

BOOK FIVE

Hidden
FEARS

LITTLE HOPE SERIES

ARIANA CANE

Hidden Fears

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Little Hope Series, Book 5

Ariana Cane



Hidden **FEARS**

Little Hope Series, Book 5



LITTLE HOPE

HOME OF
SOME NOVELS THAT ARE

ARIANA CANE

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*He wanted peace, but
he didn't need it.
All it took was her to
show him.*

*To the good girls just trying
to find a hot man with
a 🐔 piercing,
This one is for you.*

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Acknowledgments
Also by Ariana Cane

Author's Note

Hello, my Wonderful Reader! You're about to dip your toes (or anything else you want to dip—the brow wiggling is totally happening here) into a different kind of story in the Little Hope series. This story is lighter than the previous ones and has almost no Trigger Warnings besides butt smacking, wiggling into tight holes (*khe-khe*), and cursing. Well, a very hot cop is a TW on its own. So yeah, here it is. (Please read all the way to the end since there might be a couple of possible triggers mentioned).

Sheriff Benson is in a league of his own. Even though he carries the best attributes of the Little Hope men, he's also not like any of the others. Total Daddy, you say? Probably. You'll be the judge of that.

Dirty talking sheriff? He's here too.

I'm not sure what the next book will be, but I'll be taking a small break from Little Hope. Jake needs his redemption story. I'm not sure if he'll be a part of Little Hope or a crossover with the other series I'm working on.

There is also another dude (you don't know him *yet, khe-khe, but you're about to*).

Also, there is another partnerless Benson brother, ya know. He will grow up soon, and we will revisit the fine town of Little Hope and its nosey fuckers (as Sarah said).

So yes, Little Hope is not done, but it is on a small break.

Also, stay tuned for a short Christmas novella featuring ALL your favorite characters in one place.

Other mentions that might be considered triggering: a mention of the word 'r*pist' (a reference to Alicia's story); mention of an eating disorder (Josie used to be weight-obsessed. No descriptions, only mentions). There's

also a birthing scene. Very vague and made to be humorous, but it's there.

So you're warned. Go ahead and spend some quality time with Kenneth and Josie.:)

Xo-xo, Ariana

Chapter One

J OSIE
February

Bonnie Tyler’s voice calling out for a hero wakes me up from one of the wildest sex dreams I’ve ever had, involving the back of a police car and *big* cuffs. It takes me a moment—or two—to realize my phone is ringing, and it’s not my fantasy policeman putting on some ambient music in my dream.

I glance at the clock on my nightstand, the giant LED numbers a blur in my sleepy stupor. Squeezing my eyes shut once more, I blink the sleep away before I can finally see the time clearly. Two in the morning. Whatever this is, it better be good.

Sitting up, I rummage through the design journals scattered hazardously across the other side of my bed, looking for my cell. I fell asleep browsing the new vendor’s catalogs and getting ready for a high-end client I brought to the firm. I have to find the absolute best for them. Even if I need to sacrifice sleep for the time being.

And maybe, if I’m completely honest, I needed a distraction due to the day I had.

“Yes,” I mumble groggily, not bothering to check the caller ID.

“*Hey, Joz!*” a cheery male voice greets me.

“Archie?” I pull the phone away, squinting at the sudden brightness. I must be dreaming, right? It’s not like we’re close friends. I’m not sure why he’s calling me this late. “Is everything okay?”

“*Oh shit,*” he mumbles and clears his throat. “*Sorry, I lost track of time, but I found it.*” He doesn’t sound even a little bit sorry.

“Your manners?” I settle against the headboard, letting my head rest on the cool wood.

A laugh rumbles through the line—I’ve always found the man to be exceptionally sexy, but there was something about him that told *my* bad to stay away from *his* bad. Two people with the same temperament don’t tend to make a healthy relationship. At least one captain must remain calm, or the ship will blow to pieces.

“No, it,” he whispers. “*I found where I want to settle down.*”

A warmth spreads throughout my chest, and I’m suddenly ready to forgive the rude wake-up. There are a couple of moments in this life that I live for. The sunrise over a new house I’ve helped bring into this world, the sound of birds when the city is still asleep, and that moment when someone has finally found where they want to live. Where they want to set down roots. Grow a family. Build the life they’ve always wanted.

Archie has been on a wild hunt for this place since the moment I met him five years ago, give or take. He wasn’t looking for just a building but a place he could call *home*.

He took a chance on me years ago when he hired me for his mansion in Boston. I was an unknown designer. A nobody. It was a beautiful Victorian building, and I put my heart and soul into it. Yet, it still wasn’t home for him. It was too big for one person. Too cold. Despite the praise I received from the job, I could tell he was unhappy. It lacked *love*. Someone to share the space with. But because people have to come to that understanding on their own, I never told him. Yet it kept bothering me that it wasn’t what he was looking for. I don’t want to deliver just ‘good’; I want to deliver ‘perfect.’

Regardless of how he felt about his house, he loved my work, so he hired me to redecorate the tattoo parlor he opened a couple of years prior. Since then, every time he buys a new workshop, I’m there to make all his designer dreams come true.

It sounds like he found what he was missing.

“Where?” I ask, very interested.

“*Don’t freak out,*” he chuckles. “*It’s a bit far from where you usually work.*”

“Alright,” I stretch my arm across the pillow to my side, fixing my silky red shorts at my hip, “you got me scared now.”

I live and work in New York City, but if the client is an old friend of mine, I'd travel farther. Or, if they pay handsomely, I'd swim to Antarctica. I'm in a line of business that values image first, which means I need money to support myself in this big city, which includes keeping up appearances. My appearance is my brand.

On top of that, I need the money to support someone who relies on me, and she deserves to get the very best.

"It's in Maine," he tells me sheepishly.

"You're shitting me!" I smack the bed in excitement, but Archie takes it as a complaint.

"I know it's far," he starts explaining rapidly, *"but it's a cool place, and I love it. And I think you will too. I could totally find someone local, but we've worked together so much that I really don't trust anyone other than you. You know what I like, and I really think you can make our dream come true."*

"Our?" I catch the word he uses.

"Yeah," his voice turns dreamy, *"my girlfriend Leila and me, and she's been on my ass to bring you here because she wants to start right away."*

"Archi-i-ie!" I singsong, happy about being right—he's just been looking for that *someone*. "You finally found the one?"

"I did," he replies with such content I can feel his happiness from here. *"You'll like her."*

"If she makes you talk like that, I already do." It's not like he needs my approval, but people in love want everyone else to love their significant other, and I think it's adorable.

Then I remember what we were really discussing. "She's from Maine?"

"Yeah, from a small town in the middle of it."

"Really? I have a friend out there, and a visit is long overdue. Do you know how far it is from Springfield?" It's one of the largest towns in that rural area, so it's easy to picture where this mysterious small town might be.

"What? Little Hope?"

"The town's called Little Hope?" I freeze, sitting up in astonishment.

"Yeah, they have a local legend I'm not sure about. Yet. But the place is... home, you know?" I can almost imagine him shrugging his wide shoulders as if he were embarrassed to admit it.

"I know, Archie," I reply with a sigh of understanding. And a bit of envy if I'm honest—I still haven't found mine. Even though I love my apartment and this crazy city, something in my life is still missing, and I feel it more

and more every day.

Maybe it's the fact that I rent and am not able to make drastic changes to the apartment that it doesn't feel like home. Doesn't feel like where I want to be for the rest of my life. I was able to save enough for a down payment a little while ago, but someone very close to me needed the money more.

Although I yearn for a house, I don't regret it for a moment.

"I'll pay you a bunch," he starts, clearly ready to negotiate.

"I don't need a bunch of money." I do, but he doesn't need to know it. "My friend lives in the same town, so you will be doing me a favor, really. I could use a break from the city."

"You? Break from the city?" He snorts. "*I don't think they have roads for your shoes around here.*"

"Don't you dare judge my pumps!" I laugh back, but he's probably right. "Did you pick some nice place somewhere in downtown?"

A few seconds of silence. "*Not exactly,*" comes his vague reply.

"It's in the middle of nowhere, isn't it?" I sigh, imagining the football field he must have purchased, because Archie doesn't do anything half-assed.

"Yes."

"And you're looking at *it* right now?"

"Yeah," he laughs. "*Hence my late-night phone call. I thought I'd just build a house on some beautiful land because Maine has plenty of it, but it was all wrong.*"

I curl my feet under me, checking a tiny, chipped piece of nail polish I need to fix. "I'm finishing up a project, but I can come and check the place out in a couple of weeks, maybe."

"*That works. Thanks, Josie,*" he says with clear relief.

The way he says it makes my eyes water. Everyone back in my hometown thinks I'm sitting here making money by moving plates around a table and posting pictures on social media, but only people who work with me truly understand what this job means. These people let me build their homes, places where they'll raise their kids and grow old with their families. A place to plant their roots deep into the soil, leaving a mark on the land and towns.

Others let me help them build and design places for their businesses, where they spend hours upon hours building a wonderful life for themselves through blood, sweat, and tears.

To people who don't understand, it's just a money-grabbing business

without any effort, which is the furthest thing from the truth.

“Thank you, Archie,” I say, my voice tight as the giant lump in my throat prevents me from saying much more.

He clears his throat. “*You know what, pack a big bag. People tend to spend more time here than they intend to.*”

And with this vague comment, he hangs up. A few minutes later, a message comes in.

The budget is unlimited. The only thing I want is for Leila to be happy. See you soon.

Archie, Archie, Archie. My eyes turn misty, and I wipe my nose. I’ve seen him struggling because I used to be where he is. For different reasons, but I know what depression looks like, and he’s been in one for many years. I’m so thankful to hear him actually happy, and I can’t wait to meet Leila.

I lie back and pull my favorite fluffy comforter over me. I love it so much; I never travel for pleasure or work without it because I simply can’t sleep without burying myself under all this fluff. But even my comforter can’t pull me back to sleep—I keep thinking about Archie and him finding love.

And to be honest, his call couldn’t have been timed better—I’m ready to take a small-town vacation.

Chapter Two

J OSIE

The next morning, I take a long, hot shower before standing in front of my closet, trying to decide which outfit I want to wear since today promises to be not a very good one. And not because of lack of sleep.

I decide on my favorite power outfit, consisting of super tight red pants that make my butt look on fire and a red, matching blazer. A tight, black camisole accentuates my boobs, making them demand attention. I finish it off with black stilettos, grab my keys and water bottle with a sticker about ‘Bat Bitches’ I purchased from Etsy, and head into the office, dreading seeing my ex of one whole day who happens to work at the same company I do.

Well, he doesn’t just work there. He owns it.

Yes, I made a big mistake, and yes, I learned my lesson. A bit too late if someone asks me, but it is what it is.

A dozen curious pairs of eyes greet me the moment I step out of the elevator and onto the thirty-first floor. As I move toward my desk, the whispers start. I look around, feeling myself transported back to my old high school cafeteria—even in our small Shit-town, kids were ruthless, and I dressed differently. You know, how every school has an emo kid everyone hates? Well, my school had me. Needless to say, I was not popular.

The sound of my pumps clicking against the marble is deafening, and with each step, dread settles deep within the pit of my stomach. And it’s not

because of who I am about to face. But because of the odd silence. Even the buzz of fax machines and printers stops, which *never* happens.

As I round the corner to where my desk is located, right by the floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the busy city, all of it suddenly makes sense. Because the person sitting in my comfy chair is not me. And it's not me who moved my cactus to the side, killing the fresh pink blossom by squashing it into the ugly, stained, dented, and just overall offensive cardboard box sitting on the corner of my desk. Yesterday, it had finally bloomed after two years of waiting, and I was looking forward to enjoying the prettiness in the upcoming horrible day. And he went and killed it.

Weaponized by the protectiveness over my murdered flower, I narrow my eyes at the man who just yesterday brought me coffee in a lackluster, shitty attempt to kiss my ass.

"What's going on?" I try to keep my cool and sound like the *Bat Bitch* I'm supposed to be, according to my water bottle.

"Well." He leans back in my chair, a smug look on his perfectly symmetrical face. Gone is any shred of desire. Instead, it's replaced by the haughty look of someone who knows they have the upper hand. "This is my desk now. And the chair." He pats the armrests. "Very comfy. Did you save it for me?" He shoots me an awful wink that looks more like a seizure.

I take a deep breath, attempting to calm my rapidly increasing pulse, and instead of arguing with the imbecile or smacking the cactus pot over his smug face since he's already slain the plant, I march past my desk toward the office of my boss, Randy. Who also happens to be my ex. And here comes the worst part of my day. Or so I thought.

I open the door without knocking. This is not a social visit, and the angry clicking of my heels is a clear warning that he should be scared.

"Hey," he quickly says into the phone, "I'll call you back, baby."

Baby? *Baby*? He broke up with me *yesterday*, for fuck's sake.

"Can I help you, Josephina?"

Josephina? *Josephina*? Yes, this is not going to be good—he knows I hate the full name my soap-opera-loving parents gave me.

"Why is John *the Third* sitting at my desk?" I've always found his desire to be called by his full name ridiculous, but I am Josephina, so who am I to judge, really.

"Ah, yes." He smiles as he moves pens on his desk, sounding like he's completely forgotten about another dude taking the place of his senior

designer until I remind him. “John the Third has been promoted. Did you congratulate him?” His smile is so sugary it gives me an ulcer.

“Kudos to him.” John is bad. Every other contract he’s had for the past two years he’s been working here ended up with the client firing us, but his father goes to the same country club with Randy. So here is the non-logical explanation of why John’s still employed. “But why my desk?”

“You’ve been demoted, Josephina.” He tilts his head to the side, trying to appear regretful. I know because I told him he looks more compassionate when he does it. *When you attempt to sympathize with someone, you’ll get further with them*, I had told him one day after he threw a fit that a client walked out on him due to Randy ‘not understanding his needs.’ “Quite frankly,” he clicks his tongue, “you haven’t been doing a great job recently, and we’ve had a few complaints about you.”

I rear back—the only time I had a complaint about me was when a client tried to put his bony, sweaty hand inside my shirt, and I had to smack him stupid with my vintage Prada bag. Randy knows because he refused to work with the client again, protecting the honor of his employee and girlfriend at the time.

“Please, don’t act so scandalized. Rachel Rune said you took longer than promised for her kitchen renovation, therefore pausing a complete remodel of her penthouse.”

“Yes, and you are well aware that was because we couldn’t pull permits from the city since she owed five years of unpaid taxes!” I want to facepalm myself, but instead, I imagine how I’d smack the ever-loving crap out of Rachel first, the greedy bitch who lives in one of the most expensive buildings in the city and still doesn’t pay her bills, and Randy second, the cheating bastard who looks way too happy with himself right now.

“That’s not the point, Josie,” he says with a sigh. “The point is you’re demoted. We got a desk ready for you at the end of the hallway.” He points behind me.

I know the desk he’s talking about. It’s the only desk that’s unoccupied. I still ask, hoping I’m mistaken and he means John’s old desk next to the window. It’s not mine, but it will do. Even though it might be hard to explain the relocation if clients ever drop by unannounced. They do that quite often, I might add. “By the toilet?”

“You go there so often,” he cackles, “it’ll be very convenient for you.”

I squeeze my fists together, imagining his thin, pale giraffe neck between

them.

“I’m your senior designer and project coordinator, Randy. You can’t just demote me. I have tons of unfinished projects.”

“John will take them off your hands.”

I blink away sudden tears of rage and desperation mixed into a dangerous cocktail. “He can’t take my projects. I’ve worked on them from scratch.” I don’t even mention that he’ll lose these clients too, since that seems to be par for the course.

“Josie,” he says, his tone taking that of a teacher scolding a child, “how hard can it be to place two couches and a rug in a room? He’ll manage.” He rolls his eyes, and my left eye twitches.

I start rolling up my left sleeve, making a slow show out of it, and his eyes narrow on the action. Now, his eye twitches. I roll up the other sleeve, and he picks up one of the pens and starts fidgeting with it. Slowly, I start my catwalk toward his desk, focusing my unblinking eyes on his face, and he jumps from the chair.

“What are you doing, Josie?” he asks, nervously looking around as if pleading for someone to come help him. But no one will. He makes sure the blinds are always closed. I always wondered why, but after yesterday, I think I know why.

I don’t respond and just take another step. Deliberately, like an unavoidable evil in horror movies, making his cheeks pale.

He backs away until his ass presses into the glass wall behind him.

“I’ll call security, Josie. Don’t do it!”

My molars grind as I stop right in front of him. His eyes twitch again, a bead of sweat dripping down his suddenly feverish skin. His eyes shoot to the door. “Help!” he yells, and I nearly choke on the laughter bubbling out of me. “Help!” he calls out louder, and I put my hands on his belt.

“Josie?” His head tilts to the side as he quiets down, his eyes softening at what he thinks is happening. “What are you doing, baby?” His voice turns flirty as I proceed to unbuckle the belt. “Oh, baby, you want to fuck me?” He pours on the honey.

Pulling on the belt, I keep it in my hands. I get into his face, knowing how much he loves this perfume. Sure enough, his nostrils flare. I don’t need to check his pants to know that he’s turned on.

“Oh, yes,” I breathe into him before my voice hardens as I pull away. “I want to fuck you *over* so badly you won’t be able to see straight.” I shake the

belt in the air. “You stole my belt from me, fucker. You could never pull it off anyway.”

With that, I walk toward the door with my head held high.

“You’ll regret this stunt. You’re fired!” he yells to my back.

I stop and turn to face him. “You can’t fire me because I just quit.”

His laugh is maniacal. “Well, I just did anyway. Good luck getting a new job in this city! Don’t expect a recommendation!”

“Good luck finding new clients,” I shoot back. “We both know that seventy-five percent of them were *my* clients.”

“You think you’re so irreplaceable?” He wipes saliva from his chin. How didn’t I see how disgusting he was before? He always spits while yelling. “But you are, Josie. Just like everyone else.”

“So are you.” I smile sweetly and look down. “And all of your three inches.”

“It’s five!” he yells, only now noticing how large our audience has become after someone opened the door to answer his call for help.

“Whatever you say to sleep better,” I reply and walk away, hyperaware of the whispers and giggles following me.

I walk toward my desk, where John *the Third* is waiting for me with wide eyes. Leaning over it, I grab my cactus, resisting the urge to push the pot into his smug face, and walk to the elevator, clicking my heels on the marble as loud as I can. I’m leaving this place with a bang.

Once home, I place my cactus on the table, pour myself a large glass of wine, and order a large pizza because New York pizza is the best, and I’ll miss it. For all my bravado, I know that I’ll never find a good job in this city again. I won’t be able to afford the expensive rent of this wonderful studio in Manhattan. Randy comes from old money. He has connections. If he doesn’t want me to find a job here, I won’t.

I’ve spent seven years working for this company. Seven. When I came to New York fresh out of college, I was naive and young and thought the world was at my feet.

Turns out it’s not, and people like me, with big dreams and small wallets, are many. By the end of my first year in New York, I was convinced it was also my last one.

It was by happenstance that I met Lauren, Randy’s sister. We became friends. She was working for their father’s development company, meaning they developed buildings from scratch, and they always needed a few in-

house designers. Doing both had been my dream since the moment I built my first sandcastle, I think. So Lauren arranged an interview for me, and I was hired. Not as a designer, though, but as *the help*. A clerk-do-it-all.

I'd been making coffee runs for a year before someone noticed my sketches. The rest is history. Lauren got married and moved to California, and our connection eventually died out, even though I'm still very grateful for the opportunity she gave me.

A year ago, their father retired, and suddenly we had a new CEO who was young and charming. He started courting me right away. And me, a small-town girl in a big city even after all these years, was impressed. Flowers were delivered to my desk every single day for three months before I even agreed to a date.

He was attentive and wonderful, so I closed my eyes at *all* the inches he was lacking.

Until yesterday. Yesterday, when I came back to his office late in the evening because I forgot my plans on his table, only to find he already had company on the very same table. Company being a half-naked woman. When I asked what had happened, he told me he was done with me and that I needed to leave the key to his place on the table when I went.

I was gutted and still processing everything when Archie called. I had some hesitations about the trip to Maine, but now I have nothing to lose. Nothing. My lease is up in a few months, and I can go and check out the place and see if I can do anything.

Shit. Shitty shit! I can't do anything—I just got fired from one of the largest design companies in the city! I don't have my own contractors or suppliers. They all belong to Randy.

I grab the pillow from the bed, burying my face in it as I let out all my rage. I'm angry with myself and furious with that asshole. How could I be one of those idiots who slept with their boss? I groan and throw the pillow away.

Padding across the floor to the small kitchen table, I grab the pizza and eat half of it without even noticing. Screw that, I'm going to eat as many carbs as I can handle right now—I deserve it.

A month went by. I gained eight pounds, three painful pimples, and zero job prospects. Since I moved to New York, I've battled with my weight, sweating my ass off at the gym six days a week and starving myself on no-calorie salads just so I can fit in with the models on the billboards, convincing myself that people wouldn't trust my brand if I wasn't skinny and perfect. Now I ask myself, what for? Life is too short, and recent events just proved it. Besides that, you can be perfect without being skinny. I was the only one limiting myself to hungry misery.

For the past week, I've been spending my dwindling dollars on new clothes to fit this new curvaceous body of mine. To be honest, doing so made me happy, which not much has been able to do in the current circumstances, so I embraced the demise of my bank account, attempting not to think about my future too hard. It's too painful and miserable.

As for my plans to go to Maine—they had to be adjusted. Archie got shot, and he's still recovering from his wounds. Thank God. When Alicia called me a couple of weeks ago and explained the situation, I cried for two days straight. Alicia also mentioned everyone was sure the wounds were fatal, and Leila was the only one who seemed sure he would make it. An amazing soul was almost taken from us much too soon.

Then Alicia called me later and let me know that he was awake and recovering, and I celebrated with the cheesiest pizza and a huge can of the sweetest soda I could find.

Life is good.

Well, not really.

My lease is up soon. Too soon. With recent events, I don't think Archie will want to start the project anytime soon since he'll be focusing on his recovery. And if he does want to start the project, I'll be the first to talk him out of it—building a house is a very stressful project for a homeowner, and stress is the last thing he and Leila need right now.

I tried sending resumes and making phone calls but couldn't get past a receptionist anywhere. It leads me to believe that I am indeed blacklisted in the fine New York community of designers. That's what a name from old money can do. If I want to afford to live in this city, two hours from Manhattan if I'm lucky, I need to go back to waitressing—that's what I was doing when I moved here. Or I can always go back to my small town.

I shudder at the thought—*no, thank you*. My own small town never treated me well, with its judgmental assholes and the nasty rumors they like

to spread. And the sheriff, who always thought I was a thief when anything went missing and put me in the back of his cruiser. And my dad, who always picked me up from the station with the silent treatment. And my mom, who always asked the universe where she went wrong raising me that I turned out to be so ungrateful and put shame on the family name. I've been called a whore, a thief, a weirdo (a very nasty cursing word in our small town, maybe even worse than a thief), and many more.

I shudder again—nope, I'm staying and clawing my way back to normal life.

I look around my wonderful apartment. I've poured all my heart and soul into decorating this studio and was saving up for a down payment but never got enough.

And now I have to leave this place I've been calling home for three years because some asshole has a small dick that he can't keep in his pants.

I want to say that I miss him, but I don't. I think I always knew he wasn't for me long-term, which, I admit, makes me extra stupid for involving myself with him in the first place. But I've been so scared of staying alone I clung to him with all my might. I had a high school sweetheart who was a real emo kid, and then I got a scholarship and moved to college. I was working and studying, trying to get myself through a tough five years, so I barely had time to breathe, let alone have a boyfriend.

It was such a lonely chapter of my life. Without my big, certifiably insane, but still family by my side and my boyfriend since eighth grade, life there wasn't easy. Then I finished college, got my one suitcase together, bought a bus ticket, and moved to the Big Apple. The situation hadn't changed for me—I had to work many, many hours, just like everyone else in this city.

And then I met Randy, thinking I hit the jackpot in the sweet boyfriend department. But a month ago, he was 'kind' enough to pull that pink veil away from my eyes. Bless his damned soul.

I pad to the kitchen and peek inside the fridge and find nothing. Just a carton of almond milk and expired orange juice. Pizza it is.

Right when I'm about to call the pizza place around the corner who already knows my order by heart, my phone rings.

"Hey, Archie!" I greet him cheerfully, sincerely happy that he's well enough to make calls. "I'm so happy you're okay!"

"Yeah," he chuckles, "*I'm actually really good. How are you?*"

“I’m good. Real good!” I chirp happily.

Probably too happily because after a short pause, he asks again, “*Are you sure? You sound... off.*”

“Nope, I’m always good.” I’m a few seconds short of jumping and clapping my hands. “You know me.”

“*Right,*” he mumbles, clearly not believing me. “*You’ll let me know if something is bothering you?*” His voice drops, and he suddenly sounds threatening, but I’m not scared—I know he’s not mad at me. “*Or someone.*”

“No, Archie.” My heart softens at the care in his words. “I’m good. Really.”

“*Alright.*” He doesn’t sound convinced.

“How have you been? Are you one hundred percent now?”

“*Almost,*” he replies with a chuckle. “*Enough to finally start that house for us.*”

My heart stops. “You’re still recovering. You should take it easy.”

“*I need that house, Josie. It’s something for me to focus on. I need something else to distract me.*” Another rough swallow. “*Now more than ever.*”

What’s left unspoken is what breaks me, so I decide to tell him the truth. No matter how painful it will be.

“I can’t help you, Archie.” My voice nearly breaks. “I’m sorry.”

“*Why?*” He sounds a bit defensive. “*I can pay you more if that’s the problem.*”

“It’s not that,” I reply with a sigh. “I got fired, so I don’t have any developers to back me up.”

“*Huh.*” A pause. “*What happened?*”

“Just slept with my boss, ya know.” I shrug even though he can’t see me.

“*The sleazebag?*” He laughs. “*I thought you had some taste, Josie.*”

“You and me both,” I groan, embarrassed.

“*Why don’t you hire another developer?*”

“That’s not how it works.” I sit on the couch and curl my feet under me. “Usually, a developer is the one who hires designers and engineers and pretty much everyone to create and design a building.”

“*Then become a developer yourself,*” he says it as if it’s the easiest thing in the world, so I laugh out loud.

“I wish it was that easy. I need money and clients.”

“*I am your client who has money. Two in one. Hire anyone you need. You*

built a parlor for me in Texas from the ground, so I assume you hired an engineer.”

“I am the engineer who built your parlor,” I explain with pride. Even though Randy was the one who signed off the permits, because I didn’t have enough work experience to officially present the plans, I was the one who drew them. Now I’m experienced—and apparently old—enough to do it on my own.

“*See, problem solved.*” He laughs, knowing well enough that I drew the plans. He just needed to remind me of what I’m capable of. “*I’m sure you can find good contractors here.*”

I chew on my lip, kind of liking the idea. I can engineer and design houses myself because that’s what I’ve been doing for the past five years. I’d just been doing it under Randy’s company name. I can do the same under mine.

“*So, what do you think, Josie? Will you give it a shot?*”

A wide smile stretches my face. “I think I might.”

Chapter Three

KENNETH
First week of May

It's been two days since my soon-to-be brother-in-law coaxed me into getting a piercing. On my dick. Now I walk around Little Hope with a healing Prince Albert on my tip.

And that shit hurts.

I sit in my sheriff cruiser on one of the side streets and look around, making sure no one can see me. When I don't find any lurkers nearby, I dig my hand into my pants and adjust the placement of my loyal member who I betrayed dearly.

Who came up with the idea of such a tight uniform? Fucking perverts. Even without tight pants squeezing the life out of me, I can't walk with this thing *in* me without wanting to break someone's neck. It constantly itches and gets caught on my underwear. A disaster.

The only reason I did what I did that night was because of alcohol, and when I finally sobered up the next day, I suddenly became all too aware of the little piece of metal stuck in my most sensitive place. At first, I was so scared that my morning wood would make waking up in the morning painful, but my poor dick has been so traumatized that it's been down like a soldier after a long battle. If I'm honest, I'm grateful for his cooperation—I read that getting hard in the first couple of weeks is very uncomfortable.

I'm just getting cozy in my seat again when that irritating, scratchy

feeling plagues me once more, and I hit my head on the headrest, cursing Archie with all my might. I was so drunk when he lured me into the parlor, so desperate for a change that I failed to recognize what was happening until it was done.

I'm the sheriff of this small town. A town I consider to be mine. I can't be walking around all day with an itchy dick.

My days are always the same. I wake up, and before I even have my cup of coffee, neighbors come knocking on my door to complain about someone stealing their newspaper or leaving trash in their front yard.

I then go to work and immediately get buried under piles of complaints. Some of them are valid, some of them are just bitching, but they must be attended to regardless. Out of nowhere, one of the locals gets in a fight with a tourist, and I get called to the scene. In the evening, on the way back, I get calls complaining about something or someone else.

When I'm finally home, I grab a frozen dinner and a beer and eat in front of my TV. Alone. They call me a bachelor, but it hasn't exactly been my choice. Dating in a small town is complicated, and it's nearly impossible when you're a cop, let alone a sheriff.

I haven't been on a date in a long time. I enjoyed the last one I went on, even wanted to see her again... until I found out it was set up by my meddling mother, who constantly says she 'wants grandkids before she dies.' She called me the very next day, already aware of every single detail of the date, down to how many noodles I left untouched on my plate.

Needless to say, that was the last date.

My hand is my best friend nowadays. When it gets too tired, I drive to Portland or Springfield for a one-night stand or meet with my fuckbuddy, who happens to also be my informant. She's wickedly fast with computers, but she's also pretty adventurous and refuses any sort of commitment. A few years ago, I tried asking her out on a real date, but she laughed and smacked me on the shoulder, telling me to call her when I found my balls again. I don't see how my balls are relevant, but apparently, being in a relationship to some means losing yourself.

Today isn't any different from any other day of the year. The only thing that changes is the seasons. My neighbor Mrs. Roberts came to my door complaining about someone's dog pooping in her yard. My only coworker had a fit about being sent to deal with a noise complaint when she wanted to go deal with the bar fight. My mom called me asking for grandkids and trying

to set up another blind date.

I got called to a car accident not far from Little Hope, and by the time we were done there, my official shift was almost over, and I headed back to town.

Chapter Four

J OSIE

It took me a month to make all the necessary arrangements and to finish packing my stuff, but now I'm finally ready to uproot my life and temporarily move to Little Hope, the town where hope, apparently, is still a thing.

All the possessions I need to survive fit in three suitcases and tons of small bags. It was a disaster shoving them all in my Classic Mini Cooper. It's the most expensive thing I own, but she lives up to her name. She's small and very classy. I push the bags in as hard as I can, praying and crossing all my fingers and toes that my lotions and creams won't explode under the pressure, considering I sure as hell can't afford to buy replacements.

The only thing I love that isn't coming with me is the furniture that sits safely in a storage unit. I spent way too long finding the most perfect pieces at flea markets around the country to sell them. Over my dead body. Every single piece is priceless to me. In fact, if I had to choose between feeding myself and paying for the storage unit to keep them safe, I'd choose them every single time.

One day, I'll come back for them. When I have a home of my own.

Getting more and more optimistic by the minute, I grab a large coffee to go and load myself in the car. I had to move my seat up to fit all the bags in the back, so it's a tight fit, and my legs are squashed. I'm not exactly tall, a solid five-five on a good day, but the car is tiny for me and all my bags at the

same time.

Giving the bag in the back the stink-eye, I plug Alicia's address into the GPS, shift into gear, and dial her number. It's six in the morning, but she told me I could call her anyway since her boyfriend leaves early for his shift at the fire station.

"Hey-hey!" she answers on the second ring. *"Are you on your way?"*

"Yeah. Do you need anything from the city before I head out?"

"Besides my best friend?" she asks cheerfully.

"Yes, besides her," I laugh.

"Nothing really." She lets out a wistful sigh. *"I was thinking about some baked goodies from that bakery you always rave about, but we have a really good baker in town, and she'd get offended if she sniffs out that I enjoyed imported goods and let my mom know. She always buys 'local.' "*

"If you don't tell her, she won't know."

She starts laughing hysterically. *"You're from a small town, Joz. You should know better."*

"That's true." I scrunch my face. *"I must have forgotten."*

"You have." She laughs again, and her voice becomes muffled. *"Oh, stop it. Wait. I need to finish first."* There's a rustling noise and then a weird, wet sound.

"Is that Ghost?" I ask, assuming her adorable dog is showing her sloppy affection.

"No, it's Mark." She giggles, making me giggle too. But only for a moment.

They just started living together a few months ago, and I'm not sure it's the right move for me to pop up and stay at their place for a few weeks. I know she offered, but I can't shake the feeling that it's not a good idea. I know I'll be imposing even if they don't say anything. Young love needs its own space without spectators.

We say goodbye as she goes to see Mark off, and nerves settle like butterflies in my stomach, refusing to vacate. It's hard not to feel like the new kid at school. I'm so nervous about meeting Alicia for the first time. We've been friends for years but have never actually met face-to-face. Well, besides video chats. Those we do on a regular basis, but it's still not the same. What if we don't have any chemistry and end up not liking each other? I'm not ready to lose my best friend. Some things are better left untouched if they're too good as they are.

How we met is actually quite the story. A few years ago, we both were going through a lot. Both lonely, we sought help in an online community designed for people healing from trauma or suffering from depression to meet others. It was in that community that we met.

Alicia used to be very shy but eventually opened up to me and shared her story, and I shared mine. Since that moment, we've been inseparable, long-distance friends. Recently, after eight years of feeling alone, she found herself a dreamy, perfect firefighter boyfriend. While she used to look so sad whenever we would chat, she glows with happiness now. I can't ask for more for my friend.

So, when I called her the other day saying I accepted Archie's offer to build them a house, she squeaked and offered me a place to stay. I refused at first, but she seemed genuinely offended, so I promised to stay with her for a few weeks until I sorted out my living situation.

My first call before Alicia was to their local bed and breakfast, Dancing Pony, but they were out of rooms. When I told Alicia about that, she laughed and said she'd never seen them with any availability, so I'd better stop wasting time and come stay with them. When I asked her what the point of a bed and breakfast with no vacancy is, she just laughed again, leaving me wondering.

Now that I think of it, a few weeks is too long. I need to hurry up and figure out my living arrangements within days and smoothly remove myself from the premises without making it a big deal.

Anyway, I'm sure I can find some cute—and cheap—little house to rent in that town. I've watched a lot of movies, and there's always a charming little cottage surrounded by trees and hot neighbors around my age.

Relationships are the very last thing on my mind, but a girl can dream, can't she?

Many hours and pee stops later, I hum about scrubs and how they're not good enough for me—maybe a bit too loud and enthusiastic, throwing a middle finger in the air, imagining my jerk of an ex—and don't hear the cop car behind me.

As I yell “Hanging on the passenger side” with all my might, the siren

behind my car blares louder, and I instantly shut up, looking around in fear. I'm not sure how it feels for everyone else, but I spent too many teenage years in the back seat of cop cars due to my negative popularity in high school. So I'm always jittery when I hear a siren, half expecting them to be after me.

This time, they are, indeed, after me. A cop car rides my ass, siren blaring and lights flashing. I quickly lower the volume and slow down, pulling off to the side of the road.

When I come to a full stop, I look at my belongings. They cover every possible window, and I can only see the left side of the windshield ahead of me. Everything else is shrouded. Is that illegal?

The police cruiser pulls up behind me, and although they thankfully turned off the god-awful siren, the lights still flash. I peep out my side mirror at the vehicle, waiting to learn my fate.

I look down at myself, noticing blotches of sweat soaking my shirt, turning it a dark shade of crimson. Particularly under my boobs. When I left New York, I felt sexy but quickly became too hot in the cramped car and abandoned the restrictive leather jacket I threw on in the back seat somewhere between Connecticut and Massachusetts. Now that I think of it, I let my fear of first impressions cloud my judgment. My favorite tight, red shirt and black leather pants are not exactly the comfiest for a road trip.

After what feels like ages, the cop finally decides to leave his cruiser and grace me with his presence. When he carefully shuts the door, I take a second to take him in.

Hot damn.

The man is *fi-i-ine*. The widest shoulders I've ever seen stretch his uniform like nobody's business. His thighs are thick in the best way like he enjoys doing squats with five-hundred-pound weights for breakfast—I'm not sure how that material doesn't give out under the power of his quadriceps or whatever those things are called. He turns to look at the road behind him, and I'm greeted by the most perfect bubble butt on planet Earth. Yeah, the man most definitely does squats. The gun holster on his right thigh squeezes his leg with every step he takes, which tightens his pants even more. Endless possibilities flash through my mind for what's under those pants.

I swallow at the idea of those really *huge* possibilities.

I don't even have a chance to look at his face because I'm too busy ogling his fine physique. Don't get me wrong, I'm used to hot cops walking the

streets of New York, but the graceful swagger of this one makes me believe he can take on a bear with his bare hands and won't double over carrying a thick girl like me.

I must have zoned out imagining the mentioned possibilities—and they look really big up close—because the sudden knock on my window startles me. I blink away the stupor and look at the man.

God damn.

If I thought his butt was fine, it has nothing on his face. His hair is a soft brown color and cut slightly shorter on the side before growing longer on top, slightly tousled. His nose is a bit crooked, probably broken from a few fistfights. Something about his confident stance tells me he's a winner, which only makes him more interesting. One-day scruff covers his square jaw, which is so perfect, it's almost annoying. The same scruff runs down half of his wide neck, and my eyes find his Adam's apple. I've never found an Adam's apple so sexy.

“Sheriff Benson, ma'am.” My eyes drop to his pouty mouth as he speaks. “License, registration, and proof of insurance, please,” he requests in a clipped tone as he fixes his mirrored sunglasses on his nose, not reacting to the flirty smile plastered on my face.

Great, I managed to piss off the local sheriff before I even reached my destination. I subtly look around, trying to figure out how ‘local’ I am and find only mountains. No signs with the name of a town or a road. Nothing. I don't even remember what the last town or turn was because I've been driving for what feels like forever. The GPS on my phone has been frozen too many times to count, so I just gave up, hoping for the best.

Reality smacks me in the face as he loudly clears his throat, his brows raising so high I can see them over the large glasses he's hiding behind. So much for a hot fantasy.

“Sure.” I pull my bag from the passenger seat, awkwardly attempting to dislodge it from the tower of my possessions.

When it's finally in my hands, I pull out my cards and pass them to the angry cop, who's turning sterner by the second. He carefully takes them without touching my fingers and stares at them for a moment before he presses the radio on his shoulder.

Once it beeps, a voice sounds through the receiver. “*Yes, boss.*”

“Jennica,” he starts in that rich voice that might be straight from my midnight fantasies if not for his attitude, “could you please run a license and

plate number for me.”

“*Sure. Go ahead.*”

He repeats the digits from my driver’s license and my plates and releases the radio button.

“You’re far away from home, Ms. Monroe.” I can feel his stare through his glasses, and I bristle at his demeanor, taking offense.

“Is traveling a crime now?” I ask defensively, feeling my hackles rising out of nowhere. I’m cranky. I’m tired. And I need to pee. He really picked the wrong time.

“Traveling is not a crime,” he levels me with a stare, “but driving thirty miles over the speed limit is.”

Oh, crap.

“I wasn’t driving thirty miles over the limit. These roads aren’t even made for that. Neither is my car,” I argue before I can even think.

He lets out a loud sigh and looks up at the sky before speaking again. “Yes, you were.”

His radio chimes in, and the woman’s voice rings out, “*The license and plates are clean. No tickets. No record.*”

“Thanks, Jennica,” he says into the radio as he leans against my car. “Well, you’ll have one now.”

“A record?” My eyes widen—a great start for this new chapter. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“A ticket,” he explains. “You’re a hazard, Ms. Monroe. This is a dangerous road, and you can’t drive that much over the limit. The ticket will be a good lesson for you.”

“Who are you? My fuckin’ daddy to give me life lessons?” I understand what I just said too late because his jaw clamps shut, and his cheeks pinken, likely from anger. This isn’t the way to talk to a police officer, especially when I’m clearly in the wrong. But I’ve been apologizing for everything I’ve ever done all my life, so my fight or flight reaction prevails, pushing my common sense out of the way.

He takes off his glasses and sends me a heavy stare with his serious eyes. They’re pretty. Like oh-my-goodness-take-me-right-here pretty. Rich hazel, surrounded by thick lashes, with that heavy look—they’re *the* definition of bedroom eyes.

“That, Ms. Monroe, would never happen,” he says, totally ruining the moment for me.

I feel his jab in my chest, and before I can stop myself, I strike back. “That, Mr. Sheriff, would not be in the cards even if you asked,” then I level him with a glare of my own and add, “nicely.”

The muscles in his jaw pop from the pressure of squeezing his mouth shut, so I stretch my arm out with an open palm. “Give me my ticket, Sheriff. I’m running late.”

His nostrils flare, and I can see he wants to say something, but instead, he pulls a notebook from his back pocket, scribbles something, and shoves it into my hand.

“Have a good day, ma’am,” he says through gritted teeth as he walks away.

I glance at the side mirror, thinking about how that mouth of his just ruined such a fine ass, and notice that he walks kind of funny now. I even pop my head out the window to see what’s happening. And indeed, he tries to subtly shake his leg. Did he just fart? Disgusting.

But it doesn’t get any better. Looking around, he moves something at his front. I don’t want to think about what sort of STD is giving him an itch, but I spray hand sanitizer onto my driver’s license and hands before I put it back in my wallet. Yikes.

He sits in his car for a few minutes before driving away, not sparing me even one passing look.

I sigh, throw the ticket to the back of the car, and drive off too.

Chapter Five

KENNETH

As I climb into my cruiser, I curse myself with all my might at how I handled the situation. What am I? A fourteen-year-old boy who bit his tongue when he saw an attractive woman?

And damn, how fine that woman was.

I lean my head back and groan, remembering how her playful smile changed into an angry sneer the second I opened my damn mouth. Her eyes shot sharp daggers at me, aiming to kill, not wound. Her chest rose, stretching the thin material of her shirt, those tiny buttons threatening to pop every time she took a breath. At one point, I even caught a glimpse of her lacy red bra—a total misstep on my end, considering I shouldn't have even been looking there in the first place.

I remember how her full lips thinned when she got pissed, firing back at me.

And how my traumatized cock rose to life when she said '*daddy*.' I knew at that moment I had to get out of there because A, this shit hurts, and B, these pants are far too tight not to be embarrassing. What's wrong with me? I'm turning thirty-nine this year. I should be able to control my dick.

But it becomes clearer and clearer the more I remember her angry eyes and tight, black curls that my dick has other plans. It's getting so painful that I have to unzip my pants. Such an embarrassment—if someone saw me right

now, I'd be out of my job in a heartbeat. Dang it, if I saw someone sitting by the side of a road with their junk out, I'd arrest them right away for indecent exposure. I don't tolerate that.

Feeling like the worst hypocrite on the planet, I hit the gas and drive away, trying hard not to look at the beautiful, angry woman in her toy car whose scolding gaze follows me until her metal tin disappears in the rearview mirror.

The farther I drive, the harder my dick becomes. And more painful. After the stunt those assholes Archie and TJ pulled, I've been suffering for a few days now.

And I'm scared. I haven't been able to get hard since that day, and I thought they broke my equipment. The fact that this is happening would almost be relieving if it wasn't so excruciating.

By the time I reach the station, I'm calm and able to push the thoughts about the beautiful woman who was just passing through to the back of my mind.

I've got other things to worry about.

"Hey, boss," Jennica, my most loyal and only employee, says from her desk. "We just got the call from your favorite bar." She wiggles her brows, knowing how much I'm starting to hate the place, and I roll my eyes. "Our friend is there. Again."

Since Freya, my brother's wife, opened a PTSD center on the outskirts of the town, there've been more and more issues. Not all of the patients in her clinic are mellow. A lot of them tend to get into trouble, and we've only got one decent place where they can do that and release some steam. Cat and Stallion, the local bar.

But even her patients don't stir up as much shit as Jake Attleborough.

I sigh and lift my eyes to the ceiling, asking anyone that will listen to me to find Jake crap to do outside of his new favorite activity—drinking. Jake used to be my deputy, the fuckin' best shot in the state—even better than myself and Alex, who spent years in the Navy—and now he's a pitiful shadow of the man he used to be. No one knows what happened to him, but somehow, he lost his way and got into a bunch of trouble with everyone. A few years ago, he saved Freya by shooting her ex, and since then, something has changed in him. Some people said it started later, but I saw him change overnight. He was always a little annoying, but he became angry and violent.

A few months later, he made it his mission to bully a local, Kayla, who

happened to be in love with Justin, Jake's brother. After a few stunts he pulled, I had to force him to go on leave because that kind of person shouldn't be given the power a badge can have. I expected it to be temporary, but he never came back. Now, all he does is drink and get into trouble.

"Want me to go?" Jennica asks, looking too hopeful that I'll refuse.

"No, it's fine," I say with a sigh as I turn right back around. I feel responsible for Jake because I was the one forcing him to go on leave. And I'm the one who didn't catch Freya's ex in time—I'd heard rumors about someone new sniffing around town but never paid it too much attention because I was busy reconnecting with my brother Alex, Freya's husband. I feel as if this is my personal problem.

"Suit yourself," she agrees enthusiastically, not even a little bit upset about me going instead.

When I'm almost out the door, she yells, "Boss, did you check the resumes?"

"Not yet," I reply with a wince.

She groans. Loudly. "Please, do it when you're back. We're in desperate need of another set of hands. My hubby is going insane with my crazy hours. I haven't gotten laid in weeks."

"That's TMI, Jennica." I shake my head, trying to erase the image from my head. "Totally TMI."

"Your fault for keeping me here all day every day." She shrugs nonchalantly. "They're on your table. I'll withhold your coffee until you take a look at them."

"I will, and you will not." I nod and walk out, knowing her threats are empty—she'd kill me first if I went without coffee for a day.

The drive from the station to Cat and Stallion is five minutes, and by the time I'm there and getting out of the car, I hear a loud argument happening inside. I recognize one of the voices—Jake. Of course.

