my knee," he said simply.

Nikki lowered herself into position, a tiny shiver escaping when he settled his arm across the small of her back.

"Wrist," he said, and she put her right arm back for him to take. He took her by the hand instead, weaving his fingers with hers before locking that arm snugly to her hip. "Before we start, I just want you to know how proud I am of you. You not only advocated for what you needed, but you argued with me in order to get it. That was music to my ears, but I'm not going to let that detract from what you've earned. Are you ready to take your spanking?"

She dissolved under his gentle scolding. She quickly covered her teary eyes with her other hand and nodded. "Yes, Daddy."

"One," he sternly counted, and down came his arm in a swat hard enough to jolt through every inch of her. It didn't sting. It wasn't even hard enough to pinken her skin. But she felt it, oh did she feel it. Not just in her bottom, but in her

heart, where all the bad feelings that plagued her were instantly knocked free.

“Two,” he counted again. And the second swat was every bit as light as the first.

She sobbed anyway, not the wallowing unproductive crying that had gripped her before. This time, she’d been freed.

And just like that, the spanking both started and stopped. For nine years, Nikki had listened while other Littles talked about the dreaded “S” punishment. Hers hadn’t been so bad, which only proved to her beyond all else that Daddies really did know best.

Catching her up in his arms, he hugged her close and let her cry until she had no tears left.

“My good Little girl,” he crooned for her ears alone.

And just that quickly, the last of her bad feelings were gone. She felt good now. She was good, she believed. And she was his. His good girl forever.

She couldn’t stop herself. Lifting her head from his shoulder, she kissed his handsome lips, melting when she felt him smile.

“Good girl,” he murmured as she kissed him again.

And again, while his warm hands cupped her hips and he pulled her down with him as he lay on his back on the bed.

“Good girl,” he whispered, when her hands roved down to his belt to ease the buckle loose.

“Good Daddy,” she whispered back. After all, if those same two words made her feel this good, then who was to say Daddies wouldn’t like it just as much?

No one, that's who. With that, Nikki let herself get lost in his kisses and caresses, until he rolled them both over on the bed, tucking her under him. Her favorite place to be, with the one man she would love until the day she died.

For the rest of her life, she'd make sure he knew it.

## ABOUT MAREN SMITH

I am a Little, coffee fanatic, dog and cat mom, was an administrator for six years at my local BDSM dungeon, and have since become a Utah resident. An International and USA Bestselling Author several times over, I have penned more than 160 novels, novellas and short stories, and am the author of the Masters of the Castle and Daddy's Little series.

I also write under the names of Denise Hall, Darla Phelps, and Penny Alley.

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