Rushing inside, I find a man in his mid-twenties on the floor, clutching his arm to his chest, and Jake, perched on a bar stool, calmly sipping from a bottle of beer. It took me maybe three seconds flat to make it from the car to here, and the fight's already over.

"Sheriff!" Rory, the bartender, calls out from the bar as she fills a tall glass. "Take your boy outta here."

I nod and walk toward Jake.

"I'm no one's boy," he sneers.

“Amen to that.” I sit next to him. “But you’ve had enough of that, and it’s not even evening.” I point at his bottle. “I can drive you home.”

“I’ve got my own car.” He takes another slow sip.

“I know, but I’m driving you.” Standing up, I lightly smack him on the back, keeping my hand there. “Let’s go.”

He looks at me, his eyes narrowed and threatening. “I’m not going anywhere. And get your hands off me.”

Taking a deep, calming breath, I move my hand to his shoulder and squeeze. “You’ve had enough for today, Jake. Let’s go.”

His cloudy gaze turns challenging. “Or what?”

I squeeze my jaw tight and hiss, “Let’s. Go.”

He stares at me while he grinds his molars.

I put more force into my squeeze, hoping he’ll listen—I don’t want to make a scene here and bring his reputation down even more than it already is. And it’s not because we both know I’ll put him face to the floor in seconds, but it’s more so that he won’t go down without a scene and a few nasty phrases. People always remember that, even if you forget. They remember all the nasty shit you’ve ever said. And locals can sure hold grudges that aren’t so easy to shake off.

Still watching me with hateful eyes, he’s clearly contemplating if he should go the easy or the hard way, but finally downs the rest of his beer, drops cash on the counter, and stands up.

Passing me, he sends me a glare and walks out the door.

I glance at Rory. “What happened?”

“The dude,” she points at the guy who clutches his arm but has managed to peel himself off the ground, “said something that got Jake off the rails in a second.”

“Do you know what?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “But I’ll have to ban him soon if he won’t get his shit together. He’s scaring customers.”

I lift a brow and pointedly look around—it’s a fucking bar. Half of the reason people come here is for the fights. Rory rolls her eyes and goes to the back room, dismissing me.

I look at the guy and quickly assess him. A typical frat boy. They usually like to run their mouths, but it’s no reason to attack anyone. Jake is in trouble this time. I don’t think I’ll be driving him *home*.

“Hey,” I tell him. “Do you need an ambulance?” I nod at his arm.

He looks down and, as if just remembering that he's still clutching it, drops it to his side. "Nah, I'm fine. Just bumped into something. That's all."

I level him with a stare. "Are you sure? That," I nod at the arm again, "didn't look like nothing."

"Yeah, sir. Officer. Sheriff, I mean." He forces a smile. "I'm good."

"Do you want to press charges against that something you bumped into?"

His eyes dart around, and I soften my expression, understanding that I'm coming off like a small-town, asshole cop who chooses to protect locals. The urban legend states that cops in small towns will do everything to protect people who live there. That part of the legend is true. But we also protect those who come into town for a quick visit or a week. Who deliver our packages. Who help maintain our systems when we don't have qualified people. Those who are not qualified as well. We protect everyone—*that's the part* the legend got wrong.

"It's okay if you do. That's your right. *Something* hurt you, and you have the right to press charges."

"No." He shakes his head. "I'm fine. Really. I'm sure it's not going to happen again."

I pull my card from my pocket. "Give me a call if you change your mind."

"Will do." He nods and dismissively pushes the card into his back pocket. Part of me is happy that he chooses to let Jake down easily; part of me wishes he would teach him a lesson. But part of me knows that Jake is currently in a bad place, and it wouldn't do him any good to kick him when he's down.

"Alright," I respond and go outside, half expecting Jake to bolt. Rory has his keys—I don't even need to ask about that. She's good at keeping drunk people away from the wheel and saving us all a lot of trouble. I should probably hire her.

To my surprise, Jake's waiting for me outside, leaning on the driver's side of my cruiser. Once upon a time, he drove one and was a good cop until he let his personal demons come to work with him.

"Are you charging me with anything?"

"No, but—"

"Cool." He pushes away from the car and walks away.

He's not my problem. Not mine.

But he kind of is.

"Cool. COOL!" suddenly comes a loud voice from behind my back. Who

the hell is being so damn sarcastic right now?

Turning around, I find no one. Absolutely no one.

“Cool!” the voice says, making my eyes dart around. “Cool!”

Finally, I glance down. Right in front of me stands a huge ass bird. A parrot. The size of a small chicken, it spreads its wings with a loud “cool.”

I shut my eyes just for a second just so the fog can be cleared and the bird will disappear because, surely, there is no way a huge ass bird is talking to me in the parking lot of Cat and Stallion.

And, of course, when I open them, the bird is not there.

I look around, assessing if someone has seen my standoff with what apparently appears to be a ghost bird, but find no one. So I shake my head and walk to the car.

Chapter Six

JOSIE

A mile down the road from where I was pulled over sits a large wooden sign that reads, *Welcome to Little Hope, ME, where something magic is in the water*. Turns out, I was just outside of town, which means the sheriff must have been the local one.

Just great. I managed to piss off the local authority, who can make my life miserable when I need to pull a permit or do something legal. I'm still not sure how the local system works and need to look into it—some towns need Town Hall approval; some require the police department to sign off. I'm not above buying a few presents if it gets the job done—after all, this is how old ties work in this business. The problem is I don't have any ties in this town, or in this state even, but I'm full of determination to make them.

I'm from a small town myself and know how they operate—a tight bunch that isn't very welcoming to newcomers. No matter how friendly they seem. They might smile and wish me a good day, but when it comes to protecting their old, established ways of living, they turn ruthless.

Groaning at the unknown—and at myself—I pull to the side of the road at the address in my GPS. It's a cute one-story house, very well maintained from the outside. The gutters have been recently replaced and have a downspout away from the building so the water won't ruin the foundation or the holly bushes planted under the windows. Looks like a very handy person

lives here, and I know it's not Alicia because she doesn't know shit about keeping a building standing—the last time she tried doing something around the house, she nearly burned it to the ground.

I climb out of the car, and before I can dissect every detail of the building, the door opens, and a huge German shepherd runs outside. Nearly knocking me down, he starts jumping and giving me sloppy kisses everywhere he can reach, leaving wet splotches over my already sweaty shirt.

“Ghost, chill out,” a loud, commanding voice thunders through the street, and the dog instantly backs away, wagging his tail. “Hey, sorry about that,” he directs at me. “You must be Josie?”

I look at the giant on the porch. His light brown hair is pulled into a low, messy man-bun at his nape, leaving a few wayward strands sticking out on the sides. His beard is thick, and his eyes are welcoming.

“Yeah, that's me.” I smile back. “And this must be the famous Ghost?”

“I don't know about famous,” the man who's clearly Mark, Alicia's boyfriend, says. “And I have no idea what happened to him. He usually doesn't behave like a little puppy.”

“That's okay.” I crouch next to the dog and start talking to him in a soothing voice. “You're just happy to see me, right? I'm happy to see you too.” His tongue plops to the side, and he comes closer to me. “You're such a good boy!” I scratch behind his ears, and he pushes his wet nose into my red shirt, leaving yet another wet splotch. I don't think my ‘power shirt’ will survive today, but it's totally worth it. “Yes, you are.”

Ghost gives me another sloppy kiss and pulls away.

“Huh,” Mark says, clearly skeptical.

I look up at the massive man in front of me. “What?”

“He's mean.”

“Who? This adorable, handsome man?” I pet his sweet muzzle again. We always had dogs growing up, and when I moved to New York, I couldn't have one because I was never really home.

“Yes, that adorable asshole is usually a mean little fucker.”

“No, he's not.” And as proof, Ghost bumps into me, looking for affection.

“Josie!” A loud voice cries out my name, and I look up. Alicia runs out the door and rushes right into me. Enveloping me into a totally unexpected hug, she squeezes me with all her might, and my face gets squashed into her generous boobs. The woman is tall, the perfect match for a mammoth like Mark. I can already imagine their gorgeous babies and how I'll be spoiling

them because I'm officially forcing myself into their family. I'll be the 'fun aunt.'

"Hey, Alicia," I muffle into her chest while I'm trying to collect myself. And it's not about being hugged, no, it's about being hugged *by Alicia*. She doesn't do physical affection, and for good reason, but I guess she's healed more than I expected. A wave of gratitude to Mark washes over me, relaxing my muscles, and I finally find myself hugging Alicia back without fear of spooking her.

I was worried that meeting her for the first time in person would be weird, but it feels like we've known each other forever.

"C'mon in!" She leads me inside.

"Ladies, I'll walk with Ghost so you can catch up. We both need to stretch our legs a bit."

"Thank you, Yeti. Love you." Open affection in Alicia's voice gives me hope for humanity, and I just know I'm going to love him no matter what. I still can't get used to her calling him Yeti though, but to each their own.

"He is *it* for you, Alicia."

"He is." She glances at the door as if expecting him to walk back inside, and I instantly feel uncomfortable—I knew I should have booked something for myself, and now I'm imposing on their quiet, happy life. "I'm so happy to see you!"

As Mark promised, he walks Ghost for a good hour before they both come back. Mark gives Alicia a quick kiss, tells me how glad he is to finally meet me, and retires to their room since he has another shift tomorrow. He mentions something about doing half-shifts for some reason, but I'm too exhausted to understand. So I just bid him goodnight with a tired smile.

Ghost stays with us and alternates his attention between me and Alicia. We eat and talk, then talk some more, drink wine, and eat again. By the time I'm able to lie flat, it's almost one in the morning, and my vision is blurry. I strained them driving the whole day, and now, after the wine, I'm only half coherent.

While we were talking, Alicia made a bed for me on the couch in the living room since they only have one bedroom. I agreed to stay here before I knew there would be no place to sleep. Alicia doesn't seem to mind, but I do.

As I lie on the couch under my heavy blanket that Mark brought in from the car and stare at the ceiling, I think about getting out of here as fast as I can. And it's not that I'm not grateful, because I am, but me being here is

totally ruining the cozy vibe they have going on. I can tell. Yes, Mark is welcoming and polite, and Alicia seems happy, but they also seem a bit uncomfortable due to the lack of space with three people here.

I'll call the bed and breakfast tomorrow after I meet with Archie and see his new home.

Chapter Seven

J OSIE

It took me forty minutes to find the place. Good thing Alicia gave me a cup of coffee to go, or I'd be extremely unpleasant by the time I found this place in the middle of nowhere.

My employer was already here, leaning on the side of his black Range Rover.

"Archie," I say with a sigh after walking around the outside of the house. "I can't save *this*." I point at the half-ruined *thing* in front of us. But *half* doesn't even begin to describe it. In fact, it's more than half. The building is about ninety-nine percent gone. It's just walls and a roof from what I can see.

"You can," he replies stubbornly. His thick brows draw together. If it weren't for him getting aggravated, I'd say he looks hilarious. Angriiness doesn't become him.

"It's easier and quite frankly," I wince, imagining the zeros he'll need for this project, "cheaper to start from ground zero rather than fixing it."

"Josie." His voice turns pleading as he starts blinking fast like a cartoon character. "Pretty please."

"Archie," I call out to the logical part of his brain that's in there somewhere, using my best teacher voice—the very same one my middle school teacher used when she thought I was being unreasonable. "I'm telling you, fixing this house will take longer than you might think, and you're

telling me you want to be living in it in *August*.” I shake my head to prove my point. “It’s impossible, man. It’s the first week of May—totally not enough time. Plus, what you’re asking for is hard. Do you see the door?” I point at the gorgeous, arched door, most likely made of oak and woven with steel. “That’s old. I’d be a monster if I replaced it with a new one. I’m serious. I’d kill myself. I won’t even wait for anyone else to do it. I can’t find someone who will do the work for me here because *that* woodwork requires the skill set of a jeweler.” I throw my hands up in exasperation. “Look around, Archie. Should I ask a squirrel or maybe a moose?”

He lets out a loud snort and tells me, “You’d be surprised.”

I scrunch my nose, not understanding what he’s talking about.

He coughs into his fist, obviously hiding a laugh, and sobers up, glancing around sheepishly. We’re on the side of a midsize field. And I’m talking in Maine sizes. Everything is ginormous. I swear, the tallest pine tree on the planet grows in the backyard of this not-so-fine house. The porch is lopsided with decaying steps. In fact, only about three of the steps are even still safe to walk on. You’d have to jump to reach the top. The roof has visible holes in it. And those are the minor repairs. Half the vintage windows are broken. It will take forever to find replacement glass because you can’t just do an easy reconstruction of a place like that—it’s like placing a band-aid on a broken arm.

I’d have to gut the inside if they want to have heat during the brutal Maine winters. That is if they want to keep their toes attached. But while doing that, I still have to keep everything that’s original intact. You either bring a place like this back to its original glory and charm or bulldoze the crap out of it and build a modern building with modern things like AC and central heating. Anything in between is a crime. I’m not even talking about permits—if the locals deem the house ‘historic,’ we are screwed because they will not let us make any visual changes.

“Wait a minute,” he says and pulls his phone out. He types for a few seconds before he looks at the screen, the sound of ringing blaring from the speaker.

“*Hey, babe!*” a sultry voice responds, clearly thinking Archie is alone, and I instantly feel out of place. The way she says his name has my cheeks turning red.

“Hey, Lei,” Archie turns into a big, tattooed marshmallow in front of my very own eyes, and I bite my lip, trying not to smile, even though it warms

my heart seeing this sudden change. “I need your help.”

“*What’s up? I’ve got a minute.*” Her voice becomes muffled as she speaks to someone on the other end of the line, and Archie turns to me.

“Leila is on a business trip in Florida. She’s a journalist.” His voice is full of pride, and I can’t contain my smile anymore.

“*What happened? Is everything okay?*” Leila asks worriedly.

“Yes, Lei. Don’t worry,” he calms her down and flips his phone at me.

Now I stare at a very gorgeous—and young, *very young*, not at all fitting the sexy siren voice I just heard—woman with long ginger hair and cute freckles. I don’t know what else to do, so I wave and say, “Hi.”

“*Oh, Josie. Hi!*” She instantly brightens up. “*Archie’s been talking about your magic touch and said you are a wizard who can make our dreams come true. I was hoping you’d make our dream home come true too. What do you think?*” That was totally below the belt. Her voice is so full of hope that my heart sinks into my stomach. I give Archie a stink-eye because she’s clearly a targeted attack on my conscience.

He smiles smugly and flips the phone to himself. His face instantly changes into the saddest one on the planet, and he tells her, “Josie recommends we get rid of the house and build a new one.”

“*Oh.*” Her tone is sad. Very sad. Rehearsed sad.

After that, Archie flips the screen at me, and they both make these puppy eyes at me that I can’t resist. Leila’s lower lip even trembles a little.

“Fine!” I throw my hands in the air. “You tricksters.” I point an accusing finger at them. “It’s your money and your time. Don’t expect August, though. It’s not happening so soon.”

“We’re okay with that.” They both start nodding quickly, agreeing to everything, suddenly not so sad after all.

I send them both an evil eye. “That was not fair.”

“*And totally rehearsed.*” Leila laughs. “*I gotta go but I’ll see you soon. I guess you’ll be staying? I have a feeling you will be.*” Her sincere, welcoming smile warms my heart.

“I guess,” I reply. I’m a bit reserved because I’m not quite sure I’ll be able to pull this off with the locals, but I wave goodbye.

She waves back and hangs up.

“That was not fair,” I complain.

“In love and war.” He puts his phone into his pocket and spreads his arms wide, not seeming even a bit remorseful.

I turn my attention back to the house, looking at it from a different angle. And from this angle, the place needs even more work. Wincing at all the work I'm going to have to do, including finding and fixing all the original details, I make my way toward the building.

"Here are the keys!" Archie jogs toward me with an outstretched arm.

I stop and turn to him with a quirked brow. "Do you think I'll need them?"

He glances at the house, and his cheeks pinken. "Fair. Still, take the keys—we don't want problems with the local police." He chuckles, sounding vague. I hope he hasn't heard about my run-in with one of those on my way here. Otherwise, he might fire me on the spot. And I need this job.

Narrowing my eyes, I take the keys. "We sure don't."

"Cool." He nods and looks at my car. "I hate to say it, but you might need a different ride around here."

My hackles rise. "What's wrong with mine?"

He scratches the back of his head. "It's cute and all that, but it's—" He cuts himself off, looking for the right words, but I'm on a war path.

"What but?"

"But it's cute, and that's the problem. You know?" His eyes go round as if I'm supposed to understand what he means.

"I don't." My eyes narrow further.

"It's not for local roads," he explains calmly, flinching a little. "You'll get stuck somewhere after one rain."

"I'll manage."

"Josie," he sighs.

"I'll manage," I repeat firmly, and he gives up.

"Okay." He throws his hands in the air defensively. "Call me when you get stuck."

I send a scolding stare his way, and he instantly fixes his mistake. "*If*. If you get stuck." His eyes twinkle with humor, and I can't help but smile.

"I will."

I won't. I'd rather dig my car out of the ditch with my own nails than accept defeat and hear everyone's opinion that my baby is weird and unreliable. It's gotten me this far, hasn't it?

We go inside—carefully stepping over missing pieces of stairs—and talk over the details of what he envisions, and I write everything down. When Leila comes back, she's supposed to tell me if he missed anything, but he

said they've been talking about it for a long time, so he's pretty sure he got everything.

In my eyes, the picture is wrong. Even though the house is charming. Like truly charming. Originally built in the late seventeenth hundreds and with the right wing extended about eighty years—give or take—later, according to the building style and materials, the place is truly historic. With no decent plumbing, or electricity, or anything really. The last occupants lived here forty years ago, and even two years without proper upkeep can put a strain on any building, let alone one like this.

As we walk to the second floor, Archie nearly bumps his head on the ceiling—those first buildings were built to stay here forever with solid structures, strong spirits, and awfully low ceilings. He definitely needs to bend his head just so he doesn't bruise his forehead. I quirk a brow at his struggle, but he just shrugs with a lopsided smile.

I mentally roll my eyes at his stubbornness because taking the roof off and raising the second-floor ceiling doesn't scare him. It scares me though. It truly does. I wonder how the local law will look at us changing the appearance of a historic home like this.

As Archie continues talking about their ideas, my forehead beads with sweat, and I attempt to remember if any previous vendors have similar materials that might work here and wonder if they'd even be willing to work with me. And how I can raise the ceiling without ruining the structure and the charm. And how I can make central AC and heating here a reality. Or how I can make anything happen, really.

But it's a challenge, and I love it. And Archie and Leila love the place. He keeps referring to it as 'home,' and I've totally given up on the idea of convincing him to build something new. It's their home, and I'm sure as hell I'll be able to restore it for them. However long it takes.

If I find vendors. And contractors. And electricians. And plumbers. And someone who works with wood carving because I can't replace this original woodwork with a clear conscience. It's inhumane.

Thirty minutes later, Archie drives off, leaving me with his keys, a black credit card, and a house falling apart at my feet.

Chapter Eight

KENNETH

I lean my head against the back of the car seat, enjoying these last few minutes of peace before someone calls to ask for another favor. The heavens just poured down on the Maine soil, and all the unpaved side roads have turned to mud. Locals are usually able to get themselves out of it if they're dumb enough to get stuck in the first place, but newfound tourists, PTSD patients, relatives, and everyone else in between are not that accustomed to the local weather, so I expect a shitstorm to hit pretty soon.

This reminds me that I need to hire someone who can help around the office. Picking up calls and dealing with paperwork isn't too hard, but it's a lot stacked on top of everything Jennica and I have to deal with at the moment.

I grab my coffee from the console when the radio comes alive.

"Boss."

"Yes, Jennica," I reply with a sigh, imagining the amount of coffee I'll need to get through today.

"*We've got a call about a woman stuck on the road,*" she says, the radio crackling.

Here we go.

"Where?"

"*It's on the—*" The radio goes silent and comes back alive a few seconds

later. *“It’s on the road to the old Ghost House.”* She sounds as confused as I feel.

“What?”

“Yeah. It’s there.”

“Is it Leila?” I ask, surprised that someone would go to that ruined building my sister and her fiancé bought recently. Unless it’s a squatter.

“Don’t you think I’d know if it was Leila?” she scoffs, her voice abrasive.

“Alright.” I don’t respond to her jab because it’s rhetorical. “I’ll go check it out.”

Taking a sip of my coffee, I look at the time. It’s way past three. Jennica will be leaving soon, but my hours never stop. People knock on my door at ungodly hours. I’m sure they do the same to her—Jennica is one of the most patient people I’ve ever met, but even she has a breaking point.

She’s right, we need extra help. Especially now. When Jake was at the station, he was fast and efficient, and I could rely on him. I thought we had it all figured out, and he’d eventually take my place because the kid’s got some natural talent for problem-solving and leadership. I still believe it, even after all the stunts he’s pulled. It’d be hard to prove it to anyone else, though.

What the fuck happened to him?

“Boss,” comes the radio again.

“Yes,” I reply tiredly.

“The power is off on Pines Street.”

“Do we have someone to send there?”

“No, because you haven’t hired anyone,” comes her snarky reply. *“The power company is on the way, and I’ll drive over to check on it.”*

“Thanks, Jennica. You can leave after.”

“I can’t leave you like that,” she says, clearly not happy the words are coming out of her mouth. *“I’ll keep the fort down here while you run the town. But you’ll look into candidates. Deal?”*

“Deal,” I agree with sincere gratitude. “Thank you, Jennica.”

“Sure. Let me know if you need help there.” And the radio goes dead.

I swear I’m hiring the first eligible candidate in the resume pile.

I drive to the abandoned building the locals call ‘the Ghost House.’ It’s been abandoned for many years and makes weird, swishing noises whenever the wind hits it. It’s pretty far back into the woods, but locals who live close enough hear the echo through the forest on quiet nights.

I wonder for the thousandth time why Leila and Archie bought it. I

thought I knew them pretty well, and they both love the wonders of the twenty-first century, but when Archie heard about the house from Leila, he was set on seeing the local wonder.

The damn thing is pretty much a pyramid, it's so mysterious.

But Archie wants to be a local very badly.

We tracked down the owner so he'd give them permission to see the place. Even though there were no locks on the doors, I wasn't planning on letting anyone trespass. Even my own sister and soon-to-be brother-in-law.

When they saw the place, they both came back with stars in their eyes and the crazy idea of restoring this disaster. They didn't tell me how, and I wasn't asking. It's their business, after all. Even though I'm a bit curious to see who will be doing the renovations. We have two local contractors, and this job is way above their pay grade. Maybe they'll hire some construction company from Springfield? Or maybe Archie will bring someone fancy from Boston. That might work. They'll need a lot of manpower if they plan on finishing renovations in this century.

The farther down the road I drive, the muddier it becomes. Even my cruiser drifts a couple of times. If Leila wants to live here eventually, Archie'd better fix this damn road because my sister won't be driving through this death path even once.

Soon, in the opening right around the corner, I see an already familiar car stuck on the way toward the Ghost House. A very weird-looking red tin that fits maybe one person and a ton of crap. I remember that person.

I slow down to a stop when I reach the car and slowly climb outside. Carefully walking toward it, I peek inside. The same woman with shiny, black hair sits in the driver's seat, clutching the wheel with white knuckles and murmuring something under her breath. She looks shaken.

"Ma'am, are you okay?" I ask carefully.

She doesn't respond, so I ask louder, "Ma'am?"

Her head whips toward me with a startled cry. "Where the fuck did you come from?" She looks around with wide eyes, her pupils blown.

"My cruiser is parked behind you." I point in the direction of where I left it. "Are you okay?"

"Yes." She releases the wheel. "Why are you here?"

"Hmm." I clear my throat. "You called us."

"I didn't call the cops." She snorts. "None of you can be trusted," she adds under her breath, but I still hear. It wasn't meant as a personal jab, but it

feels like one anyway. Especially after our last encounter. Yes, I was a dick, but she was the one who was speeding on a dangerous road, and I had helped with a car accident just an hour before. I didn't need to witness another one.

"Who did you call?"

"A mechanic."

Justin, my brother's friend, owns the only mechanic shop in town, and he's currently out of town with Kayla, his fiancé, for some tattoo competition. So that leaves Paul at the garage, Justin's right hand, who's probably shagging up with Marina, the local diner owner, and Kayla's pretty much adoptive mother. That's a small town for ya.

I'm sure this lady called him, and he dumped it on Jennica, who dumped it on me. Just my life. I sigh into the sky.

"The mechanic is out of town, so they called us," I explain patiently.

"You only have one mechanic?" She looks at me quizzically.

"Small town." I shrug, not bothering to explain further. "Ma'am, you need to leave the car so I can try to get it out."

"What are you going to do, Sheriff?" She quirks a brow. "Press the gas pedal? I've already done that." She turns toward the road, rolling her eyes.

I sigh—*again*—a bit louder this time and try reasoning with her. "It's protocol." I don't add that it's also common sense.

"Protocol my ass," she mumbles and opens the door.

The first thing that I see as she gets out is her shoe. A black, shiny, sharp-nosed shoe polished to a level of perfection military guys would envy. My eyes freeze at the damn thing. I've never had a shoe fetish, so who the fuck knows what's happening. When she stands to her full height, her eyes are level with my chest. But her defiant chin pointed upward and straight shoulders make her somewhat taller. She has bright, shiny, red pants that match her car, tightly hugging her luscious thighs, and a black, loose sweater hanging off one shoulder, revealing the lacy strap of a black bra.

When my eyes adjust to her unexpected beauty, she does the unspeakable—she bends over and sticks the top half of her body inside the car, trying to grab something from the loaded passenger side, her back arched, her lower half directly in my line of vision. And what a half it is.

My dick cries out in pain as it stirs in my pants. I squeeze my jaw shut, annoyed with myself at the inappropriate response and at her for causing it in the first place. When she finally fully emerges from the car, I'm standing in front of her with a boner that itches like crazy. Scratching my dick probably

won't be the smartest idea now, so I try to discreetly shift my legs to offer the poor fucker some relief.

Turns out, it's not so discreet after all because I see the exact moment she notices it—her eyes widen just as her face twists in disgust. She backs away a touch and crosses her arms over her chest.

Great. Now she thinks I'm a pervert.

I walk past her—not a difficult task since she's giving a wide berth—and climb into her car. And I mean 'climb.' The seat is so close to the wheel I can't even fit one of my legs. I push it all the way back and still can barely squeeze in. I have to bend my neck at an unnatural angle, hoping it will return to normal when I'm done.

The car is junk, and I mean it. Every single surface is covered with some sort of bag, package, or something else entirely. There's even a half-dead cactus in a small pot. Which spawns my next question: what is she doing here with all this stuff?

I attempt a couple of tries forward and reverse while my knees pretty much push into my nose, but the car is stuck. *Great.* She came here in a rear-wheel drive car. It won't be a problem to pull it with my cruiser, but I don't want to leave half of its carcass in here, so I climb out and walk to the nearest bush. Breaking thick twigs off the evergreens, I head back to the car and throw them under the tires.

She stands to the side, watching me warily. By now, the situation in my pants has been resolved. To be honest, it was resolved the moment I saw her disgusted face. I'm the local law, a person who's supposed to take care of the local citizens, even the ones just passing through. I can't make anyone feel uncomfortable in my presence. That's not why I'm here.

Even though I wouldn't mind her being a bit happier seeing me...

Fuck. *Fuck!* I forcefully shake my head, trying to will the lower part of my body to behave.

"I'll go get my car," I tell her as I walk toward my cruiser.

Backing it up in front of her metal tin, I hook it up to mine.

"Put your car in drive and press the gas pedal just a little when I start pulling."

"Okay." She scurries inside, thankfully not arguing with me this time.

She's out of the mud on the first try. When I see that she stopped and shifted into park, I go to unhook her car and put my gear back in my trunk. Then I walk to her and lean toward the passenger side, gesturing for her to

roll the window down.

“Thank you,” she says quietly, giving me a small, sincere smile for the first time. It makes her appear younger, and if not for the driver’s license I’ve seen, I’d be treading very carefully.

I just nod and ask, “What are you doing here?”

“I’m going somewhere.” Her chin lifts up.

“Where exactly are you going?” I pointedly look around—we’re surrounded by trees with a visible opening far ahead of us. Where the Ghost House is.

“Did I do something wrong?” She presses her lips so tightly I can barely see them.

“I need to know where you’re going.”

“Why? Is this road private property?” Her little nostrils flare, making her look like an angry chipmunk.

“No,” I say through gritted teeth because I can’t argue with that—the road is *not* private property, but the land where the house stands *is*. “But there is nothing around here to be interested in.”

“There’s something around here I’m very interested in. So are you, if I’m correct.” Her right brow lifts suggestively, and I instantly back down, feeling caught.

“I don’t know what you’re insinuating, ma’am. But you need to turn around, it’s not safe here.”

She mumbles under her breath—quietly—but I still hear it, “Fuckin’ good boy complex, so proper and prim.”

“What?” I ask, my nostrils flaring with fury.

“Nothing, Sheriff,” she replies with a wide, plastic smile. “Thank you so much for your help, but I should be on my way.”

“Where are you going?” I ask as I grip the edge of her window, surely not expecting her to do something stupid.

But she does. The sexy minx hits the gas and drives off, the rear of her car swerving a bit, making me jump out of the way. She’s a fucking psycho! In my town!

I run to my cruiser and follow her.

“Boss,” the radio comes alive.

Not now.

“Yes, Jennica,” I reply anyway.

“There is a fight at Cat and Stallion. How far are you?”

As usual, the timing is perfect. Just perfect. “I’m still on the road with the stuck car.”

“Okay, I’ll check it out.”

“Be safe.”

“Always am.”

The radio hums and goes silent. I feel bad for sending her to resolve a fight, but I can never say it to her—Jennica wants me to treat her like any other cop, but I grew up in a small town, and a woman is still a woman, even if she’s wearing a uniform. And besides that, her husband will skin me alive if she ever comes home with a shiner under her eyes. I wouldn’t blame him. So I usually go to cases like that myself or send Jake. Well, used to send. But now I have to chase after a crazy fugitive on the muddy road instead of dealing with other problems.

There is no way she doesn’t see me, but she doesn’t take her foot off the pedal. Swerving every so often, she keeps driving ahead. I can press the gas harder, but she’ll press it too, and I don’t want her to end up in a ditch. I wonder where she’s going other than to prove me right by being a squatter in my sister’s ruined house.

And right on cue, we enter the opening in the woods. The gravel clacks under the tires as the car slows down.

The crazy lady hits the brakes only when she’s almost *on* the porch. Her car screeches, gravel shooting up behind it. She jumps out of her tin and rushes inside the building, jumping over broken steps. Her ass jiggles in her tight, red pants every time her foot hits the ground, making my jaw squeeze tighter.

I park the cruiser, rush inside, and find her in the kitchen, clutching her phone in her hands and trying to press buttons.

When she sees me, she drops her phone on the floor and jumps back.

“You’re trespassing now!” She points her sharp, red-tipped finger at me. “Where is your warrant?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” My forehead wrinkles. “You just broke in to this house.”

“I didn’t break in to anything. I work here. I have the keys!” she shouts back.

That makes me pause. “What?”

“I have the keys,” she repeats quieter.

“I heard that,” I reply, annoyed as I stare at her, waiting for her to crack.

“You said you work here. How?”

“I’m a designer. The owners hired me to fix the place,” she explains, picking her phone up from the floor and eyeing me warily.

“Huh.” Interesting, because I sure as fuck don’t know anything about that, and I know everything about my town. My friend and my sister sure would have told me if they hired someone to fix their fucking place.

“Huh?” She looks at me as if I’m a dumb fuck. “That’s all you gotta say? You scared me shitless, and all you say is ‘huh’?”

I clench my jaw, trying not to aggravate her by saying the wrong thing. I don’t know how unstable this lady is, but she sure can’t be trusted.

“Look,” I throw my hands in the air in surrender. “You have all this stuff in your car, and you were trying to escape me on this damn muddy, dead-end road. What else was I supposed to think?”

She’s stewing in her anger but doesn’t say anything. I can practically see steam coming out of her ears. “How about ‘Hey, this lady’s driving home, let her be?’”

“But I knew you weren’t driving home. This is my town, and I know everyone.”

“Your town. Here we go.” She snaps her fingers with a look of total disgust on her face. “Cops in small towns always think everything belongs to them and they’re the head of everything. Cops, mayors, and all that shit.” Her eyes look to the side angrily as if reliving some painful memory.

When her darkened eyes return to me, I somehow feel like she’s not talking about me. Well, not only about me anyway. She doesn’t look like someone from a small town. Quite the opposite. She looks like a shark from New York, if not for all the junk in her car.

“You’re the law and the order,” she keeps on going.

In other circumstances, I’d let it slide, but she irks me. I’m getting mad just looking at her. Her rapidly rising chest draws my attention too often. Her narrowed eyes are lined with a black catlike wing. Her lips are pressed tight. Everything makes me mad.

So I stride toward her and point my finger at her face.

“You’re a squatter until I talk to the owners.”

“I’m not,” she spits back.

“Yes, you are. Maybe where you came from, it’s normal to invade someone else’s house, but here, in this small town,” I say mockingly, “we respect each other’s privacy.”

“Yeah?” She cocks a hip and glares at me with an open challenge. “Then respect mine,” with that, she presses her nail into my chest, “and get the hell out.”

“Or what?” I lean closer, breathing like an enraged bull.

“Or you’ll find out a few tricks I learned from the place I came from,” she hisses into my face, rising on her tippytoes so she can get closer.

In fact, she’s so close I can smell her fruity shampoo and see the tiny specks in her gray eyes.

“And what tricks are those?” I challenge back, completely forgetting where and what I am.

“The kind of tricks,” she licks her lips while her eyes drop to my mouth, “a good boy like you can’t handle.”

I can’t see her eyes anymore because mine are transfixed on her lips, which look more swollen now than they were a moment ago. Her tongue keeps peeking out, wetting her lower lip, and driving me positively insane.

I’ve long forgotten why I came here in the first place. She’s standing so close that with every breath, her chest touches mine. Her eyes shoot hot daggers at me while she keeps constantly licking her lips, and mine suddenly turn dry.

I inhale deeply, enjoying the sweet smell of fruit and the woman in front of me.

Good boy. This is not the first time she’s called me that, and we’ve only met twice, and only for a few minutes. She knows nothing about me.

“Cat got your tongue,” she smiles evilly and adds breathily, “good boy?”

My eye ticks. I clamp my jaw shut and lean forward, probably about to make the biggest mistake of my life when my radio comes alive.

“Boss, I could really use your help at Cat and Stallion.”

I press the button on the radio on my shoulder as I keep my eyes on this infuriating woman. “I’ll be right there, Jennica.”

Taking a slow step backward, then another one, I say, “I’ll be checking your story.”

“You do that,” a smile grazes her lush lips, “good boy.”

My nostrils flare, but I keep walking. No matter how much I want to go back and show her just how bad I am.

Chapter Nine

J OSIE

What the fuck just happened? I ask myself as I lean my ass on the table behind me, feeling my legs turn to Jell-O. It's like someone else possessed my body, and I couldn't keep my mouth shut. Like my whole being's sole goal was to aggravate and push him just so I could see how far he'd go.

I *wanted* him to go off the rails. I pretty much begged for it with those 'good boy' comments. I wasn't wrong though—the sheriff looks like a guy who likes to solve everyone's problems and carry them on his mighty shoulders. Whereas I am a girl who'd end up in the back seat of his cruiser in cuffs. And not the fun kind. I might look all polished and expensive now, but the truth remains the same—you can take a girl away from a deep country with questionable values, but you can't take the country out of a girl. Turns out, it takes me half a breath to revert to my roots and turn into a prickly rebel.

I need to interrogate Alicia about him carefully—after all, he's the local law, and I need a lot of help with the permits and help with certain people. Things I can't do now because I've been clearly placed on the sheriff's shit list. I've never fucked up a project so badly before, especially before it even started.

I can't even blame him—I was way out of line here. And why did I try to escape him? I guess old habits die hard. It was sort of embarrassing and I

don't know what possessed me, but it also felt very cool and liberating. Something I couldn't afford to do for a long time since I was trying to maintain my appearance of being this professional and expensive badass who shits rainbows and farts designer glitter.

Always being calm, cool, collected, and on top of my game was exhausting, but I understood that only when I dropped the act for the first time a couple of months ago when I got fired and stuck with nothing but thin-crust pizza and my knowledge of the industry. This turned out to be insufficient since knowing the right people is apparently the only way to bloom in the big city. After that, I understood how hard it was to always keep myself in check. Always smile at everyone and respond to every single phone call from my clients, no matter the time or the circumstances. Sometimes, their demands were ridiculous, but I had to find a way to resolve the issue and pull a pink rabbit out of a hat with holes because the clients were always right. Even if they wanted a fluffy rug in front of their fireplace.

I think the sheriff is doing the same thing I've been doing for years. So now, naturally, after tasting freedom, I want everyone around me to feel the same liberty of just being themselves.

As I start walking around the house and taking measurements, I think about Archie's warning about my car. I was too stubborn to listen to him, but he turned out to be right. Unfortunately. I might need to think about other driving arrangements while I'm here because the location of this place is remote, to say the least. But since he didn't take my car seriously, I refuse to rent another car. Maybe I'll find a horse.

Yes, that sounds like a plan. After all, I know how to ride one.

This house is a long project and won't be livable for a long time, so I must also find a rental. Where is that charming cottage with a hot neighbor? I've read too many of Alicia's books. They've raised my expectations for small towns too much.

By the time I'm done with all the measurements and look out the window, it's gotten pretty late. After checking my phone, I understand I'm stuck here since the roads are shit, and it's past seven and getting dark quickly. Not knowing the way around town, I can't drive from here in my little car for fear of getting stuck in the middle of the forest alone at night. Getting stuck here totally beats being stranded out there. Even with the threat of an unstable roof over my head. But I can always ask Alicia and her boyfriend to come and pick me up. Mark has a big-ass truck, and I'm sure he

wouldn't mind.

Still, I hate being a burden.

I look at the ceiling and groan in annoyance with myself for losing track of time and being too stubborn to listen to Archie. *Crap*. Fetching my phone, I find Alicia's number and press Dial. And nothing. My eyes dart to the corner of the screen and find no bars. Just great. I move around the house, trying to find reception. The more rooms and windows I walk to, the less hope I have. No bars anywhere.

Well, I got my wish of being stuck here. The only way to get out of here is to go to my tiny car and pray that I don't end up in a ditch since the mud definitely hasn't dried out even a bit and that some random wandering bear doesn't find me.

Locking the house behind me—again, a useless task since no squatters can even get here, but old habits and responsibilities die hard—I walk to my car, looking around. It's gotten really dark. Looks like I spent quite some time wandering around the house looking for reception and lost precious minutes of light.

I climb into my vintage baby and slowly turn it around toward the road. This time, I don't have a police officer chasing me, so I carefully press the gas pedal, paying close attention to the road ahead of me.

Sometime later, I let myself relax since everything's going great.

Shush. Swish. Bum.

A blink later, I find my car sliding into a ditch, and there is nothing I can do about it. I try pressing the gas, then the brake, then the gas again. I turn the wheel in all directions but still end up in a ditch. *Fucking awesome*.

I push the door open and step outside, shin-deep into the gooey mud. Lifting one foot, I say goodbye to my fantastic shoe I used to love so much because it stays *in* the mud, and I don't see how my favorite pair of perfectly lacquered mules can survive this.

"You must be kidding me," I murmur as I bend to retrieve my shoe but lose balance and fall forward. It all happens in under two seconds.

"C'mon!" I yell to the universe. My hands instinctively get thrown forward, preventing me from smashing my face into the dirt, but nothing else is so lucky.

"Fuckity fuck!" I yell, smacking my open palm into the mud, making sure the splashes reach the very last untouched spot—my face. I groan loudly and smack it again until I no longer have any anger left in me.

The bushes to my right rustle, and I freeze, my mouth open, ready with another curse word.

Another rustle.

I'm too scared to breathe, remembering the horror stories Alicia has told me about local bears and their one-sided 'love' for newcomers. Me. I'm the newcomers. And she didn't tell me what that 'love' entailed.

I try to push myself up, but my foot is still stuck in the mud, so I pull it harder, freeing it in the process but leaving the last shoe in the same mud. Saying a final goodbye to my favorite shoes with the "Bat-Bitch" vibe, I push away from the ground and scatter toward the car.

But I'm not fast enough—a low rumble sounds behind me just as heavy paws pad from the bushes. Toward me.

Motherfucking shitty shit!

A bear. A fucking bear! Coming my way!

I'm trying to rack my brain for any useful information on how to deal with bears but find none, because, guess what? I've never seen one in real life before. All the animals I've seen have been cute and fluffy with way smaller teeth. I've never even been to the zoo! I know how to deal with snakes and other slithery stuff, but not bears. Do I run? Do I scream? Do I cry?

I cry. Yes, I cry! He'll get ashamed and leave me alone. That should work.

The bear's standing about thirty feet away from me, tilting his head and opening his big mouth. Saliva drips from his enormous teeth, the roar reaches my ears, and I start crying on cue.

I didn't get that far from the car, and this is my last chance. Slowly backing those two or whatever feet that separate me from the driver's side, I hit my ass on the door, closing it shut.

No, no, no!

Behind my back, I feverishly attempt to find the handle. When I feel it with my hands, I let out a loud sigh, making the bear slowly move forward again. Toward me.

I keep pulling the handle, but it's stuck. It fucking stuck! Just my luck—to die on Maine land, covered in the Maine soil, mauled by a Maine bear. Very poetic.

Sudden headlights blind the bear, and he turns his head to the side, shutting his eyes and forcefully shaking his head with visible aggravation. I almost feel bad for him. Almost. Turning toward the light, I find a car

approaching us with speed, illuminating the large animal in front of me.

Please, please, help me! I silently beg whoever's coming. I don't want to die here today. Or in the next fifty years. I want to grow old and wrinkly while talking shit about my second cousin who stole my boyfriend right before the prom since people are allowed not to have a filter in their old age, and I've got a lot to say.

The bear lets out a loud roar and rises on his rear legs. Paws? Feet? Limbs?

The car visibly speeds up and comes to a screeching stop past mine, right between the bear and me. And then I recognize the police cruiser.

A huge mass of sheriff jumps out of the open door and rushes to take a stand between us. He takes a gun out of his holster and brings his arms up in the air. His shoulders and chest visibly widen *even* more as he lets out a loud growl. Was it the bear? I blink, confused for a moment. No, it's the sheriff.

The bear moves on his rear limbs and lets out a roar of his own. Sheriff leans his upper body forward, showing off his muscles like a wrestler, and roars back. He starts waving his arms, appearing even bigger in size. I'd find his actions hilarious if he weren't standing between me and that big, salivating mouth wanting to taste some of my yummy, pizza-grown flesh.

The bear makes some sort of rumbling noise, lands back on all his paws, and turns around. Skittering back into the forest, he disappears behind the bushy evergreen a moment later. Once he's out of sight, Sheriff starts slowly backing toward me, keeping his watchful eye on where the bear disappeared.

When he's sure the bear is gone, he holsters his gun and turns to me.

I must look terrible because his forehead wrinkles with concern.

"Are you okay?" His voice comes out scratchy and a bit breathless.

"I—" I try to say something but fail, so I just nod instead. My fingers are still glued to the door handle, and my shoulder hurts because I've been holding my stiff arm behind my rigid back for too long.

"Did he get you?" His eyes quickly run over my body, looking for damage.

I shake my head, still unable to talk.

"Josie?" he asks in a gentle voice, and I look at his face. "Are you okay?"

I let out a loud sigh, and tears start streaming down my face. I wipe them away with my hands, remembering too late that they're covered in mud, and now I look even more like a fucking mess. So I start crying harder. Soon, the crying turns into a hiccuping hysteria I can't stop. My feet are bare, and more

than half of my body is covered in dirt. My favorite shoes that I can never buy again are forever buried in the dirt, I have no one but Alicia here, and I almost got eaten by a bear.

No, I'm not fine.

I'm too busy feeling sorry for myself to notice that the sheriff has walked up to me. I notice him only when his strong arms wrap around my shoulders and pull me into him. My face squishes into his chest while my arms get smooshed between us.

"It's okay, Josie," he whispers with reassurance, awkwardly patting my back.

And I cry harder. I just can't stop at this point. I free my hands from the prison of our bodies and wrap them around his torso, pressing myself harder into his firm and very warm chest. He is so large and safe that he's my lifeline right now, even though I didn't like him a few hours ago. But he saved me, and now he's offering me mental support so I don't go off the rails. And I'm very close to doing just that. The rails are right there—I can see them.

I don't know how long we've been standing like this, but eventually my tears die down and hiccups subside. I take a last deep breath and pull away.

And then I see it. He's covered in mud now too. *My* mud. His pristine uniform is not so pristine anymore. Huge chunks of mud are stuck to his cheek and chin—it must have gotten there from my hair.

"I'm sorry." I sniffle, nearly crying again.

"For what?" he asks, confused.

"For ruining your clothes. And your face." I point my finger at him. "I'll dry-clean it." I instantly fix myself, "I mean your clothes, not your face."

He looks down at himself as if only now noticing what a mess I've made.

"Don't even worry about that," he rasps and swallows hard. During all that, I forgot that he was in danger too, yet he stood between me and that bear.

"Thank you. For saving me," I say sincerely. "I don't know what I would have done if you didn't show up."

He glances around, looking totally unbothered. "It's nothing. It's just my job."

"Yeah, I forgot." Suddenly, I feel like an idiot for going all sentimental and crying my ass out on his chest. Yes, I'm very grateful to him for stepping up, but as he said, it's just his job, and we are not exactly buddies.

Taking a deep breath, I turn around and try to pry the door open again.

“It’s stuck?” he asks from behind me. So close.

“Yes,” I reply, nearly rolling my eyes at the obvious.

“Let me see.” He walks past me and tries the same thing I did with no results. His jaw clamps shut, and he puts more force onto the hold. His forearm strains and his veins pop, creating the perfect arm porn that mesmerizes me like a snake until I see the handle in his hands. Separated from my car.

“Oh,” he says, rolling his lips. He inspects the handle for a few moments. “It’s an old can; you should have gotten rid of it a long time ago.”

I forcefully grab the handle from his hand, sending him a death glare. “We were fine.”

His lips twitch, making me mad since I don’t find the situation as amusing as he does.

“C’mon.” He nods toward his cruiser. “I’ll drive you to town.”

I longingly look at my dear reliable car I’m about to betray and leave in a ditch, then I remember the bear, and the idea of leaving my Classic Mini here seems a lot less awful.

Looking down at myself, I shift my eyes to his. “I’ll ruin your fancy cop car.”

“I’ve had worse in there,” he replies with a chuckle. “Do you need anything from yours?”

“Yes,” I sigh, looking back at my loyal little bug who betrayed me by jamming the dang doorknob. “Everything.”

His brows go up. “You’ll get *everything* tomorrow when I tow it back. Do you need anything for today?”

“Yeah.” I start moving through the mud, but he stops me with a raised hand, looking at my bare feet.

“Tell me what, and I’ll get it for you.”

Chewing on my lips, I choke down a snuffle, threatening to make me whiny again. Instead, I point at the front seat. “The purple duffel bag.”

I have no home, so I carry all my belongings with me. Even though Alicia told me to stay, I still snuck out with my bag in case I needed it. How did I reach the point where I’ve built numerous homes for people and ended up homeless myself?

In the meantime, Kenneth walks to the passenger side and tries to pry it open. When I hear a screeching sound, I make a move toward him, crying out

in fear, “Wait! You’ll ruin that handle too!”

“How do you want me to get the bag out then?” He blinks at me in confusion.

“Let me try.” I walk to him, glancing at his now totally ruined shoes, and try the handle. Of course, it’s locked from the inside. “Do you know how to pick a lock?”

“No,” he says, clearly a bit shocked I dared to ask. “Do you?”

“Yes,” I sigh and look at him. “Do you happen to have a hairpin?”

He gives me a death glare.

“I guess not,” I reply and longingly look at the bag with all my stuff inside.

“I can break the window,” he suggests cheerfully, and I rear back in horror. He just looked scandalized about me picking the lock, and now he wants to smash this lovely window. The original, may I add.

“Don’t touch my baby!” I bring my index finger to his face.

He swats it away like an annoying fly. “Then we’ll open it tomorrow when I tow it.”

“No one can tow it today?”

“It’s a small town in Maine, for fuck’s sake.” He looks tired, saying it like he’s been trying to explain it to me for years, and I still haven’t listened.

I guess that’s my answer.

“Let’s go.” He motions for me to follow with a deep sigh.

Opening the passenger side of his cruiser, he’s waiting for me to climb in. I’ve never seen a cop car from the front row. Feeling a bit like Christmas came early, I move his notepad from the seat (the very same one he wrote me a ticket with), get in the car, and start looking around before Sheriff comes in and scolds me for being nosy.

The inside is clean. Nothing is out of order. A green thermal mug. A pen. Two sticky notes with numbers on them. That’s it. No donut or cheeseburger wrappers. No old coffee cups. Nothing I used to see. Sheriff Benson is not a slob.

When he’s inside, he buckles up and asks me, “Where to?”

“Bed and breakfast.”

He snorts.

“What?” I ask, confused, not understanding why even his snort sounds doubtful.

“I can’t believe they found a room for you.”

I half turn toward him, crossing my arms over my chest. “And why is that?”

He sends me a funny look. “Relax. I just meant they never have any vacancy.”

I remember Alicia mentioned something like that too. “Who’s staying there?”

“Fuck if I know.” He chuckles and shifts gears. “You tell me when you get to your room.”

I sigh. “I don’t have a room there, but I hope they can find something for me.”

He sends a puzzled look and shifts his full attention to the road while I switch *my* full attention to the arm porn happening next to me. I’m so grateful that it was a pretty, sunny, and warm day (at some point), so the sheriff felt compelled to wear short sleeves. Even though I’m freezing my ass off in a sweater, it doesn’t seem to bother him.

He places his left elbow on the window while holding the wheel with his right hand. His fingers are long and large. And I mean *huge*. One can do some *good* with them, but two could do some real *good* damage.

My thighs clamp shut on their own accord while I swallow a sudden dry lump in my throat, suddenly imagining them on me. *Inside* of me.

The muscles on his forearm are corded, adorned by popping veins. I love veins. I may have been a vampire in a previous life. His knuckles are red and white and a bit disfigured—old scarring, probably from some fight. Maybe even multiple. It explains his slightly crooked nose. Did he use his fists a lot? Does he?

I give him a side glance, expecting to find his eyes on me since I haven’t exactly hidden my ogling, but to my surprise, he’s fixated on the dark road ahead, and his body language screams ‘relaxed.’

We drive in silence for ten minutes before I finally crack, unable to keep my mouth shut any longer.

“Thank you.”

He glances at me quizzically.

“For coming to my rescue,” I clarify.

“Yeah. No problem. It’s my job.” He shifts his attention back to the road, but his cheeks slightly pinken. He’s clean-shaven today, or at least he was this morning, and now he has this dark, mysterious shadow over his square jaw.

The sheriff absolutely doesn't know how to accept gratitude.

"I know," I say softly, deciding not to focus on the 'job' part. "And still, thank you."

He glances at me one more time, gives a quick nod, and goes back to driving.

"Why were you here, by the way?"

His neck moves in a rough swallow, and he starts tapping his fingers on the wheel. "I was coming to check on you."

"Did my story prove me not guilty?" I bite my lower lip, sounding a bit flirty even to my own ears. Too late to take it back though.

"Yeah. But that's not why I was coming." He sounds a bit shameful, even though I'm not surprised that he probably called Archie or Leila the moment he drove off. He must know everyone around here.

"Why?" It's hard to drown the curiosity in my voice.

"There was a moose," he says on a forceful exhale, and his cheeks turn the lovely shade of my favorite blush called 'orgasm.'

"A moose?" I ask, unsure if I heard him correctly since I was busy staring at his face.

"Yes, a moose." He shakes his head. "Never mind that. I heard about a bear sighting, so I had to come and check on you."

I consider his words for a moment. I've been nasty to him—of course, after he was nasty to me, but that's not the point—and yet, he felt compelled to come and check on me. Cops in my hometown would leave me to rot (or be eaten, even better), happy they were rid of the problem despite it being their job.

Also, what's the story with the moose? Is it the same moose Alicia told me about? I think they call him Frank. He's like an urban legend here or something.

When the Sheriff parks by the bed and breakfast named Dancing Pony, which looks like it just stepped out of a medieval movie, he half turns toward me.

"Go, check."

"Okay," I reply quietly, and before opening the door, I add, "Really, Sheriff. Thank you." I know his name since Alicia told me a few things about him when I explained my unfortunate arrival to town, but somehow, it feels too intimate to call him that when he keeps insisting all of it is part of his job.

He nods. "Go."

He's so fast to get rid of me, and I can't even blame him. Not after the way I spoke to him from the very first time we met. My mood darkens as I pull on the door and climb out without a second glance.

Chapter Ten

J OSIE

When I step inside a dark foyer, I'm instantly hit with the authenticity of the place—it matches the outside so well. Gaping around at the beautiful wooden pieces of furniture straight out of my favorite old movies, I don't notice the person stepping out of the dark.

“Hello,” a female voice suddenly says from my left, making me jump.

“Fucking hell!” I yell, and she laughs.

“Oops, sorry.” She chuckles, not sounding even a bit remorseful. “I thought you knew I was around.”

“No.” I pat my chest, trying to stop my palpitations. “I was too busy admiring the woodwork.” Glancing at the coffee table to my right, I ask her, “Where did you get all of it from?”

“What? That table?” she asks as she follows my gaze.

It's gorgeous. Made of three large trunks cut to about two inches thick that are put together in a perfect line, it sits on four massive, lacquered legs. Each leg is carved with numerous tiny ornaments, and I'm sure if I lean closer, I'll see some sort of detailed picture woven together. That's a masterpiece right there.

The lady clears her throat, drawing my attention back to her. When I look up, I find her smiling at me with a raised brow.

“Yeah, all of it. Where did you get it?” When I'm on a treasure hunt, I

cease to be polite. Mentally smacking myself in the face, I add a warm smile to my question to not sound like a total moron.

She must have noticed it because she lets out a Tinker Bell-like laugh. “Oh, I bought it from the local carver.”

My mood instantly perks up. “Really? Who?”

“I don’t know if his name will tell you anything, but it’s Mark.”

“The firefighter Mark?” I feel my brows disappearing into my hairline.

“Yes. You know him?” She squints her eyes at me suspiciously, and I have to chuckle. Small-town citizens are protective of their own.

“Actually, I do.” I run my fingers over the smooth surface. “I’m staying at their house. His girlfriend Alicia is my best friend.”

“Right!” She snaps her fingers, probably remembering some rumors. “You’re that fancy big-city designer everyone is talking about.”

A-a-and I was right. Somehow, it didn’t sound flattering the way she said it.

“Everyone’s talking about me?”

“Small town.” She shrugs her shoulders with a vague smile I totally get. “How can I help you, Josie?”

I didn’t tell her my name, and the question must be written all over my face because she laughs. “You’re the talk of the town. We love newcomers because the gossip leaves locals alone.”

“A-a-ah,” I hum knowingly. I’m all too familiar with that.

“So?” She lifts her brows, reminding me of the question she asked.

“Right.” I clear my throat. “I’m looking for a room.”

Her face instantly falls, as if she expected me to borrow some milk and sugar at night because that’s why people come to hotels. “Oh, I’m sorry, but we don’t have a vacancy.”

I level her with a stare. “Is it because I’m an alien?”

“Are you?” she asks in a conspiratorial voice, leaning her head closer. She places a warm smile on her face when she doesn’t see me responding to what’s supposed to be a joke because I’m not in the mood for it. “No, don’t even think like that. We’re just having a theme week.”

“A theme week?” I parrot, blinking slowly—my mind is not fast enough to process riddles today.

“Yeah. It’s the wizarding week,” she explains shyly and looks at the slightly lit hallway where she probably came from like a silent ghost.

Well, that explains her outfit. Living in New York taught me not to judge

people by their clothes, so her pointy witchy hat and long mantle weren't the first things I focused on. The gorgeous coffee table next to the couches and that amazing accent table by the wall were the first things for me.

"Okay." I tap my fingers on my thigh. "Maybe you can give me a call when you have something available? I'll be staying for a while."

"Sure, what's your number?"

I give her the digits as she puts them in her phone, and then ask her, "Can I use your phone to call for a taxi? I don't have mine on me."

"Oh, Josie," her face saddens instantly, "we don't have a taxi here."

"At all?" I can almost feel my face falling as the tips of my lips and eyes turn down, I swear.

"Well, we kind of do, two drivers, actually." She giggles as her cheeks pinken a bit, making me think she knows them *very* well. "But today is Thursday, so they all work in Springfield now since locals use taxis only on the weekends sometimes. Or neighbors." She brings her finger up in the air. "They'd rather use neighbors as taxis." She looks so guilty like she herself shaved me bald without my permission.

"It's okay," I sigh. It's not. How will I get to Alicia's house? How is the walk? And how long will it take to get there without shoes? Double the time, I guess, if I try to avoid sharp objects and not freeze my feet to black chunks that might fall off tomorrow.

"Why do you need a taxi though?" she asks, tilting her head slightly.

"To get to my friend's house." *Duh, lady. You don't have a place for me.*

"Why can't the sheriff drive you?" Her forehead wrinkles, even though I don't know why she'd be so surprised that a local officer is not at my call at all times.

"Sheriff?"

"Yes, he's there." She points outside, the bracelets on her wrist clicking together. "Surely, he can give you a ride. He's very protective and won't leave you on the street at night."

I follow her finger outside and find the cruiser still parked where he dropped me off.

"I guess I'll ask him." Before I depart, I remind her once again, "Please give me a call when you have some availability. I'll take any room."

She nods with a wide smile. "Sure, will do."

Before I leave, she calls out my name. I stop and turn around, hopeful that she changed her mind and maybe found some hidden room somewhere in the

attic. With the ghosts. I'll take it.

"Yes?"

"Do you need to use the bathroom?" She smiles softly.

"What?" I blink.

"The bathroom. You know, to clean off." She points at her face and then at her body. I look down and remember that I'm covered in mud. How could I forget about that?

"Nah, I'm good. Thanks though."

I wave and start toward the door again.

"Josie," she calls out once more.

I turn around without even asking what she wants.

"How does the other guy look?" she asks with sparkling humor in her blue eyes.

"Better," I sigh. "The other guy looks much better."

She gives me a warm smile with a wink. "Next time, then."

"Next time." I smile back and push the door open.

When I walk outside, my feet instantly freeze. I didn't feel it before, but between me being dragged out of the mud, the bear attack, and the adrenaline rush on the way here, I didn't feel as cold as I am now. Taking a deep sigh for bravery, which is pretty much the equivalent of a shot of tequila in the current circumstances, I open the passenger door.

"Hey." My voice comes out small even when I don't intend for it to.

"Hey." His is husky. He always sounds like that though.

"Why are you still here?" I ask shyly.

"I knew they didn't have any rooms." He nods at the seat. "Get inside."

I climb in and buckle up. Interlocking my fingers on my lap, I chew on my lower lip. "Can you drive me to Alicia's house?"

"Sure."

He shifts into gear and takes off. When he notices my sudden shiver, he hits a button on the dashboard and shifts the air vent toward me. A wave of warmth instantly hits me in the face, and I shiver, but from pleasure this time.

"Thank you."

"Where were you planning on staying, Josie?"

After a few moments of watching out of the window, I start explaining, "I stayed at Alicia's. She told me I can stay as long as I need, but I can't." I jump in my seat, thinking that it came out wrong. "She's great, don't get me wrong! She's amazing, but they just started this new family, and I thought I'd

be in the way. That's why I didn't unpack anything. Plus," I snort, "they don't have any room, really. Their house is gorgeous and homey but tiny."

"So where were you planning on staying?" he repeats, firmer this time.

"At the house. Well, at least until the bed and breakfast has anything available."

"In the Ghost House?"

I snort, rolling my eyes. "I don't get why people call it that."

He sends me a side-eye. "Because the house makes sounds like it's about to give its last breath."

I quirk a brow at his explanation. "I can very much guarantee that the structure of that building is sturdier than most modern constructions are, and it'll stand even when others fall. It just has loose doors and windows."

"And fucking steps, Josie." A raised brow. "And floors." It rises higher. "And the roof."

"Floors are not bad, don't say that." I nearly laugh at his dramatism. "They're original, and there is no way we're replacing them. They're amazing. We just need to see what's underneath and buff them a bit."

"A lot." He glances at me, and I glance back.

"A bit," I repeat stubbornly.

He seems to give up, but then he starts again. "What about the steps?" he asks with obvious snark.

"Stairs inside are fine. Old hardwood, baby. Made to stand." I clap my hands two times, and Kenneth snorts. I squint at him, seeing the perverseness buried deep in the depth of his proper mind peeking its head to the surface. "Outside needs to be replaced. It's not so bad."

I don't even notice when I begin defending the very same house I begged Archie to bring down. Somewhere in that short period of time, it became the sole purpose of my existence since I don't have anything else left besides getting enough money for a venture I've been planning. I don't have a job other than that house, and I don't have hobbies since my job was my hobby, which took all of my free time.

I don't have a family. Well, I do have a family that I prefer not to see most of the time.

I also don't have many friends besides Alicia. A few people I thought were my friends sided with Randy when the split happened—turns out he looked shinier and more promising than I did. And they were absolutely right, considering I have no plans or future. I'm at rock bottom, paying for

that one choice. Well, you live, you learn. I just wish my lesson wasn't so embarrassing.

When Archie showed me the house, my first reaction was to build him a new modern construction with all the needed amenities the modern world can offer, but after spending a few hours inside and *feeling* the place, I came to the understanding that the house is a part of Maine and Little Hope and absolutely cannot be replaced. If now, out of nowhere, Archie changed his mind and wanted me to build something new, I'd put my bones in front of any wrecking ball that came through.

In the meantime, Kenneth gives me a doubtful look. "The place doesn't seem safe, so you can't stay there."

"Good thing it's not your decision to make." I'm totally aware I sound like an ungrateful prick, but I'm at my limit for the day.

"It is if it puts any of my citizens in danger," he replies through gritted teeth. I'm sure I can hear the enamel grinding off.

"I'm not your citizen." I don't give up. I never do. Almost never.

"You're under my jurisdiction when you're here." His voice turns authoritative, and he sounds like a sheriff announcing his candidacy.

I clamp my teeth together, nearly breaking them—what's with this man wanting to control everything and everyone? It's infuriating. I'm not even part of this town, and yet he makes me his problem. I'm my problem and only mine.

We drive in silence for a few more minutes, stopping at every yellow light, even when we could easily just speed up a little bit and make it through. You know, like one mile over the speed limit, and we'd make it twice as fast. But no, I'm with Sheriff Benson, who doesn't break rules.

When we arrive at Alicia's place, I turn to Kenneth and say, "Thank you, Sheriff." His brow quirks at me using his title as a name, but it's the only way to separate myself from him. "I really appreciate you coming to my rescue. Multiple times, actually. So yeah." I snuffle, suddenly feeling cold and embarrassed at my lack of filter. "And I'm sorry for getting you dirty." My eyes dip to his uniform, still covered in dry mud. His cheek is clean now—he probably wiped it while I was interrogating the elf lady.

He gives me a short nod and leans back on the seat. I jump out and walk toward the house while he waits for me to go inside. It's very chivalrous of him, I must admit, and I kind of feel better at his gesture.

Just when my knuckles are about to connect with the surface of the door,

I hear a loud moan. It's not even a moan. It's an earth-shattering cry. Before barging in like a SWAT unit to throw bad guys around with all my Krav Maga skills I picked up in six months, I pause long enough to register it as a cry of pleasure. *Oh shit.* What do I do now?

I slowly back up when my back bumps into something. Jumping and flipping around, I find Kenneth behind me, his eyes narrowed. His hand is on his holster, and his other arm instinctively wraps around me, squishing my body into him again while slightly moving me to the side so I'm not in the line of danger. I think it's his default setting. He can't even control it—that's how deep protecting others is in his bones.

"What happened?"

As if on cue, another earth-shattering cry comes from behind the door. Kenneth's eyes narrow even more and then widen instantly when understanding dawns on him too. "Oh."

"Yeah," I sigh and slightly push myself away from him because his protectiveness grates on my nerves. It makes me ache for another hug and feel sorry for myself for being so fucking lonely.

Coming to the stairs, I take a seat on the lower step, as far away from the porn going on inside as I can get without actually leaving.

He steps down too. Stopping in front of me, he places his hands on his hips. Deliciously narrow hips. This man has all the quality attributes of the perfect male specimen I usually dream about.

Besides the attitude. Sometimes.

"What are you doing?"

"Waiting." I shrug and place my hands under my thighs because they're getting cold. I'm not even sure I feel the soles of my feet anymore at this point.

"For what?" He sounds curious.

"For them to finish and then..." I chew on the inside of my cheek, "cool off, I guess."

He clicks his tongue disapprovingly. "You're freezing, Josie. You don't even have shoes on."

"Well, sucks to be homeless." I chuckle darkly, sniffing and wiping my itchy nose with the sleeve of my sweater. Very unlike me, but very fitting for the situation. Being homeless is starting to get to me. Homeless and lonely.

He lets out a loud sigh before speaking again. "Let's go."

I instantly perk up. "Thank you! I don't know how else I'd get to the

house tonight when everyone is... busy.” Then I add, mumbling under my nose. “I should have stayed there from the beginning.”

“No, Josie.” He shakes his head. “I’m not going to drive you there.”

“Why?” I blink.

“I can’t leave you there with a clear conscience. I just can’t.” He looks—and sounds—tortured.

“The house is fine,” I try convincing him, but he just presses his lips together and shakes his head. “Where will you drive me then?”

A shrug of his wickedly broad shoulders stretches his beige uniform shirt. “My place. You can stay there until tomorrow.”

I feel my eyes going round like saucers. “Your place?”

“Yes.” He spreads his arms, showcasing his muscles. “Looks like you’re out of options.”

I sniffle again. “I can’t stay at your place. It’s not,” I chew on my cheek, looking for the right word, “appropriate.”

“It’s fine. You’re my friend’s friend, and you can crash in my guest bedroom. Alright?”

I look at his face, searching for any indication that I might regret it later, but find nothing. Only a good citizen of Little Hope, offering a helping hand to a fellow acquaintance who ended up in the dirt. Quite literally.

“Alright,” I quietly agree with a shrug and rise to my feet. “I still think that if you could drive me back to the house, that would be awesome.”

He ignores me and marches toward his cruiser. Before following him, I glance back at the door, reconsidering staying here and waiting, but another moan sounds through the door, and I scutter after Kenneth.

When I get inside the car, I feel a calmness spreading through my very being despite the situation.

“You’re tougher than you look.” Kenneth’s quiet voice breaks me out of my daze, and I look over at him.

“Yeah? Why?”

He glances at me briefly before returning his attention back to the road. “I’d expect you to rush back to your fancy home in the big city.”

And just like that, the spell is broken.

“I don’t have a fancy home in the big city,” I reply, my fists balling on my knees, angry at his assumptions. Even though I’d probably assume the same. Wasn’t it the sole purpose of maintaining this image so that everyone would think exactly what he’s assuming? Looks like I’ve reached my goal,

but it does seem less desirable now.

“Could have fooled me,” he mumbles loud enough for me to hear.

“Judgmental much?” I snort and turn toward him. “Do you think you have me all figured out, huh? From the few interactions we’ve had?”

He gives me a side-eye. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Like what? Like I’m some dumb bimbo from a big city who’s chasing brands and money?” Even though I’ve been building this image for years, somehow, it irks me that he sees me this way. All this is just the wrapper. I’m so much more underneath, but it looks like no one understands that. And even though I wanted this very thing, I loathe that he’s been fooled too.

“Josie,” he says with a sigh, “it’s not—”

“Oh, but it is.” I can’t stop. I won’t stop. “You think you know me oh-so-well because I wear expensive shoes?” I pointedly lift my knee up and look at my bare, dirty feet. “Oh, wait. I’ve got no shoes! Or is it my ruined pedicure? You expect me to cry over it, right? Look at my chipped nail polish. What will I do now? Oh, goodie!” I fan my face with my hand, slightly changing into a New York accent I worked hard to pick up in order to fit in. “And guess what? You’re right. I love my expensive shoes, and I love my pedicure. And I want to cry over losing my shoes because they were the last ones I can afford since I no longer have a stable job. And I miss my fancy apartment because now I don’t even have a bed to sleep in. So, dance your little victory dance, Sheriff, because you were right—I’m as shallow as you suspected.”

My chest rises with every deep breath. My heart is racing. My eyes swell with unshed tears for all the things that went wrong in my life.

“Josie,” he starts after a loud swallow.

“Save it,” I interrupt him by raising my hand in the air. “Can you please drive me to the Ghost House?”

“I can’t.”

I squeeze my fists on my knees harder. “Then stop the damn car, and I’ll walk there.”

“No, Josie,” he reprimands, which totally doesn’t help the situation. “Stop the hysterics.”

I feel my nostrils flare. “Stop the car.”

When he doesn’t stop or make any indication that he means to slow down, I start pulling on the handle.

“Josie, for fuck’s sake.” He reaches over me with one arm, spreading his open palm over my chest to keep the belt where it belongs.

Over my boobs. His hand is so huge that it covers most of my chest, his pinky resting on my right nipple.

We both freeze, and he pulls his arm back as if it was burned.

“Sorry,” he starts mumbling, his voice is a bit higher than before. Sucks because aroused men don’t talk falsetto, and one would think that touching someone’s boobs would make them hot and bothered. But not Sheriff Benson, no. He’s a different breed. Now even my boobs have lost their appeal. My life is going down the drain.

“I didn’t mean to touch your, you know, your,” he points at my chest, “this.”

Coming down from the anger high, I feel my cheeks pinkening at my outburst and afterthoughts. He didn’t deserve it. Well, maybe a bit, but to be honest, I don’t know for certain what he wanted to say. Really. I just chose to put words into his mouth. I was the one scraping up old wounds. So, I take a deep breath, hoping it will dampen my flaming cheeks.

“I know, don’t worry.”

He pulls to the side of the road. When the car is parked, he places both his hands on the wheel, and I feel his intense stare on the back of my head as I look out the passenger-side window.

“Josie,” he calls out, but I ignore him, so he adds gentler, “Josie, look at me please.”

I slowly turn to him, rolling my lips and feeling utterly embarrassed.

“I didn’t mean to offend you. I had a very long day and have taken my irritation out on you. It was wrong of me. I’m sorry.” His voice is firm and steady. He’s totally owning his shit.

“It’s not your fault.” I sniffle and start muttering, “I just behaved kind of weird. I’ve been doing that a lot lately.” My chuckle is full of embarrassment, but it lightens the mood. “Sorry about that.”

His low laugh is quiet and tired. Very, very tired, and I glance at him from a different angle and find something I haven’t seen before. Sunken eyes, deep tension lines around his mouth, his lips pointing downward. The man is exhausted.

“I was still out of line,” Kenneth continues, and I want to interrupt him again, but he stops me with a quick shake of his head. “Let me finish, please. It’s not my place to tell you what to do, but I sure hope you’ll accept my invitation and stay at my place for the night. I’m very tired,” he winces, saying it, “and I prefer not to drive through the whole town and then some

more just to get stuck somewhere in the woods in the mud in the middle of the night.”

Suddenly, I feel guilty. I bet it wasn't easy for him to admit to being tired, and here I am, demanding he drive me back to who knows where.

“Okay,” I agree softly. “I'll gladly accept your invitation.”

“Cool.” He nods and shifts into gear.

A few minutes later, we arrive at the dead-end street that looks like a little, cute neighborhood. Every house has a manicured yard with tiny gnomes and pots with plants. I'm not sure it's a good time to put those out since it's pretty freaking cold at night, but I'm sure locals know their plants better.

We pull into a newly paved driveway in a two-story, single-family house. Made of red brick, it has a white door and matching windows. Very simple and very clean. Looks like it's been power-washed because even in the dark, the building looks shiny.

The yard is flawless, but it doesn't have a single speck of hominess the other neighbors have, yet it's nice and organized. Too organized. Just like the man himself.

I don't wait for Kenneth to open the door for me and climb outside, instantly hissing when my bare feet touch the cold asphalt.

Jumping from foot to foot, I rush to the door, not waiting for a special invitation because this girl has no pride left. Sheriff is hot on my heels. He opens the storm door, unlocks the main door, and pushes it inward, gesturing for me to enter.

I might admit I'm super curious to see inside his home. He's a mystery to me, and this is the place where he can be himself and scratch his balls without any judgment.

Speaking of scratching the jewels—I eye him carefully, remembering all the weird movements he's made with his legs quite a few times. Did I just agree to come to the house of someone who has crabs? I shudder at the thought but then instantly push it away. I haven't known Sheriff Benson for a long time, but from what I've seen, a man like that would be religious with his hygiene, so there must be a good explanation for that. I'm itching—pun intended—to learn all about it, but today is not the day.

He flips the switch, and the living room illuminates with a soft, warm light. I nearly gasp at the place and at how accurate my predictions turned out to be. The place is pristine. Army pristine. Not a pillow out of place. I'm sure

everything is laid in a particular order and a certain angle to each other. Not a cup on the coffee table. Not a ring from a mug. Not a speck of dust anywhere.

Soft, neutral tones bring the room together, eliminating any possibilities for a pop of color or—God forbid—character. The place screams ‘boring,’ which makes sense for the rule-following bore who lives here. Most likely alone.

I send Kenneth a subtle glance, memorizing him in his happy place. No matter how boring it is for me, it sure isn’t as boring for him. He takes off his shoes and places them on the dedicated shelf, then all his gear follows. He removes the holster and puts the gun inside the safe sitting inside the cabinet in the hallway.

I stand by the door on the small welcome rug, moving from foot to foot, not knowing where I should go.

He finally notices my hesitation. “You can go take a shower or something. I’ll get us some food after I take a shower too. It’s been a long day.”

“Sounds good,” I say and look down at my feet. “I don’t want to ruin your floor.”

He follows my eyes and waves me off. “Don’t worry about it. The bathroom is over there,” he points to the corridor, “and the towels should be in the cabinet under the sink.”

“Okay, thanks.” I carefully pad toward the bathroom, trying to leave the least dirt possible. It’s long dried out, but I still try not to leave any chunks behind. I’ll come back and mop the floor as soon as I’m clean.

Chapter Eleven

KENNETH

I scrub my face for the thousandth time and wonder how I ended up in this situation in the first place. I just invited a random person to my house, a woman I don't even like. What made me do that?

Shaking my head as if it can help me get rid of the weirdness of what's going on, I wash off the soap and turn off the water. I feel a zip in my back as I reach for the towel hanging on the hook. *When did I pull it?* Fuck, getting old is not fun. I feel like the switch was flipped when I turned thirty-five, and all my family's jokes might be finally coming true. They say the older I become, the harder it will be to find someone who won't annoy the hell out of me on a regular basis. I didn't tell them that I gave up on the idea of becoming a family man and learned how to be happy with my life as a bachelor. I just wish our town would be a bit bigger so there would be space for a bachelor to roam.

Who am I kidding? When was the last time I had an orgasm that wasn't self-induced? I don't even remember. After pulling that favor from one of my old college buddies, I had to go and meet up with her. It was like I was selling myself for information. *Sex before that* was good, predictable but good, but after that, I just wanted to take a hot shower and scrub the dirt off. It wasn't the woman. No, it was me—something was wrong with *me*. I can't even enjoy sex anymore. I can't enjoy much of anything in general anymore.

The things I used to love bring less and less thrill every day.

I climb out of the shower and head toward the supply closet to get a mop. Dirty floors make me itchy, and I saw chunks falling off Josie when she was carefully padding to the bathroom, trying not to leave any mess—a useless task since she was pretty much caked in dried mud. I myself left some mess when I walked to the bathroom. After the hug she gave me, I was covered in the same brown stuff she was.

But I'd take the dirt and shit and all that any day instead of going through the same fear I felt when I saw that fuckin' bear coming out of the woods and her small body pressing into her car with nowhere to go. I don't remember being so scared in my life, and I've seen some shitty things. I was sure I'd fucking win if I had to wrestle the bear—so much adrenaline was pumping through my body because of fear, making me indestructible. Fear for this woman.

Trouble, trouble, trouble. I've known she was trouble since the moment I saw her sitting in that metal tin with a wide smile on her face, hoping to wiggle her way out of a ticket.

I'm just about to call her name when I'm greeted with the most outrageous view I could have expected. The most delicious.

And fucking painful.

Josie is on her knees, with her ass up in the air, scrubbing the floor. She's wearing two towels—thank fuck it's not one, or it'd be too short—one wrapped around her torso and one around her hips like a skirt. But even the fluffiness of the towel doesn't hide her delicious ass. Quite the opposite. The lower parts of the back of her thighs are visible to my suddenly hungry eyes. Her wet hair hangs over her face like a curtain, hiding her face from view. Her whole body moves forward every time she moves her hands over the messy spot on the floor.

I swallow a dry lump in my throat and move from foot to foot, feeling an uncomfortable zip in the pit of my stomach.

“What are you doing?” I ask gruffly.

She pushes her hands away from the floor but stays on her knees. *Fuck me.* Blowing a wet, dark lock of hair away from her face, she scrunches her stubby nose.

“I'm cleaning the mess I made.”

“You didn't have to.” I clear my throat, trying to look anywhere but at her.

She chuckles lightly. “I think I did.” Looking around, she adds, “Your house is very clean, and my feet, well, my whole body was covered in mud. You gave me shelter,” she smiles sheepishly, “so it’s the least I can do.”

“Thanks.” Even to my own ears, I sound grouchy. “Why are you naked?”

She looks down at herself, and her cheeks instantly turn pink. She pulls the top of the towel higher up her chest. Like that can help.

“I don’t have any clothes. We couldn’t get my bag from the car, so I have nothing.” Her nose twitches and her eyes turn glossy. *Oh, hell no.* I don’t do well with tears.

I grind my molars, mad at her for not letting me smash the damn window and get her shit. Now I have to walk around with a fuckin’ hard-on while she’s scrubbing my floors on her knees like every dirty fantasy I’ve ever had.

“You don’t have anything at all?” I ask again, even though she has already told me. I don’t know what I’m hoping for. Maybe her pulling a potato sack from between her breasts (fuck, that’s an image) or just biding myself some time to calm my rapidly growing cock down.

She shrugs as her face falls, and I instantly feel like a total asshole. I drove her here, and I know for a fact she didn’t have any bags on her. I’m not even sure she has her phone.

“I’ll get you something. Hold on.” I retreat to my room, not wanting to face her sad eyes and trembling lips. Especially when I made them that way. Otherwise, I’d do something stupid like take her into my arms, sit on the couch, and tell her I’ll fix everything.

“I’m holding,” she mumbles under her breath, but I still hear, so when I glance at her, she smiles brightly even though her eyes are still a bit glassy and pats her knees with her palms. “Holding,” she says with narrowed eyes. Her right cheek twitches in amusement.

As I walk to my bedroom, I roll my eyes and dig into my dresser. I pull one shirt out and hold it in the air, measuring if it will fit her. It should. It’s very tight on me. Then I grab my gray sweats—without holes—and head toward the door. Right before I touch the handle, I return to the dresser, take the shirt a size too big even for me, and replace the tight one. The baggier, the better. My poor dick can’t handle her tits stretching the thin material of my worn-out shirt.

Thinking about how I made the right decision, I almost walk out of the door when I decide to return and grab the tight shirt again.

Halfway back, I decide *nah, I can’t do that to her.* Even though my dick

would be painful, it would be happy—and *I* would be happy—but it wouldn't be right to put her in an uncomfortable situation where she doesn't have anywhere to go because I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be able to look somewhere other than her magnificent chest.

Armed with the largest and thickest T-shirt and gray sweats that might stretch on her ass too well, but I don't have anything else that might fit her, I walk to the corridor and find her in the kitchen washing her hands. She's still wearing the towel dress as she turns to me. I drop the clothes on the chair by the island.

"It should fit you."

"Thank you." She swallows. Her eyes dip to the floor. A far cry from the mouthy woman I met at first. "I hate being a bother but don't have a choice." Her voice is small, and that's not my intention.

"It's not a bother." I clear my throat. "You're not a bother. I have spare clothes and a spare bedroom. Not a big deal."

"Thank you," she replies quietly. "I'll be right back."

She takes the clothes and scuttles back to the bathroom. I pull a pizza from the freezer and throw it in the oven because I'm too exhausted to make anything else. Grabbing two beers, I take a seat at the table.

I stare at the bottle in my hands when a soft voice calls my name.

"Kenneth."

I lift my eyes and blink slowly because, surely, she's not standing in front of me in just my T-shirt. Yes, it almost reaches her knees, but I know there's nothing underneath it. Nothing. Unless she snuck my boxers without me noticing, I know her ass is bare.

Just as everything else is.

"Why are you naked?" My voice is thick. I don't remember using this in months—it's how I talk in bed when I want something. Need something.

She instantly looks down and starts patting herself as if she thought she forgot to put anything on, like in one of those high school nightmares we all have had. When she finds the soft material under her fingers, she starts explaining, "The pants were too big. I couldn't even walk with them, even if I rolled them a few times over, and this shirt is so long, it looks like a dress." She shrugs one shoulder, and the collar of the T-shirt slides a bit on one side. "So I figured I'd just ditch the pants."

You figured wrong, but I don't say that because I'm two breaths away from saying something perverted that will make us both uncomfortable. Her

more so because she'll think I'm a damn predator when I'm the furthest thing from one, but I can't help the way my body reacts to her. Like it has a mind of its own where Josie is concerned, and by God, she does not make it easy.

To make my brain focus on something other than the knowledge of her bare ass under *my* shirt, I slide the beer toward her and gesture for her to sit. She slowly pads her bare feet toward the table, and I notice her burgundy nail polish. How do I know it's burgundy and not just red? I'm transfixed by her toes. Totally transfixed. Before, she was covered in mud—it was quite literally impossible to see any of them. And now I see. I never thought I was a foot fetishist, but looks like times are changing.

I must have zoned out for a moment because it takes me a second to register that she's fidgeting with her bottle for a few silent minutes without drinking it.

“What's up? You don't like beer?”

She looks up at me with her big, foggy eyes. “What?”

“What are you thinking about?” I ask slower.

“A lot of things,” she sighs, “and nothing at the same time.”

“I'm familiar with that.” I lean back on the chair and take a sip.

We sit in silence, thinking about our own things for some time, but then the beeping sound of the stove timer brings us back to reality. I stand up to get the pizza, and Josie does the same. Only with her it looks different. She jumps to her feet, making her tits jiggle, drawing my attention to her shirt. Her—*my*—gray shirt. It's enormous but still not big enough to hide her curves.

Why the fuck did I give her a gray T-shirt? Not navy or black, any dark color that wouldn't make her nipples visible. Because they're very visible in that gray color. Very. They poke the material, challenging me not to look. Daring me.

I'm too busy imagining her nipples in my mouth that I don't realize she's darting to the counter, grabbing the towel. It happens so fast I don't have time to stop her before she opens the oven and pulls the pizza out.

Bending.

She does it while bending to reach for the fucking pizza.

I swear I can see her naked pussy, and I also swear it's bare.

Fuck me. I groan inwardly—I *think*—and walk to hide behind the island because my cock decided to strain my sweats too. They're black, but it will be very hard not to notice a giant tent. The pain in the piercing is manageable,

so at least that's good. I take a deep breath and then another. Inhaling and exhaling slowly. Trying to calm all this blood rushing through my veins.

Slowly. Slowly. Breathe in and breathe out.

And I almost manage it... until she pokes her finger—*her fucking finger*—inside the cheese on the pizza and brings it to her mouth. The finger disappears between her lips, and then she pops it out, moaning loudly. Almost as loud as we heard coming out of Mark's house today. And just like that, all my hard work is ruined, and my dick is tenting my sweats again. The pain shoots nearly to my spine, making me release a low exhale full of desperation. All I want right now is to open the fridge door and push my pelvis in so it will freeze for good and stop causing me pain.

Giving up on containing the fucker and surviving the pain, I lean forward on the island, letting her cut the pizza. It can't be that hard, right? Can't be.

But then she turns toward me with those jiggling tits of hers, and I'm back to suffering just like that. I can't believe a couple of days ago, I wished it would start 'working' again. Now I wish it would go back to sleep because this pain is no joke. It feels like someone is ripping my freshly grown, thin skin from the inside and pulling it through a meat grinder. It's been a week, and I thought it would be healed by now. I remember TJ mentioning that it would take two weeks to stop feeling pain when getting hard, but I assumed it wouldn't be so freaking bad.

She must have noticed it because she nearly drops the pizza plate on the counter and rushes toward me. I have nothing else to do but rush to the other side of the island.

"Kenneth, what happened?"

"Nothing," I grit.

"You're all pale. Like pale *pale*. It's not nothing." She makes a move toward me, and I scoot to the side, trying to hide the tent in my pants. It's smaller and slowly descending into nothing, but it will be *hard* to explain what's happening without going into detail.

"I'm fine, Josie. Just having a dizzy spell." I wave her off, hoping she'll take the hint.

She takes another step toward me, but I sidestep along the island. She pauses and tilts her head, looking at me curiously. Then she finally nods to herself because it's sure not to me and goes to grab the pizza. Placing it on the table, she takes two clean plates and places them at our seats.

When she sits in her chair, she gestures for me to come and join her.

“Go ahead, I’ll just grab a fork.”

“A fork?” Her forehead wrinkles. “For pizza?”

I don’t respond because I don’t have to explain my actions to anyone, but I sort of do because I need a bit more time to get the situation under control. By doing so, I kind of put myself in a situation where I need to eat a freaking pizza with a knife and fork while I’m starving. I’m closing the utensil drawer when Josie drops something on the floor.

“Oh crap,” she murmurs and bends to pick it up. She’s sitting with both her feet under her butt, and while she’s bending, one side of her ass lifts up, revealing once again something I’d rather not see. Not today. Any other day in like a week—yes, give me all of that, but today it’s torture.

“Fuck, Josie! Go put pants on!” I yell, unable to control myself any longer. The situation in my own sweats is getting worse by the second. Again.

“What?” she cries out. Her hand lands on her ass, and her eyes widen in horror once it finds nothing but bare flesh. “*Ohmigod!*”

She jumps from the chair and pulls on the T-shirt. “Did I just flash you?”

“You did. Twice already,” I say in a falsetto so offensive it hurts even my own ears.

“Why didn’t you say anything the first time?” *Good question, Josie. A very good question, indeed.*

“I thought, I dunno,” I glance around, looking for help that isn’t coming, “I imagined it or something.”

“You’ve been imagining my pussy?” Her eyebrows disappear into her hairline as she takes a step back.

“Yes.”

Her eyes turn into saucers.

“I mean, no! I haven’t been imagining your,” I gesture to her legs, “private parts. And yes, I saw it.”

“You just said you imagined it.” She points an accusing finger at me.

“For lack of a better word.” I wave my hand in the air in annoyance with myself more than her showing me her goods. *Fuck, I bet she tastes good.* Imagining her legs spread wide in front of my face and her quivering thighs on my shoulders...

I’m acting like a hormonal teenager who can’t control his temper around her. It has to stop.

Her eyes narrow. “I have a perfectly nice pussy, just so you know. A lot

of people would be happy imagining it.”

I agree, Josie. I so fucking agree.

“I don’t doubt that.” I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to suppress the *rising* idea of her perfect pussy. “But can we talk about something else?”

She takes a few loud breaths and then plasters a wide smile on her face. “Sure. We can talk about pizza,” she points at the table, “which is getting cold and *hard*.” Her knowing smirk says all I need to know.

“Good one.” I subtly shake my foot, letting my dick fall down my leg because the fucker has been through hell for the past five minutes and still refuses to behave. “But honestly, Josie,” I say as I walk toward the table, “you need to put some pants on.” I swallow the lump in my throat. “For both our sakes.”

She freezes, the pizza halfway into her open mouth as she watches me. “Oh,” she says as she licks her lips. “Oh, I see.” Then her narrowed eyes send very sharp daggers my way. “I recall our very first encounter and how you mentioned that this,” she wiggles her brows, “would never happen.”

“And it won’t,” I state firmly and grab a slice of pizza while lowering my ass on the chair. “Eat.”

She sends me a funny look and picks up the piece she dropped. Her white teeth sink into the slice while she pulls it away from her mouth. A string of cheese is left hanging in the air. Then she grabs it with her finger and pushes it back between her lips. She’s being nasty, for fuck’s sake. How am I aroused by that?

I subtly shake my head and dig into my own slice.

Turns out it’s not so subtle because she quirks one brow in a silent question I choose to ignore totally. She snorts and finishes her piece in three giant bites, puffing her cheeks while chewing.

And I can’t stop looking at her mouth. Every few seconds, her tongue peeks out to clear the sauce from her lips, and my nostrils flare in response every time.

I don’t know what’s happening. Maybe it’s the lack of sex recently, but her bad manners turn me on.

Then she brings her fingers to her mouth and licks the grease off them. Her eyes close as if she’s drinking God’s nectar. It’s a frozen pizza from the store, for fuck’s sake. I expected Josie to be demanding and prickly. She looked so fancy with her vintage car stocked with all sorts of expensive-looking bags. I took one look at her, speeding on my territory, breaking the

rules, and instantly placed her into a certain category. It's my job to keep the town safe from any threats. Can it be that I judged her wrong? Because the more I see of her, the more I like. Quite literally.

I spread my legs wider, hoping more space would chill my poor, abused cock.

She picks up another piece and bites into it. Juices sluice over the side of her chin, and I wonder what else can look so good running down her chin...

"Do you have crabs or something?" she asks suddenly between chews, and I start coughing, withdrawn from my fantasy. A piece goes down the wrong pipe, and I can't take a breath.

She stands up and rushes to my side. Patting me on the back with one hand, she places another on my shoulder. "Do you need some water?"

"N—" I cough, "no. I'm okay now." I turn my head slightly to face her, and she meets me with a raised brow.

"Do you?"

I cough again. "What?"

"Have crabs."

"For fuck's sake! No, I don't have crabs. Why would you think that?"

She points at my lap. "Your junk constantly itches, and you're trying to adjust your dick all the time." Her saying the word 'dick' makes it jump to attention. And she notices it. Smirking, she mumbles under her breath, "Never going to happen my ass."

"Josie," I plead.

"So, what's up with your junk?" She nods toward my lap.

I press my lips tighter and stare at the pizza in front of me, hoping she'll go away. She doesn't.

"Ke-en-ne-e-eth," she singsongs and digs her nails into my shoulder, thinking it might force me to respond. It doesn't make *me* respond. "Ken!" she barks, and I bark back.

"Nothing!"

"For real," she bends, bringing her face closer to mine, "if I'm going to stay at your place, you could give me a warning about needing to call pest control before I climb into your bed." I glare at her, and she rights herself instantly with a huff, "One of your beds."

I sigh loudly, covering my face with my hands. "It's a *phmhng*." It comes out as gibberish.

"What?" She leans in even closer, clearly irritated with my incoherent

answer.

I drop my hands from my face. “I got a piercing!” I nearly yell.

“Where?” she asks, dumbfounded, without moving away.

“There.” I point at my cock, which is currently shriveling from the unfair accusation.

Her attention shifts from my face to my lap right before her eyes go wide. Very wide.

“Oh!” She tilts her head while staring at my sweats as if trying to see through the material.

“Josie,” I bark, drawing her attention.

“What kind?” she asks, licking her lips and leaning a hair closer to my lap.

Why is she licking her lips? Oh, fuck, no. *Don't do that now.* I don't even know who I'm begging now.

“What kind of what?” I don't even know what she's asking at this point.

Her eyes slowly move to my face. “What kind of piercing do you have?”

I narrow my eyes, grab the edge of the table, and pull myself closer, hiding my lap under the surface as I move a little farther away from her. She drops her hand and blinks rapidly, straightening her back. Her cheeks turn red. Like totally beet red. Then she rushes to her chair, stumbling on the way. I guess we're both affected by the circumstances, and I'm not the only one who lost control. Which means I have to stay strong and resist the urge to throw her on the table and punish her for flashing that perfect pussy of hers that started the suffering in the first place. Because I know she's curious. Very curious.

Once she's back in her chair, she picks up the piece of pizza again and starts slowly chewing it. We sit in silence for a few minutes as she avoids my eyes, and I start to miss her snarky remarks and naughty humor, but I don't know how to break the ice I've just created.

She does it for me.

“I miss my shoes.”

And then she says that.

I finish chewing, wipe my mouth, and ask, “Shoes?”

“Yeah,” she sighs, “the ones that are left in the mud.”

“I can grab them when I tow your car tomorrow.”

She hesitates for a second before saying, “Nah. They're ruined anyway. Don't bother. It's part of my old life.”

We sit in silence until she calls me out. “You can put that fork and knife down.” She points with her slice of pizza. “Stop torturing yourself. You proved your point.”

“My point?” I play dumb.

She glares, making me chuckle, and I finally ditch the utensils and pick up the pizza with my hands. Taking a first big bite, I lean back in my chair with a moan.

“Look at you, Sheriff Benson. There might be hope for you after all.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I deadpan.

She sends me another look, but then her eyes soften. “You know, there should be a place where you don’t have to pretend, and it’s not fair I’ve taken that from you. That you can’t just be yourself.”

I grind my teeth. “I don’t pretend.”

“Yes,” she sighs with a sad smile. “I don’t actually think you pretend. I might have phrased that poorly. I meant you need a place where you don’t have to be a hero.”

“I’m not a hero.”

“I think you are,” she contradicts me, and I press my lips tighter. She ruffles my feathers like no one else.

I lean forward on the table, and she mimics my gesture. A playful smile on her face tells me she thinks I’m flirting. And I was going to, until I figured out that it would end up with her on her back and me deep inside her. The sexual energy between us is undeniable, but she’s a guest in my house, and I’d feel like a dick if we went down that path.

“You think you have me all figured out?” I ask, my voice low, a tone I reserve for bad criminals since making sure *she* doesn’t want *it* is the only way we will make it through the night. “You’re wrong.” I shake my head, continuing without letting her have a chance to speak. “I’m not a hero. I’m the same fuckup as everyone else.” Her playful smile slowly turns into a frown as I keep going, far away from my original plan just to keep her at a safe distance. Now it’s more. Now, she touched something that wasn’t meant to be touched. “And we are not friends, Josie. You don’t know anything about me.”

Her eyes turn dark, and I wince, expecting tears since I went too far. But instead, she surprises me by narrowing her stormy eyes.

“If I recall correctly, I wasn’t signing up to be your friend. I’m sure that list is long enough without me with all those good deeds you’re doing.” She

leans even closer, nearly crawling on the table. “And I didn’t ask you to bring me here. In fact,” she pushes back and rises to her feet, “it’s time for me to go. Thank you for your hospitality.”

With that, she rises from the table, and I throw my hand out, grabbing her forearm.

“Stay,” I say gently, but she pulls away from me, so I ask again, even softer this time. “Please, Josie. Stay. I’m really tired, so I didn’t react well.”

She shakes her head. “I really have to go. I think Alicia should be done by now, and she can come and get me. Or maybe Mark.”

Even though he’s in love with someone else, the mention of another man’s name makes my skin crawl. I clench my teeth before I say something I’ll regret and take a deep, calming breath—this woman can rile me up in point two seconds flat.

“Josie, stay,” I start, ashamed of my behavior. “I was out of line. We can just go to our rooms and not see each other till tomorrow morning.”

Her lips form a thin line. She’s pressing them together so hard they turn pale for the lack of blood flowing to them. Her chin lifts in defiance, and I prepare for the storm.

... that never comes. Her shoulder suddenly drops, and she sits back in her seat. Her whole posture is the picture of defeat, and it doesn’t make me feel even slightly good. I won. I should be happy. But I’m not.

“I was wrong too.” Her voice is small, just like her posture. “I never should have assumed things about you and never should have taunted you with it.” She looks up at the ceiling, biting her lower lip.

I give her a half-smile, sincere but still a bit reserved—I don’t want to make any wrong moves with her.

“We’re even then.”

A beautiful smile brightens her face. “I guess we are.”

Chapter Twelve

JOSIE

I lie on the bed, watching the shadows from the window light play on the ceiling. Even his guest bedroom is nice. I mean, the majority of people—at least people I know—use guest bedrooms to store junk. But not Kenneth. The sheets are crisp and clean. The dust is nonexistent. The cream nightstands match the frame, the curtains match the throw blanket on the bed. Everything matches. Almost too perfectly. I can't help but assess the room with my designer eye—it's a default setting of sorts and doesn't turn off even when I want it to.

I'd add splashes of color here and there just to make it a little more like home and a little less like a pristine museum. Maybe I'd put an out-of-place vase on the dresser and a curtain with sewn-in fluffy balls on the windows.

And a comforter. I'd definitely add a comforter. This one is nice, but it's not mine.

Though I'd give up my comforter willingly if he just told me what kind of piercing he has. I'll be damned, but proper Sheriff Benson has a very improper pierced cock, and I'll be damned if it's not the only thing on my mind. Is it a Prince Albert? I bet it would look good. Does he have a regular metal ring or some fancy jewelry? The possibilities are endless.

I've never had a partner with a piercing on his private parts, and just like that, Kenneth Benson became even more desirable and, therefore, less

attainable. I can't start an affair in a place where the sheriff is pretty much Superman without a cape. Though, he might be hiding one somewhere. I don't know how long I need to stay here and what to do to make this house happen. I can't afford distractions or attachments. Especially attachments, since I'm not planning on staying, and Kenneth Benson looks just like a man who might change my mind. I didn't work my ass off for years just to end up back in a small town with zero prospects.

I toss and turn for hours before I'm able to fall asleep, just to be woken a few minutes later by a knock on the door. I think I must be dreaming, so I squeeze my eyes closed, but the steady raps come again. I push up onto my elbows, trying to figure out where the knocking is coming from—someone's trying to take the front door off its hinges.

I throw the comforter away and peek outside my bedroom door. Not finding Kenneth anywhere, I tippytoe to the entrance door so whoever is there doesn't know I'm here. Flashes of horror movies blink in front of my eyes as I imagine his wife coming home from a business trip to find me here.

Is he married? I don't know anything about him. Yes, I'm in a separate bedroom, but with my head full of dirty thoughts about her husband.

My forehead breaks out in a cold, guilty sweat.

I carefully look into a peephole—I doubt this lady is Kenneth's wife unless he is into cougars. The woman behind the door is standing with her hands on her massive hips that make even me jealous. She has rolls in her bright red hair and matching fuzzy slippers on her feet. Right as I look through the peephole, she steps closer and peers through it on the other side.

"I know you're there, Sheriff. I see your car in the driveway. Open up."

She doesn't sound particularly pleasant, but it's not my monkeys and not my circus, so I begin silently moving backward when she raises her voice.

"Don't you dare run away from me, Kenneth Benjamin Benson! I'll tell your mama that you disregarded my request. I'll go to the mayor and tell him that!"

She did not just say that...

"Do you hear me?"

Yes, she did. My original plan to stay away from all of it goes down the drain. I don't hear the water running, so Kenneth is not in the shower. Nor is he in the kitchen. And the woman just said his car is still here, which means he's been so exhausted that he didn't even hear her first attempt at shaking the house or her current yelling. A wave of protectiveness rises in my chest,

making it tight. I walk back to the door with the determination of a bulldozer set on its course—those are vicious, trust me—and pull it open.

“May I help you?” I ask in a stern voice, making the lady stutter.

“Y-you—” she clears her throat. “Who *are* you?” She narrows her eyes at me.

“You’re knocking on the door at the ungodly hour of,” I look at the wall clock and then back at her, “six twenty-nine in the morning and have the balls to ask me who I am?”

Her eyes narrow even more. “Did your mama wash your filthy mouth with soap? I would.”

I give her a sweet smile, drawling on the words. “Well, good thing you’re not her.” And yes, my mama washed my mouth with soap, and this is precisely why I curse like a sailor.

Her mouth puckers into something that resembles a cat’s buttohole. “I don’t know who you are, but you need to step away so I can talk to the sheriff.”

She makes a motion to push me aside and move through the door, but I step in her way. She moves to the other side, and I mimic her, not letting her pass. I might be short, but I am mighty.

“Move right this second, young lady!” she orders, pointing her index finger at my feet. Fumes are pretty much coming out of her ears. “I must speak to Sheriff right now.”

I give her another smile. “You can talk to him during normal business hours *at the station*.” Then I add with snark, “Like normal people do.”

She gasps and brings her hand to her chest in horror. “How dare you?”

“What’s going on?” comes a raspy, sleepy voice behind me.

The morning guest latches onto it like a leech. “Kenny,” she starts, her voice breaking as if she’s about to cry, “this... this *woman*,” she throws a nasty look my way, “here insulted me.”

A loud sigh right behind me lands right on the back of my head, making the fine hairs on my neck stand up.

“What do you need, Mrs. Roberts?”

Mrs. Roberts glowers at me, but the second she turns to *Kenny*, her eyes fill with adoration. “You know how I always have a cup of my morning coffee on my front porch? So, I was having a cup today as well. And it was a different cup than usual because this awful woman Donna refuses to sell me her special blend for some reason.”

I snort—*I wonder why.*

She sends me another nasty glare and continues her story. “So, where was I?” Her eyes turn upward for a moment. “Right. I was having my morning cup of horrible coffee and even bought those cupcakes from Mrs. Landy. Just like a treat, you know, since the coffee was so awful. And you know, it’s an early hour, and because of Donna, I had to brew my coffee twice because the first time turned out to be awful.” She lowers her voice at the last word as if sharing the secret. “So, when I finally managed to make the perfect cup, I took my cupcake, and I was—”

I let out a loud, dramatic snore because she is putting me into a coma, and begin wondering if there’s an end to this story before I turn forty.

She presses her lips tight, her eyes promising a slow death before she relaxes them enough to talk again.

“As I said before I was rudely interrupted, I took my cupcake and my coffee that was just slightly better than the first, if I may,” she presses her open palm to her generous chest covered in a white, fuzzy bathrobe, “and went to sit on my front porch. And then I saw it.”

Her lower lip begins trembling, and for a moment I feel bad for Mrs. Roberts—whatever made her almost cry must have been really horrible. But it doesn’t last long.

“I saw Mr. Cricket,” she almost yells his name, “taking my newspaper from the front lawn! Right in front of my very own eyes! Before I can even read it. Can you believe the audacity?”

I have no idea who Mr. Cricket is, but he sounds like he and I could be good friends.

“Mrs. Roberts,” Kenneth addresses her with a tired sigh.

“No, no, no. I don’t want to hear anything this time.” She raises her hand in the air. “You must arrest him for robbery!”

I hear Kenneth taking three deep breaths behind my back. I’m totally aware of his presence even though he hasn’t moved.

“It’s not robbery, Mrs. Roberts. We’ve had this talk before. Besides, Mr. Cricket is eighty-two, cut him some slack.”

Eighty-two? My head whips toward Kenneth. Eighty-two? That’s how old my grandma was when things got really tough, and I know how many challenges she faced every single day. We’ll all be lucky to live that long.

A wave of instant fury rises up my chest, totally replacing the protectiveness, and I turn back toward the morning guest.

“Come to the station during business hours,” I start in a clipped tone, leaving how much this lady annoys me to zero imagination, “and don’t harass officials in their homes during their time off!”

With that, I push Ken back with my ass and shut the door right in her face. Then I march to the kitchen, pour myself a full glass of water, and down it in the longest gulp of all gulps.

The sound of bare feet follows me into the kitchen. “What the fuck was that, Josie?”

“What?” I pour myself another glass just so I don’t go back and pull all the rolls out of her hair. I drink slower this time for fear of drowning in the glass; I wonder if it’s ever happened to anyone.

“That!” He points his enormous finger at the door where the lady disappeared.

“I told your neighbor to stop bothering you at this ungodly hour.”

“That’s what you did?” He blinks slowly.

“I don’t see you chasing her.” I lift a brow, daring him to argue.

And argue he does. “That’s not the point, Josie. You shouldn’t have opened the door in the first place.”

“Why? Because you’re ashamed of me?”

“It’s not that.” He pinches the bridge of his nose.

“What’s *that* then?” I stare at his face, quite honestly trying not to stare at his cock in hopes of seeing the outline of the piercing. I deserve a medal for that because the task is nearly impossible. Morning Kenneth Benson is one large, yummy lollipop, and we all know what you’re supposed to do with those. His tousled hair, heavy eyelids, and morning scruff make my mouth water. Even his tangled and wrinkled T-shirt makes him so fucking sexy. It’s unfair how one man can turn my properly functioning brain into horny mush.

He takes a deep breath before speaking. “People here like to talk.”

“And what? You’re a grown boy, Sheriff. What can they possibly do to you? Call your mom?”

He gives me a funny look. “You’d be surprised.”

I roll my eyes at his words. “This woman is clearly harassing you and the poor old dude next door. Why would you let her do that?”

“This is a small town, Josie,” he explains tiredly. “This is how small towns operate. I can’t just throw her away.”

“Why?” I deadpan. I was never the one to give in to bullies. Hence me ending up in cuffs half of the time.

“Because I’m the only line of protection this town has.”

His explanation makes no sense to me.

Until it does.

The people have no one to rely on or complain to besides this man, and they don’t know how lucky they are to have him—cops in my small town were the opposite of him. If I saw one on the street, I’d cross it just to stay away. I wish more people were like him: reliable, honest, and loyal.

And I think Mrs. Roberts is well aware of that, hence her banging on his door before seven in the morning. I think I just started a personal beef with one of the locals, and I don’t feel even the slightest bit bad about that.

“Kenneth,” I say with a sigh, “you can’t let them run you into an early grave.”

“This is my job,” he replies stubbornly.

“To die young so Mrs. Roberts can read her newspaper in peace? C’mon.” I snort in annoyance. “You know she’s mean.”

“She is... not the most pleasant person, but she’s part of this town, Josie. You can’t do that.” His face turns cold, and I figure this is where we part ways.

“I was just trying to—” I cut myself off before I say too much.

“What? What did you try to do, Josie? Make sure I was the talk of the town before I even drank my coffee?”

“I was trying to protect you!” I yell, mad at him for assuming the worst of me. “A crazy neighbor is knocking on your door when you’re so exhausted that you don’t even hear the bell. Damn right, I’ll be protecting the front. And the back. And the damn sides too! You let all of them run you into the ground because you want to fix everything. It doesn’t work like that if you want to stay sane.”

His head rears back before his eyes narrow, and he hisses, “You want to talk about sane? A person who tried escaping a cop on a muddy road in the middle of the fucking woods? That sane person?”

I pinch my lips tight before I do something stupid like launch myself at his jugular to drink the blood of my enemy and then bathe in it.

And he just keeps going, not knowing how close he is to losing his dick. “And guess what? I don’t need protection from anyone, let alone someone like you.”

I quirk a brow, waiting to see where he’s going with this because it’s got to be good.

“... Someone who’s just passing through while everyone else stays.”

His mouth clamps shut as he considers if he said too much but doesn’t want to back down.

This, right here, is another reason why I must get the hell out of here—Sheriff Benson has the ability to see right through people to keep the town safe, and it seems as if he doesn’t like what he sees in me.

“I see,” I mumble, backing away.

His eyes follow my movement while the muscles in his cheek pop from pressing his teeth together too hard. When my ass is through the door of my bedroom, he lets out the loudest sigh I’ve ever heard a human make.

“Give me a second, I’ll get dressed.”

“No need,” I squeak, throwing my open palm in front of me as I peek out the door. “I’ll call Alicia to pick me up. Or I’ll walk.” Even though my phone is still in my baby-car buried in mud. But I want out of here so badly that I just might walk right over to Mrs. Roberts and ask to borrow hers.

“Josie.” Another sigh. “You don’t have any clothes; you can’t walk outside like that.”

“Right.” I nod a few times. “It’s against the law to walk without underwear.” I give him a sweet smile. “I’ll hide between buildings then, like the dirty little secret I am.”

“Joz,” he calls out, but I point a finger at him.

“Stop, don’t even think about it. Whatever you’re thinking. I’ll be fine.”

“Joz—”

“Don’t call me that,” I cut him off, getting more upset. “Only friends can call me Joz.” His face darkens, so my cruel words hit the mark. “Thank you for taking me in, Sheriff. I really appreciate it, but you’re right, I’m just passing through.”

With that, I back into the room and close the door. Leaning against the wall, I press my hand to my mouth and cry. Silently. Letting my body shake violently because I’m sick and tired of everything and because life keeps throwing me curveball after curveball.

Being strong is exhausting.

Once I’m done sniffing, I walk to the mirror and fix myself the best I can, which isn’t a lot to begin with since I don’t have any of my pick-me-up things. Then I square my shoulders and walk out the very same door I just leaned on.

He’s waiting for me in the kitchen, dressed in a clean, pressed uniform, a

steaming cup of coffee in his hands. His hair is perfectly tousled. I've been hiding for a maximum of five minutes, and he already looks like he just visited a barbershop and Starbucks at the same time.

When he sees me, he picks up another mug from the table I hadn't noticed before and offers it to me. I shake my head, refusing the Trojan horse. No matter how delicious it smells. He silently puts the mug back, finishes his coffee in one go, and rises to his feet.

I'm standing, unsure on my feet as I shift my weight. Rejecting his offer to give me a ride seemed like a powerful move at the moment, but to think of it, it wasn't very mature. As he pointed out (rightfully so), I don't have clothes besides his T-shirt on. I didn't wash my clothes yesterday because I simply forgot. I was exhausted from the adrenaline withdrawal, then he was tired in the kitchen, and I didn't ask where I could do it, and then I was preoccupied with the thoughts about his pierced tip (maybe). So all my belongings are now in a plastic bag I found yesterday under the sink—I wasn't surprised when I saw that he, too, has a bag with bags.

I don't know if I should remind him of the offer and pretend I never said what I did, but he makes my life easier by walking toward the front door and picking his keys up on the way. I silently pad after him. When he opens the passenger door first, he lets out an aggravated sigh. I peek from behind his shoulder and find the dried-out mud still covering... well, pretty much everything.

An instant wave of shame descends upon my righteous shoulders, and I become small.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

He shrugs his shoulder in dismissal. Funny thing—he hasn't said a word since I came out of that room.

Sheriff moves toward the back seat and opens the door, gesturing for me to get inside. I want to say '*hell, no,*' but looks like my options are limited. Silently, I climb inside—without his help this time. He shuts the door and walks around the cruiser toward the driver's side. I pull the hem of the T-shirt closer to my knees, hoping my naked behind won't be wiping whatever germs the real criminals left on this seat.

"Where to?" he asks gruffly.

"Alicia's," I reply with the least emotion possible.

The drive to her place is quiet. He hasn't said a word, nor have I. When he parks in front of the house, I instantly pull the handle only to find the door

won't budge. *Great.* I forgot all the extra features the back seat of a cop car comes with—the lack of freedom being number one.

Sheriff comes around the car and opens the door for me. I climb out carefully, trying not to flash the whole street like I did to him yesterday.

“Thank you again,” I say quietly but sincerely as I walk toward the door.

“Josie,” he calls out, and I pause, turning my head halfway just so I can indicate that I'm ready to listen but not ready to talk. “For all it's worth, you're still important. Even if you're passing through.”

I give him a sad smile and walk up the stairs. I might be important, but I'm not important *to him*.

Before I can even knock, the door flies open, and Alicia comes out.

“Hey,” her voice is small.

“I'm sorry for—”

But she doesn't let me even start before she blurts, “Kenneth sent me a message yesterday that you'd be staying at his place because we were having wild sex, and you felt bad about coming in.” Her cheeks turn pink, and I instantly feel like a total jerk. “I'm sorry, Josie! I didn't think you'd be coming back at that time. We started and lost track of time.” She's almost crying at this point, thinking she did something horrible.

I turn around to find Sheriff watching us, and I send him a death glare. He accepts it with one of his own and climbs back into the car. Once he's out of sight, I face Alicia.

“Look, if you're going to apologize about having hot sex with your man, save it.” I throw my hand in the air, preventing her from speaking. “Seriously, Alicia. Don't even think about that.”

“But you have no clothes and nothing really. He said everything was in the car, and I checked, you didn't leave anything here. What happened? You don't like it here?” Then her cheeks redden even more. “Stupid question considering how yesterday went, and it was like the first day you're here. I'm sor—”

“Alicia!” I stop her with a laugh, and she smiles back.

“Okay.” She gestures for me to come inside. “Let's save you a walk of shame. My neighbors are vicious. And very, very old. They have zero life besides talking crap about everyone around them.”

“Tell me about it,” I snort, and her eyes turn curious.

When I'm inside, she gives me the new shorts she bought to cover my naked ass and has me sit in the kitchen. Two minutes later, I have a steaming

cup of a fancy latte. Ten minutes later—a full-blown breakfast with eggs, bacon, and potatoes. It screams ‘cozy-home-you-don’t-have’ right in my face, and I start sniffing.

“Joz,” Alicia calls, “are you okay?”

And to my utter astonishment, I start crying. What does Alicia put in her food, damn it?

“Oh, Joz,” she says as she stands up from her chair to comfort me. Lowering to her knees, she wraps her arms around me and stays like that until my tear ducts dry out like the Sahara.

When I sniffle and pull away, she lets me go. She takes my face into her hands and wipes my tears and snot away with her fingers, not looking even slightly disgusted.

“I’m sorry about that,” I mumble, embarrassed.

“Be quiet, woman.” She laughs. “No more sorry’s, please.”

“Agreed,” I say with a smile, wiping my face with my sweaty palms, making even more of a mess.

“Finish your breakfast, or I’ll give you more,” she orders, pointing at the cooling plate on the table.

“And I won’t say no.” I dig into my food, telling her about my adventures yesterday and this morning between bites. When I reach the bit about Mrs. Roberts, she starts laughing.

“I wish I saw his face. No, wait, her face. No, his.” And she laughs again, smacking her open palm on the table.

“That was a sight to see.” I finish my story and find her chewing on the inside of her cheek. “What?”

“Nothing.” She blinks innocently even though I know she’s withholding something she wants to say.

“Alicia.” My voice turns stern, and she just giggles.

“No, really. It’s just you’re probably the only person who can call him out on his shit.” She thinks for a moment and adds, “And maybe Leila. Leila is never shy with her words. She just never pushes them on you, you know?”

I look at her. “And I do?”

She lets out a belly laugh. “Sometimes you do, but that’s precisely what Ken needs.”

“Why would he need it, and why from me?” I ask, not understanding what she means.

She smiles mysteriously and shifts topics. “How did the meeting with

Archie go?”

“Oh-h-h.” I pinch the bridge of my nose before going into detail about how much needs to be done. When I start talking about the woodwork, I remember the bed and breakfast table and am about to ask Alicia about it when she offers herself.

“I’m sure Mark can take care of the woodwork for you. He has brilliant hands.” Her cheeks take a rosy glow, and I start laughing.

“I bet he does. Actually, I saw some of his work at the bed and breakfast, and now I suspect that his brilliant hands also make some of the things in this place?” My brows raise in question, and she nods proudly.

“Almost everything. He’s really good with it.”

“Yeah, I’ll need him then. Once I figure out the rest.” I cover my face with my hands and groan. “*If* I figure out the rest.”

She cackles and moves to refill her coffee. “You will. You’ll figure *everything* out.”

Glancing at her after such a vague remark, I push my empty mug toward her to request more coffee. “Keep ’em coming, baby.”

I’m tempted to ask about the Sheriff’s piercing because I’m sure there are some rumors circling around—it’s a small town, after all—but it might be something he wanted to keep to himself, considering the feature is new if it constantly itches and hurts.

I’m sure my own cheeks change color, imagining the type of jewelry he might have. I think it just became the eighth wonder for me, despite the man it’s attached to.

Chapter Thirteen

KENNETH

Dropping her off with bare feet and a naked ass was a disaster. *She* is a disaster. Since the moment she showed up here, I've had so many angry outbursts. More than I've had in years. And she's only been here for a couple of days.

Last night made it clear—I must stay away from her for a number of reasons, keeping my sanity intact being number one.

She rattles me. She makes me lose my cool. She makes me want to throw her on the table for a rough fuck one minute and throttle her the other. Or maybe both at the same time. And I'm not known to be rough. I've actually been called a very gentle and thorough lover. But I don't want to be gentle with her. I want to punish her for her big mouth and for her naked pussy moving on top of my chair in my house. For her constantly calling me out on the things no one else ever does. For that stubbornness every time she contradicts me on every single thing I say.

I haven't known the woman long enough for her to cause such strong emotions, and I don't plan to see how much stronger they can become over time. Staying away is the only option.

I call Bobby, the guy who owns the only local tow truck company, and ask him to meet me next to Josie's car. I head that way in hopes that I'll be able to get there before he does. I give Jennica a quick call on the way to ask

if we have anything urgent, but she says that I'm good for a couple of hours, no one is banging on the door for a change. I don't tell her I already got some of that this morning, and Josie fought off the demon named Mrs. Roberts on her own.

Mrs. Roberts has a habit of banging on my door at least three times a week. The majority of her complaints are about Mr. Cricket, who has an early stage of dementia. But according to her, he's faking it and was put on this planet to steal her newspaper or the shoes she leaves at the front door. My theory is that she leaves them there just so he can 'borrow' them.

Mr. Cricket was my elementary school teacher, and I could never bring myself to charge him with anything. Even before he was officially diagnosed, though the signs were already there. So yes, Mrs. Roberts has been my pest for nearly a year now. I have other people who come in to complain all the time, and it just so happens that Josie met the very one who's a professional in starting the rumor mills. I bet by the time I dropped Josie off at Alicia's, half of the town already knew that she spent the night at my place, and most of them probably thought she was totally naked when she opened the door.

I should expect a call from my mother by midday, if not earlier.

I find Josie's car the same way we left it. I half expected the bear to come back, but the site is clear. I'm not sure if it's the same one, but bears have gone bananas recently. I'd say for a few years now. A bear has been spotted walking down Main Street a few times over the years. Nonsense, considering they leave us alone if we leave them be. Freya claims that the very same bear always shows up at their cabin and occasionally in town when she's there. Alex says he's seen him a few times too, but the animal never comes close when he's around.

I don't know what's happening with animals in this town, but looks like they've decided on some sort of riot.

I park behind Josie's tin and climb out of my cruiser. It's been raining most of the night, and the road hasn't improved even after a few hours of sun.

Looking around to make sure no one sees me, I pull plastic bags over my feet since I forgot my fishing boots, tighten them, and trudge through the thick mud toward the passenger side. I assume this is where she lost them.

When I reach it, I don't see anything sticking out from the brown mess, but they have to be here. I roll up my sleeves and push my hand into the mud. It's here. Pulling it out, I shake the remnants of the dirt. I remember the shoe—it's the same one she wore when she was escaping me. The very same one

that drove me insane.

I should bury the shoe right here, along with the leftovers of my emotions from that day, but I don't. Instead, I train my eyes on the mud around it, looking for the other one. The second one takes a bit longer to find, but I place both shoes in a plastic bag with a satisfied smile on my face.

And I feel it. A stare. Turning toward the area where the feeling is coming from, I find a moose about thirty feet away from me. The moose everyone calls Frank. Why the whole town is obsessed with the damn thing, I'll never know. But every single woman in Little Hope adores the beast, and he seems to be very affectionate in return.

I don't like him.

Even though I owe him for steering me toward this road when Josie needed help.

I don't know how he knew it, but when I was driving, the damn thing stood in the middle of the road, not letting me pass. It was right before the turn into this muddy road. I don't know why I was coming this way anyway. Maybe I really wanted to make sure she wasn't a liar, which would be pointless because I already verified that part with Archie. I still can't believe the fucker didn't tell me about her coming to town. I called Leila too, asking why they kept it from me, but she just gave me some weird, Leila-style, vague answer.

So yeah, I mostly needed to check on her. I couldn't sleep if I knew the woman was in the middle of nowhere by herself. At some point, I feared I'd look like a creep, so I decided to turn around and drive back to town.

He didn't let me. I tried to pass him. Tried to shoo him away. But he just stood there like an unmoving statue until I turned toward the road to the Ghost House.

So yeah, I kind of owe him. Even though I'm one hundred percent sure it was just a coincidence because there is no way a moose was deliberately trying to influence my path just so I could get to Josie on time. I mentally shudder at what could have happened to her if I didn't listen to him.

A loud snort brings me back to reality, and I shamefully look around, trying to find what's making the sound. I tried being discreet, but looks like someone got me.

After a quick assessment, I find no one besides the moose. Another snort comes, and my head snaps toward the sound. It is the moose. The moose just fucking snorted.

“What?” I ask, feeling like an idiot for talking to an animal.

Obviously, he doesn't respond and just watches me with his big, dark eyes.

“I'm an idiot,” I mumble to myself.

... And the fucking thing snorts again.

I tilt my head to the side, watching him, and I swear he does the same. I purse my lips. He beats his hoof on the muddy ground. I narrow my eyes. His ears flop, almost as if annoyed. I roll my eyes at myself but do it anyway—I start talking to a moose.

“Thank you,” I say through gritted teeth. He's waiting. “What?”

He's waiting.

“Thank you, *Frank*.”

He beats the hoof, turns around, and walks away. I blink. Then I blink some more, trying to understand if I'm going insane, and walk back to my cruiser before Bobby arrives. Throwing the bag with the shoes into the passenger seat, I take the bags off my feet and place them in the designated trash bag and hide it in the compartment in the door just in time for Bobby's arrival.

He jumps out of his truck.

“Hey, Sheriff. Need help with your girlfriend's car?” he asks smugly.

Here we go.

I groan loudly. “What have you heard?”

He cackles. “Not much. Just that Mrs. Roberts came to ask you for sugar this morning and found you and your girlfriend engaged in some ‘gross,’” he makes air quotes, “activities.”

“Yeah?” I ask, squinting. “How does she know what we were engaged in if we were inside my house?”

He laughs, scratching his chin. “I'll make sure to ask her next time.”

“You do that.” I give him a stern look, making him clamp his mouth shut. He still has that smug look on his face, and there's nothing I can do or say to erase it. People here live for drama when it doesn't involve them.

“Do you have keys?”

“I think they're in the car.” I nod toward the tin.

“Alrighty then.” He walks to the car, pulls a small set of tools hooked to a keychain, and goes to work. Once it's open, he gets inside, complaining about the seat being so close to the steering wheel he nearly breaks his back. I suppress my smile because that was exactly my thought when I did the same.

After shifting to neutral and leaving it like that, he climbs out. My eye starts twitching due to safety concerns, but Bobby's been around the block and knows how to pull a car out of the mud.

"Can you do it all without damaging it?" I ask carefully, trying to sound professional and not too eager.

"Yeah," he takes off his cap, scratches his head, and puts it back on. "The car is light. I'll just pull it out and put it on the bed. It'll be fine." Before walking out, he sends me a smirk. "Worrying about your girlfriend sending you to the doghouse?" Giggling he adds in a giddy voice, "So good to see you being just like the rest of us."

I don't know what he means, and quite frankly, I rarely listen to Bobby because he, Marina, the local diner owner, and Paul, her boyfriend, are the local gossipy bunch. Which means he'll blow this story out of proportion by the time he reaches the body shop.

I sigh, checking my watch. Eight twenty-five.

When he's done, and Josie's car is loaded onto his truck, he tells me that he'll drop it off at Justin's and drives off.

I get to my cruiser and head toward the coffee shop. Jennica has been doing me a solid by holding the front, and I owe the woman her favorite coffee and donuts. For the rest of her life.

When I walk into the shop, I'm greeted by a couple of people in line, and they quiet down the instant they see me, feeling guilty as if I caught them red-handed with theft.

"Sheriff!" Donna, the owner of the shop, calls out. Well, it's technically Dunkin', but it only sells Donna's goods—it's a complicated story. "Here for a cup of joe?"

"Make it your fancy-schmancy latte Jennica loves so much. The largest cup, please." And then I add, sighing, "And a box of donuts."

"Oh!" She brightens. "Got some sins to wash away?"

I send her the lopsided smile I know she loves. "You got it right, ma'am."

"You boy!" she swats her hand my way. "Your mama raised a flirt."

I smile—shyly this time—and shrug my shoulders. I need Jennica to have the best coffee, and Donna can make the best coffee when she's in a good mood.

She busies herself with two other orders, giving them to the others in the shop, and then shoos them away. With my order, she takes her time. While she's mixing the oat milk my best-in-command loves so much, she sends me

a curious look.

“So, Kenny,” she starts, fishing, more like it. “I heard something interesting this morning.”

“Does it happen to be what you were discussing when I came in?” I raise a brow.

“Well,” she giggles. “I wasn’t discussing anything.” She bats her eyelashes at me, making me snort. Right. “But I heard something.”

“What have you heard?” I place my elbow on the counter, leaning against it, pretending to be calm.

“I heard that you and your lady were doing some naked activities on your front porch.”

“Did we?” I deadpan.

“Yes.” She nods enthusiastically. “Very much so.”

I sigh. “Have you already spoken to my mother, Donna?”

Her cheeks pinken enough to give me an answer.

“Give me that coffee, Donna.” I sternly point at the plastic cup in her hands and put cash on the counter.

She passes the cup of iced coffee to me, fills another with steaming hot coffee, and places it in a to-go tray. Then she fixes a few donuts in a box and carefully places it in front of me.

“For what it’s worth, I didn’t tell her about you being naked.” She sounds guilty. Just a bit.

I take the coffee and donuts. “Doesn’t matter. Someone else will.”

With that, I walk out, smacking the door on the way—*accidentally*—and finding a few curious looks thrown my way by nearby people. After meeting my stern eyes, they scatter.

By the time I reach the station, my mood plummets. When Jennica notices me walking in, she says something into her phone and puts it down. Leaning back with a smug look on her face, she says, “I heard you were doing the horizontal tango in your front yard this morning.”

I send her a death stare, making her cackle.

“What happened, Boss? Have you thrown your back out in the process? I bet your age is getting to you.” She interlocks her fingers over her stomach.

I raise the plastic cup in my hand and shake it in the air. “I’m trashing this.”

She smiles smugly. “I don’t think so. You need me to cover for you tonight.”

I pause. “What’s tonight?”

“Your night off.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She nods enthusiastically. “I’m going to cover for you so you can cover,” she looks me over, “whatever wasn’t covered. I don’t know what happened, but you had a woman in your place, Boss. That part I believed.”

“And what?” I walk to my office, sipping my coffee on the way and hoping she’ll leave me alone.

She doesn’t. She follows me inside with her coffee and a donut and takes a seat on my leather couch, crisscrossing her legs. “I spend a lot of time with you, Boss. More than your family does.” She takes a bite from the sugary donut, dropping white powder on her lap. “And I’ve noticed you being funky for the past couple of days.”

“You have funky days too.”

“Yeah,” she shrugs, “and they’re usually funky because I fought with my hubby or just want to kill him because he pissed me off.”

I watch her with emotionless eyes. “Does your story have a point?”

“Yep.” She takes another bite and talks without chewing all the way. “You’ve gotten all nervous since this new designer from the big city showed up here.”

“Josie has nothing to do with it.”

“Yeah?” She raises a dark brow, daring me to continue.

“Yeah.” I cross my arms over my chest and lean back in my chair.

“Whatever you say. The offer to cover for you still stands though.” She stands up and points at the stack of papers on the corner of my desk. “Check the candidates, would ya?”

When she leaves, I glance at the couch, suppressing the urge to go and clean the white mess she left.

No matter what I say, I respect Jennica and her opinion. She’s been my right hand almost from the moment I started as sheriff. Without even seeing me around Josie, she knows something is up. If she sees it, others will too. Another reason to stay away from her. I meant what I said—she’ll leave, and I’ll stay to pick up the pieces of my life. She’s not meant for small-town life with a small-town sheriff on a small-town paycheck.

At eleven-twenty, I receive a call from my mom.

“*Kenneth Benjamin Benson!*” Here we go. “*I did not raise you like that!*”

“Like what?”

“Participating in frivolous activities on the roof of your own house! And not telling your mother about it!” She uses the same voice she used on us when we majorly fucked up in school.

I groan. “You know what the scariest part is, Mom? I’m not even sure what you’re more upset about.”

“You stop that right away, Kenneth! You know how much I want grandchildren.” Her tone turns sad, almost on the verge of crying. *“Bring this amazing lady to dinner.”*

“You’re not even scared that she was naked in the front yard?”

“I knew it!” she cries out in excitement. *“C’mon, we’ve all been young.”* She lets out a giggle, and I suddenly want to gag.

“Mom,” I say with a sigh, “nothing happened. Josie is Alicia and Archie’s friend. Her car got stuck, and it was late, so she stayed in my spare bedroom. Nothing happened,” I repeat, unsure who I’m trying to convince more.

I can almost feel her excitement deflating. *“Oh.”*

“I promise you’ll be the first to know if I decide to go after someone.”

“By the way,” her voice yet again turns excited, *“my friend’s daughter comes to visit her next Friday. She’s recently divorc—”*

“Bye, Mom!” I hang up, feeling bad for not letting her finish but getting mad over her constant meddling. I’m thirty-nine, for fuck’s sake.

Pulling the stack of resumes closer to me, I start reading the first one.

Chapter Fourteen

JOSIE

“No, you can’t stay there.” Alicia shakes her head as she crosses her arms over her chest.

“We’ve been over this, Alicia,” I reply calmly, even though I’m feeling anything but. “And we both agreed it’s okay for me to stay there.” In fact, we’ve been discussing this for what feels like ages, and we just keep going in circles.

It took me three hours to make Alicia consider letting me move to the Ghost House. I tried reasoning with her yesterday and this morning, and it seems as though she’s finally made a decision. I must act nonchalant about all this ‘unsafe’ business, or she’ll back out. After the sheriff’s message to her, she went into overprotective mode with a hefty dose of guilt, and now she’s taken it upon herself to make sure I’m fed every two hours like a newborn baby and tucked on the couch with a blanket. It’s getting a bit exhausting, and it’s been just twenty-four hours.

I wave her off like an adorable but very annoying fly. “It’s a perfectly livable house.” Somewhat.

She pauses for a moment to give me a meaningful stare—she must think it works on everyone because it works on Mark, but he’s wrapped around her pretty little finger. “There’s a reason people call it the Ghost House, you know.”

“Urban legends.” I wave my hand in the air, my metal bracelets clinking in the process, and I find the sound soothing. I always have, even though it annoyed some people in the office. It’s so good to be my own boss where I can wave my hands as many times as I want without being threatened by the office piranhas. “You should know more than anyone else. You write them.” I raise my brows, reminding Alicia that she’s a writer and gets paid to create said legends. “The plumbing is old, and the heating,” and other things I don’t mention, “but the house is not that bad. I’ll come stay with you when they replace the roof, okay? Plus, it’ll be easier for me not to drive back and forth. I’ll start doing some of the work with the contractors. And besides, I need to get a feel of the place. You know how it is for me.”

She purses her lips. She knows about the weird quirk I call ‘professional insight.’ If the circumstances allow, I prefer to stay in the place I’m about to reconstruct for a few nights so I can find what exactly the place is missing. If there’s a weird sound, an extra squeaking floorboard or step. I’ve slept in some pretty creepy places, and the Ghost House doesn’t scare me in the slightest.

Bears, on the other hand, do. I can order some bear spray to carry on me at all times and, in the meantime, stay indoors. And a car. I probably need a new car. I hate that Archie was right. Thinking about my vintage treasure I abandoned in a rush to escape bear claws makes me feel guilty. But then I remember that it shut me out when danger was nearby, making me feel slightly better.

“I don’t know, Joz.” Alicia doesn’t sound convinced. “We’ve got space here. A safe space, you know.” Her eyes grow round, reminding me of the bear situation. I think.

“The house is safe too, I promise.” Safer than walking in on Alicia and Mark doing the deed because it’s just a matter of time before that happens. I’m sure Ghost is already traumatized. I don’t want to be the next victim.

“Alright.” She throws her arms in the air. “You win. But you call me the very minute you feel uncomfy. Right?”

“Scout’s honor!” I lift my hand.

“Okay then.” She nods, satisfied. “Let’s go get your stuff from the car then. I’ll call Justin on the way there.” Right, her older brother and local, hot mechanic who owns the only auto shop.

She grabs her keys and heads toward the door, making me instantly sweat in panic. I can’t let her drive me there because she’ll want to see the house,

and when she does, she'll drag me back to her place, kicking and screaming.

"I'll call Archie to pick me up!" I suggest cheerfully, jumping enthusiastically like a toddler. "We need to discuss a few things anyway."

She watches my performance silently, not looking convinced as she crosses her arms over her chest. "Call then."

I smile sheepishly. "Can I borrow your phone?" I still haven't gotten mine from the car. I haven't gotten anything really, so I'm still wearing borrowed things, including underwear.

She pulls it out of her back pocket, unlocks it, and passes it to me. I tap Contacts, find Archie's name, and hit dial.

"Alicia?" comes a voice on the other end. "*Is everything okay?*"

"Why does everyone in this town seem to think there must be a disaster happening if someone calls them?" I bitch, and he laughs.

"*An old habit. Sup, Joz?*"

"I was wondering if you're busy right now or if you could pick me up from Alicia's and drive me to the house?"

A very annoying cackle makes me pull the phone away from my ear for a moment.

"*I see.*" A loud click of a tongue. "*So, your car,*" the word sounds like the worst insult from his mouth, "*got stuck?*"

"Yes," I say through gritted teeth, letting him enjoy the moment.

Another cackle. "*I'll be there in ten minutes.*"

I give the phone back to Alicia, who's trying to hide her smile.

"Not a word." I point my finger at her, and she zips her lips while still smiling. Fine, I'll live with that.

We chat about her new book and research she's doing with Mark since she's about to launch a new series about hot firefighters when we hear the engine of a car outside. We leave the house to find Archie stepping out of his black Range Rover.

"Ladies, the chauffeur is at your disposal." He curtsies with a cheeky smile.

"Hi, Archie!" Alicia waves at him. "I wanted to drive Josie there, but apparently," she sends me a stink-eye, "I'm not good enough."

"No, you are not." I pat her shoulder with a laugh. "But you'll get there!"

"I'll work my ass off to achieve the goal!" She presses two fingers to her temple like a soldier and clicks her heels together.

"I don't have any doubt," I say with a giggle and blow a kiss at her. "I'll

call you.”

Her face turns serious as she starts chewing on her lip. “I’m still not convinced, Joz.”

“But *I* am.” I smile and walk to Archie’s car.

He gets inside after waving goodbye to Alicia. When he starts the car, he gives me a side-eye. “Is there any particular reason you’re wearing fuzzy slippers ten sizes too big?”

“What are you, fashion police?” I laugh. “And they’re just two sizes too big.”

“See? I was almost right.” He pulls onto Main Street.

I sigh and tell him about the eventful day I had, leaving out a few particular details. Particularly about Kenneth’s piercing—because why would Archie know anything about that—and my stay with him.

Archie whistles. “Wow. You had quite a day. Which could have *been avo-o-oided* if you just listened to me,” he singsongs.

“Be quiet,” I reply grouchily as I stare ahead.

He lets out a belly laugh. “Tastes so good to be right. Anyhow, where are we driving to?”

“Back to my car. I need to see if I can get it out today.”

He gives me a doubtful look. “I don’t think much has changed since yesterday there, Josie. I’m sorry about that. I should have made some travel arrangements for you. The roads there still suck. I can call Justin so he can get your car maybe?”

“I still need my stuff from the car. I have zero cash on me. Or my phone. Or my anything really.” My voice dies down at the end.

“Maine hasn’t treated you well, huh.” His voice is considerate.

“It hasn’t so far.” I turn to him with an evil smile. “I’ll make it, though.”

“That’s the spirit!” He raises his fist for a bump.

I touch my knuckles to his with a laugh—Archie is in a better mood than I’ve ever seen him. And this time, it’s not the pretend clown mask he used to wear. He truly seems light and happy. Maybe I’ll become him one day when I grow up. In a place like that.

His face turns serious. “We’re not driving to get the car though.”

“Why?”

He looks at me funny. “Knowing Ken, your car is already at Justin’s.” My face must give away my confusion because he explains, “He would never let you go and get it yourself.”

“Let me?” I raise a brow.

Rolling his eyes, he mumbles, “Jesus Christ.” Then he adds louder, glancing at me with every carefully chosen word, “He’ll make sure you won’t have to go and get your car yourself. Is that better?”

I smile, biting my lip. “Much better.” For some reason, this town has made me revert to my old self. The woman who has zero filter and a sharp tongue. Needless to say, both got me into a lot of trouble, and that doesn’t seem to have changed here. But quite honestly? I’m kind of loving it.

At the traffic light, he takes a phone from his pocket and dials it. After a couple of rings through Bluetooth, a rich voice rumbles through the cabin. “*Please, don’t fuckin’ tell me you got stuck too. I’ve had five of those this morning.*”

How could I have forgotten how rough and masculine his voice was since yesterday? The roughness of it instantly settles on my skin, raising goosebumps.

Archie replies with a laugh. “New people don’t get along with Little Hope’s nature?” Then he gives me a wink.

A loud groan from the speaker makes my toes curl. “*Yeah, it’s been a week. What’s up?*”

“Do you know where Joz’s car is by any chance?” Archie shoots me a quick look and returns to the road.

“*Why?*” Even to my ears, he sounds a bit defensive.

Archie’s face turns devilish. “We just need to get a few things from it.”

The reply comes after a short pause. “*We? Are you in the car together?*”

“Yeah, we’re just trying to locate her possessions.” He can barely contain the laughter at this point, but for the love of everything, I don’t understand the game he’s playing. “Do you know where it is?”

A heavy, silent pause. “*Yeah. I towed it to Justin’s.*”

Archie gives me the I-told-you-so look. “Alright, we’ll get it there. Thanks, Ken!” And then he quickly presses the button on the dashboard.

“What was that?” I deadpan.

“What?” he asks innocently.

“Archie,” I say with warning in my voice.

“Ken is my really good friend, and I just—” he cuts himself off while I patiently wait for him to find his words again. “I want the best for him.”

“Are you sure?” I ask doubtfully.

He looks at me a little longer this time—as long as his driving allows it.

“I’m sure,” he says with a warm smile.

Archie parks his Rover next to a bunch of trucks of all calibers and gestures for me to follow him. The auto shop looks like any other place I’ve taken my car too. I’m not talking about some fancy dealership service center—I always felt too bad spending more money there when I could find a better use for it. Plus, people in small shops like this one are usually the best. Sometimes they have crude humor (trust me, I know), but one just has to meet them with a crude humor of their own so there’s mutual respect.

A tall, fit guy with a backward, blue cap over his blond hair comes out, wiping his greasy hands on the even greasier rag clipped to his belt.

“Fucker, nice to see you,” he starts as he walks toward us. I shoot a curious look at Archie, expecting him to say something nasty in return, but he laughs and stretches his hand out to meet his.

“I’ve seen you treat my baby Kayla well, so I’ll let it slide, Grease Monkey.”

Justin clamps Archie’s hand in his in a tight handshake, and they both smack each other on their backs. Hard. I’m not quite sure what to make of their relationship, but it’s an interesting one for sure.

Once they’re done, Justin turns to me and stares at my face. “And you’re the one who our dutiful sheriff did his dirty morning activities with in the back of his neighbor’s car in the front yard?”

My eyes bug out for a second as Archie lets out a loud snort while Justin continues, “Or was it in the front seat?” His face turns thoughtful. “I don’t remember.”

I roll my eyes. “I see the rumor mill never sleeps.”

“Not here, ma’am. No.” His cheeky smile reminds me of the very same one Alicia gave me this morning when she brought me my second breakfast at nine o’clock.

“It was on the roof of his cop car,” I say with a secretive smile.

His eyes twinkle with clear amusement. “I knew I’d like you.”

I offer him my outstretched hand. “It’s mutual. I’m—”

“Josie, I know.” He takes my hand in a gentle grip. “My sister has been talking about you for years.”

I feel a stare and turn my attention to it, finding Archie looking at me with a soft, contained smile. I raise a brow, but his smile just grows bigger as he stays silent.

“It’s good to finally meet you,” Justin continues.

“Likewise,” I reply sincerely. Alicia has always been fond of her older brother, saying how protective, funny, and loyal he is. The things I appreciate the most in a man.

Wheels squeal to a stop, and we all turn toward the sound. The sheriff’s cruiser parks right behind Archie’s Rover, and the man himself steps out a minute later. He strides toward us with the determination of an enraged rodeo bull, and I start feeling awfully guilty. I don’t even know what for, but his accusing stare and angry movements are enough for me to back down. And it’s not because of fear, but for suddenly feeling guilty when I didn’t even do anything.

Justin tilts his head to the side as he watches Kenneth, then his eyes move to me and then back to Kenneth. Suddenly, a wide back steps between me and the approaching angry Sheriff—Justin stepped in front of me, hiding me from the view. I don’t know what’s happening, but I want zero part in it.

“What are you doing here?” Sheriff’s voice asks just as Justin says, “Sup, Sheriff? Came to check on the car?”

“Justin, I don’t have time for this.” Kenneth’s jaw is so tight his words come out almost like a hiss.

“Then why are you wasting time on our small company?” Justin says without a note of malice, but Sheriff doesn’t like it.

“Not today,” Kenneth warns. “What’s going on here?”

“What do you mean?” Archie sounds like he’s barely containing his amusement.

“I just met my sister’s best friend.” Justin crosses his arms over his wide chest, and I take a small step to the side so I can see Kenneth, who pauses for a second and looks like he lost all his words.

“What?”

“Oh, you didn’t know?” He clicks his tongue. “Something must have escaped our mighty sheriff.” The popping muscles in Kenneth’s cheeks become very visible. “Joz and Alicia have been friends for like what?” Justin glances at me. “Four years?”

“Five,” I squeak.

“Five.” He nods. “So she’s pretty much family, and I take care of my

family. Which means you can go, I'll make sure her car is fixed."

Kenneth's lips turn pale from pressing them too hard, but he refrains from answering. He levels Justin with a glare, but when his eyes turn toward me, they soften a little. "Are you okay with that?"

I nod, not knowing what to say or why he's so interested in me. Just yesterday, we parted ways on bad terms, and now he wants to make sure I agree with Justin's plan, like my opinion truly matters.

"Okay. All your stuff should be in the car." He shifts his attention to Archie and holds him for a moment, then Justin. "Make sure she gets home at night."

"Will do," Justin replies with humor this time.

Kenneth turns around and walks back to his SUV with rigid shoulders. Justin exchanges a quick look with Archie before he turns toward me.

"Huh" is all he says. Huh.

"*Huh* what?" I ask.

"You're a very interesting woman, Josie."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Stop talking riddles. Alicia gave me full access to sisterly insults."

He snorts. "I sure hope you're better at it. Let's go." He gestures for me to follow.

All three of us walk inside the garage and toward my vintage treasure, still caked in mud.

"Is she okay?" I ask.

He gives me a funny look. "She is. You've got a couple of dents there," he points to the passenger side, "a blown tire and jacked door handles. It's an easy fix, but I've got my hands full right now, so it might take a couple of days. Besides, you can't drive anywhere in your baby until the roads dry out. Alicia can drive you around, or you can take her car, I'm sure she won't mind. I have a spare truck, but it's a stick if you're okay with it."

I drove a stick half of my life because we didn't have fancy cars, but I'm not about to tell him that since maintaining the appearance of a spoiled, rich brat is apparently easier than breaking people's assumption by hinting that I have some depth to me. Even though I don't think Justin sees me that way. I've heard a lot of things about him from my friend, and it looks like Justin has perfected a mask of his own.

"Okay, I think I'll ask Alicia." I walk to the car and pull the handle. It opens right away, so I glance at Justin. He notices my confusion and points at

the door.

“It will get jammed again. I need to replace the lock. I have one that might fit, but I need to take it off another car and clean it.”

“Okay,” I sigh and pull two bags with essentials from it. Archie immediately rushes to my side and silently takes my bags from me. He gives me a stern look when I try arguing and pulls them away from my hands. “Thank you,” I tell him quietly.

“I’ll be in the car,” he says and walks toward his Rover.

“Joz,” Justin calls out.

I turn to him. “Yeah?”

“Does Sheriff, I dunno,” he slightly shrugs one shoulder, looking unsure, “make you feel weird?”

I see asking this question makes him as uncomfortable as me hearing it, but I see the answer is important for him. His sister went through hell, and he wants to make sure that no one else ever does. My heart melts a little despite some stories I’ve heard about him from Alicia. Told in a loving way, I must add.

“No, Justin.” I gently place my hand on his forearm for a moment. “I don’t think that Sheriff Benson is capable of making anyone feel that way.”

He scratches his chin. “I know. But you still tell me if something gets weird. Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I smile, feeling that one of the most important people in this town just became important to me too.

“Where are you staying?” he suddenly asks.

“I—” I pause, trying to come up with something to say quickly.

“Don’t lie to me.” He glares.

“I don’t know yet,” I reply honestly, even though I don’t know why.

“Why not at Alicia’s?”

“They just started living together, and I don’t know how long my project here will take. I just can’t do that to them.”

He chews on the inside of his cheek, thinking about something, giving me more time to really look at him. The more I look, the more resemblance to his sister I see. The same highlighted, natural blond hair, the same sun-kissed nose, the same perfect skin. Even their eyes look so much alike. And their height. Justin is a tall man, even taller than Alicia. Who stands at what? Five-eleven? Yeah, these people have something in the water here.

“Don’t tell her, or she’ll stop sleeping at night.” His voice pleads, and I

see just how much he cares for her.

“I won’t. I told her I’m staying at the Ghost House.”

“That piece of shit that’s falling apart?” His brows draw together. “You can’t stay there, Josie. It’s not safe.”

“I’ll fix it.” I shrug one shoulder—people keep forgetting that’s what I do for a living.

“Stay there after you fix it. Seriously.” He shakes his head slowly. “It’s not a safe place to spend the night.”

“Why? Because of the ghosts living there?” I smirk.

“Because of the fucking roof that can fall down on you mid-snore.”

“I don’t snore!” I cry out. “Did Alicia tell you that?”

He nearly rolls his eyes, and I instantly feel like an idiot. Randy told me I snore. But I don’t! Pressing the heels of my palms into my eye sockets, I groan. “The damn local hotel has zero availability.”

“You know what?” He taps his foot on the floor. “I think I have a solution.”

I spread my fingers wide to peek through them. “Really?”

“Kayla has a trailer she doesn’t use anymore.” My ears instantly perk up at the news. “It’s parked behind the garage.” He gestures over his shoulder. “We can move it to the house so you can sleep safely, at least. How does that sound?”

I sniffle and wipe my nose theatrically but sincerely at the same time. “Like you just solved all my problems.”

“It’s a deal then.” He winks and places his arm over my shoulders in a brotherly hug that suddenly makes me miss my own brothers. His tone shifts from serious to funny. “Now tell me about that activity of yours this lovely morning. Does the sheriff really have three nipples?”

True to his word, Justin, along with Archie—who was thoroughly pissed that I didn’t tell him about my housing situation—moved the trailer to the Ghost House. They replenished the water and gas, and Justin showed me how to use all the amenities. I’m familiar with trailer living since we had them on projects all the time, but this one seems like a bit of an older version, so I was scared to mess it up at first. But everything turned out to be just the same as

every other trailer.

I was worried that Kayla might not support the idea of me taking her trailer, so while Justin was moving the trailer to the house, Archie drove me to the diner where Kayla waitresses to help the owner, Marina, for a couple of days a week.

When I asked her if that was okay, she just waved her hand with the most gorgeous and feminine body art I've ever seen and told me I could use it as long as I needed since she was shacking up with her 'forever fiancé.' Her words. Since, apparently, he fucked up big time, she's been punishing him for years now by denying the wedding date. They both look happy to me though, and I don't see anyone suffering much. Well, maybe Justin. But I haven't seen them around each other much yet.

Funny thing though, I asked her if it was okay if I fixed her trailer a bit, and she gave me full rein. And now, two weeks later, this very modest trailer in the middle of nowhere feels more like home than any place I've ever lived in.

To cheer myself up and compensate for the lack of luck recently, I ordered some new clothes since the last fashion pieces I got in New York don't quite fit. I don't starve myself anymore, but I still remain healthy, and that's my goal now. I love my body and every single curve I've got, and I want to sway my ass on the street so a certain someone can notice it because, as of recent, I've become invisible to him.

Not going to lie, I've been waiting for Sheriff Benson to show up every day. Either for a fight or makeup, doesn't matter. But he hasn't come. He made it absolutely loud and clear that my friendship is not something he needs or wants.

Feeling more sour with every passing day, I push him and the mystery of his cock to the back of my mind, like someone who showed up in one's life just to disappear the next day without leaving a lasting footprint.

Or so I told myself.

Chapter Fifteen

KENNETH

After a few unsuccessful attempts to find someone useful, I decide to go grab us some coffee, or I'll go crazy couped up here. It's probably the first time I'm actually hoping for Cat and Stallion to have a fight or maybe for a cat to get stuck in a tree. Anything to get me out of this stale office.

I grab two coffees for myself and Jennica from Donna's and go back to the station. The moment I step on the asphalt, I hear my sister's voice calling out my name. I turn around to find her coming my way with a huge smile on her face.

"Hey, Ken!" Leila wraps her arms around me. She's gotten a bit... fuller and a lot happier in a loud way, if that makes sense, while she's usually reserved and quiet. I pull back and look her up and down, trying to figure out where this change is coming from.

Until a light bulb lights in my head. "Leila?" I ask slowly, staring at her belly.

"Dang, Ken." She rolls her eyes with annoyance—it's something she does with me pretty often. "I didn't even tell Archie. Are there no secrets sacred for you?"

My eyes bug out. "What? It was just a shot in the dark." I add, scratching the back of my head, "To think of it, I didn't even say anything, and you gave it up on your own."

She quickly glances around, making sure no one is listening because rumors in Little Hope travel fast. “Keep it down, would you?”

I glance at her totally flat stomach. “You are really pregnant?” I ask quieter.

“Yeah,” she replies, still looking around. “But I just found out. Don’t tell anyone.”

“Of course, I won’t.” I rear back—I’d never spoil a surprise that’s not mine to spoil. I pull her back into a bear hug. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thank you,” she muffles into my shoulder and pulls away. “I’ve always suspected I’d be before you.” Then she adds, wincing, “Unfortunately.”

I tilt my head to the side. “Why?”

“Because you want everything and everyone to be perfect, and that’s not how life is.” She sighs, not knowing how close she hit to the bullseye. Her words are what Josie has been telling me all this time. “I knew it’d be a long time until you found someone who’d be able to see through it all.”

“Through what?” I ask, confused. My baby sister likes to talk in metaphors.

“Through you.” She lifts a brow.

I snort, wrapping my arm around her shoulders, and pull her with me to the station. “There’s nothing to see there.”

“Sure,” she replies, and I hate the way she says it.

“Lei-i-ila,” I start my warning, “don’t do that to me.”

“What?” She shrugs and points at the window. “Who is that?”

I follow her hand through the glass and see someone sitting at one of the deputy’s desks, vigorously writing. “That’s a very good question.”

We go inside, and the first thing I do is walk toward the desk, sending a questioning look at Jennica. She just raises her brows and shakes her head. The man at the desk is about twenty-five with longish, dark hair, wearing civilian clothes.

When he sees me, he leans back in the chair and waves at me. “Sup, Boss.”

I pause and look at Jennica again. I left twenty minutes ago and don’t remember hiring anyone. But with her desire to hire someone and me postponing it, she must have taken the matter into her own hands. “Care to explain?”

She only smiles as the dude starts talking. “I’m Brad. Brad Dudley,” he says as if it’s supposed to tell me something. “Mayor’s son,” he adds when he

notices me not looking particularly happy.

Right, Dudley. The disruptive asshole who pocketed half of Little Hope's money and let big developers buy the buildings owned by locals for generations, forcing Donna to sell her special blend under someone else's brand.

"And?" I cross my arms over my chest. I know who the little fucker is—I've got a profile on him.

"He talked to you, right?" He looks between me and Jennica, seeming a bit confused.

"He did not."

"Oh." He snuffles and stands up, offering me his hand. "I'm Brad Dudley, your new deputy."

I look at his hand as if it was Frank's shit and then back at his face. "I didn't hire you."

"I guess my father was supposed to talk to you." On cue, the phone in my office rings. Brad's face brightens. "I guess that's for you."

I grind my teeth and walk to my office. Picking up the phone, I bark, "Benson."

"Hello, Sheriff. My son should be there any minute," comes the cheerful voice of our dear mayor. *"I was hoping you could provide him with a place to work since you're hiring anyway."*

"He was not on my list."

"Well," he laughs, *"he is now."*

I look back at the brat who's scrolling on his phone and sending my sister dirty looks from time to time. "I don't think it's happening, Dudley."

"Oh, I think it will. You owe me. For that favor of yours. Remember?" His voice turns threatening.

Shit. I knew he'd collect but didn't think he'd force me to take his piece of shit son, who will be nothing but trouble as law enforcement of Little Hope. It's like doomsday.

The mayor takes my silence for hesitation and continues, *"As I recall correctly, I had to get rid of certain evidence for a couple of your friends who went a little—shall I say, free?—in our neighboring city?"*

Fuck. I owe him. When Mark and Justin went on a warpath intent on delivering justice for Alicia last year, they forgot about a tiny camera on the wall of the building across from the club. I didn't know about that either. The mayor pulled some strings to get the video erased. I still can't sleep without

being part of fucking corruption, but I couldn't let two rapists roam free and deliver more evil. They'd done enough over the years and flown under the radar.

When it happened, I became even more deliberate about serving justice the way it should be. No corruption. No gray areas. Just black and white. And here I am, being pulled by the same string back into corruption. I know the mayor is an asshole, but he is a man of his word. We agreed a favor for a favor, and I'm sure after this one, my debt will be paid. I just wish he picked something else for payment. I'd rather give him my kidney than hire his son.

"*Are you there, Sheriff?*" he asks with a chuckle, knowing I'm listening.

"Yes," I bark.

"*Good. So the problem's solved?*"

"Yes," I say through gritted teeth.

"*Great!*" he exclaims happily. "*Brad is a good boy. Give him a chance.*"

He hangs up, leaving me with a sense of dread. Brad is not a good boy; Brad is a menace. When he was sixteen, he was in a hit and run, injuring someone. When he was seventeen, he turned a little handsy at a party, and someone reported him. Multiple traffic violations, speeding tickets... the list goes on. And now the mayor wants me to give him power by giving him a badge?

It's going to be a fuckin' disaster, but there's nothing I can do unless I want the old story to resurface. And that's precisely why I hate anything out of order.

Squeezing my lips shut, I trudge out of my office. Leila is sitting at the table and chatting with Jennica, well, Jennica is chatting—complaining about me, most likely—while Leila's listening with an understanding smile. Dudley Jr. is at the same desk he was at when I came in, looking too smug and far too comfortable.

I walk to him and say, "You're on probation."

Jennica's chatter quiets down.

He lifts his face from the screen. "Probation? But my fath—"

"Probation," I repeat firmly. "You got it?"

He swallows and nods.

"What? I don't hear you."

He jumps to his feet, pulling on the edge of his shirt. "Yes, sir."

"Good." I nod. "Jennica will give you a uniform."

"I will?" she chimes in, and I send her a stern stare. "I will," she agrees

easily.

“What about my badge?” Brad dares to ask.

“If you pass probation,” I stare straight into his eyes, “you’ll get the badge. Got it?”

“Yes,” he replies, then adds, “Sir,” in a hurry.

“Come back tomorrow at seven-thirty.”

“Seven-thirty?” he repeats, sounding scandalized.

I glare at him. “Yes.”

“Seven-thirty it is.” He jumps to his feet and hurries away. Before he reaches the door, he stops, realizing he forgot something, and heads back to Jennica’s table. “What about my uniform?”

Jennica passes him her business card. “Email me your shoe and clothing sizes.”

“Thanks.” He takes the card and quickly leaves.

I walk to the coffee station, feeling two sets of eyes staring at the back of my head. I add sugar into my cup, and the stares are still there. I stir it and still don’t think anyone’s blinked once. When my coffee is done, I take a big sip and turn around. Sure thing, two sets of widened eyes stare back at me.

“I mean, I know I asked to hire someone, but Brad Dudley?” Jennica whistles and puts her hands behind her back, rocking in her chair.

“I must agree, Ken. That seems...” Leila trails off, looking in the direction Brad just disappeared, “a bit weird.”

“I owe his father. He collected.”

“What did he possibly do for you to agree to hire his son?” Jennica asks, chuckling.

Leila must have noticed something on my face because she quickly takes the reins into her own hands. “Well, I’ve heard he’s changed.”

“Do you believe it?” I ask, doubtful.

“No,” she laughs. “But there is nothing better than tomorrow. Plus, you can be a good influence and change the course of his life.”

I snort. “Right.”

“What?” she asks, confused.

“She’s right,” Jennica adds. “You’re like a local hero.”

Hero. Hmm. Funny how no one has ever said anything to me before, but since Josie has opened that vault, everyone seems to suddenly sense it.

“Alright,” Jennica stands up, “you guys can talk while I run to Marina’s diner. My hubby asked to pick him up some Lonely Kurt.”

I don't know why her husband would want to eat breakfast for dinner since Lonely Kurt is the most popular local breakfast, but who am I to judge?

"See ya!" Leila waves at her and moves to my office. I follow her.

She takes a seat on the leather loveseat by the window and brings her feet up. "They've started hurting so bad, and I'm only like eight weeks in."

"How didn't you know you were pregnant?"

"I was on a few business trips back-to-back and kind of lost track of time."

I contemplate before asking the next question since it's none of my business. But Archie is my friend, and Leila is my sister, which makes it double my business. "How do you think he'll take it?"

"He'll be over the moon," she replies, placing her palm on her belly. "He's been talking about having a family since he proposed."

"Isn't it," I bite the inside of my cheek, "I dunno, a bit early?" It's a valid question since they just officially got together in February, then there was the shooting and recovery soon after.

"Maybe." She shrugs one shoulder. "But it is what it is."

I lean back in the chair, spreading my arms wide. "I'll be a double uncle soon." Our half brother Alex is having a baby soon, and now Leila. It's a baby boom in Little Hope.

"I guess you will." She chuckles. "How about you?"

"What about me?" I blink, not understanding what she's asking since I just told her I'll be an uncle. I don't know what else she wants me to say.

She squints at me. "When will you have a baby?"

I start coughing, not expecting the question. "What? What are you talking about?"

"You're thirty-nine, dear brother." She points at me. "It's about time you slow down this hero race and find yourself someone nice. I'm worried about you."

Again with this hero shit. I'm starting to get triggered by it.

"There is no woman." Somehow, this part irked me the most. "Just because you got baby fever doesn't mean others did."

"Yeah? No woman?" She lifts a brow, her eyes drilling holes into mine.

"No woman," I repeat, feeling my cheeks getting heated under my scruff.

"Alright," she shrugs again and gets up. "Time to go. Archie's coming back from Boston soon, and we'll be going to check the house."

"Yeah. You do that." I'm suddenly very interested in the stack of paper at

the corner of my desk that's been waiting for my attention for weeks now.
"I will." She smiles like she knows something I don't and walks away.

Chapter Sixteen

J OSIE

Another week passes, and I finally finish the structural plans and preparations. I know I should have done it sooner, but I'm on a short time frame with zero workforce.

Once Archie and Leila approved my final plans after a few alterations a few days ago, I started looking for people and materials. As it turns out, becoming a developer, even with a ton of experience, is not an easy task. I interviewed a bunch of contractors before narrowing the list to two. After I explained what we planned to do with the house, the rest refused even to come down here. They all have big companies in Portland, but only two work out of their usual zone.

As soon as I have contractors here, I'll need to find all the materials and apply for permits. I wish I could put them all under my name so I could start, like yesterday, but the contractor's name and license must be mentioned too. Rules are rules, and I will never break them—well, I like breaking rules, but not when lives are at stake. Plans and approvals are needed to pass all the necessary inspections for safety purposes, so I just suck it up and wait for the contractors to arrive. I just hope that in a small town, permits won't take weeks or even months like in the big city.

It's the next day, and the contractors are here. The first one rolls in with his shiny, white F-150. A bulky guy around forty-ish takes one look at the place, raises a brow, and asks in a sweet voice, "Honey, are you sure you want to take this on?"

I hate being called endearments on the job. I'm as professional as everyone else on site. But for Archie and Leila, I'll suck it up since I don't have many options around here.

"Yes," I state firmly and go into detail of what's needed here from him. After five minutes, I notice the lack of enthusiasm. And the more I talk, the glassier his eyes become. After ten more minutes, we part ways.

The next one comes driving—*shocker*—another F-150. Black this time, less shiny, and more industry-appropriate. The man himself looks more rugged and more worn out, even though he seems to be around thirty, thirty-five. He's tall and lean like he's never had a drop of fat in his diet. He's wearing a black T-shirt, and his corded, ropey arms, covered in tattoos, are terrifying.

His eyes are hard and look much older than his whole body is. They move to me first, and after a short nod, they shift toward the house.

Slowly walking toward the porch where I'm waiting for him to do his initial rounds, leaning my ass on the crumbling rails, I watch as he runs his attentive eyes over every single detail my eyes landed on first too. He's my last hope.

"It's gonna cost a shitload of money." That's how he starts the conversation. No hellos, but no 'honeys' either. Not a bad start if you ask me.

"Client is willing to pay." I offer him my hand. "Josie Monroe."

He shakes my hand, his grip firm. "Jericho Landell." Surprisingly, he doesn't try to intimidate me or prove his dominance—something that's a little too familiar in this industry. Instead, he gives it a quick shake and lets go of my hand a moment later. "When do you want to finish it?"

I sigh. "September. But realistically, that's not an option."

"No, it's not. Let me see inside." He takes his cap off and puts it on backward, instantly looking at least five years younger.

I push away from the rails and lead him inside. We walk from room to room while Jericho scratches his scruffy chin more and more often. But the more he does it, the more hope I feel since he looks at all the right places and notices things that must be noticed.

When we return to the kitchen, he dives under the sink and rips the

bottom of the cabinet open. Pushing on the floor, it cracks open too. He looks underneath and comes out.

“The bones are dam’ good. They sure knew how to build back then.” Even though his voice is gruff, he sounds respectful.

“Yeah,” I reply with affection. “Some old houses are built better than some modern ones.”

“That’s for sure.” He looks around before focusing back on me. “I’ll take it.”

“W-what?” I stutter, not expecting him actually to agree.

“I’ll take the project. I’ll need to move my crew in here. We might need to clear some trees for work and for the trailer for us. Is that yours?” He nods at Kayla’s trailer outside.

“Yeah.”

“My men are quiet, but they’re men. I don’t think it’ll be a good idea for you to stay out here for months while they’re hangin’ around. They leave their socks on the floor by the trailers and do all the shit their wives don’t let them at home.”

“Like forgetting to put the toilet seat down?” I smile.

His lips twitch. “That too.” He scratches his chin again, turning more serious now. “Before you decide to hire me, you need to know that I have a record.”

Suddenly feeling uncomfortable, I swallow a huge lump in my throat. But then I square my shoulders, suddenly feeling ashamed. The man just told me he’s been in prison, and I judged him without knowing anything else. He didn’t have to tell this to me since contracts do not require it, but he seems like an honest guy. Besides that, I haven’t felt even the slightest threat from him. In fact, the first ‘honey’ dude felt a thousand times more slippery.

He probably sees my hesitation because I notice him slowly moving backward toward the door with his hands raised.

“Wait,” I call out, feeling like a piece of judgmental shit.

“That’s okay, Ms. Monroe,” he replies, not putting his hands down. “Let me know what you think.” But his tone suggests he already knows what.

“May I ask a few questions?” My tone is careful.

“Sure.” He nods toward the door. “Let’s do it out there.”

He’s out the door instantly, almost as if his ass is on fire, and I follow him. We stand next to the porch, about six feet away from each other. I watch him and his actions carefully, trying to read the man. Wisely choosing the

words for my questions, I think of the best way to approach him. He doesn't *feel* like a dangerous man, but you never know. Plus, I don't want to offend him by being insensitive.

"Fire away," he finally says, tired of waiting. "Anything you want to know—you have to learn who you'll be working with day in and day out. I've got no secrets, or I wouldn't share my past with you."

"True." I smile. "What were you there for?"

"Aggravated assault."

"Wow." Not the answer I expected. I thought if he's so free about sharing this information, maybe he'd say 'for something I didn't do.' But he seems to be proud of whatever got him there, and that makes me a little nervous.

"Expected another answer?" he asks with an easy smile.

"Busted." I smile back, feeling a bit lighter for some unimaginable reason.

"Will it help if I say that he deserved it?"

I watch him from under my lashes. "It actually does. Would you change anything if you had a chance?"

"Not a thing." His reply is instant with zero hesitation.

I chew on my lips, thinking about what he just revealed.

"Did you ever harm a child or a woman?"

His lips thin. He looks totally offended but still tries to contain his anger and reply in a neutral voice. "No. And I never will."

I nod, satisfied with his answer because quite honestly? I believe him. Yes, they say ex-cons lie all the time, but I've lived among enough liars to recognize one when I see him. And he is not it.

"What about your men?"

"I check them thoroughly before hiring. The guys I bring here are my friends who have been with me for many years. I vouch for them. But I am," he spreads his arms, "not the most trustworthy person usually, due to my record. So it's up to you to do your due diligence."

I shift my attention to the woods around us. It's a serious decision, and I don't know what to do. I haven't found any other contractors besides the 'honey' guy who wouldn't agree to come here for a long time. Several local contractors do small repairs and are not qualified to work on this project. No matter how much I take on myself, I can't teach them things they don't know how to do. This guy is my only hope, to be honest.

But him moving his whole crew kills my plan to live here peacefully next

to the house. I understand his concern for us sharing the space. He wants his men to have some decent rest after a day of hard work, and with me present, they wouldn't be able to relax the way they could alone.

But if I can't stay here, I have to drive from town while I don't have a decent car to get through local roads when it's raining, which seems to be happening nearly daily. Until we pave the road, that is. Which will happen toward the end of our time here. I'm not making that mistake again. Been there, done that.

“Can I think about it?”

He gives a short nod. “Take your time. I'm finishing a house about fifty miles away from here. Let me know if you decide to go with us. If not, don't worry about calling me.” He waves goodbye in the air. “I'll know.”

He walks to his truck and drives away. He doesn't take off like a madman but slowly hits the accelerator and very carefully does a three-point turn, trying to avoid splashing mud everywhere.

The way he holds himself, the way he moves and acts, nothing screams danger. But you never know. I can ask around about him, hoping someone might have heard something, even though I doubt it. He is from Portland, and it's pretty far from here.

Chapter Seventeen

J OSIE

A few days later, I still have zero information about Jericho. I also have the same number of prospective candidates for doing the work. I talked to Mark, and he said he'll make the accents and some furniture. He'll also work on the window and doorframes and stuff involving wood. Anything else is beyond his expertise, and besides that, he doesn't have time since he's replacing a fire chief who went on a leave of absence due to his health. Good for Mark—he deserves this promotion! But not good for me since it leaves me with fewer options and even less time that he can make it work.

I tried calling all contractors in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and even Massachusetts, but all of them refused to come here for a long-term contract. Which makes me mad since professionals who work in this industry know that people build houses in different cities, *ya know*, and this place is not *as* far as they all make it seem. *Damn pussies.*

The next try on my list of desperate contacts was all our old subcontractors from New York. But I didn't get past a secretary—when I introduced myself, they all became suddenly busy somewhere on another planet.

Another set of pussies.

The more days pass, the more desperate I become, and Jericho the Felon seems like my best and only option.

Today I'm in a particularly foul mood and decide to treat myself to one of the special breakfasts at the local diner. The road seems to be dry, so my car can make it. I can't take staying another day without decent human interactions.

I get dressed in one of my white polka dot sundresses, put on my red kitten heels and red matte lipstick, and drive to town. I took 'moving into a rural area' a bit too seriously. It's one thing moving into a small town, and it's entirely another moving to the field-mountain-whatever-the-fuck-it-is ten miles away from the closest small town.

I'm losing it. My sanity.

I park my car on the already busy street and walk toward the diner, meeting a few curious looks thrown my way. I nearly roll my eyes, feeling almost back home where I grew up. When I open the door, the buzzing in the room stops, and all eyes stare at me. Some of them look at my outfit, some of them look at my hair—I don't care, I like what I like.

"Hey, hun. You look like you just stepped out of that movie, *Stedford Wives*." An old, gray-haired guy booms through the diner with an Irish accent.

"Nah, it's like she's from that show. What was it called?" Another similar-looking man chimes in from behind his omelet. "About that Lucy girl. All you're missing is a pregnant belly and bare feet." He throws his head back and starts laughing. The Irish dude joins him a second later but stops when he sees my face.

"And you both are missing your teeth." I square my shoulders, feeling a bit petty about talking back to old men, but it's always irked me how people categorize me as some sort of submissive housewife just by the way I dress. I just like the style! I like dresses, and I like heels. I also like bright lipstick and funny patterns. But not everyone seems to get it, so they have a hard time separating me from some TV show from the fifties.

"She's got you there, my man." An amused voice giggles from the counter. I turn toward it and find Kayla, Justin's forever fiancé, gesturing for me to come and sit on the barstool. "C'mon, I'll get you coffee."

Sending a stink-eye to one of the old guys, who retaliates the look tenfold, I gracefully place my ass on the stool.

"They don't mean bad," Kayla says as she puts a cup in front of me and fills it with drip coffee.

"Oh, I know." I take sugar and generously pour it into the coffee. "Got

some cream?”

“One second.” While she goes to grab the cream from the fridge, I, for the thousandth time, enjoy all the visible art she has. She’s wearing a short-sleeved shirt, and both of her full tattoo sleeves are on full display.

“Is that—?” I ask in astonishment as I point to her wrist. First of all, I’m surprised she found a spot for such a big tattoo on her already pretty full sleeve, and second, really?

“Yeah,” she giggles.

“Frank the Moose. I’ll be damned. Lemme see.” I open my palm and gesture for her hand. She stretches it to me, and I, indeed, find a moose looking at me with his very human eyes. His antlers are large and covered in rose vines that match the rest of her arm. I look up at her, still holding her hand in mine. “I can’t believe you got a tattoo of a local urban legend.”

She starts laughing. “Frank is not a legend. He is very much alive—I assure you that.”

I let go of her hand and lean back in my chair. “You all talk about him like he’s some sort of magical creature who understands everything. But I’ve been here for nearly two months and haven’t seen anything. I’m starting to think you all have mass hysteria.”

She moves a lock of her platinum hair behind her ear and gives me a secretive smile. “That’s because it’s not time for you yet.”

“For what?”

“To meet him.”

For a second, I think she’s insane, just like the rest of the town, but then I remember how oddly at home I feel, which probably makes me insane too. Especially if I’m secretly hoping for that meeting.

She probably sees my thoughts written on my forehead in bright, neon lights because she cackles and asks, “How bad is your day?”

“Lonely Kurt bad.” I wince and add, “Almost double bad.”

‘Lonely Kurt’ is the most popular breakfast in the diner. It’s packed with so many calories you can probably survive off of it for a few days. It’s usually reserved for bad days. Or very good ones where nothing can scare you.

She whistles and yells toward the kitchen to Marina. “One Lonely Kurt with extra bacon, crepes, and whipped cream.”

“The heavy one!” I correct her before she made an unforgivable mistake and ordered me a fat-free substitute.

“The good one, Marina!” Kayla yells with a smile.

“Poor soul!” Marina yells back as she starts moving pans around, making me feel all fuzzy inside. I didn’t know I’d been missing *that* part of small-town living—when you’re out of luck, they all rally behind you in case you fall. This particular small town hasn’t been very welcoming, but I’ve never felt out of place in this diner or around Kayla or Justin, who took me in like another sister, or Alicia and Mark even when they wanted their alone time. Or Archie and Leila. They’ve been trying to make sure I don’t feel like a contracted worker but their friend.

Even Kenneth, even when he told me some awful things and even when he was grouchy, he still didn’t make me feel unwelcome.

These people make me do something awful—they make me miss home.

And quite honestly, I also miss Kenneth. He’s been actively avoiding me for the past few weeks by crossing the street when he sees me or walking or turning the other way when driving by. I’m almost waiting for a reason to go and visit him at his station just so I can see his surprised eyes. And the rest of him too. Those tiny moments we shared together somehow became a highlight of my coming here.

When the food is loaded on a plate in front of me, and I chug two cups of coffee, I lean back on the stool, feeling a bit better.

“May I have another one, please?” I call out to Kayla when she comes back to the bar after refilling everyone’s coffee.

“Damn, the woman can drink,” the toothless guy with the ‘Lucy’ reference whispers loudly in wonder.

I turn toward him with a wink. “You have no idea, Grandpa. We, the housewives, have some secrets under our big skirts.”

He lets out a loud cackle. “I bet you do.”

I wink at him again and turn back to my heavy cream, which tastes divine with bacon.

“You are nasty.” Kayla comes to refill my cup and makes a gagging sound.

“And I wear it proudly on my sleeve.” I pat my shoulder and take another bite of bacon.

The door behind me opens, and the chimes make a twinkling sound.

“Hey, Sheriff.”

I freeze with a piece of bacon halfway to my mouth.

“I wanted to ask you something.”

“George!” Kayla calls out one of the patrons. “Leave the man alone and let him have his lunch, for fuck’s sake.”

I put the bacon into my mouth and start chewing, not noticing the taste. Wiping the corners of my mouth with a napkin and glancing down at my dress, I make sure it falls around me in perfect waves. Why did I suddenly become so aware of my appearance? Because of the fine and grumpy man currently walking toward the counter. I can feel his presence with every fiber of my being.

He takes a seat two stools away from me and waits for Kayla to come to him.

“Hey, Ken. What can I get you?”

“Jennica asked for a Lonely Kurt,” he says with a sigh, and I suddenly lose my appetite.

“Are you in the doghouse again?” Kayla laughs as she scribbles something down on her notepad and places it on the counter in front of the kitchen.

“I feel like I’ve never gotten out of it.” He eyes me warily while saying it. My nostrils flare as anger rises up in my chest. How dare this man invite me into his house and... and flirt with me... and let his cock go hard while he has *Jennica*?

And the worst part is that I remember her name being mentioned. I just can’t remember when it was exactly. Is my mind responding to stress by completely erasing any mere mention of her? Or am I just getting old?

Chapter Eighteen

KENNETH

I didn't expect to see *her* here, and I'm usually aware of where she is at all times. I'm also aware of Landell's visit, and I'll be having a chat with him about that. I keep track of her making acquaintances with the locals in a strange way, but I wouldn't expect anything else from Josie. The rumors about 'that strange, cool, fun, fancy fashion lady' reach my ears here and there.

But today I'm a bit distracted with the Jake situation again and the lack of candidates. Even though I agreed to put Brad on probation, he won't be much help for the first few months. If he lasts that long, which I doubt. He spends his time going to the bathroom to check himself in the mirror fifty times a day and never responds to his phone. I need someone reliable and easy to train and pronto.

I looked up the resumes Jennica gave me, I did, but they're all bad. Like truly bad. Eighty percent want to become cops because they are power-hungry, and the rest don't qualify. One candidate's resume stated that he was eighty-two. Eighty-two, for God's sake. I thought there was some typo and went to check his records. No, he was indeed an eighty-two-year-old veteran who came to visit his granddaughter in Freya's center and liked it so much he decided to stay.

So I had to throw all the resumes away, getting more double shifts for

myself and extra shit from super-feisty Jennica this morning because she had to cancel her plans involving a large margarita with her friends this weekend since, I quote, “I can’t leave your stupid ass here working by yourself.”

She took on some basic training for Brad since she has hopes for him while I’m responding to calls. Unfortunately, looks like Dudley Jr. is really our only option, so I might start training him seriously too.

This morning, she’s been teaching him the rules of arresting someone and reading them their rights. He’s been cackling the whole time, telling us stories of how he was on the receiving end of those readings. Twenty minutes in, I saw her eye begin twitching.

And that’s how I found myself with my tail between my legs this morning, fetching food for her. Because she’s right. We can’t go on like this any longer, and I must find at least someone with two brain cells to rub together and preferably without entitlement issues. After the eighty percent of power-hungry candidates, the eighty-two-year-old guy doesn’t seem so bad, so I might reconsider.

I swallow the lump in my throat when I notice her straight back and proceed to the counter. She’s dressed like a character from the fifties, and I instantly imagine how submissive she might be. A fucking stereotype—I’ll never admit it to anyone that I’d even consider it to be a reality, but how good would it feel to bend her over the table and pull that dress up, revealing her gorgeous, plump ass, a glimpse of which I was fortunate enough to see. I bet she has some sexy underwear—she looks like the type.

But I’d prefer her without them.

Feeling my dick stirring in my pants, I hurry to take a seat. Two stools away from her in case she had the audacity to use that sensual shampoo of hers. I can still smell it, even weeks later. When she gave me that hug after the bear attack, and her hair was right in my face, I got my fill. I didn’t know hair products could smell so damn good, but on her, it was intoxicating.

Everything on her turns out like that. I also remember how she smelled wearing my shampoo. When she leaned closer to see what kind of piercing I had, I got a whiff of something *mine* on her. Oh yes, I remember that too.

While I give my order to Kayla and she passes it to Marina, I notice the sudden shift in the air. Josie’s posture changes: her shoulders square back, and her nostrils flare. She takes a bite but is clearly having a hard time chewing it. When she’s finally able to swallow it, she asks Kayla, “Can I please have the check?”

“Already?” Kayla asks, sounding surprised. “I thought your morning was shit, and you needed some pick-me-up time?”

Josie forcefully shakes her head. “No, I’m good. Something came up.”

“Yeah?”

My head whips toward Kayla, who sounds surprised, and I get the feeling I’m missing a valuable piece of information here.

“Something urgent,” Josie mumbles and digs into her purse. Everything in me has to restrain myself from telling her to put her wallet away. No fuckin’ way a woman of mine will ever pay when I’m present.

A woman of mine?

For fuck’s sake. I have more fingers on my hands than total interactions with her. I need to get laid—looks like my hand can only get me so far. And since Josie showed up in my town, it’s been put to very frequent use. Despite the fuckin’ pain the fresh piercing caused at first.

Josie takes back her card, puts it back into her purse, and stands up.

“I’ll see you later, maybe?” Kayla asks before Josie departs.

“Yes, sure.” Josie sounds distracted.

I can feel her intense presence with every pore on my body. My skin greedily absorbs the air she breathes. It also absorbs the unexpected anger and hurt.

While she’s walking toward the door, I try not to watch her ass with all my might. Or glance in her direction in general. Her whole body seems rigid. Is it because of me? Is it because she despises me so much that just me, appearing in the same space, caused her distress?

The thought doesn’t sit well with me, and I decide to strike up a conversation with her when I see her next. Which shouldn’t be difficult since she seems to be everywhere I go, and avoiding her has been my full-time job for the past month.

“So,” Kayla asks, leaning on the counter in front of me, “what’s your deal with our new friend?”

I look straight at her. “What do you mean?”

“Please.” She snorts. “Justin told me how you came to his garage to demand they hand her over to you like a prized possession.” She wiggles her brows.

“What the fuck?” I cover my face with my palm. “Did Justin join the line of local talkers?”

“He joined the line of Josie’s family,” she says carefully. “We all have.”

I drop my hand and look at her. “Does she need a family, Kayla?” I ask because even if I saw Josie’s naked ass and know it looks mouthwatering, I don’t know anything about *her*.

“Don’t we all, Sheriff?” she asks in return with a sad smile.

I swallow a lump in my throat because I’ve always had a family. A bit fucked up, like everyone else’s, but a family regardless.

“Lonely Kurt!” Marina yells enthusiastically from the kitchen.

Kayla goes to pack my order, leaving me with my thoughts about the mysterious woman I know nothing about but who seems to plague my mind recently regardless. When she places the paper bag in front of me, I take it with a quiet ‘thanks’ and rise from the stool.

Before I go, Kayla calls my name.

I turn around and nod in acknowledgment.

“She does need a family.” It’s all she says before heading back to the kitchen.

Even more reason to stay away from her. Lust is one thing, but being more is something entirely different, and I’m not built for that. Years ago, I wanted a family of my own. Wanted a wife and kids, but those dreams are long gone. Now I just want to make sure everyone in this town is happy and safe, and I can’t do that if I have to worry about my own family as well. I know myself.

Besides that, I’m a possessive motherfucker when I want something, and a woman like Josie might not like it. I’ve dated before and didn’t like sharing, but somehow, I just know that with her, it would be on a totally different level. I’d be jealous of the fucking air she breathes. I also know we’d be fucking on every surface I’d find, because she seems like the fantasy woman of my dreams.

So I don’t even entertain the idea.

Getting into my truck, I notice the small red car parked down the street. Maybe Jennica can wait a few extra minutes. I turn off the engine and wait for Josie to appear.

I wait and wait.

And wait.

It’s been thirty minutes, and nothing is happening. Getting more aggravated by the second, I walk toward her car to see what’s going on. I don’t know where she is in my own town twice in one day.

Walking past her car, I hear my name being called. I internally pray to the

sky to strike me with lightning because anything is better than being stopped by Ashley, the local self-appointed “blue blood” who has caused so many problems for people close to me. But she is still a citizen of this town, so I stop and wait for her to catch up with me.

“Sheriff,” she purrs, cocking her hip to the side. “I have an issue with my security system, and I would love for you to come and check it.” She places her hand on my forearm, and I try to step to the side, but she digs her fingers into my skin, keeping me in place. The only way I can get rid of her touch is by making a scene.

While I’m figuring out how to pry Ashley’s fingers off my arm, Josie chooses exactly this moment to come out of the hardware store carrying two big plastic bags. The moment she notices me, her eyes zero in on Ashley’s hand on my arm. They narrow just as her lips purse tighter. Her chin lifts up, and she starts walking to her car and therefore directly toward us, because we’re standing right by the passenger door.

“Excuse me,” she says in an annoyed voice as she walks up to the door.

Ashley slowly turns to face Josie.

“May we help you?”

Josie’s eyes shoot to my face at the mention of ‘we,’ and I think I hate Ashley a little more at this moment. Prying her hand off my arm, I ask Josie, “Do you need help with that?”

She sends me a quick glance and shakes her head.

Ashley laughs forcefully. “Too good for our small town?”

I’m about to divert everyone’s attention somewhere else because everyone knows how nasty Ashley can be, but Josie isn’t local and isn’t aware of that. She might feel uncomfortable at the jab, especially after I said something very similar at some point.

But Josie gracefully puts her bags on the seat, fixes the wavy strand away from her eye, and turns toward Ashley with a stony face even I’m scared of.

“Let’s make one thing clear. I’m from a small town,” my eyes widen at her declaration because I was sure she was city-born, “and I know how one operates. We’re going to shut this down before it begins.” Despite her mentioning a small town, her New York accent’s peeking through. “You leave me alone, and I leave your fake Prada bag,” she points at Ashley’s bag hanging off her elbow, “and your fake Jimmy Choos alone.” Now she points at Ashley’s shoes. “Do we have a deal?” She raises her brow.

For the love of everything, I have no idea how she can tell those things

are fake. Or what designer they're from, really. But I'm enjoying how Ashley's face turns pale while her nostrils flare in silent anger.

"They're not fake," she says as her eyes shoot to me.

"Do we have a deal?" Josie repeats, clearly losing patience.

"Yes," Ashley hisses through gritted teeth, and Josie's face stretches into a mask of fake happiness.

"A very wise decision. And by the way, I love your bag." She points at the bag again. "You two have a lovely day!" she says to both of us with a plastic smile as she gets into the driver's seat. I watch how her hips sway in that dress of hers, making me swallow my saliva. So much fucking class in that woman.

Ashley starts fidgeting with her bag.

"What do you need help with?" I ask, drawing my brows together because I totally forgot what she wanted.

"Nothing," she replies as she turns and darts away. Damn, I wish I'd known this trick to get rid of her years ago.

Staying right where she left me, I watch Josie's car disappear down the street. I miss her and her sass. And apparently, her ass because I couldn't pry my eyes off it while she was walking. Will getting laid help me get rid of this strange obsession with the woman I've never even had? I don't even want to find out, which is weird.

Chapter Nineteen

KENNETH

Walking into the station with a cold Lonely Kurt is like walking into a minefield, but it's all about the attitude. So I plaster a smile on my face and stride toward Jennica, who's currently on the phone listening to someone's complaint.

"Yes, we will do that. Right away," she says into the phone, rolling her eyes.

I place the bag on her table and head for my office, hoping whoever is on the phone annoys her more than my cold offering.

She talks for a few more minutes and hangs up, letting out such a loud groan I can hear it from my office like she's yelling right into my ear.

"Who was that?" I ask her.

"Mrs. Roberts." We both groan now.

"What's it this time?"

She walks to my door and leans her side on the doorframe. "She's complaining about you being incompetent and harboring a criminal. Know anything about that?" She quirks a brow, trying to hide a smile.

"I'm about to beg her to move someplace else, I swear. This woman comes to me at least three times a week."

"Well, we've got good news and bad news!" She claps her hands theatrically. "Good news—she won't bother you anymore. Bad news—she's

starting a petition to remove you from office.”

“I hope she succeeds,” I say, pressing the heels of my palms into my eyes. And I’m only half-joking.

“Want to tell me about that criminal of yours? I guess it’s the same one who got stuck on the way to the Ghost House?” She’s watching me carefully, smiling like a bloodthirsty shark.

“I got you your favorite breakfast.” I point in the direction of her table.

“The cold one,” she deadpans.

“I was stopped by Ashley.” I wince, remembering her fingers on my skin and Josie’s eyes when she saw it. And how I felt guilty without doing anything.

“You are forgiven.” Her eyes go round as she pushes away from the doorway and walks back to her table.

“Boss?”

“Yeah?” I lift my head from the report I’m writing and glance at the clock on the wall—it’s almost five, and our shift is over soon. *Officially.*

“There is a fight at Cat and Stallion.”

“Again?” I throw my pen on the table and stand up.

“Yes. They need one of us there for the statement because someone got hurt.”

“Shit.” I walk out of my office and toward the exit when someone smacks into me at full speed.

“Oh, sorry,” the girl, about twenty years old, mumbles as I try to steady her.

“Are you okay?” I ask, hearing Jennica coming over to us.

“Yeah, sorry. I’m okay, I wasn’t watching where I was going.” Her eyes dart around before they land on my face. “I just saw the ad saying that you need people?”

I exchange a look with Jennica, who comes even closer, and the girl notices it.

“Not as an officer or anything, but I was hoping I could leave my resume for the dispatcher position or an office assistant or something.” She swallows nervously. “If you’re looking for any of those.”

I watch her face closely, wondering if I have seen her somewhere, but I don't recognize her.

"We're looking for someone for those positions," Jennica chimes in and shoulders me away. "But it's more like one position for all of them. Is that okay?"

The girl starts nodding quickly. "I can help with whatever."

"You can leave your resume with me. Right, Boss?"

I send Jennica a stink-eye, knowing she totally cornered me. I sigh. "Right. You can leave it with Jennica."

The girl's face brightens, and she's led away by a very happy Jennica while I rush to the bar, expecting Jake to be in trouble again.

And I'm right. I know it the moment I step into the bar. I find a guy with an ice pack on his nose, the lower part of his face covered in blood. And I also find fucking Josie, who's standing by the counter, holding Jake's hand in hers and pressing another ice pack to his knuckles.

Fuck me. It's happening again. Jake is in trouble, and this time, Josie is here, *cradling* his hurt fuckin' hand like she has a right to.

Fuck. What if she does? What if they have something going? Jake is young, and Josie is hot. And she's been left alone by me for a long period of time. Anyone would jump at a chance to impress her. Not me, of course, but everyone else would.

Going to the man first while shooting daggers at the 'happy couple,' I get his part of the story first since he looks the worst.

"What happened?" My voice is on the verge of combusting with anger, and I'm not sure who it's directed at.

"This asshole," the guy points at Jake, "hit me in the face."

"And I'd hit you again," Jake says back not so quietly. In my presence. Shooting him a warning to keep his mouth shut, I return back to the man in front of me.

"How did it happen?"

"I was just having some fun, man, and he went off the rails, punched me, and broke my nose."

"Yeah?" Josie chimes in, her voice clipped. "You're missing a few key details, if I recall."

Slowly turning toward her, I find her pressing her lips tight. Fighting the urge to rush to her side and check if she's okay, I ask, "Do you want to add something? Or maybe explain what you're doing here?"

She's protecting Jake while I'm doing my job. Maybe it's time to stop coddling him so much and give him a real lesson. I'm usually more patient with Jake, but he's pissing me off today by letting her take care of him. Pathetic.

"Why do I need to explain myself to you?" Her head rears back with apparent shock. "I'm in a bar! Getting a drink, just like everyone else."

"It's not night yet," I hiss through gritted teeth.

"Oh, you shush." She rolls her eyes, and Jake snorts. I shoot him a glare, and he instantly bites his lips and stares back at his fist. I hear a few chuckles from around us as the music is lowered, and we become the main entertainment. I can hear every single one of them holding their breath to see how it all will play out.

"What are you going to do?" the man asks, reminding me of why I came here in the first place.

"What do you want me to do?" I ask him as my eyes are still trained on the pretty picture of fury with raven hair before me. She looks like a little dragon while she sends me evil glares with her tiny nostrils flared. I half expect to burst into flames from the intensity.

"To arrest the asshole, that's what!" he cries out, drawing everyone's attention to us for good.

Mine including. I slowly turn my head to him. "Are you pressing charges?" I ask.

"Fuck yes!"

"Fuck no!" Rory says firmly from the bar where she's been watching the whole thing. "Not in this bar, you won't. You got what was coming, and if you're going to proceed with that, I'll come out there and punch you in the face myself."

I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to give myself a minute to breathe because this is quickly escalating to something I don't want to deal with. Rory never involves herself in bar fights, but if she's so publicly voicing her desire to join in, something nasty must have happened, and it's not just a bar fight as someone reported.

"So what? No one is allowed to have an opinion around here? Or does the local law protect only the locals?" He suddenly turns toward Josie and points his free hand at her. "You shouldn't even be here, looking like you're just asking to be fucked." He waves his hand at Josie and cackles while my right eye starts twitching and my hands ball into fists. "I mean, why else would a

chick come to a bar in a fuckin' hoe dress?"

I'm a second away from throwing my badge away and adding another broken bone to this asshole. I watch as Josie's face puffs, her cheeks redden as I try to understand if she's angry, stressed, or scared. And the fucker better pray it's not the latter.

"It's below the knees, you idiot!" Josie bellows from her place where Jake makes a move toward us, but she sinks her nails into his forearm, instantly stopping him. My other eye starts twitching.

"Take this trash out of my bar, Sheriff Benson." Rory crosses her arms over her chest. "Jake is not to blame this time. This man," she nods at the guy with the broken nose, "got real handsy while Josie was sitting at the bar having a margarita that I make specially for her, when he," another nod at the guy, "*demand*ed attention. Josie refused—politely, may I add—but the man didn't take 'no' for an answer and got real handsy." She raises a brow, and I feel my heart speeding up.

I place my hand on the man's shoulder and squeeze. He lets out a squeak, and I squeeze harder.

"So Jake had to step up," Rory continues. "That's my statement as a witness. Now, take him out, please."

My muscles turn rigid as I *help* him rise to his feet while still holding his shoulders. He makes a move to get rid of me, but I drag him outside. And right to the side of the building, away from curious eyes.

When no one can see us, I take my badge off my uniform and push it into my back pocket. Then I grab the front of the man's jacket and push him into the wall.

"What the fuck?" He sounds surprised.

"Listen here." I lift him higher so he's on the same level as my eyes.

"You can't do this." He smiles smugly, showing his bloody teeth. "You're a fucking cop."

I let out a dark laugh. "I'm off duty, and I'm talking to you as a *concerned citizen*."

"You call this talking?" He snorts. "I knew you hillbillies were all the same."

"Yeah, we're all the same. We respect women in our town." Pushing him deeper into the wall, I lean closer. "You touched my woman," I hiss into his face. "And you have two choices. First, you go back to whatever place you crawled out from and never come to my town again. And the second option is

that I break the arm that touched my woman, and then you crawl back to whatever place you came from.”

He cackles into my face without an ounce of fear. *Good.* I want a worthy opponent now. I *need* it. Or I’ll take it out on Jake because the fucker seemed way too comfortable with Josie.

“What are you going to do? Beat me with your badge?” Another hyena cackle.

I feel my face stretch into an evil smile. Letting go of his shirt, I quickly shift my hand over his throat, and he bares his bloody teeth.

“I see how it is.”

“Give. Me. A reason.” I put more force into my grip on his neck, feeling his pulse beating under my skin.

He brings his hands up in the air in surrender. Fuck. I hoped for another outcome. I let go of his throat and take two steps backward. He starts rubbing his neck, still smiling. “I heard you all are a bunch of mellow fuckers with you leading the pussies. They don’t know you at all, huh.” Laughing to himself, he walks past me toward the street. “You can have your whore. Ashley was right, she’s not worth it.”

I go to follow him but then stop myself, thinking about Josie still sitting in the bar. Watching him go, I make a mental note to check who that fucker is and add another fuckup to Ashley’s list.

Walking back to the bar, I slowly move my gaze from person to person, accusing every one of them for not stepping up. Only Jake did. This doesn’t happen here—women are free to do what they want, and they should all feel secure to do so. But the wave of new people somehow has made it impossible, and I’ll start fixing it.

Josie is still sitting by Jake, but she lets go of the ice and his hand—thank fuck. I walk to Rory first. She’s wiping a glass with a towel.

“Was the story true?” I ask in a grim voice.

She nods. “Every word.” Then she watches me for a few moments before the corners of her lips fall down. “Not in this bar, Ken. Not after—” She swallows and turns around so I can’t see her eyes.

“I know, Rory.”

Not my story to tell, but there’s a reason why Rory keeps her bar a safe place. Jake is my next stop. Slowly walking toward him, I find his eyes and hold his angry stare all the way until I reach them. This is probably the first time I recall him being uncomfortable. My eyes move from him to Josie and

back to him. He probably notices my dark interest because he swallows and shifts his body slightly away from her.

I hold his eyes with a silent warning for a few long moments before I turn to her.

“Let’s go.”

“What?” Her brows draw together in confusion.

“Let’s go to my car,” I repeat, my voice stony. I’m barely able to contain myself at this point.

Her eyes turn into tiny slits. “Why? Who the hell told you you can order me around?”

I watch her, not blinking, and say in a lower, more dangerous voice, “Get your ass into my fuckin’ car. Now.”

That makes her hold her tongue and swallow a dry lump. I can see her throat moving. She blinks slowly, glances at Jake and then back at me.

“Now, Josie,” I hiss, barely able to speak.

She grabs her purse and scampers away. When she’s out of sight, I look at Jake. “I’ll let it slide this last time because you did something honorable for a change. The next time, we’ll be having a different talk.”

He gives a short nod of understanding and motions for Rory to get him a drink.

I leave them to themselves and go outside, expecting Josie to wait for me.

But she’s nowhere to be seen. Looking around, I try to get a glimpse of her white dress and her raven hair, but she’s not here.

Right then, right in front of my face, a tiny red car drives by me, and Josie’s smiling face appears in the driver’s window.

Little minx!

I’ve been waiting for her to give me a reason to break free. I think she just did.

Chapter Twenty

J OSIE

As I watch Sheriff Benson's mouth fall open as I drive past him, I hold onto the steering wheel with a death grip. *What am I doing?*

Having fun? Maybe. Awakening the beast? Definitely. Feeling truly myself for the first time in years? Hell yes.

Because even from here, I can see his eyes narrowing as he watches me go. And that makes me feel *good*.

Then, in the rearview mirror, I see him slowly walking to his car without giving me a second glance. I don't know what I expected, but this total disregard was not it. Because that's what it looks like. All my good feelings quickly die down, and my playful mood evaporates.

Sighing to myself, because I've clearly made up too many stories in my mind while there's nothing happening in reality, I relax in my seat and go through the events of the last few hours.

To say I went bananas at the mention of mysterious *Jennica* (I still can't remember where I've heard her name) and him *being in the doghouse* would be an understatement. But I was also hurt. I felt like he gutted me even though he didn't owe me a thing.

And then, when I got my groove back after picking up a few supplies at the hardware store, I discovered him cozying up with another woman, who had a grip of ownership on his corded arm—fuck me for even noticing it.

Turns out Sheriff Benson is a ladies' man. Suddenly feeling on the same side as *Jennica*, I decided to be a menace for the both of us since this Jennica wasn't there to protect her honor.

When the woman on Sheriff's arm opened her mouth, I immediately recognized her type. We had one of those back home too. Everyone does. It's like they never left high school—no matter where you go and which society you enter, there will always be mean ones, bullied ones, jocks, nerds, pretty ones, ugly ones, powerful ones, smart ones, and the list just goes on. Since I came to Little Hope, I feel like I've entered a high school cafeteria with me at its gossipy center as 'the new girl.' Lucky me, since I've got some experience navigating those.

Then I went to the local bar to find a space where Sheriff doesn't appear out of thin air. I'd been chatting with Rory, a super smart woman who pretends to be *just pretty*, for some time when a city boy with a swagger that suggested he had a Ferrari and very deep pockets came up to me. I recognized the type instantly, and besides that, he reminded me of Randy a bit—expensive clothes, popular cologne, and a horrible attitude.

Refusing his 'generous' offer to go to the bathroom to 'blow off some steam' didn't work as expected. He leaned closer and closer, saying that he could play this coy game all day long and liked 'little girls playing hard to get.' And that's when I nearly vomited and wanted to pour my drink over his head while twisting his balls in my palms.

Then his hand landed on my ass before I could do anything.

A local guy, Jake, deemed a villain by many as I've learned over the month I've been here, came out of nowhere and grabbed the man's arm off my ass, twisted it in the air, and exchanged a few words with him I absolutely cannot recall since they were said so quietly, only they could hear them. Then the guy threw a punch—a very weak one, even I could throw one better—and Jake retaliated with just one punch to his nose. That was all it took for him to back down. Took too much, in my opinion. My word should have been enough from the beginning, but I guess he's somewhat right—legend says women wearing dresses go to the bars only to get noticed by horny men and get fucked in bathroom stalls. Apparently, nothing we do, even dressing up, is for us, and everything is for them.

While I was pressing the ice pack Rory gave me to Jake's hand, the hero of the hour tried to wiggle away, but I held him tight, repeating how grateful I was for his intervention. I didn't need his help, but I was glad to see that

chivalry was not dead. And he just kept averting his eyes, not knowing what to do with my gratitude. I suddenly got mad at every man and woman who made him this way because that man has a story, and I have a feeling no one knows about it.

Dreading seeing the sheriff, because it was just a matter of time before he'd arrive, I was thinking of what I was going to say to him. I've never felt awkward around men, but I do around him. He makes me lose my cool and brain cells, quite honestly.

This is the only explanation I can think of while I'm driving toward the Ghost House, breaking all speed limits while *no one* is chasing me. Unfortunately.

For a moment, there in the bar, I thought he worried about *me*, Josie, but turns out he was just *doing his job*.

Slowing down on the muddy road that seems to never dry, I try to avoid any ditches and bears because I've reached my limit of adventures for today.

I park in my usual spot and walk into the house. I can't do much yet, and quite frankly, I don't have the energy for anything substantial today, but I found a cute breakfast table in the basement and dragged it up to the kitchen. Made of oak, like many things in this house, it can easily be used anywhere, accentuating the sturdiness of the place. I bought missing supplies for refinishing it, and now is the perfect time to distract myself with something other than imagining Sheriff's piercing.

I take off my bracelets and put them on the island so I won't forget them when I go to the trailer—they're my favorite pieces I bought with my very first paycheck. I'm about to pull gloves on when I hear the engine of a car. A big car. A truck, most likely. Peeking through the window, I feel butterflies start flying in my belly, beating on my lady parts from the inside. They're ready for an adventure before he even steps foot inside the house.

He slowly gets out of the cruiser and walks toward the door, his eyes never once leaving the window where I'm hiding.

The door opens.

The sound of footsteps moves my way.

When he notices me, he pauses, tilting his head.

"You've been bad, Josie." His voice is coarse. Way coarser than I've ever heard.

He slowly brings his hands to his belt, and they start working the buckle. Slowly.

I swallow the driest lump I've ever had in my life.

"But I think you know that." His low chuckle joins the butterflies in tickling every part of me. "Don't you?"

I don't say anything because I simply can't.

"What happened, Josephina?" He tilts his head to the other side while using the name I hate. Or do I? "Cat got your tongue?"

He pulls the belt off, drops it on the floor, and takes one step toward me. I take one backward and hit the wall behind me.

"Josephina?" he asks breathily, and I don't think I hate the name that much anymore. Maybe just dislike it a bit.

I quickly shake my head.

"Good." He smiles. "Very good. Because you need to explain to me what you were thinking by running away from me." A step forward. "You wanted me to chase you, didn't you?"

I blink.

"You wanted to see what I can become when I'm high on the chase." A bullseye—he got my intention right. I've been wanting to see what Sheriff Benson is made of for a long time.

He undoes the button on his pants, and my eyes dip right there.

"I'm very high on the chase right now, Josephina. Very high. What are you going to do about it?" His voice drops so low, it's barely his anymore.

"I wa—" I clear my throat because I can't even put two words together, and he hasn't even touched me. "I wanted to see what's under the hood of that hero complex the size of Maine."

He moves toward me like a predator, and I flee behind the island.

"Do I feel like a hero to you now?"

I shake my head, watching his actions warily. Butterflies erupt in the pit of my stomach, and all I want is for him to touch me, but I know that the second he does, I'll erupt into flames like a phoenix.

"Still want to look under the hood?" His tongue pokes out for a moment.

I nod.

The corner of his lips lifts with a half-evil, half-promising smile. "Good girl."

"I'm not." I glance at him from under my lashes.

"Oh yeah?" he asks, taking a slow step forward.

Somehow, his face changes. Scratch that, his whole posture changes and my idea of making him chase me suddenly seems even better.

“Tell me again about that hero complex.” He slowly advances on me, and I have the urge to flee just so he can catch me.

“Yeah?” I quirk a brow, surprised to see this side of Kenneth. The side I knew existed but didn’t think I’d ever meet. “I see how the whole town adores the sheriff. And how you let them all dictate your life.” I roll my eyes only partially from annoyance—the folks adore him, and he tries to live up to their expectations. Which are pretty high—they think he makes Earth move the opposite way and would get the moon if they asked. He doesn’t have time for himself because he’s too busy serving others. Serve and protect. He takes it to heart.

Maybe that’s why I’m so bent on cracking this shell. Old habits die hard, and Sheriff Kenneth Benson awakens my own hunting instincts that have always been dormant.

“Can you do that, Sheriff?” I continue. “Yes, I can,” I mimic his voice, making his lips twitch. “Can you help us? Here I am.”

Another twitch.

His eyes are trained on my face while his coiled body slowly moves toward me. His mouth is slightly ajar, and I can see the tip of his tongue tracing the edge of his top teeth. As if he’d love to taste my blood.

“Oh really, Josie?” He licks his lips. “What do you think when you see me?” Another step closer. “Do you want me to come and save you?” He tilts his head to the side. “Oh, you just want to *come*? From my cock. Or my fingers.” His lips stretch into an evil smile. “Or both.”

It’s my turn to lick my lips feverishly. My skin starts burning. My fingertips itch to touch the scruff on his face.

“Because I can make you come, Josie.” Another step forward as my butt hits the table behind me. “I can make you come so hard, no one else will ever be able to replace me. You may even become addicted to my cock. Mine and mine alone.” His voice turns raspier. “Is that what you want, Josie?”

Swallowing hard because I don’t have anything to say, I’m thinking that I might have bitten off more than I can chew. Can I really handle a man like Kenneth? He seems like a goody two-shoes, but in reality, he is more man than Randy ever was. More man than any man I’ve ever been with. How can someone like me handle him?

“Why are you quiet all of a sudden?” The corner of his lips turns upward. “Are you scared, Josie? I don’t think you are.” His eyes move up and down my body and return to my eyes. “You know why? Because you, Josie, are a

very naughty girl.”

I keep blinking, thinking about how this man is plucking every single word from my wildest fantasies.

“What is it about you that drives me nuts?” He touches my chin with his finger. “What is it about you that makes me forget every single responsibility, every single duty I have? That allows the primal side of me to take over, desperately wanting to fuck you senseless where you stand?”

Sounds too good to be true, but I don’t say it out loud. A lot of people promise, but they don’t deliver. Something tells me that Kenneth Benson can deliver.

“What happened to you, Josie?” He tilts his head to the other side. “Forgot how to breathe?” His voice turns downward sinfully.

“You wish,” I reply, trying to sound playful. In reality, I sound lost.

“What is it then?” he asks.

“I’m just thinking about what you’re going to do with all those promises.”

His smile turns evil. “Oh, you’ll find out soon enough.”

He takes the last step separating us. And now I’m caged between the table and his coiled body. I can feel his chest muscles pressing into my soft breasts. He brings his hands to either side of me, gripping the table by my waist. The motion brings him even closer. And now I have to lift my head to look him in the eye.

“Can’t wait,” I breathe out.

“Don’t be so sure.” His voice turns ominous. “You woke something up that was not supposed to be awoken. I don’t think either of us can handle it.”

He brings his hand to my thigh and starts kneading the muscles at my side, and I get lost in the feeling of his powerful hand on my body. I close my eyes, waiting for him to move his hand...

Right when common sense hits me with the reality of the situation, I push him away, suddenly feeling the pain and loneliness in the air around me.

“No.”

He stumbles back. His eyes are hooded, and his jeans look entirely too tight.

“What?”

“No, Kenneth.” I shake my head more, attempting to rid myself of the thoughts rather than convincing him. “I can’t do this.”

“Why the fuck not, Josie?” His voice drops an octave, turning downright dangerous. “You’ve been toying with me every chance you got, and now,

when I'm here, you say you can't?" He grinds his molars before speaking again. "Was it all a fucking game to you? Seeing how far a small-town guy would go for you?"

"What?" I blink, not understanding what on earth he's talking about because the reason is obvious. "No! I wasn't toying with you."

He runs a hand through his hair. "Then what happened between there," he points at the window where I was waiting for him, "and here." His finger points at the space between us.

I watch his face, not believing him—there is no way he doesn't know what I mean. Maybe he's not so good after all.

"Jennica, Kenneth. Jennica happened!" I almost yell.

"Jennica?" His brows rise to his hairline. "What does she have anything to do with this?"

I blink at him in astonishment. "You're together! How can you be here with your..." I press my lips together, trying to find the right phrase in my aggravation, "your belt while you're buying her breakfast?" Then understanding dawns on me. "A-a-ah, I see. You need to scratch the itch while you are in the," I make air quotes, "doghouse."

He opens his mouth. Then closes it. And opens again. "I can't fucking believe it," he growls.

I purse my lips and wait for him to elaborate.

"You think I'm a fuckin' cheater?" He looks so offended I become unsure if I read the situation right. Walking toward the place where he dropped his belt, he says, "Jennica is my coworker and a friend, who is happily married, by the way." He glares at me for a second while lead settles in the pit of my stomach. "But you should have known better, Josie. Out of everyone," he waves his hand in the air, "I thought you had figured me out. Turns out I was wrong."

There's so much disappointment in his voice that I can barely take it. He picks up his belt and heads toward the door.

Without thinking, I run after him and grab his hand right before he pulls the doorknob.

"I'm sorry," I whisper into his back, and he stops without turning to me. "I'm sorry I assumed it." I lean into his back while holding his hand. "I didn't mean it." I pause. "At least not like it came out." Letting out a loud sigh, I decide to tell him the truth. "My ex-boyfriend cheated on me, and I'd never want anyone to be on the receiving end of that feeling." The muscles on his

back tense, and I press my cheek between his shoulder blades. “When you mentioned Jennica and buying her favorite breakfast, I—” I clear my throat, “I got jealous.”

He takes a deep breath.

“But also hurt. I thought we had chemistry and maybe... something else, but then Jennica and all my assumptions.” I chuckle. “Which clearly made an ass of me.”

His chest rumbles.

“What I’m trying to say is don’t go. Please.”

He makes a move to turn around, and I let go of his hand and take a step backward. He finds my eyes and holds them.

“I was wrong to assume anything. I’m sorry, Ken,” I whisper, feeling utterly remorseful but hopeful he can feel it. “Will you stay?”

Chapter Twenty-One

JOSIE

His intense eyes don't stray from mine when he says, "I am not a cheater, Josie. Never have been. Never will be."

"I know," I whisper.

He sighs. "The moment is kind of gone."

My stomach drops in disappointment. "I'm sorry. I know you're a good guy." Then I add, turning to the side and mumbling under my nose, "Maybe too good for me."

He cocks his head. "Why is that?"

"You wouldn't know what to do with me," I answer, biting my lips and taking the first step backward.

"Yeah?" He quirks a brow.

"I don't know." I shrug one shoulder as I start walking backward. My hands intertwine behind my back. "You seem so proper and prim." I plaster a 'good girl' smile on my face. "And I am neither."

"Are you sure of that?" He drops the damn belt on the floor once more, and I can breathe again. "You seem like you can be a particularly good one."

Sinking my teeth into my lower lip, I look up at him from under my lashes. "I can try if you ask me. Nicely."

His face turns positively feral. "Or I can just order you."

My breath hitches. "Or you can do that."

I walk backward until I hit something with my ass. Not caring what it is, I watch him slowly moving toward me with the grace of a predator. His steps are confident and sure. It's not like he has swagger. It's like he invented it.

His nostrils are flared. His arms are corded and tense, like he's ready to spar with someone, and I'm having a hard time trying to move my gaze from them to his face, which is a piece of art on its own. He always has his five o'clock shadow. His seen-it-all eyes can look right into me. His strong, full lips make me want to sink my teeth into them.

When he reaches me, he stops half a foot away. So close I can smell his skin and sweat, yet so far, my skin isn't touching his.

"Tell me," I ask.

"Be a good girl for me," he rasps, melting my brain into a puddle. "A very good one. Can you do that, Josie?"

I nod, placing my palm on his chest. His hand lands on my thigh. Slowly—ever so slowly—he starts moving his hand up my leg to my stomach. It lands on my waist and pauses there, exploring the curve. His other hand comes to the other side, and he presses, just a bit.

"I like that," he confesses. "I like the parts of you that make you a woman." He brings his hand to my belly. "I like the softness of your body." His left hand moves up and caresses my tits. "And the fullness of it."

Please, like that part between my legs too, I think to myself, and the heat slips down my thigh. Because it's getting painful, and I'm starting to get the meaning of the phrase 'blue lady-balls.'

"Also," his hand keeps exploring and moves up, "I like how you like to play with fire."

When his hand lands on the base of my neck, he spreads it wide, covering the top of my chest.

My breath hitches.

He moves his hand up a bit, and now the base of my neck is pretty much between his thumb and index finger.

I take a deep breath and lick my lips.

His eyes turn brighter. "I knew you'd like that too. Good girls usually do."

Fuck me.

Then he squeezes.

Not hard, but hard enough to make it known. While most of his palm is pressing on the top of my chest, he keeps squeezing.

The fire starts between my legs, spreading to my spine. My hands land on his forearm. He must have noticed a flicker of fear in my eyes because he loosens his grip but doesn't let go. "Tell me to stop, Josie, and I will. One word." He leans in closer. "Tell me to stop."

I can tell him to stop, and I'm sure he will. I trust him. I trust in his goodness and his morals. I trust him. He's a little different from what I expected, but he is the same.

I look him in the eye, deeper than I've ever looked, and whisper, "No."

His nostrils flare, and the muscle under his right eye ticks.

"Tell me to stop."

I try moving my face toward his, as close as he lets me. "No," I breathe out, making the tick in his muscle intensify.

He growls.

Legit growls like something out of my wildest fantasies or Alicia's books.

And then he lets go of my neck and crushes his lips on mine. There is no foreplay, no warning. He is here to take no prisoners. Our banter was the foreplay. The whole month we've been tiptoeing around each other was the foreplay. The offenses and forgiveness were our foreplay.

My arms snake under his and wrap around his back. My palms spread over his muscles, which move under my touch. I'm clutching him like a monkey while he's fucking my mouth with his tongue. It's not a kiss, it's fucking. Teeth clashing, tongues assaulting. I'm sure I'll have a bruise on my lips tomorrow.

And I'll wear it with honor.

He suddenly lets go and flips me. I end up with my front pressed into the very same table I was going to restore while his pelvis is firmly pressed against my ass. His hand lands on the back of my neck and pushes me harder into the table, eliminating my ability to move.

Then I feel his hot breath on my ear, his front molding to my back.

"Now, Josie. Tell me to stop now." His words scorch my skin, sending goosebumps. "Tell me to stop while I still can."

"No," I grit out, annoyed, angry that he's still trying to escape but giving me the ability to decide. "Fuckin' take it already, Sheriff, and stop giving yourself an escape plan."

He pushes onto my neck harder, squishing my cheek into the wooden surface.

"Shut," he licks the shell of my ear, "the fuck," and bites, "up,

Josephina.” He lets out a forceful sigh. “You’re going to fuckin’ take it now.” Another push on my head.

“I gave you an escape, but you didn’t take it. And now you’re mine.”

Bucking his pelvis into my ass, he presses his whole body on mine. It should be scary—a huge man on top of me, immobilizing my movements—but it’s not. It’s fucking hot. It’s hotter than anything I’ve ever experienced.

His hand never leaves my neck while his other hand lifts the bottom of my dress up. It moves over to my butt, caressing my skin.

A loud crack.

He just ripped my panties off! With one hand!

Enraged, I push away from the table—those were my favorite—but he pushes me back, not letting me get up.

A wave of heat rushes through my body.

His two fingers start moving along my ass crack and then to my wet folds. And wet they are. When he slips one finger inside, he clicks his tongue.

“You’re a very bad girl, Josephina, while you promised to be good,” he whispers into my ear.

Who the fuck knew that using my full name could be such an aphrodisiac, but when he says it, I’m ready to go. The muscles between my thighs spasm in anticipation and pain.

Another finger joins the first one and starts pumping. In and out, in and out, making me squirm as I wiggle my ass.

“Nah-ah.” He puts more force into his grip.

“Just fuckin’ do it,” I order through gritted teeth, barely able to control myself. He hasn’t done much but look into my deepest, darkest fantasy, deciding to bring it to life. That’s all it takes to make me a wiggling mess.

A loud slap echoes in the kitchen, making me freeze. I turn my head to the side to look at him. He just slapped my ass! Not like slightly, playfully, but slapped, sending the flesh of my ass cheek jiggling.

“Be very good, Josie, and I might reward you with something you’ve never felt.”

“I’ve had orgasms before,” I reply breathily, trying to rile him up even more.

He meets my stare with half-hooded eyes. “Not with me, you haven’t.” A smirk graces his lips, daring me to tell him to stop. “And you won’t forget it when I give you one.” He licks his lower lip while his eyes turn heavy. “If you deserve it.”

I narrow my eyes back, not recognizing the Sheriff Benson I'm used to, and stick my ass in the air even more. His quiet laugh is husky. It raises all the fine hairs over my body. Well, the ones that are left.

Letting go of my neck, he starts fidgeting with his zipper. I perk up and lift my body off the table, trying to get a peek at what's down there. There is no way I'm missing Kenneth Benson's cock, the eighth wonder I've been dreaming about.

When he notices my stare, he slows his movements and pulls the zipper down, making a show of it. The biggest dick I've ever seen springs free. Its girth will be challenging, I can tell. I might be able to work with the length, but that cock is huge.

Its head's glistening with moisture, showcasing a wide, silver ring on the tip. *Prince Albert*. I've done my research, hoping he had *that*.

I swallow. Then I clear my throat and lick my lips, suddenly feeling anxious and excited at the same time.

His laughter is short and breathy.

"You'll be fine. You were made to take my cock, Josephina." His voice is forced. Hoarse. Like it's hard for him to speak.

I like how he keeps repeating my name, not leaving any doubts that he is with me and not someone else from his own fantasies.

His hand comes back onto my back, pressing me into the table. I happily oblige, and quite honestly, I'm glad he's doing everything because I wouldn't know what to do with this monster. I have some googling to do.

With his cock in his hand, he moves the pierced tip over my drenched pussy. It's swollen and painful and so ready for action. It has been since I heard the sound of his truck approaching the house.

Then he pokes it inside, and I expect pain. But none comes.

He pulls it back and presses in again, spreading the wetness around. This time, it goes deeper.

Out again and in. Here he meets resistance, and I'm trying to jiggle my ass to adjust to him, but he grabs my side with his hand, stopping me.

"Relax," he orders calmly. "I got you."

Letting go of my neck, he brings both his hands on the sides of my ass and lifts me to my tippytoes. This way, he has better access. He slowly presses in, wrapping one hand around me, bringing one hand to my clit.

He presses. I gasp. He slips deeper. I breathe out. Another push. And deeper.

He retracts, grabs my ass with both hands again, and pushes all the way in.

I moan into the table, full of pain and anticipation. And him.

His left hand grabs my shoulder and pulls me up onto him. Pressing my back into his front, he brings his hand to the front of my neck. Dominating me in his firm grip, he starts moving his hips. I'm on my tippytoes, and with every push, he brings me higher up his body, taking off some of my weight. His hand tightens around my throat, and I gasp for air. My pussy contracts, trying to squeeze him harder.

A sudden bite comes to the side of my neck, and then he starts licking.

I'm sweaty. I'm wet. My lips are dry from moaning.

"How do you want it, Josephina?"

"Harder," I breathe out. "I want it harder."

"That's my good girl," he hums approvingly and helps me lie back on the table. "So good at taking my cock."

Once my tits touch the surface, he grabs my ass and delivers my wishes.

I don't think I've ever been fucked so hard before. I'm just trying to hold on to the edges of the table while he's impaling me on his monstrous cock. I feel the piercing touching the spots I like with every thrust. His heavy balls slap my clit with every push.

I can feel his holster push against my back, and I wonder if his gun is still there.

"Do you want to come?" he asks with a growl.

"Y-yes," I moan.

"How bad do you want to come, Josephina?" He keeps thrusting his hips into me, firmly holding my ass in place.

"I want to come, Kenneth." I moan, throwing my hand on his shoulder. "Please."

He moves one hand back to my clit and wraps another under my boobs, holding me in place while he keeps impaling me onto his giant cock.

With another thrust, it goes even deeper, hitting the very maximum I didn't know I could take. Suddenly, I feel the weight of his muscular arm on my back. Moving me. Pushing me forward. He presses my body into the table, restraining me again.

And that's enough for the fireworks to come.

My legs start shaking as I let out the loudest and most embarrassing moan possible.

He groans while his movements turn jerky. A moment later, I feel the stickiness running down my thighs and his quivering body pressing into my back. I've never seen a man react to sex with *me* the way he just did.

A few more thrusts and he wraps his arms around my torso, bringing me to his front. We're both panting, trying to catch our breaths. If not for him holding me, I'd be back on the table since my legs turned into jelly.

He bites my earlobe, gently pushes me away, and starts zipping up his pants.

And I just know that I'm about to meet with Kenneth the Saint again.

Chapter Twenty-Two

KENNETH

I tuck my cock back into my pants. My work pants. I zip them up and feel for my belt, but it's not there. *Right*. I dropped it when I got here. Fetching it from the floor, I put it back where it belongs—my pants. A part of my uniform. While I'm on duty.

To be anal about timing, I'm not on duty *officially*, but it never stops for me. When you're a sheriff in a small town, you're on duty twenty-four hours a day. I imagine it's a bit better for folks in bigger towns, but here, we don't have much manpower, so I never put my badge down.

Besides that time when I wanted to smash that guy's face with my fist. For a moment there, I forgot who and what I was. I just wanted to be Kenneth Benson, a guy who beat another guy to a pulp for offending his woman.

His woman. My woman who is not even mine.

And yet, I just fucked her like an animal on the table. And I was rough with it. Somehow, she awakened something dormant in me. Something I didn't know I had.

The worst part is that I don't even know when it started—maybe when I saw her cradling Jake's hand like it was something precious to her, and I got blinded by jealousy. Maybe, when I heard that bleeding asshole talking shit about her. Or when I knew she might have been scared. I already recognize her initial reaction to any advance is to strike back, but it doesn't cancel out

the fact she still might fear him.

But I know when my infatuation with her continued: when she tried running away from me, and I gave in to the chase. She liked it too. And like an idiot, I got hooked on *the feeling* of freedom it supplied.

I didn't come here to fuck her, at least, I don't think I did. I wanted to play with her. To scare her away from me because it's the only way I'd stay away—if she didn't want me. But she did. She so fucking did. She was wet before I even touched her, excited at the prospect of being my prey.

... And then it all went to shit when she accused me of being a cheater. I fuckin' hate cheaters. My father was one. He strayed from my mom and got someone else pregnant. Which resulted in Alex.

When his mom died, he came to live with us. I resented them both at first, and it took me time to learn to suppress this anger deep inside of me, because I didn't have a choice. I was the eldest, and my siblings and my mom relied on me. But with Alex, I just couldn't... I had to grow up to understand it wasn't his fault, but it was too late. He had already enlisted in the Navy. He's one of my biggest sins I'll be trying to fix for the rest of my life.

I'm not sure I'll ever be able to forgive our father, but Mom seems to have. She's a saint though. She accepted Alex like one of her own kids, and to this day, I don't see a single difference in the way she loves or treats any of her four kids. I'm the eldest, then Alex, Leila, and Aiden, who's still in high school. He reminds me the most of Alex with his anger control issues and hot head. I always keep an eye on him because God knows our father doesn't. He's not a bad guy, but he's not the best father.

He ruined everyone's life by cheating on our mother, so being accused of being one hits too hard and too close.

And Jennica? I suppose it might have seemed that way since I was picking up her breakfast. Then Kayla's damn comment about the doghouse. I can't believe Josie hasn't heard that Jennica works with me. We've been together at that station for so long that she's like another sister to add to my flock, and the idea of looking at her like anything else makes me shudder. I'm sure Jennica reciprocates the feeling tenfold. Josie should have heard rumors about the station at this point. Nothing stays hidden in this town, no matter how hard you try to bury the bodies.

I thought Josie was the only one who could see the real me. It felt like we had some unexplainable cosmic connection where she could peek through the layers I've covered myself with that no one else has ever been able to see.

But then she went ahead and threw a bomb, and I got so mad when she accused me. So fuckin' mad.

Until she wrapped her hands around my body and pressed her face into my back. She doesn't seem like the type to apologize easily, so I stayed to listen. I imagined myself in her shoes and how jealous I got over a simple hand-holding. Josie was jealous, and somehow, it made me warm inside.

I think that's exactly why I stayed.

And ended up with the most intense orgasm I've ever experienced. It was so bad—*good*—my knees nearly gave in. And here I thought my dick had stopped working. Apparently, she and her sharp tongue gave it quite a restart.

Even right now, while I'm trying to collect myself and actively avoid her face, I feel her eyes following my feverish, guilty movements. She scoots to the edge of the table, places one leg over the other, and fixes her skirt around herself in a perfect wave.

And silently watches me. Watches how cowardly I glance around, looking for an escape. I've had sex before, but this was not sex. This was an all-consuming, mind-bending experience I wasn't ready for. I'm still not ready. I need to process it, leaving it as a one-night stand for now.

"Getting cold feet?" she asks with obvious mockery in her voice.

"What?" I look at her, totally hearing what she said but needing time to come up with an answer that won't sound too mean. Or cheesy.

She quirks a brow and leans back on her palms nonchalantly, showing that she understands just how full of shit I am.

"Look, Josie," I start with a sigh. My dick is back in my pants, and my belt's guarding it in case the fucker decides to pop back up. Because it clearly does. When she starts playing with the hem of her skirt, revealing her delicious thighs again, it stirs. And I instantly recall how I dug my fingers into her creamy flesh. How good it was to hold onto it.

While I'm cursing myself ten times over for getting aroused again, she continues watching me, waiting to hear what sort of crap I'll come up with.

"This," I gesture between us, "was just sex. You know that, right?"

"Did I ask you to marry me?" The corners of her lips slightly turn upward with clear amusement.

Suddenly, I'm hot. She said the *m* word. My back starts sweating, and my palms turn clammy. I discreetly wipe them on my pants.

"Relax." She laughs, obviously enjoying my discomfort. "I was joking. It was sex." She jumps off the table and shrugs. "Good sex, by the way."

Besides, I'm never getting married, so you're off the hook."

That's what I wanted, right? For her to be okay with that? But why don't I like the sound of her confirmation, making it seem like it wasn't a big deal to her. I'm running for the damn hills, for fuck's sake, and she just fixed her skirt, dismissing me like a cheap booty call?

"Yeah, about that." I chew the inside of my cheek, thinking about how I should go about that. "I'm so—"

She lifts her finger in the air, her narrowed eyes throwing blazing daggers at me. "If you're going to say you're sorry, I swear, I'm going to punch you in the nuts." Her eyes dip to my thigh. "They're big enough to be easy targets."

My forehead wrinkles in confusion as I attempt to figure out if that was meant as a compliment because one never really knows with Josie. "Why?" I ask, giving up.

"You and I are both adults. I like it rough. You like it rough." At her words, lead settles in the pit of my stomach. "We had fun. Move on, Sheriff. I have."

I carefully watch her, looking for any indication that she might be lying, but find none. She really liked it. Actually, I'm pretty sure she loved it. But she dismissed me so fast, I didn't even have a chance to fully buckle my belt before she had apparently already moved on. Isn't that the best-case scenario for me and the sole reason I drive to Portland sometimes?

So I simply nod and move toward the exit, feeling like I've just been discarded like a used condom.

My forehead breaks into a sweat.

A condom.

I pause, thinking about if I should go back and discuss it. But when I glance back and find her wiping the table we just fucked on, I press my lips together and head toward the door before I weep like a pussy.

But then Josie, being the grown-ass woman she is, stops me with her words. "I'm clean, in case you're wondering."

I stop and turn to face her.

"And I'm on the pill."

I swallow, "I am too."

She quirks her brow, a hint of a smile on her lips.

"I mean, I'm clean too," I add, suddenly feeling like an idiot.

"Then we're square." She snaps her fingers, dismissing me.

What the fuck? How do I react to that? Something swells in my chest, and I'm unsure if I should go back and show her to never dismiss me like that or walk out the door and not turn back.

If I was the better man, I'd choose the first. But I give her a short nod, turn around, and grab the knob.

When I'm in my car, I bang my head on the headrest, cursing myself with every word I know. How did I mess up so badly? I just fucked Archie's designer. He's my close friend. Maybe even the closest one I have. And yet, the fucker didn't warn me about her arrival.

Yeah, Josie is from the big city, and they tend to take these things easier than women in small towns. Every time you sleep with someone, they start shopping for a ring. That's exactly why I have a fuck buddy in Portland with zero expectations, and if I need something new, I go to a bigger city where no one knows me, and I can fuck someone anonymously.

And I need to do that now so I can erase the feeling of her quivering thighs in my hands. How tightly her pussy squeezed my dick. And how she took as much as she gave.

And how much it hurt when she admitted that it was just sex.

Yes, I need a good fuck to prove to myself that it's not her, it's just an act. This weekend, I'm going to Portland.

Chapter Twenty-Three

JOSIE

Well, that was unexpected. Kenneth Benson can fuck like an animal. And his conscience is even bigger than his cock, which is giant to begin with. Quite honestly, more than I anticipated, and now I can add another complex to the lengthy list—a big dick complex. I’ve heard it existed but never seen one before in real life.

I think he ruined me forever.

Feeling his cum dripping down my thighs because Sheriff ripped my panties off, I decide to go take a shower in the trailer. But halfway out the door, I change my mind. I’ll wear the remaining proof of the carnal coupling of two people with insane chemistry (because I don’t know what else to call it) as a badge of honor for a few more minutes. In case bears come barging in.

I saw the exact moment Sheriff came down from the high, and the thousands of little wheels started spinning in his head. He has a hero complex, filled with a good boy complex, topped with a big dick complex. One might think the latter would negate the former two, but in reality, it just intensifies his desire to make everything perfect. A creature, given a cock like that, would want everything around him in perfect order to match the perfection unfairly given to him by the universe.

No matter how much he barks about my assumption being false, I know

I'm right. It's not easy to carry so much on someone's shoulders (and between one's legs, apparently). Eventually anyone would snap, so one needs some sort of release.

It's pretty natural that he's a control freak between the sheets. Some powerful people like to be dominated in bed, but I always sensed Kenneth was zaddy. Too strong-willed and too powerful to allow anyone control over him.

A shudder runs through my body when I remember how he pressed me into the table. My cheeks heat up at the thought of how I reacted. I could yell '*I've tried it all*' all I want, but I've never done anything so animalistic. Yes, I'd had good sex with decent orgasms, mostly with the help of certain toys. Well, I thought it was good until now.

Now my perspective has changed, and Sheriff Benson is to blame. One might think spending the last few years in New York would introduce a person to everything that is out there, but it turns out one needs to go to Maine to see it all. I mean, I've heard all roads lead to Maine, and it must be for good reason.

When the truck outside starts, I run to the window to discreetly check on Sheriff. He's sitting in his cruiser, staring ahead. I can see his unmoving hands tightly gripping the wheel. Typical. There must be so many thoughts running through that perfect, big head of his.

I sigh, feeling a tiny bit bad for him—this 'everything-must-be-perfect-including-my-consciousness' complex won't let him sleep tonight for sure. There's nothing I can do about that though. I made sure to point out that it's normal to have sex if both participants are willing, no matter how rough it is, but I bet he's creating a horror story in that big brain of his, picturing me upset and unwilling. On the other hand, I will see no dreams tonight since I'll be dead in bed after the strongest orgasm I've ever had.

When he finally drives off, I decide to go to the trailer. While he was still here, I wanted to pretend that I'd go about my business of fixing the table, like this best sex of my life was just another Tuesday. But I have zero energy to even blink, let alone move my arms.

Taking a quick shower, I climb into a bed that must have seen so much throughout the years, and fall asleep, thinking how cool it would be to add more to the list.

Morning comes with the sort of soreness I don't remember feeling for a long time, and memories cloud my mind the moment I open my eyes. I remember his strong body holding mine. His corded, powerful arms wrapped around me. And his lips—

Wait a minute. We didn't do much kissing. Such a shame. Sheriff has nice lips, and I bet he'd use them better on things other than droning on and on about his stupid duties. I wish we could have continued our exploration of each other, but he got spooked. I remember how fast he rushed toward the door and how nicely his bubble butt flexed as he ran from his sin. Which was me, apparently.

My pussy clenches, remembering how well he used this butt to piston inside me. Another clench. I sigh and pull the vibrator out of the tiny nightstand. Closing my eyes, I recall everything that happened the previous evening, and it's not to keep me going—I don't need any extra visual stimulation since Sheriff Benson has officially ruined porn for me, replacing the naughtiest movie I've ever seen with his image.

When I'm done, I feel better. A bit. My cactus sits on the nightstand looking sad, still not quite recovered from John's box, watching me with judgment. How bad has my loneliness become if I feel judged by a half-dead cactus?

Taking another quick shower, I make myself a cup of coffee and walk outside. The morning here in the woods is chilly, but I know it's going to be hot later. I'm losing warm, sunny days while I can't decide on a contractor for this house.

Sighing, I pull my phone from the pocket of my sweats, find the name, and hit dial.

"Yes," comes a gruff voice three rings later.

"Jericho?"

"Yes, *Ms. Monroe.*"

"Josie," I correct him since we're about to build a long and wonderful relationship. Hopefully.

"*Josie.*" I can almost hear a smile in his voice.

"I have to hire you; I don't have a choice." Probably not the best way to start a conversation, but he granted me honesty, so I have to return the favor. "But I trust you. I don't know why, but I do. Please, don't get offended, but I'd rather put it out there for you to decide." Silence follows on both ends, and I let him digest the weight of my words. "And please, don't let me

down.”

“*I won’t.*” It sounds like a declaration of sorts, but it calms my nerves. “*And I appreciate your honesty.*”

“Good.” My chest becomes lighter. “When can we start?”

“*Email me the plans, and I’ll send you my estimate. My crew will be free in two weeks. We can start then if the permits are ready.*”

My spirits rise at the timeframe. “I’ll draw the contracts after you send me all the info. The faster it happens, the faster I’ll get the permits.”

“*Sounds good. I’ll text you my email.*” There’s a heavy silence before he sighs. “*I appreciate your trust, Josie. It means more than you might think.*”

He hangs up before I can utter another word. It’s probably for the best or I might get all mushy. I suppose people like him don’t have much trust given to them, which is understandable. But I believe in second chances. Sometimes, even third chances.

A minute later, my phone pings with incoming messages—Jericho texted his email address. While I’m adding it to my phone, it suddenly starts ringing. No caller ID. Weird. I press the ‘accept button.’

“*Is this Josephina?*” The strong, unwavering female voice sounds all too familiar.

“Yes?”

“*Oh, good. It’s Mrs. Ramona from St. Paulina’s school. I just called the work phone number you listed here first, but they told me you don’t work for them anymore.*”

Mrs. Ramona is the headmistress of the boarding school I’m paying for, and I recognize her business voice well enough to know what today’s call means. I must have forgotten to update my contact information on the school website and remove the old phone number. Why would they choose to call the work number and put me in this very uncomfortable position? Because I think I know where this is going, unfortunately, and I’ve been dreading this phone call.

It would be one thing if it was my sister who never calls me. Never. Even though she has my phone number for emergencies, she’s used it only once. To yell at me years ago, and that’s about it.

“Is she okay?”

“*Yes, she is okay. Don’t worry. It’s the payment I’m calling about.*” Here we go. Lead settles in my stomach. “*It bounced back. We tried a few times, but I’m afraid we have to ask for another form of payment, or we will be*

forced to send her home.”

I knew it. She can't go home, no matter how much she wants to, or the town will ruin her life just like it nearly ruined mine. Damn it! Trying to come up with a quick explanation is not fun business.

I take a deep breath, calling to the confident Josie, who was brave enough to take on the beast that is Kenneth Benson. “Yes, I don't work for that company anymore because I opened my own business.” My voice doesn't waiver. “And I will update the payment information by tomorrow if that's okay.”

“Of course!” The headmistress's tone turns understanding. She's a great lady but has a business to run, so I understand her being strict about her money. *“We will try again once you update it.”*

“I'm just on a short vacation,” I lie through my teeth, crossing my fingers, “and will be back tomorrow.”

“Certainly, not a problem. Thank you for understanding. I will—”

“How is she?” I ask before she stops talking about finances and hangs up.

The heavy silence says it all. *“She still talks about wanting to go home, but her grades are great.”*

Good. That's good. She's always been bright. “Does she have friends?”

“She does.” Her voice turns more enthusiastic. *“Quite a few, may I add. She also showed a very big interest in creative projects recently.”*

I let out a loud exhale, hoping I didn't blow the headmistress's eardrums out. “Good. Mrs. Ramona, do you think—” I clear my throat. “Do you think she's happy?”

“I think she is.” Her voice turns soft. *“You did the right thing, Ms. Monroe. She has a bright future ahead of her.”*

“Thank you. I'll transfer the money tomorrow. Have a good day.”

“You as well, Ms. Monroe.”

The top thing on my to-do list has suddenly been shifted. Thanks to the mini fortifying station Archie installed for me so I could get reception and work, I'm not cut off from the outside world. So I go find his number and dial.

“Hey, Joz. What's up?” He sounds cheerful like he's been up for hours.

“Archie, I need to ask you for a favor.”

“Sure. Anything.”

“I need an advance payment sooner if you can, please. I need to pay for something, and turns out, I ran out of savings.” I cringe in embarrassment.

“Yeah, not a problem. But Joz, is everything okay?” The concern in his voice makes my eyes turn misty. *“I can help you if you’re in trouble.”*

“Nothing like that, Archie. Don’t worry. It’s just the tuition for my sister’s school is very expensive, and since I don’t have a stable job, I don’t have any more income coming in.” I laugh sarcastically. “I’ve got a few trendy bags I can pawn off, but it might take time.”

For the thousandth time, I wonder if I’ve been doing the right thing by letting myself enjoy my nice apartment and cute clothes when I could have saved more money by now if I’d driven two hours to work and worn shirts from a department store.

I did that at first when I wasn’t even a designer. I woke up at four-thirty so I could get to work on time. But when I started climbing up the ladder, I decided to move closer to the office. And when I started getting high-paying clients, I was told that I was the face of the company and had to look my part. The fashion police in New York are brutal, so I started spending a hefty chunk of my paycheck on my nice, recognizable clothes, a chunk for the apartment in a very nice area within walking distance from the office, and the leftovers went toward my sister’s tuition.

I thought at some point when I had more clients and more jobs, I’d start saving and eventually build up security for myself. I didn’t take into consideration that I could get fired and not find another well-paying job. And that was completely my fault.

“Not a problem. Send me your bank info, and I’ll make a transfer.” A moment of silence on his end before his voice turns surprised. *“But Joz, I didn’t know you were paying for your sister’s school.”*

I laugh sadly. “It’s not something I usually talk about, you know. But yes, I pay for her boarding school so she doesn’t have to grow up like I did.”

He’s quiet for a moment. *“How did your parents agree to it?”*

I exhale loudly. “It’s the only school they agreed on. It’s either this one, or she goes back to the farm. The choice is obvious. They want what’s best for her but in their own way. Thank goodness they agree with me on education being important.”

“I bet they picked the most expensive one,” he snorts.

“They did.” I blow a strand of hair away from my face. “But just because it’s very strict and also happens to be very expensive. But when I visited the place, it didn’t appear to be as strict as the farm, so in my eyes, it was the better option.”

“I’m proud of you, Joz. Changing your sister’s life so she doesn’t have to claw her way out like you did.” His voice is full of affection, and I actually believe he means what he says.

“Thank you, Archie. I wish she saw it the same way too.” My voice breaks at the end. Because my sister doesn’t see it as a ticket away from our small town. Instead, she sees it as a conspiracy to keep her away from our parents and the farm. I always wonder if I made the right choice by intervening, but I believe she has to have a choice. Staying on the farm, she wouldn’t see what life could offer. If she still wants to go back by the time she graduates school, there will be nothing I can do. But I’ll know I tried.

“She will one day. You just gotta be patient.” I hear Leila calling his name from somewhere. *“I have to go, Joz, but I’ll transfer you the money right away. See you.”*

Feeling utterly grateful to have people like Archie in my life, I send him my bank info and decide it’s time I get a few minutes to myself since my day has already been shaken. I knew I was running low on funds but didn’t know how low. Needless to say, I’m not very good with financial planning, so this venture of starting my own business just became even more terrifying. I need an accountant or someone who can help me deal with that aspect of running a company as soon as it becomes more than just one client, or I’ll go bankrupt before I’ve even started.

With the wheels still spinning in my head, I take a cup of freshly made coffee and the plans outside to run through them one more time before sending them to the contractor. Feeling happy with the plans and the schedule, I email everything to him and put work aside so I can be present at this moment—something I forgot I was even *allowed* to do. And it feels good. Right.

The birds are chirping. The leaves are crinkling. An owl hoots, someone howls (I sure hope it’s not a wolf). The forest is alive, and somehow, I’m not scared.

I don’t know how long I’ve been sitting like this, but the remains of my coffee are cold when my phone rings again. I check the caller ID because I’m not in the mood for more chats. But finding Alicia’s name, I change my mind.

“Hey, Alicia.”

“Josie! I need your help.” Her voice is serious, and my spine instantly goes rigid.

“What happened? Where are you?” I’m on my feet to run inside the trailer to get the keys before I even finish talking.

“*Oh, no! Nothing like that!*” she rushes to explain. “*I just need a different sort of help.*”

“Oh,” I pause and sit back on the steps. “What happened?”

“*The girls are going out to the club, and this time, I want to go with them.*” I hear her swallowing nervously. “*And I need you there.*”

“I’ll be there.” I nod even though she can’t see me. Alicia voluntarily going to a club is a big thing. Huge. And I’m very proud of her. If she needs me there, I’ll be there. Even though I don’t want to go. Surprisingly, I’m enjoying this quiet life without people around me. I thought I’d be dead bored after New York, but I’m not. And it’s scary since I don’t want to become a small-town girl again, no matter how inviting this little town is.

Plus, Kenneth did something to me, and the idea of other sweaty male bodies rubbing over mine makes me want to vomit.

And this is precisely why I need to go too. Recalling the way his face changed when he heard the ‘marry’ word; I wince with shame and guilt. I was just joking, but clearly, the word triggered something deep inside of him.

“*We’re going on Friday, and the girls are getting ready at Freya’s house. Do you want us to pick you up so we can go together?*”

“Yeah.” I’ve been jealous of their tight little circle, and I’m overjoyed at the inclusion. “That would be awesome.”

“*Great. I’ll stop by around five so we can head that way.*”

“See you!” I end the call, feeling lighter than before. Letting myself breathe and having new friends who seem like they stick to each other no matter the circumstances or the size of their wallet sounds like something I’ve been missing in my life without even knowing it.

Feeling done with fateful phone calls for the day, I silence it and let myself be surrounded by the sound of nature—I’ve come to love doing this here.

Until I hear a rustling sound from the bushes nearby. I jump to my feet and rush inside—the last time I heard a similar sound, a giant, people-eating bear wanted to taste a chunk of my flesh. I’m closing the door behind me, nervously looking around when I notice a moose standing in the clearing in front of the house.

“F-Frank?” I call out tentatively.

He beats a hoof on the ground. I look around in case someone’s pulling a

prank on me. When I find no one, I carefully step outside, leaving the door behind me wide open in case I need to run back, because you never know with these wild beasts.

“Hi, Frank.” I wave at him like he can understand the gesture. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

I swear he tilts his giant head to the side. I swallow and take a slow step down the stairs.

“Can I come closer?”

He doesn’t move, and I take it as a yes.

“Hey, boy,” I start cooing, and his eyelids lower. I, again, take it as a good sign and continue my slow advance. “You’re so big. So majestic.”

His eyes turn glassy.

“Such a beautiful creature.”

He lowers his head a bit. I’m not quite sure what I’m doing or what the end game is here, but I want to pet him so badly, so I keep going.

“I see why everyone’s in love with you. You’re so handsome.”

Frank lets out a happy snort, and I stop in front of him, letting the moose decide the path for our future relationship. He tilts his head to the other side, snorts again, and places his head on my shoulder. A very heavy head. I stop breathing for a moment, but then, after letting out a happy sigh, I start petting behind his ears. Dogs love it, so I hope he does too.

He lets out a couple more snorts and pulls away. I can’t help but let a huge smile spread across my face, suddenly feeling happy and content with everything that’s about to come.

He blinks his big, beautiful eyes at me for a few more moments and heads toward the woods. With a swagger. I swear the moose has a swagger. To be honest, he reminds me a bit of the sheriff.

I’d love to see him today. It’s Wednesday, and maybe he’ll come around before we go to the bar or club or wherever we’re going. I’m not sure why it’s so important, but I wouldn’t mind if he stopped by, let’s say, today.

But he doesn’t stop by today.

And he doesn’t stop by the day after.

Or Friday morning.

My mood plummets fifty points down on a ten-point scale, and I want to go to the club even less. But I already agreed, plus Alicia needs me no matter what kind of mood I am in.

Archie transferred the money to me the same day, and I transferred it to

the school, saving my sister for another month from the over-the-top strictness of our hometown.

Chapter Twenty-Four

J OSIE

After the final approval from Archie and Leila, we signed the contract with Jericho, and now, on this sunny Friday morning, I'm driving to town to submit the permits.

Dressed in very professional gray fitted pants and a white linen shirt, I clack my black heels toward Town Hall. Sending friendly smiles left and right, I open the door and walk to the window. There's no one in sight, but I hear some movement between the many rows of cards and different folders.

"Hello there!" I call out cheerfully, having a very good feeling about today.

And my good feeling turns sour when I find Mrs. Roberts walking toward me, holding a stack of papers in her hands.

Holy fucking shit.

Her footsteps falter for a moment when she notices me, and then her shoulders straighten just as an evil smile spreads across her face.

"Well, well, well." She pushes her glasses up her nose with her middle finger—so poetic, I'd probably do the same. "I've wondered when you'd show up."

Plastering the friendliest smile on my face that totally deserves an Oscar, I say cheerfully, "Good morning, Mrs. Roberts! How are you doing today?"

She silently walks to the window separating her from the citizens—me in

this case—and plants her ass in the chair.

“How can I help you?” she asks with a glare, totally ignoring my inquiry about her well-being.

“I would love to apply for a permit for the house renovations,” I reply so joyfully I bet I have rainbows coming out of my ears.

“Would you?” She squints and leans forward, placing her interlocked hands under her chin. “Well, you need two sets of plans for that.”

“I have it!” I dig into my purse and produce two sets of papers.

Her smile drops a notch. “Actually, we just got new requirements from the state.” Her smile returns with force. “So you need three copies.”

“Well, look at that.” I click my tongue and pull another copy from my bag, watching her smile falter. “I’ve got another one just in case.” Because I’ve been in this game before and know how much they love sending people on a wild goose chase in a maze with no exit.

I put the papers on the counter and push them toward her under the glass. She picks them up and starts looking at them. I pull one more copy out and push it through to her as well with a wide smile.

“Here is one more. Just in case, you know.” I shrug one shoulder as if I don’t know what ‘in case’ means, *you bureaucratic jerk*.

Her lips turn into a tight, white line. “You need to fill out an application for the permit,” she says while she’s inspecting the plans in her hand.

“May I have the application form, please? The website said you’d have the updated version.”

“Yes.” She picks up a paper from the stack on the side of her table and passes one to me.

“Thank you!”

I quickly fill out the form and push it toward her. She looks at it and then back at me. “We also need a copy of that.” She nods at the application on the table.

“Great! Could you please make a copy then?” I blink a few times, pretending to be a sweet and slightly dumb Barbie.

When her face slowly stretches into an evil smile, I understand that Barbie is about to step over to the dark side.

“Our copy machine doesn’t work,” she reports with visible pleasure.

My jaw ticks, but I keep smiling. “Well, do you have another one?”

She snorts. “It’s not the big city, Miss New York. We’ve got only one. Come back when you have a copy.” She disregards me by switching her

attention to the crossword on her table. My plans have been pushed to the side, along with the other papers.

“Sure thing,” I tell her through a forced smile. “I’ll be right back.”

“Sure you will,” the witch mumbles under her breath and starts scribbling on the crossword.

I grab the application and march outside. Once I’m out, I clench my fists and groan in annoyance. Probably, a bit too loudly, judging by the weird looks people send my way.

“What?” I bark, and they scatter away. As they should—I might bite today.

I look left and right, trying to figure out where I can find a copy machine. There should be some offices nearby. Deciding on the right, I march down the sidewalk. The first stop is the insurance agency. I poke my head inside and call out, “Hello?”

“Yes,” a nice lady of respectable age who looks positively like a fluffy dandelion comes from the back door. “How may I assist you?”

“Hello!” I walk inside with yet another wide smile. “May I ask for a huge favor?”

“Sure thing, dear.” She pads her heavy feet toward me. “What do you need?”

“I need to make a copy of this application. Town Hall’s copy machine doesn’t work.”

The dandelion turns into a Venus flytrap in a matter of a second. Her eyes turn to slits just as her shoulders square back, and she grows a few inches.

“You’re that fancy designer who was involved in frivolous activities in Mrs. Roberts’s front yard.” It wasn’t a question, so she didn’t expect an answer. I’m still going to give it to her.

“Yes, I am that fancy designer. And no, I was not involved in any activities in her front yard.” Then I add with a sweet smile. “It was in his.”

With that, I turn around and head toward the door, knowing well enough this woman won’t be helping me in this life or any other.

“That Benson boy was supposed to meet with my granddaughter that day. We set it up with her mother, but he refuses to see her because you showed up.”

I turn around and find her with puckered lips and fire in her cloudy eyes. Instantly feeling a bit guilty about that, I bite my tongue and bid her farewell. Sometimes I forget that the pond in small towns is not deep, and a third of the

population might see me as competition of all kinds.

I walk to the next door. And the next. And the next. And every time it ends the same—the moment they identify me as ‘that fancy designer,’ their machines miraculously disappear.

Almost an hour later, I am ready to strangle the next person who tells me ‘no.’ And then I see the police station. The last place on earth I want to go to, but it happens to be my last resort too. After all, I can guilt-trip him into letting me use his copier.

Fixing my shirt so it hugs my curves just right and wiping the sweat from my face from running through the street, I head into the station. The moment I open the door, a female voice goes silent. A woman with the largest eyes I’ve ever seen widens them even more. She glances at me and then at Kenneth, who’s standing in the doorway to an office about ten feet away from her.

“Hi!” Plastering on a friendly smile, I wave my hand.

“Hey,” the woman, who I suppose is Jennica, says, standing up. “You must be Josie?”

“Yep. That’s me.” I walk toward her and offer her my hand. “The very same one who’s reportedly done some naughty deeds in the front yard of Mrs. Roberts.”

Jennica snorts and gives me a firm shake. “The last I heard it was in front of the church on Sunday morning.”

I click my fingers in the air. “My memory must have been betraying me after all these activities.”

She laughs, glancing between me and Sheriff. “I guess I’m gonna go get me some coffee. Do you want any?”

“No,” Kenneth replies.

She sends him a side-eye. “I wasn’t asking you.” Then she shifts her attention to me. “Do you want some coffee, Josie?”

I blink before I gather my wits, glancing at the equally astonished Kenneth. “No, thank you so much though.”

“Alright, I’m gonna go then.”

“Wait,” I stop her, and she looks at me. “I actually might need your help.” Smiling sheepishly, I shrug my shoulder and tell her my story while Kenneth doesn’t move an inch from his spot.

By the time I’m done, Jennica is laughing hysterically. Even though I don’t find it funny, her laughter is contagious, and I join her.

“See, I need your help.”

She places her hand on her chest, wheezing. “Phew, I was getting so tired of the damn bar fights, and you just brought some fresh entertainment.”

At the mention of a bar fight, I quickly glance at Kenneth. His intense eyes are trained on me. The muscles that bulge from his arms as they sit crossed over his chest make me dizzy, and I think he knows that because the moment he notices me looking at them, he flexes his biceps. The jerk. I roll my eyes and return my attention back to Jennica.

“Give me your paper. I’ll make you ten copies so she can get off your tail.”

Taking the application from me, she goes to the back room, still chuckling, leaving me alone with Kenneth.

“You okay?” he asks quietly.

“Yeah,” I reply, chewing on my lip.

“Are you—” he swallows, “hurting?”

I quirk a brow, ready with a snarky remark, but then I notice his face—he’s truly worried about me. Maybe he thinks he was too rough. Even if he was, I liked it and wouldn’t want it any other way.

“I’m okay. Really. A bit sore from not using it,” I glance down with a smirk, “for a long time, and deciding to break my streak with the biggest dick I’ve ever seen was probably not the smartest idea.”

His breath hitches as his cheeks pinken. He has a two-day beard that makes him look even more masculine—if that’s even possible. And this lovely color in contrast makes me want to jump on him like a monkey.

“Alright.” Jennica comes back with a stack of papers and passes it to me. “I’ve got your fifteen copies in case her suddenly unsteady hands drop them *accidentally* or a flood washes them away, you know.” She winks.

“I know.” I sigh dramatically. “You’re a lifesaver. Thank you!”

“Not a problem.” She waves me off and looks between us. “Do I need to go and get that coffee after all?”

I smile and head to the exit. “Nope. I need to go. Thank you again!”

I wave at them and disappear, feeling their eyes on my back the whole time. Well, Jennica’s eyes are there. His are on my ass for sure.

When I get back to Town Hall, the witch is expecting me with a sweet smile. I bet the townsfolk have already reported how they abused ‘the fancy designer’ the best way they could. I pass her the application with a smile, and she takes it.

“You need to pay now.”

“Of course.” I pull my wallet out.

“We only accept cash.”

“Look at that, I’ve got some!” I pull out the amount needed for all the permits and place it on the counter.

She counts it and places it into her drawer. “Come back next week.”

“Can I please have a receipt?” I blink at her. Looking positively annoyed, she scribbles a receipt and passes it to me. “And the confirmation that you received the paperwork. With the date.” Then I add, blinking faster, “Please.”

She presses her lips together, stands up, and walks to another room with my plans and application in hand. And then I hear the damn *copy machine*. She comes back with two copies, puts a stamp on them, signs, and pushes them toward me.

“Look at that, Mrs. Roberts! You fixed the copier.”

She doesn’t reply when I grab the papers and march through the door, smiling so hard my muscles spasm, and I fear I’ll remain like that forever.

This small town does not like me very much. And the worst part? It’s not the first.

Chapter Twenty-Five

J OSIE

Alicia comes to pick me up at five, right on the dot. When I jump into her sedan, she whistles. “I might need to fight off your suitors tonight.”

I admit, I took some time to prepare myself, thinking that maybe Sheriff Benson may be walking nearby Alex’s cabin, just for an evening stroll, totally accidentally, and see me being all sexy and stuff. My short, black dress accentuates all my curves that I’ve grown so fond of. My red heels match my bright red lipstick and my tiny over-the-shoulder purse.

I smirk at her. “Don’t be ridiculous. I can fight them off myself.”

She giggles and makes a U-turn. We chat about her upcoming book, Mark’s promotion, and Ghost. When I ask her who is going to be at Freya’s place, she tells me ‘everyone.’ I’m excited but very anxious. I wasn’t in the mood to go out today, but her excitement is contagious, so I’m beginning to look forward to it.

When we drive to Freya’s house, we find a few cars already parked there. Before we can even knock on the door, it flies open, and Kayla’s smiling face appears on the other side. “Welcome to Hooters!”

I exchange a quick look with Alicia when Freya yells from the inside, “It’s not a fucking Hooters, Kayla!”

Kayla turns and yells back. “Have you seen your tits, woman?”

“You’re just jealous, skinny bitch!” There’s a loud groan before Freya

speaks again. “Let’s see what you look like when you have Justin’s spawn in *your* belly.”

Kayla giggles and gestures for us to come inside. Freya’s waddling toward the sink, carrying a big tray with tons of different appetizers. I rush toward her. “Let me help you.”

I take the tray from her hands, and she shows me where to put it on the coffee table in the living room.

“Finally, someone with brain cells around here who can identify a needy party,” she complains, sending daggers at Kayla and then Leila who’s sitting on the windowsill, typing quickly on her phone.

Kayla snorts. “Don’t listen to her. She’s been bitching the whole day because she’s constipated.”

Freya sends her a middle finger and slowly moves toward the leather couch by the fireplace. Alicia laughs and follows her. “When are you due again?”

“In two weeks.” Freya pops her feet up on the coffee table and starts rubbing her belly. “And I’m so ready for it.”

“Are you—” I blurt out, not knowing how to ask her if she’s planning to go clubbing *tonight*.

“Pff, no-o-o.” She shakes her head. “Actually, I probably should. The baby would definitely pop earlier. I’ll let her sit here for a bit though.” She lovingly rubs her belly. “But I feel so left out all the time, so I decided to get you all here. At least this way, I participate somehow and don’t feel left out.”

“I know the feeling.” I smile sadly.

She sends me a quick glance and pats the spot beside her. “C’mon, tell Freya how you had hot monkey sex with our hot sheriff in front of the grocery store.”

“Yew,” Leila makes a gagging sound like a cat with a furball.

I walk to Freya, laughing. “I see the story got tamer. The last I heard, it was in front of the church.”

“On top of the police truck,” Kayla chimes in with a raised hand.

“Inside Mrs. Roberts’s living room.” Leila can’t resist either, making a gagging sound. Her face turns sour, and we all laugh.

“God, I love small towns.” Freya rubs her belly gleefully.

“You’re weird,” Leila adds with a laugh. “You’re just like Archie, so badly wanting to become a part of it that you close your eyes to all the shit that’s going on here.”

Bullseye. We, the newcomers with no home, want to be included very badly.

“I’m soaking it all in with pleasure.” Freya flips Leila the bird, making her chuckle.

“How are they, by the way?” Kayla brings us all drinks and sits on the chair. “Are they talking again?”

She’s referring to Alex and Archie’s quarrel. Apparently, something happened between them when Archie was sleeping with Leila, and now they’re not on good terms.

“No.” Leila’s face falls. “They just nod politely at each other, and that’s about it. Looks like it will take some special event wrapped in extra circumstances to make them bury the hatchet.”

“Such a shame. They’ve been through hell together,” Kayla says.

“Yeah.” Freya starts chewing on her lip. “Alex has been worrying about it but too damn stubborn to do anything about it.”

“Same with Archie.” Leila sighs. “I see he misses him, but he’s too dead set on Alex being at fault.”

“He was, though,” Kayla coughs into her fist, and Freya sends her a nasty glare. “What? He was.”

“I know,” Freya says tiredly. “He knows it too.”

We chat about the situation some more before I feel my stomach growling—the last thing I had was coffee in the morning, that’s it. I glance at the delicious-looking appetizers and reach for one when Kayla smacks it away, sending the spring roll flying from my hand.

“What the fuck?” I cry out, and Kayla starts nervously glancing at Freya while Leila starts giggling. Soon, the giggling grows into hysterical laughter.

“For fuck’s sake!” Freya throws her hands in the air. “It was one time!”

“No, it was not,” Kayla and Leila contradict her in unison.

I look between them like a lost puppy. “What in the ever-loving crap just happened?”

Kayla turns to me. “Don’t eat anything here other than lasagna unless you want to spend the rest of the evening shitting your guts out.”

I must look too confused to ask anything because she clarifies in a quiet whisper, “Freya is a *shitty* cook. Pun intended.” She widens her eyes to stress the point.

“Oh!” I exclaim and quickly move away from the tray, guiltily glancing at Freya.

“C’mon!” She rolls her eyes. “I learned how to cook something else besides lasagna!”

Everyone’s quiet, and that’s saying enough. I slowly retreat to the furthest part of the couch, trying not to draw unnecessary attention.

“Josie!” Freya calls out with delight. “Do you want to try my dumplings? They’re so good.”

I quickly shake my head. She narrows her eyes, slowly shifting her attention from person to person until no one can hold it together anymore, and everyone starts laughing.

Soon, I bring my feet under my butt, making myself comfortable, and listen to their chatter while ogling the beautiful, homey cabin. This is something one can call *home*. Made with dark colors and heavy wood, the place screams ‘stability’ and ‘roots.’ And the coffee table Freya rests her feet on reminds me so much of the one in the bed and breakfast—I guess it’s Mark’s work too.

“Josie, I love your dress,” Leila suddenly says from her window.

“Thank you,” I reply shyly, trying to pull the hem lower to cover my very exposed thighs.

“Kenneth won’t know what hit him,” Kayla chimes in, taking a sip of her homemade margarita, which is awful if I’m honest, but somehow, it’s still the best drink I’ve ever tried. Well, maybe not better than Rory’s delicious masterpieces she makes specially for me.

“W-what?” I mumble, feeling my cheeks turning red.

“Oh, please.” Leila rolls her eyes. “We all know.”

“Know about what?” I quickly look between them and find every single one of the ladies looking at me with understanding. “C’mon. Does anything in this place stay hidden?”

“Not a thing.”

“No.”

“Nothing.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

KENNETH

When Josie left the station, I got a few curious looks from Jennica. I'm surprised she was able to hold her tongue and not bombard me with questions. The silence lasted about thirty minutes before she couldn't do it any longer, and now she's going for a full-on interrogation.

She walks into my office, where I'm stewing in anger.

"When are you going to go over there?" Her voice is just as angry as I feel, and I don't have to pretend I don't understand what she's asking.

"When I know I won't throttle her."

"I don't blame you." She whistles. "Want me to go with you to make sure there's no bloodbath?"

I shake my head. "I appreciate it though."

"Don't sweat it." She shrugs one shoulder. "I like Josie, and I think she's good for you. So she's good for us."

I meet her eyes with a stare of my own.

"What? She is. You've been killing yourself with work, Boss, or letting everyone else kill you with their complaints. Neither is good for the town." I'm about to protest, but she shushes me with a raised finger. I hate when women do that because it's like a magic wand of sorts that makes grown men lose their footing. "Don't even sweat it, you won't change my mind."

I nod with acknowledgment, respecting her opinion and desire to make

me a family man.

“By the way, about that girl who came here the other day?” she says, meaning the young woman who came here before I stormed off to the bar the other day.

“What about her?”

“I think we should hire her as an office assistant or something.” She shrugs her shoulder nonchalantly as if she doesn’t care. “We could use the help, you know, and now we have a lot of work, thanks to Freya’s center.”

“We also have a bigger budget because of that,” I remind her, and she instantly glances to the side guiltily. A lot of people complain about her center, but the same people forget how much money her business brings to town and how much good we’ve already done with that.

“True.” She clears her throat. “Anyway, I talked to her and think we should hire her. I can set up the time for you to interview her too.”

“No need. Hire her.”

“What?” She blinks in confusion.

“Hire her,” I repeat a bit louder, not sure how she didn’t hear me the first time.

“I m-mean, you don’t want to interview her yourself?” She suddenly starts stuttering. I’ve never seen her do that before.

“You already did. I trust you,” I reply as I rise from my chair, finally ready to go for *that* talk.

She’s still standing frozen, slowly blinking at me with confusion.

“What?” I ask, irritated that she’s still here with *that* look on her face.

“Are you okay?” she finally mumbles.

“What the fuck is wrong with you today?” I blow up in irritation.

“You. Something is wrong with you.” She points that annoying finger at me. “You are the most controlling control freak of all control freaks in the freakishly controlling land, and you just told me you don’t want to check out a person you’ll be hiring. Do I need to call nine-one-one?” She throws a thumb behind her back. “I can call Mark to come and check you. Just in case, you know.” She blinks again dramatically.

“Get outta here.” I wave her off, and she retreats back to her table, cackling like a very annoying hyena.

A knock on the window stops me right before I leave my office. It’s the same gray parrot. He’s been coming here frequently, proving that I’m not going crazy. At some point, I even called Jennica to make sure she saw the

damn talking bird too. The feathery thing refused to utter a word in front of her, but the moment she closed the door, the bird turned into a snitch.

Turns out, he's totally capable of forming complete sentences, and his favorite activity is to spy on people. The weird bird has become *my* little snitch. Every time he comes to my office, he's got another rumor he heard from someone. He repeats their sentences completely, sometimes even mimicking voices, so it doesn't take much to guess who was talking.

"Not today, Bird. I'm in no mood to listen to folks' gossip."

He knocks on the window with his beak again.

I sigh. "What do you want?"

"Smash. Smash. Smash Roberts," he keeps repeating, nodding his head.

I rush toward the window, shooshing him away. "Go away. You'll start another damn rumor with your smashing Mrs. Roberts."

He flips his wings and takes off. When I pass Jennica's office, her cheeks are red from silent laughter. I send her a stink-eye and go outside, ignoring the silent questions sent my way.

I decide to take the car. I could walk, sure, but then I'd have to talk to people who would stop me every ten feet, and I'm in no mood for that. A few minutes later, I park next to Town Hall.

Another minute later, I'm standing in front of Mrs. Roberts, who's sitting in her chair with raised brows over her blue-rimmed glasses.

"How can I help you, Sheriff Benson?" She sounds utterly pleased with herself.

"You know well enough how you can help me." I make my voice stern. "You can't make Josie jump through hoops because of your pettiness."

"And you know all about pettiness, don't you?" She leans back and fixes her glasses with a finger. "How about my niece, who went on a date with you, but you never called back? Not even once. And then you bring that... that *filthy woman* to your house."

I come closer to the damn window separating us, hoping I'm calm enough not to break the fucking thing. "Do not call Josie filthy. Or anything else other than Ms. Monroe."

She smiles, but I keep staring until her smile dies down. Another minute passes, and my teeth are almost ground to a pulp while her forehead begins sweating.

"You didn't call my niece back," she squeaks. "Are you too good for her now when you got yourself a city girl?"

The vein in my temple starts pulsating. “I didn’t call your niece because she reports everything back to you, and you report everything back to my mother. And I don’t need my mother to know all the ways I like to fuck.”

She rears back, clutching her hand to her imaginary pearls in horror. “That woman made you a bad man, Kenny. Your mother would never approve of such a filthy mouth.”

I point at the stack of papers where I see Josie’s application sitting on top. “Make sure everyone puts a stamp on it by Monday, or I’ll make sure that you never get your morning coffee in peace.” I press two fingers to my temple. “Have a good day, Mrs. Roberts.”

Walking outside, I take a lungful of fresh air—I don’t remember feeling so fucking good for a long time. Until my phone rings. The caller ID says *Justin*. I pick it up.

After a quick talk, I feel even better.

Tonight is the night.

The night I’ll finally get rid of these memories of Josie’s ass in the air.

I walk down to the bar in the familiar setting. A poorly paved street between two brick buildings with bright neon lights. I get let in by the same bouncer I’ve been seeing here for the past three years when I used to visit and then head down the narrow stairs.

The blaze of loud music envelopes me in a buzzing cocoon when I open the door. I wince, completely forgetting how loud it can be—staying too long in a small town teaches one to appreciate the quiet. I barrel through the discomfort toward the bar and motion for the pretty bartender to get me a beer.

While she busies herself pouring my drink, I watch her movements. They’re precise. Efficient. And I find them lacking.

What the actual fuck? When have I ever found order lacking?

I slightly shake my head like a madman trying to get rid of an unwanted memory and force myself to stare at her ass. It’s good. Perky. Firm. Might be too firm.

It lacks roundness to it. A softness for my hands to grab onto.

She comes back, places a full, foamy glass in front of me, and leans

closer, trying to talk over the loud music. “Need something else?”

Her tone is totally suggestive, but I’m too far gone on my quest to be strayed from it. “No, ma’am. But I appreciate the offer.”

Giving her a flirty wink to smooth out the rejection, I pick up my beer and take a sip.

... And nearly spit it out because I’ve clearly gone insane. There, right there, swirling with her loose black curls, can’t be Josie. Because she is *not* the same Josie I’m used to seeing around town, with long skirts and dresses and stylish blouses from the sixties. The thing is I knew she was going to be here, but I wasn’t prepared to see her looking like *that*.

I blink a few times and squeeze my eyes shut for a second, knowing that when I open them, Josie will be gone because she’s clearly the product of my feverish imagination.

But she’s not. She’s still there. Wearing a short, black, sleeveless dress that hugs her body like a tight glove, showcasing the goods on the top and on the bottom *at the same time*, and my poor eyes don’t know where to focus. Her red shoes have red soles, and they flash every time she jumps. Her curls are wild and free, not like I’m used to seeing in her creative hairdos. I’m not even sure it was that wild after I fucked her on the table.

Damn it, it means the fuck for her wasn’t as good as I expected because no self-respecting sex can leave a woman’s hair the same way as before it started. And right there and then, I vow to myself that if the stars align again for us to fuck, she will not be able to walk after because her knees will turn into jelly. Her eyes will be hooded, and her lips swollen.

And just like that, my cock is obviously straining my jeans, pushing on the zipper, wanting to get to her pussy. Because *it* clearly packs some magic if she is all I can think about day and night. We haven’t even spent that much time together if I don’t count the bickering.

In the meantime, while I’m daydreaming about Josie’s pussy, she’s progressively getting more drunk. I watch her walk, or more like saunter to the bar without a care in the world, not noticing all the hot stares she’s getting from every man around. Once she reaches her destination, she leans her front on the counter for everyone to see. Then she enthusiastically waves to the same bartender who flirted with me, but she laughs and bumps another bartender’s shoulder to serve her. A male bartender.

While Josie is busy picking lime pieces from the glass in front of her and arranging them in some sort of a flower on a napkin, the asshole places his

hands on the counter and spreads his arms wide, trying to appear larger like a fucking baboon during mating games. He says something to Josie, who throws her head back and laughs like it's the funniest thing in the world. Even from here, I see the asshole's eyes hood over as they dip in her cleavage, and he enters the dreamland where he *allows* himself to undress her.

She points at something behind his back. He turns around, grabs a bottle, and comes back. He has two shot glasses. Tequila. The universal leg spreader. I know it, and he knows it. *Fucker*.

He pours two shots, nudges her to take one, and they both down it after clinking.

My right eye starts ticking.

His hands on the counter slowly crawl toward her. Inch by inch. While she's laughing at his stupid jokes. She smacks the counter with her palm, throwing her head back again at something clearly *very hilario*—

“Hey,” someone yells into my ear.

I turn around toward the voice—Leila, with a shit-eating grin on her face, is standing before my very eyes.

I nervously look around. “What the hell are you doing here?” I knew Josie wasn't here alone, but Leila? I didn't suspect this one coming.

“We're having a girls' night out.” She shrugs while her smile spreads wider.

“Here?” I feel my eyebrows creeping up my forehead while I do a quick assessment of her clothes—I don't need to fend off any fuckers who look at my baby sister's body. Her decent clothing makes my pulse calm down a bit.

“Yeah.” Another shrug. “Why?”

“You're engaged!” I sound outraged even to my own ears.

“And what?” She snorts like she used to do when she was a kid when she wanted to spray water out of her nose—I bet she doesn't do it in front of Archie. “I'm dancing.”

“You're pregnant!” I feel my pulse skyrocketing.

“And what?” She snorts. “I'm not sick.”

“Yeah, but—” I look down at her stomach, swallowing nervously. “But the sound... It will hurt the baby.”

She laughs, smacking me on the shoulder. “Ken, you're such a softie. You'll be a great uncle.”

I will be an uncle. Twice. Once Freya gives birth, I'll have to be more

responsible because I can't be a bad uncle. I gotta be the best. But Leila? Leila's kid is like my own. I saw her grow up. I changed her diapers. And now she'll be a mom, and I'll be changing her baby's diapers since I won't have any of my own.

And for the first time, I don't feel so good about it.

"Oh, Kenneth," she says with soft eyes, and then they instantly change as she looks back at the dance floor where Kayla is jumping like a mountain goat with Alicia, who seems very comfortable to be in this crowd. I narrow my eyes, not believing she can be this free, and scan my surroundings. Sure enough, I find Mark lurking nearby, nursing a glass of something I assume is water. He doesn't see my stare—all his attention is focused on the girls and the crowd around them.

"Does she know Mark's here?" I ask, meaning Alicia.

"Duh." She smiles. "Like they can be separated from each other for an hour. When he heard where we were going, we barely talked him out of bringing Ghost." She refers to their German shepherd, who adores Alicia maybe even more than Mark. "But he's good. He's just worried, you know."

I nod because I do. With Alicia's history, it's no wonder Mark is overprotective. Which brings me to a valid question.

"Where's Archie?" Because I'll never believe that possessive motherfucker let her go to a popular local hook-up place.

She rolls her eyes, groaning so loudly I'm sure I can hear it through the music. "He agreed not to come if Mark would be here." Then she adds with a chuckle, "But I'm pretty sure I saw Justin's truck outside, so I suspect Archie might be there too."

I laugh at that because it sure seems like a possibility. Justin is Kayla's forever fiancé, but he's obsessed with her. And Justin knows this place, hence his phone call to me. There is no way he let her come here without checking multiple times to make sure it's safe. This place is not dangerous per se, but it can be. Any place can be, especially where alcohol is served, so I don't blame the men wanting to keep an eye on their better halves.

"What are you doing here then?" I ask, confused. "You all are taken, and this is the singles spot."

"Not all," she says suggestively and glances back.

"What?" I play dumb.

"We're here to get Josie laid. She sure needs it."

I watch my evil sister watch my face change. Her smile spreads wider,

and now she reminds me of the Cheshire Cat with all her teeth.

“What the fuck?”

“What happened?” Her eyes go round. “Is something wrong?”

“You can’t just go around and make people get laid!” I yell at my sister that I don’t like very much right now.

“Don’t get your panties in a twist—she’s a grown woman.” She bumps her fist on my arm and smiles again. “Plus, she’s been under a lot of stress lately.”

“What stress?” I click the bait.

“You know, with breaking up with her boyfriend, being jobless and homeless. And all the hell the town has been giving her.” She clicks her tongue, shaking her head.

“The hell?” I feel my brows drawing together.

“Not my story to tell.” She raises her hands in a surrendering gesture.

“Leila!” I growl.

She just smiles. “What are you doing here, by the way?” I level her with a stare, and she laughs. “Right. Well,” her little fist bumps my shoulder again, “good luck!”

With that, she departs toward her party. I’ve been keeping Josie in my periphery the whole time while she was walking from the bar back to her dancing buddies. And while I was talking to Leila, one of her buddies somehow grew a foot taller. And that fucking buddy is holding her waist, pulling her closer to him.

When he presses his thigh between her legs, I’m on my feet.

I can’t see what’s happening from behind the people, but I’m there in two seconds flat. It’s enough time for her to show real struggle, trying to get rid of him. No one from her party is suddenly in sight.

His hands move lower toward her butt when she tries pushing on his chest. Her face is pinched with anger and determination.

Without thinking, I grab him by the back of his neck and pry him away from her. He stumbles back and blinks at me.

“What the fuck, man?”

I step into his space, my face in front of his. “Get the fuck outta here,” I hiss.

“The hell?” He looks confused. “I was here first.”

I move even closer. Finding his eyes, I hold them with a meaning he can’t misinterpret. “Get. The fuck. Out.”

“But she was—”

I grab the front of his shirt. “One more word out of your mouth.”

“She’s here for what we all are!” he cries out, not getting the clue.

I feel something clicking at the back of my head. My vision clouds, and I release his shirt, take a step backward so I can have a longer range when two small hands wrap around my bicep.

“Yep, we’re leaving.”

I turn toward the sound and find Josie holding me in her iron grip, surprisingly strong for such a small creature.

“We are not,” I hiss back.

“He’s right. Everyone comes here to hook up. Not a big deal.” She pulls on my arm, but I hold still. The fucker clearly has zero self-preservation because he starts talking.

“Yes, man. We all know what we are here for. She’s been shaking her ass for hours in front of my face.”

I lunge at him, but Josie throws all her weight, trying to hold me in place. A large body forms in front of me.

“Chill, Ken.” Mark carefully places both his hands on my shoulders and slightly pushes back. Carefully. He knows not to aggravate. But I struggle nonetheless to remove Josie’s grip and go for the asshole who’s still standing without a clue what he did wrong. Fuckers like him need a lesson.

“Ken, look at me,” Mark’s voice calls out to me again, and I finally focus on his face. “I know you want to kill him right now but *trust me*,” he accentuates the words, reminding me about why he is here with Alicia, “this is not the situation where you want to get really dirty.”

“I’ll just teach him a lesson,” I try reasoning quietly for only him to hear.

He shakes his head. “You chose the wrong dude to bullshit to. I know what you want to do, and I’m telling you, if I knew you’d react like that, I’d have been here first. But I gave you the courtesy to deal with your woman’s trouble.”

Your woman, he said. *My woman*.

I meet his eyes head-on, seeing the fucking meddling of everyone around me. A tiny guilty wince is everything I need to know.

A tug on my arm brings me back from smashing my fist into Mark’s face. Turning toward it, I find Josie still holding me in her iron grip. Her forehead is sweaty. Her eyes are big and confused. With mascara smudges under them, she still looks so freaking beautiful.

Her painted red lips are perfect though, not a single smudge. *Good, no one got there yet.*

I ease a little, but the fucker behind Mark's back says something that I can't hear. Mark's jaw sets, and I figure it's not good. He turns toward the guy who quickly scatters away before Mark makes a full turn.

I glance at Josie—I don't think she took her eyes off my face the whole time.

"Are you okay?" I ask in a quieter voice, hoping she'll hear me.

"Yes, I'm okay," she replies softly. "But he's right, you know. I was being suggestive, so it's not really his fault."

"For fuck's sake, Josie!" I blow up. "You're allowed to say 'no' if you change your mind, and he'd better get the fucking clue! It's your fucking right as a woman. As a person."

She swallows hard and nods silently, still looking guilty for no reason.

"Ken," Mark calls out.

I glance at him.

"Justin is outside. We'll take everyone back home. You good here?" He slightly nods at Josie.

"Yeah, go. Thanks."

"Sure." He nods and walks toward the bar where Alicia is struggling to hold onto Leila and Kayla. Both with pinched, angry faces and determined movements. My sister is a little warrior. I bet she went on a warpath when she saw what was happening. And Kayla grew up in a tough neighborhood, fighting for her life was pretty much her everyday activity, and she's very loyal. So it amazes me how Alicia was able to hold off both of them at the same time. She has the build of an Amazonian, but those two are vicious.

And they are friends. More than just friends at this point, I think. They are a team. I'm sure if Freya wasn't ready to pop any minute now, she'd be here too.

And it looks like they accepted Josie into their small circle. For some unexplainable reason, it makes me happy.

When Alicia meets my eyes, hers narrow, and she gives me a quick nod. Her nostrils are flared, her jaw set tight. Looks like she was also fighting herself to keep from coming to the battlefield.

The situation of them somehow staying out of here and leaving her alone for that moment when the asshole got handsy seems a bit too... rehearsed.

I look down at the woman who's still holding my arm with both of her

hands.

“Why are you here, Josie?”

She swallows. “I came here because Alicia asked me to come with them. I didn’t want to, but when I came here, it felt so good just to dance, you know.”

The fuckers set it all up.

“You said you were dancing suggestively. What did you mean?” I lean closer. “Did you want someone to come and get you?”

She lowers her eyes for a second before raising them back up at me. “Yes,” she mouths, and my heart drops into my stomach. The acid of rejection rises up, making my eye tick. “You,” she adds after a few seconds.

“What?”

“I saw you at the bar,” she says while chewing on her lip. “And then you were flirting with the bartender. And *winking* at her.” A sniffle. “I just wanted, I dunno,” a shrug and another sniffle, “for you to get jealous or something. To notice me here.”

“So you shook your ass for me?”

She nods, and I let out a relieved laughter. “Do you want to go home?” I ask.

She shakes her head.

“Want to dance a bit?”

A shy nod.

I gently place my hand on her waist and pull her toward me. I let her decide how close she wants to be. And when Josie places both her hands on the front of my shoulders, I let my other arm slip around her back and relax.

Her hands seem relaxed, while her body is anything but. I lean a bit closer to her ear so she can hear me. “Are you okay?”

She chews on her lips, again not smudging that damn red lipstick even a bit, and finally says, “I was wrong about you, Kenneth.”

“How so?” I ask curiously.

“You don’t have a hero complex.”

I smirk at her declaration—wasn’t this exactly what I was trying to explain to her? I’m about to remind her about that, but she’s not done talking.

“You actually are a hero.”

I choke on the words that were about to come out of my mouth while she inches herself closer and presses her cheek between my pecs. I let my arms roam free and pull her tighter into my embrace. We’re moving in slow

motion, which is totally opposite from the crazy beat currently playing. And while everyone around us is jumping and waving their hands, we're slowly swaying from side to side, locked in our own comfortable world.

Her ear is right next to my heart, and I bet she can hear my erratic heartbeat. And it's not only because it's responding to the wild beat. It's responding to her. To her body pressing into mine. To her even breathing next to my chest. To her smell.

I look up, cursing the situation and her for becoming my weakness and the catalyst that is slowly changing me. I give up on fighting it and drop my head down, burying my nose into her hair. She smells like secrets, addiction, and madness. She smells like a woman.

Josie moves her hands under my arms and to my lower back, where she pushes her fingers under my belt and finally relaxes. I feel her whole body giving in as I feel her weight in my arms. I like it. I like the feel of it. I like holding a woman just because it feels good and not only because it will lead to sweaty bodies tangled in the sheets.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

KENNETH

We spend a long time like that, just holding each other. Onto each other. I like having her in my arms and judging by the way her body relaxes and leans into me, she enjoys it too.

“I’m *hmmmm*,” she mumbles something incoherent into my chest, and I pull away a bit.

“What?”

“I’m hungry.” She looks so annoyed it almost makes me laugh.

“We can go grab a bite if you want. Something must be open still.”

She mumbles something else.

“What?”

She mumbles again, but I don’t understand, so I repeat, “What?”

“I’m also horny! When you’re holding me with all your big muscles and all that,” she yells louder into my face so I can hear.

And I do. Hear, I mean. Swallowing a nervous lump in my throat, I look around to make sure no one else heard her. False alarm since everyone around us is busy grinding onto each other or getting lost in the music.

“And all of that,” she steps away from my embrace and waves her red-tipped finger around my torso, “doesn’t help the situation.”

“What doesn’t help?” I narrow my eyes.

“You know, your huge body and super strong arms,” she replies, rolling

her eyes, and I can barely choke back the laughter. She's probably only leaning on me because she's drunk. "Holding me so *tenderly*." She says the word as if it personally offends her. "All that doesn't help, ya know."

"I know," I grit through my teeth and grab her hand. "Let's go."

"Where?" she asks loudly but doesn't struggle against my hold.

"We'll grab a bite and get you some water." I have to keep leaning down to her ear due to our height difference, even with her heels, so she can hear me. But I don't complain because I like her smell. I like how her body shivers when I accidentally graze her skin with my lips when I lean too close.

"Alright." She shrugs and spreads her fingers to lace them with mine.

My heart skips a beat, but the moment I realize how much she trusts me, my determination to get her out of here settles in. Determination to make sure no one touches her tonight while she's intoxicated. Including me. No matter how much I want to.

No one touches her ever. Period.

When we're finally outside, free of the drunk and sweaty crowd, she takes a full breath and moves to my side. Her arms wrap around my forearm as she presses her cheek to my shoulder. She seems... content. I feel the same.

Freeing my arm out of her grip, I put it around her shoulder and pull her into my side. "My car's there. Let's go."

"Should you be driving?" She snuffles and wipes her nose. "You know, drunk."

I glance down and find her with a tilted-up-to-me head. "I was planning on staying in the city and taking an Uber to the hotel," I don't add the part about doing it with someone else, but my mind was changed the second I hugged her, "but I haven't even finished my beer."

Her forehead wrinkles in concentration. "So you're not drunk?"

"No, Josie. I am not."

She presses her lips tight, and I don't know if it's a good or a bad thing because I never know what she's thinking about. "Weird."

I snort and walk her to my truck, where I open the passenger side and gesture for her to get inside because I don't trust myself around her anymore. Much.

She puts her heeled foot on the running board and pushes herself up. She falls forward when she reaches the seat, throwing both hands in front of her. She lands with her elbows pressed into the seat and her ass up in the air. Her

ass in a tight short dress. It rises up her juicy behind, leaving exactly zero to my imagination. Her black lacy panties wink at me from under the hem of her ridden dress. Plus, I already have a vague idea of how it all looks—and *feels*—so the situation's becoming painful with every passing second.

I look up at the sky and groan, asking for stronger willpower because she's testing it like no one ever has, and I absolutely cannot fuck her on the street while she's intoxicated. The more I repeat it to myself, the more I'll believe it.

A loud giggle escapes from her painted-red lips while she's trying to climb inside. I firmly place my hands on the door, so I don't do something stupid like grab her waist and help her inside just so I can get another feel of her like some sicko. My hands anywhere near her right now would be very dangerous.

When she's situated inside, I shut the door, groan at the sky again, and walk around the truck to my seat. Once I'm firmly in my seat, Josie ditches her shoes and brings the soles of her feet up. She hugs her legs and places her chin on her knees.

I make a quick assessment, ensuring she's buckled up, and shift into gear.

"What do you feel like?" I ask, clearly meaning food since that was the reason we left the bar.

Her head slowly turns to me. She makes a point of raising one sharp brow so high it nearly disappears into the sky.

"Really?" she snickers.

"Food, Josie. Food. What do you feel like eating?" I feel my cheeks reddening.

"Not helping," she replies unimpressed.

"Oh, fuck me," I groan and wipe my face with my hand.

She snorts. "Can I?"

I throw an accusing look at her. "For fuck's sake, Josie." Shifting my left leg to the side, I try to relieve some of this pressure in my pants. "You need to stop."

"Why?" she asks nonchalantly. "I like you squirming."

"Yeah?" I glance at her quickly. "What if I take you up on your offer?"

"Then I get laid." She shrugs. "Give me pistachio ice cream after, and my perfect evening is complete."

"You love pistachio ice cream?" Choosing to verbally ignore her comment about getting laid, I give her a side-eye and turn the car toward the

side of the street, where I notice an open burger joint. Greasy food will do her some good now—maybe it will soak up some of that alcohol she consumed and let her have a clearer head.

“Don’t judge my taste, and I won’t judge your vanilla.” Her hand comes in front of my face, and her finger pokes me on the nose. She giggles and retreats back, leaving me with a weird feeling deep in my chest.

And how does she know my favorite ice cream flavor is vanilla?

I have to drive past the joint because every single parking spot is taken. It’s a busy street, but I didn’t know it was this busy late in the evening.

She puts her shoes back on and pulls on the door, aiming to jump. I rush to her side, annoyed that she doesn’t let me be a gentleman even for a moment.

But to my surprise, she does. When I reach her door, she’s still sitting on the seat with her feet swinging from the height.

“Do you think I’ll break a leg if I jump down?” She lets out an inappropriate giggle.

“Let’s not find out.” I walk up to her, carefully place my hands on her waist, and lift her up. Her hands end up on my shoulders.

Even when I put her down on the ground.

“Josie.” My voice turns pleading.

“What?” She looks up.

“Don’t do that.” I’m not above begging right now since I need all the help I can get, from her included.

“Don’t do what?” Her long lashes form shadows on her cheeks as her eyes dip to my mouth.

I swallow. “Do this thing you do with your hands, you know.”

She instantly pulls her hands away, looking scared. “I’m sorry, Kenneth, I didn’t know you don’t like being touched.”

I sigh. “I do, Josie. A little bit too much.”

A look of understanding glazes over her eyes for a second, but then it’s replaced with her signature cheeky smile. She lightly smacks my shoulder and heads toward the restaurant.

The moment we get inside, I understand how stupid my idea to come here really was. Should have gone to some drive-through where no one would see her in the security of the darkness of my truck. Because every single pair of male eyes is on the woman next to me. *My woman.*

I place my hand on her lower back and send threatening looks at every

single motherfucker who doesn't get the message. A few drop their eyes back to whatever they are doing, but some don't. I squeeze my hand in a fist, itching to smack their faces. One particularly dumb asshole can't take his eyes off Josie's ass. I follow his eyes and find her dress ridden a bit up. I lean toward her bottom and pull the hem of her dress down.

"What are you doing?" Her head whips around as she asks me, but I ignore her because my eyes are focused on the motherfucker who dared to stare. Once he sees me being so familiar with her and my hands on her ass, his eyes rise to mine for a moment before they return back to his buddies at the table. *That's right, asshole, she's with me.*

I feel a bit better.

"Kenneth?" she calls out again, sounding a bit confused, but I just slightly nod my head, hoping she'll drop it. She's a smart woman because she watched my face for a few seconds before sliding her small hand into mine. I glance at our interconnected fingers and take a deep breath. "Better now?"

I nod. "Let's eat." I pull her with me toward the bar.

"Hey." I wave at the bartender. Once he comes to us, I ask, "Do you have a table available somewhere?"

"We have a few empty bar chairs over there." He points to the side. "That's about it."

I look at the chair, which is too high. I imagine how her legs will be on full display for everyone to enjoy, so I decide that going home is probably the better idea. But she doesn't hear said idea because she's already dragging me by my hand toward the spot the bartender pointed at. When she climbs on the top of it and crosses her legs, I clench my jaw so tight, I'm sure a couple of my teeth crack.

I take the other chair, still grinding my teeth.

Once she leans on the counter and waves for the bartender, my blood pressure skyrockets. And it reaches its peak when he starts talking to her tits rather than her face. I place my hand in front of her and start tapping my fingers on the wood. That sure draws his attention. He gives me a sly smile and finally moves his eyes up to her face.

How does every single human with a dick want to play on my nerves today? It's like the universe decided to see how far it could push me.

In the meantime, I hear her ordering us two burgers with fries. She didn't even ask what I wanted, and to my surprise, I don't fucking care. She can order what she wants for me—I couldn't care less as long as she covers her

tits.

The bartender's eyes keep dipping down, and by the time he leaves, my breathing comes out in angry puffs. I grab the hem of my jersey shirt and pull it off with one move, staying in the thin T-shirt I had underneath.

Her eyes go wide.

I push the shirt at her. "Put it on."

"W-why?" she stumbles, still looking confused.

"It's cold." I keep holding it outstretched.

"I'm actually hot."

I hear a snicker behind me, and I don't need to turn around to know it's one of the fuckers enjoying the show.

"For fuck's sake, Josie," I hiss as I push the piece of material into her hands, "just put the goddamn shirt on."

She carefully takes it from my hands and pulls it on top of her dress. Once she's covered, I feel so much better. I can breathe.

I don't know what the fuck this fit was, but I've never felt such a violent gust of jealousy. I've always been a very territorial man, but this is a new level even for me.

She pulls her hair from under the collar and rolls her sleeves up since they are too long on her.

"Do you feel better now?" she asks with a raised brow.

I nod, not denying the truth. However she'll see it.

"I like your exposed arms better this way too." Her shy smile tells me it was said to my benefit, so I weakly smile back.

The bartender returns with two glasses of water and places them in front of us with an obvious smirk. I bet he's enjoying my misery too.

With a grunt, I grab the glass and down half of it, thankful the water is iced. A heavy stare focused on me nearly makes me choke, but I swallow slowly and place it back on the counter. Josie's watching me from under her long lashes—from the look on her face, I can tell she wants to talk about it, but she's contemplating. I give her a slight nod, and her shoulders sag. Not with sadness but with relief. I guess she's not in the mood for big revelations either.

Once I'm able to breathe and be myself again, I look her over. Drowning in my shirt, biting her lower lip, with all that wild hair, and tugging on the hems of the sleeves so they cover her hands, she looks like the very thing I didn't know I've been missing.

“Everyone left,” she says in a small voice.

“Yes.”

My confirmation somehow brings her mood down. “That happens to me all the time.”

“Wait.” I tilt my head to the side. “Do you think they all just up and left you?”

She shrugs, not confirming. But it’s not really needed because her crestfallen face says it all.

“Josie,” I place my hand on her naked knee, feeling the warmth of her skin, “they left because I was there. It was a setup.”

Her forehead wrinkles in concentration, trying to put two and two together without success.

“They were playing matchmaker,” I explain with a sigh. Her eyes go round. “Yes, they were. As for the asshole who tried assaulting you, I saw Alicia holding Kayla and Leila so they wouldn’t chop his balls off. A couple more seconds, and someone would have had to hold Alicia too. To think of it, they probably should have been set free since I wasn’t allowed to act.” Her face begins brightening, so I keep going. “They’d never leave you there alone. Never. You’re one of us.”

“Of you?” she repeats in a small voice, making my chest ache.

“Of us.”

The bartender picks this time to bring the food. Placing it in front of us with a quirked brow, he asks, “Anything else?”

“No, thank you,” Josie replies for us both because I choose to ignore him.

We dig into our food in silence. It’s a strangely comfortable atmosphere, and I let myself relax. Until she tells me she needs to go to the bathroom.

“No,” comes my response.

She looks at me dumbfounded. “What do you mean ‘no’?”

“No, you can’t go there because this place is shady.”

“Do you want me to pee right here?” She nods at the floor beside us.

“Can you wait?”

“No!” She sounds outraged and rises to her feet. “Damn men with their misunderstood perception of the female bladder.” Flicking her hair back, she sends me an accusing glare and waltzes toward the bathroom. I take my wallet out, drop the cash—*with* the tip—on the table, and follow her. When she disappears inside the unisex bathroom for one person, I lean against the wall by the door and wait.

And wait.

And wait.

How long does it take a woman to pee?

And then I hear a muffled sob. I put my ear to the door and hear another one.

“Josie,” I call out. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” A loud sniffle. “Give me a minute.”

I lean my forehead on the door. “Open the door.”

“I’ll be out in a second.”

“Open the door, Joz,” I ask tiredly, and she must hear something in my tone because the door cracks open, and I push inside.

In a small space, probably five by five, she leans her back on the wall opposite from the door. Her mascara is smudged even more, and dark streaks flow down her red cheeks. She’s wiping them away with zero results because her nose is running too, and her face is just a red, snotty mess.

A week ago, I’d be running for the hills if I saw someone looking like this because I wouldn’t know what to do, but I have the strongest desire to stay and learn how to comfort her.

I lean on the locked door and ask carefully, “What happened?”

She wipes her nose with the sleeve of my shirt she’s wearing and looks up from under her wet lashes. “Nothing really. Just feeling a bit sorry for myself.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” I probe gently because I’m just learning how to deal with emotional women. When my sister used to cry coming back from school, my initial reaction was to smash the noses of her offenders. When my mom cried when our father cheated on her, I smashed his nose. Well, I tried since I wasn’t big enough to do any real damage. Somehow, I don’t think I can smash someone’s nose in this situation because it feels like all the offenders in this case are living in her head.

“Not really.” She looks to the side.

“Okay,” I agree easily, scared to step on the wrong eggshell.

I must have done the right thing because she looks at me, chewing on her lip, and then decides to talk. “It’s just being here, with all of you, and seeing how real family and friends should work makes me realize how little I have.”

“You don’t have family?” To think of it, I know nothing about her. Not where she comes from. Not where her family is or even if she has one. Who are her friends besides our townsfolk?

“I do.” Her sigh is full of pain. “But it’s a long story.”

“Okay. You’ve got family. You’ve got friends. Many friends from what I’ve seen today.” She lifts her eyes at my words. “What? It’s a lot of friends, and every single one of them is mighty.”

“They are.” A beautiful smile of quiet happiness slowly spreads across her face.

“You’ve got me.”

“In what capacity?”

“I don’t know yet.” A slight shrug. “Do you?”

She shakes her head with a loud snuffle. “I’m not staying in Little Hope forever, you know.”

“I know.” I nod, suddenly feeling nauseous. “You have a project.”

“Yes.”

“Alright.”

“Kenneth?” Her voice drops an octave.

“Mmm?”

She lifts those big eyes of hers at me. “I’m still horny.”

I look at the ceiling and groan. “Fucking minx.”

Closing the distance separating us with one step, I cover her mouth with mine. She parts her lips with a clear invitation, her hands dig into the muscles on my shoulders.

“Ken,” she breathes out my name, making me harder than any blow job ever would.

I grab her ass into my hands and lift her up. Pressing her back into the wall, I hold her with my hands while my body’s firmly pushed into hers. In this position, she’s forced to spread her legs, and my cock presses into her heated pussy. It’s so fucking hot, I can feel it through my jeans.

Once she feels how hard I am, she starts wiggling her ass so her pussy slides over my jeans-clad front, making me moan into her mouth. She digs her nails into the back of my neck and presses the heels of her shoes into my ass, nudging me to move. I gladly oblige and start moving my hips forward. With every thrust, she gasps. After a few moments, she stops kissing me back and just leans her back on the wall behind her, her mouth slightly ajar.

“You like that, Josephina. Don’t you?” I whisper into her ear, and she shudders. “You like riding my body to get you off?”

She doesn’t respond, so I whisper louder this time. “You need to answer me if you want to come.” I slow down my movements. “Do you want to

come, Josie?”

“Yes,” she moans and slams her head on the wall. “Fuck, Sheriff, I want to come. Make me fuckin’ come.”

She just called me *Sheriff*. From anyone else, I’d say they’re just revisiting one of their fantasies, but when it’s coming from her, the fantasy is actually mine. I didn’t know I wanted to hear her say that when she is on the verge of an orgasm, but turns out I do. At this point, being Sheriff apparently has become a part of my identity.

“Make me come,” she whimpers. And I oblige.

Moving one of my hands from her ass to the front of her throat, I wrap it over the base of her sweaty neck. I want to lick these droplets so badly, but it will divert me from my main goal—making her come. Once my hand fully settles on her throat, her eyes open wide. They’re wary and focused on my face.

“Do you trust me?” I rasp.

After a short period, she nods. Somehow, it makes my heart sing. I get a better grip on her ass and slowly start moving her up and down my body, making sure my cock aligns with her clit every time she comes down. All the while slowly and gently pushing on the front of her throat. She gasps for air, and I release my hold a bit, finding the right pressure point for her.

A few seconds pass before she completely relaxes. Her cheeks pinken, and a light sheen of sweat covers her forehead. She keeps biting her lower lip while I keep pumping her up and down my body, not even feeling the straining of my own muscles.

When her thighs squeeze my torso harder, and her breathing loses the steady rhythm, I know she’s close.

“I see how much you like to be dominated. Just like I knew you would,” I hiss, barely able to not finish in my pants without even letting my dick touch skin. “You can be a good girl and come for me now.”

Her mouth falls open just as her eyes close. I press a little harder on her neck and speed up her body movements with my hand on her ass, and just as I instructed, she falls apart. Her mouth opens in a silent moan, her hips jerk over mine while her nails dig into the back of my neck.

“That’s good. Ride that high,” I encourage her movements while she chases the last wave of her orgasm.

At this point, I’m not sure how I am still standing and how my balls are still full. I must admit, I’m proud of myself. The pain in my straining dick

might disagree with me, but Josie's satisfied face is totally worth it.

I gently lower her on the floor and take a step back, enjoying the view of her flushed skin, wild hair, and... fucking red lipstick that stayed on. What the fuck does it take to smudge it off? I vow to myself right here and now that I'll find some way—some activity—that will make it come off. Because when it stays on, untouched, I feel like I didn't do a good job. Like the mission failed. Despite her shaky legs, the damn thing didn't budge. A good kiss should wipe that off, right? Why is it still on then?

Josie looks down at my pants, clears her throat, and says in a hoarse voice. "I think you need help with that."

"I so fucking do." My laughter is forced. "But not here, in the dirty bathroom of a shitty bar. We're going home."

"Home?" she asks with a bitter laugh. "Where is that?"

"Where we make it," I reply simply, stunning her into silence. I offer my hand to her, and she takes it without any hesitation. "Let's go."

When we leave the bathroom and come to the bar, everyone knows what we were doing there. Despite me trying to fix Josie's clothes to the best of my abilities, which was not a lot considering my own shaky movements and straining cock.

I make a point to look at every single motherfucker who dares give Josie a hungry eye. Or worse—an accusing one. And sure as hell, a few eyes lingering on her ass and knowing smirks make us switch roles. Somewhere in the middle of our path outside, Josie starts dragging me toward the exit while I bunch like a bull. I hate assholes like them, thinking that if a woman makes out with a man, it automatically makes her a whore, and she deserves treatment as such. I don't tolerate assumptions like that, especially if they are made toward my woman.

My woman?

When did Josie truly become my woman in my mind? At some point, I started thinking of her as one, and it became a habit.

"C'mon, Ken," she hisses when I stop to stare at one particularly difficult observant. The very same one who stared at her ass when we first came in. He is a few beers in and in the mood for a brawl. So am I. This is not my town, and I am not a sheriff here, which unties my hands. Defending the honor of my woman will not make me a bad guy, it will just make me a normal one.

"Kenneth!" she raises her voice, and this time I'm able to shift my

attention toward her. “Let’s go.” Her eyes are pleading. Only now do I take the situation all in—she’s wearing high heels and my shirt that covers her ass more than her dress does, her hair is wild, her eyes are a bit lost. She’s in a room full of horny assholes—myself included—and she doesn’t need the situation to get worse. She just wants out of here.

I give her a short nod and move forward.

Once we are outside, I steer us toward my truck parked on the side street. My strides are fast, and, for a moment, I forget she can’t keep up.

“Wait.” When I don’t respond, she pulls on my hands and calls out in a louder voice, “Ken, wait.”

“What?” I grunt without turning back.

“I can’t run in these heels. Can we slow down a bit?”

This time, I stop and turn toward her. “No, we fuckin’ can’t. Because if we do, I won’t be able to force myself to keep walking to the truck. Instead, I’ll go back and smash every motherfucker’s face for looking at you the way they did,” I hiss, barely recognizing myself.

“Ken,” my name on her lips is a whisper. “It’s okay.” Her eyes are wide with confusion.

“It’s not.”

With that, I bend in my middle, press my shoulder, and hoist her body on my shoulder.

“Ken!” she squeaks, but I can’t answer. Not now. I’m too focused on getting the hell out of here before making her embarrassed to be seen with me.

“Kenneth, put me down!” she cries out.

I smack her ass with my hand. “Be quiet, Josie.”

“Kenneth!” a squeak.

“I said quiet.” I smack her bottom again, harder this time.

Even in this position, I hear her breathing quickening. *Interesting.*

“My ass is almost naked,” she mumbles, calming down.

Right. Can’t share the goods. I pull on the hem of her dress, but it covers very little. So I pull on the hem of my shirt she’s wearing with the same result.

“Fuck,” I mumble and spread my hand over her ass. Despite her backside being very juicy, my hand is fucking huge, and it covers the top of her thighs along with the bottom of her ass.

I get a few snickers I’m trying very hard to ignore as I pass the people on

the street.

And I can say I've never been happier to be back in my truck.

Or more disappointed. Because on the one hand, the stares and laughs stop, but on the other hand, I have to let go of Josie. And she seemed to fit so well thrown over my shoulder with her ass near my face. I wanted to bite it so badly, but it'd totally go past appropriate and might not go well with the general public. I sure as fuck would have asked a woman if I saw one on the street being thrown over a man's shoulder if she's enjoying being there of her own will. Not even one motherfucker did, and it makes me lose a little bit more faith in humanity. Meaning I have to level up and compensate for that by being a better fucking man and a cop to society.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

JOSIE

His beastly hand on my ass feels oddly safe. It's so big, it covers half of my bottom and then some. It was hilarious how he tried pulling on the dress and then on his shirt that he lent me. The skimpy thing I picked with the sole purpose of hopefully drawing his attention at Freya's cabin barely covers anything when I'm standing, and it covers almost zero when my ass is in the air. I love attention, and I am not going to apologize for it.

Speaking of asses. I must admit, the view from here is spectacular. His butt is even bubblier than I imagined, and I wonder if it's as firm as it seems. He thinks I'm drunk, and besides, he suspects I'm cocoo, so he won't hold it against me for trying. I mean, he's hauling me somewhere over his shoulder, so the jury is still out on who is the cocoo one here.

I poke my finger into his ass cheek, expecting some sort of outburst from the man. But none comes. What the hell? I try to angle my head and see if he even felt it. His steady, unwavering strides are a clear indication that he did not, so I poke again. Harder this time. My nail barely sinks in, I'm not even talking about my finger—his butt is really firm. So I try again.

“Will you stop it?” finally comes his gruff voice.

I angle my head so I can see at least his head. “Will you drop me already?”

“Drop you?” He chuckles. “I don't think so.”

The beeping of the car tells me we're near his truck. He opens the door, hauls my body off his shoulders, and pushes me inside. His movements are annoyed but gentle at the same time. Like he'd love to slap my ass again but refrains from doing so for some ethical to him reason.

I don't know why he hesitates—I'd let him.

I sit with my hands under my thighs and wait for him to get inside too. When he climbs in, he starts the engine but doesn't shift gear, and I know something is brewing because the Kenneth I've known always switches gears right away. He doesn't like wasting time.

I turn toward him and wait.

"Josie," he sighs, placing his hands on the wheel at the perfect two-and-ten position. Oh, it's going to be good.

"Yes?" My voice is timid. He's been poked enough for one evening, and there should be a limit for one man.

"I'm sorry for the way I acted there."

"For fuck's sake!" I cry out, throwing my hands in the air, wanting to shake my fists with outrage.

He sends me a questioning look, rearing back a little.

"What? Stop apologizing. Seriously. It pisses me off."

"What does exactly?"

"Your apology." I point my finger at him. "What exactly are you apologizing for?"

"For pressing you to the wall and mauling you in a fucking dirty bathroom of a damn bar! You deserve better." His voice rises, bordering with annoyance.

"That's precisely what I needed though, so stop it." I roll my eyes and stare ahead.

"You wanted to be mauled in a dirty bathroom?"

"Yes!" I turn toward him. "For a moment, I wanted to forget all my problems and just feel, you know. And you make me feel all sorts of things, so no, Kenneth, I am not sorry, so shove your apology up your firm ass." I angrily fold my arms over my chest.

"I make you feel?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "That's all you got from what I said? Typical." I snort.

"So do I?" he repeats the question. "Make you feel."

I drop my guard down, showing a piece of the real me. Of my

vulnerability, something I don't let anyone see.

"You do."

Something sparkles in his eyes but dims the moment I continue.

"But I don't want to feel it."

He swallows hard. "Why?"

"Because I'm not here to stay, I already told you that."

"Why not?"

I sigh and decide to go with the truth despite what he might think of me. "Because I can't confine myself to a small town. And because I need money, Ken. And I can't make it by staying in Little Hope forever because once I'm done fixing Archie's house, I'll have to find another job that pays well."

His eyes turn steely. "What do you need the money for? Are you in trouble?"

I shake my head. "No, I'm not in trouble or on the run or paying off some gambling debt. Nothing like that, but I need the money."

I can tell he wants to pursue the issue, but something—must be the bitchy narrowed eyes—tells him to drop it.

He sighs and leans back in his chair. "I'm not looking for anything either—I've got a lot going on to have my hands full with a new relationship." He lets his voice trail like he's not saying something.

"But the sex was good," I supply hopefully.

He chuckles. "It *was* good."

"I'm not here to stay, and you don't need anything serious." I sum it up.

"What are you saying?" He squints at me.

"I'm saying we can have fun." I shrug my shoulder.

"All women say that and then get attached." His words are supposed to rile me up because they are supposed to be thrown in the face of all womankind, but somehow, they sound so respectful coming from his mouth.

I shake my head, refusing his words. "I just got out of a relationship and don't plan on starting a new one anytime soon."

The air suddenly stiffens. "Oh yeah? How so?"

"Well, he dumped me. So I'm here." I spread my arms with a sad chuckle, withholding some of the truth. He doesn't need to know the whole story.

"Fucking moron," Kenneth snorts and starts tapping on the wheel. I giggle in return.

"Tell me about it."

He keeps tapping his fingers on the leather when he says, “No one can know.”

“Why?” I suddenly feel like a mistress. “Are you ashamed to be seen with me?”

“What?” He sends me a questioning glare. “No! Why would I be? The thing is—” He pauses and chews on his lip. “You’ll leave, and I’ll stay. And if they know about us, I’ll never hear the end of it from my family, who will think I fucked it up somehow and drove you from the town.”

“Why? You are a grown man.”

“Yeah?” He laughs. “You haven’t lived in a small town. You just wait and see.”

I actually have, but I’m not about to go into details about that. And this is one of the major reasons I’m not staying in Little Hope. Ever. In any small town really. I’ve had my share of them, and I’m done. The big city with its anonymousness is my way to go now. Plus, all my stuff is still in storage, and there is no way I’ll get rid of my furniture—I’ve spent hours hunting down those antique pieces, and I don’t see how I could move them somewhere without paying a fortune I don’t have.

“So what are you saying?”

He lets out a forceful breath and looks at me. “I don’t know what I’m saying, Joz, because I don’t know what you want. But I’ll roll with it.”

I dig myself deeper into the seat, bring my knees up, and hug them. Suddenly shy, I glance out the passenger window while asking him, “What were you doing at the club?”

The silence in the car says it all, so I slightly turn my head to look at him.

“Getting laid?”

Somehow, the idea of him being with someone else doesn’t seem so normal anymore. Yes, we have chemistry. Yes, we fucked, and it was good, but he doesn’t belong to me, nor do I belong to him. What do we do?

“You can’t blame me for wanting that when you were there for the same.”

“I don’t,” I whisper. “I don’t blame you.” I shrug lightly as if it doesn’t bother me at all. “I mean, you’re a grown man, and you can do anything you want, you know.”

I stare at the window again, chewing on my lower lip. If I don’t stop it, I’ll bite a piece of it. Forcing myself to relax, I place my open palms on my knees.

“I just don’t necessarily like the idea of it, you know.”

“I know.” His voice sounds gentler. “Let’s not talk about that today. I’ll get you home, and we can talk when you’re sober.”

“I’m sober now.”

His chuckle is tired. “You’re not. Buckle up.”

This time, he waits for me to put the seatbelt on and then shifts into gear.

“Where are we going?”

“Home,” he repeats the same thing he said before. Giving me a side-eye, he asks, “Did you really plan on staying in the city?”

I sigh. “No.”

“What about your plans?” Is it me, or does his voice sound strained? “I mean, how did you plan to do, you know, the thing.”

“The thing?” I ask with a raised brow.

“You know, have,” he swallows loudly, “someone with you.”

I stare ahead and sigh. “I wasn’t planning on it.”

“What?” His head whips toward me, and his voice sounds at least two octaves higher. It’s hilarious really—I didn’t know Kenneth could produce such a high-pitched sound.

“What?” I blink at him while he slows down the car, trying to divert attention between me and the road.

“I know you mentioned you were shaking your ass for me when you saw me, but what about before that? You weren’t planning on finding someone today?”

“No, Kenneth,” I reply, feeling utterly disappointed because we both know that he was planning on it. “I came only because Alicia asked me to come.” I chuckle sadly. “I don’t even have my stuff with me. Mark had our purses. I don’t even have a credit card or a phone on me right now.” I spread my arms as wide as I can to demonstrate the lack of pockets or any other places I could stick a wallet or a phone into. “And they dumped me.” Ken’s face changes as he wants to fix that I misspoke, so I add, “Played matchmakers, if you will.”

His assessing eyes quickly take a sweep over me, and he quiets.

We drive like that for a few minutes, and the mood in the car is dark. Well, my mood makes it dark. I was playing brave and unfeeling when, in reality, his desire to get laid with someone else hit me harder than I anticipated. Meaning he got way deeper under my skin than I wanted him to, so probably it’s time to hurry the hell up with the repairs and move back to

the big city.

I can't say what Ken's thinking because every time I send a quick glance his way, his face remains stoic.

The ride is slowly becoming super uncomfortable, and I wish I'd driven back with Alicia and the guys. I wasn't lying when I said I wasn't planning on finding anyone, and I don't know where he got this idea from, but I've been horny since the moment we had sex—that's true. Because of him. I just don't think anyone would satisfy this hunger I've been having besides him. Apparently, he doesn't feel the same.

Suddenly, a huge lump forms in my throat, and I can't seem to swallow it. My eyes and nose begin itching, and I start vigorously rubbing on them.

At some point, I sniffle.

"Are you okay?" Kenneth's gruff voice sounds concerned.

"Yeah," I reply with a sniffle. "Just allergies."

A moment of silence is followed by his quiet reply, "Okay." And then his large hand covers mine, the very same one that is currently trying to wipe the snot away from my nose. He grips my hand firmly and brings our joint hands onto his thigh. "I knew you were in that club. Justin called me today and said you guys were going. I was there because I didn't want you to leave that place with someone else."

I watch his face, slowly blinking in confusion.

"I went there because I knew every fucker in the room would be all over you," he explains grouchy.

"Why didn't you come with us from the beginning?"

He sighs. "Because you needed a girls' night out."

I snicker, making him laugh. "See how that turned out." I suddenly stop sniffing, and my nose itches less.

His thigh is firm, and so is his grip. My hand is totally swallowed in his. His skin is so much darker and rougher compared to mine, even though I've done a lot of repairs in my life with my own hands and definitely don't lack calluses. You can't be a good designer if you don't get your hands dirty yourself from time to time.

He lets out a loud, defeated sigh and says, "I didn't flirt with the bartender. She offered, but I refused. Politely."

That's all it takes for the itch to completely stop, and a wide smile spreads across my face. I don't ask anything else because I don't know if I'll like the answer. The only thing I know is that Sheriff Benson is too good of a guy to

lie, and if he says he knew I was there, I believe him.

The air in the car is lighter, and I'm totally living my dream right now of driving in a truck and holding hands with the hottest and toughest guy in the state. The only thing missing is a flannel shirt for me and him. And maybe a dog. Yes, definitely a dog.

"Ken," I whisper.

"Yeah?"

"I need to pee." I lower my voice even more.

"Again?" His forehead wrinkles in confusion, and I shoot daggers his way. Understanding his misstep, he instantly adds, "I meant, now? We're in the middle of nowhere."

"Exactly, can't hold it anymore. Can you stop somewhere?" I start tapping my foot on the floor.

He throws a quick glance at my wiggling ass. "Hold on. There is a service road in half a mile. We can stop there."

I don't know if it was half a mile—to me, it felt like ten—but he slows down and turns onto a narrow road. It's not paved and barely visible; I'd totally miss it if I was alone. If this road weren't here, I'd have asked him just to stop on the road and let me pee on the side of it. It's that bad.

Once the truck comes to a full stop, I don't even wait for him and jump out. Obviously, needing to pee so badly gave me the ability not to break my legs while landing in such high heels. What can I say—I'm motivated. Running on the same heels into the woods, I find the first bush and land there.

"Josie?" His voice takes me away from the nirvana I've entered, and it sounds awfully close.

"Go away, Kenneth!" I cry out, embarrassed that he probably just heard the waterfall that's happening.

The sound of retreating footsteps follows a loud chuckle. I relax and finish my business.

When I'm done, I try to run back to the car, but the urgency has passed, and apparently, so has my magical ability to run in the wilderness in heels, so I nearly break my ankles a few times. When I finally reach the door, I find Kenneth leaning against the truck, barely able to contain his laughter.

"You good?" he asks, trying to bite the inside of his cheek like it can prevent him from cracking up.

"I'm good."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

KENNETH

When she comes out from the bushes, not looking any less marvelous than when she entered, I bite my tongue, trying not to smile and be too obvious about liking the picture I'm seeing. Or say something *cute*. Even with a leaf stuck to her wild hair, she looks like a sexy goddess, swaying her hips in those high heels of hers. I went after her just to make sure she wouldn't break her legs, or a bear wouldn't come out of the woods, but her startled cry was hilarious.

I lean my back on the front of my truck, folding my arms over my chest, knowing it will draw her attention since she seems to love my muscles. I've noticed she stares at them every time she thinks I don't see. And on cue, her eyes drop to my biceps when she stumbles on a root on her way. I play my biceps, and her eyes instantly go to mine. Instead of shying away from being caught, she smiles suggestively.

"You know, I'm still horny."

This is my turn to skip a breath. I move from foot to foot while she starts swaying her hips with a larger amplitude, making my eyes lose focus. All this pent-up arousal, her coming on my still jeans-sheathed dick, gave me a very short fuse. Her popping her hip is enough to send me into a frenzy.

While she's slowly moving toward me with a seductive pace, I start sweating. Until she stumbles onto something and starts flailing her arms,

nearly falling forward. I launch toward her, catching her just in time. Helping her up, I get the feel of her body in my arms, and she starts laughing hysterically.

“It went better in my head,” she hiccups, trying to catch her breath.

“It was perfect in reality,” I reply gently, trying not to put down her efforts. I hope she’ll repeat them one day.

I pull away a bit to look at her face. Josie bites her goddamn painted red lip, looking unsure. I take her hand and lead her to the back seat of my truck. When I open the door and gesture for her to go inside, she sends me a questioning look. I nod to her to climb in.

She listens but, in her fashion, ensures I suffer as much as possible. Sticking her ass in the air, she wiggles it. Then, leaning on her elbows forward, she glances at me from under her lashes, making me nearly come into my pants. I lift my hand and give her ass a loud slap.

“Oh!” she cries out, leaning forward. “You just slapped me!”

“Wasn’t that the reason you’re sticking out your gorgeous behind for me?” My voice dips lower.

She narrows her eyes and moves forward, leaving me space to climb after her. I close the door behind me, crack a window open half an inch, and turn toward her.

She’s watching me, biting her lip.

“Take off *my* shirt, Josie.”

She slowly brings her hands to the hem of my shirt on her body and starts pulling it up, revealing that goddamn dress that nearly got me into trouble today. Her hair is tousled like she just spent hours rolling around in bed. The lipstick is on.

“Now, take off your dress,” I order in a jagged voice. My mouth is dry.

“I can’t,” she whispers. “I need help with that.”

“Turn around.” My voice is barely mine. She obeys instantly, and I slowly pull the zipper down, following it with a gentle touch of my finger. Goosebumps instantly cover her smooth skin.

I slowly pull the straps down her shoulders, and she frees her arms away from them. No bra. No fucking bra. I can’t wait to see it from the front.

I lean forward and place a gentle kiss on her shoulder, making her shudder. Leaving a trail of kisses from her shoulder to the side of her neck, I trace the exposed curves with my hands. She bends her neck to the side, giving me full access.

“You taste so fucking good, Josephina.”

A light shiver runs through her body, and she leans her back into me. My hand moves to her front, grazing her tit with my thumb. I keep moving my hand over her smooth flesh, enjoying the softness of her body, so different from mine. I fuckin’ love that.

Cupping her full tit with my palm, I close my mouth on her shoulder and suck, knowing it will leave a hickey. So everyone will know she belongs to someone. Me. She belongs to me for the time being.

I grab the other tit in my hand, squeezing them both while my mouth keeps sucking on her neck. When she lets out a low moan, I can’t take it anymore. Grabbing her over her waist, I pull her onto my lap.

“Oh!” she cries out in surprise.

She sits sideways while I start kissing every single place I can reach on her shoulder, neck, cheek. Letting out a feminine giggle, she pushes me away.

“Wait a second.”

My eyes are foggy, so is my mind. I don’t know why she wants us to stop. I don’t want to stop. But she told me to wait, and with the remaining strands of my willpower, I squeeze my fists by my sides, waiting for her to obviously escape, leaving me with the worst case of blue balls and a damaged brain from a total blood withdrawal.

Still giggling, she throws her leg over my lap, ending up straddling me.

Oh, fuck me.

Her tits are right in my face, and I want to be smooshed by them. She places her arms on my shoulders. “This is much better.”

Josie makes a move to drop her shoes off her feet, but I grab her hand, stopping her. “Leave them on.”

“As you wish.” Then she adds with a cheeky smile, “Sir.”

Every single drop of blood that was still left in my body instantly rushes to my already steely cock. I don’t think I’d remember my own name if someone asked me now.

“How much do you love this underwear?” I ask in a growl.

“Not as much as I love you tearing it apart.” Her cheeky smile is provocative. Exactly the encouragement I need.

I give her an ass slap as a reward, murmuring, “A very good girl,” and rip her panties with one pull, making her giggle.

“You’re awfully dressed now, Sheriff.” She hooks her finger on the hem

of the collar of my T-shirt and pulls it down. I don't even know at this point what jump-starts me more—'Sir' or 'Sheriff.'

In the limited space, I try to pull my T-shirt away. She's trying to help me the best way she can, but it's a struggle, and we both end up laughing. I don't remember ever feeling this comfortable and just being myself during sex with someone. I'm not a shy guy per se, but I'm reserved and don't usually mix sex with comfort. Sex is a release of pent-up desire, anger, and frustration. Sex with Josie is a divine experience.

When my torso is naked, Josie's eyes turn brighter. She spreads her open palms over my chest, touching every single inch of it. When her fingers land on my nipples, she pinches them, making me throw my head back.

Wiggling her ass over my lap, she tells me, "This has to go. Now." The urgency in her voice makes me feel so much better about mine. She scoots away from my lap, letting me undo my belt and zipper and pull my pants down to my ankles. The moment I do it, my cock springs free.

"Oh fuck," Josie mumbles and I look at her, trying to see which sort of 'oh fuck' that was. She's licking her lips with her eyes transfixed on my dick, and I figure it was the good kind.

"Do you like it, Josie? Do you like to see my cock so hard for you?" I rasp.

She swallows and starts nodding quickly without saying a word.

"Do you like my piercing too?" I ask the dreadful question because this is where the future will be determined—either I kill Archie and TJ for their trick or let them live.

She clears her throat. "Y-yes. I love it. I love how it touches the walls inside of me."

"Yeah?" My voice is hoarse. "What does it do to you?"

She looks up at my eyes for a moment. "Makes me come harder."

She just let them live.

I groan in pain of pleasure. "Come over here, Josephina. Come sit on my cock."

She crawls closer to me and stops right before she's about to climb on top of me. Then she opens her palm and gives it a long, thorough lick. The next thing I know, her hand lands on my cock, and she starts slowly moving it up and down.

"It's big, Ken." She gulps. "I don't know how it will fit in me."

I let out a hoarse chuckle. "It already has, Josie. You were made for

taking it. You were meant for me.” I tag on her arm. “C’mere.”

She follows my lead. Her ass ends up on my lap with my cock squished between us. When the fucker feels her wet heat, it twitches in pain. She rises a bit and makes a move to put it inside of her, but I smash her ass back where it belongs.

“Not so fast.”

Letting my hands loose to roam around her body freely, I try to get my fill of it. Her lips graze over my chin, and I turn my face to meet her lips. Why the fuck did I waste so much time without kissing her? Her lips are delicious. I expected to taste her lipstick—however the fuck it tastes—but I taste only her with a slight hint of tequila.

My hands move to her ass and begin moving her body. Her wet pussy glides over my cock, making me nearly roll my eyes. She lifts her pelvis a bit, giving it space to spring free. On the next move forward, the head goes in. I pull her back, and on the next, one more inch slides in. It’s so fuckin’ easy because she’s drenched. My thighs are wet from her pussy and our sweat.

Changing the position of my arms, I bring my hands right under her ass and help her move up and down. She digs her nails into my straining biceps, and the more they strain, the more she digs. She fuckin’ loves it. I flex my muscles more, and she moans.

“Harder,” she orders between kisses, and I oblige. A couple of minutes later, she pulls from the kisses and hisses, “Harder, Ken.”

I thought ‘Sheriff’ and ‘Sir’ were a turn-on. They got nothing on ‘Ken’ and ‘harder’ in the same sentence. I wrap one arm around her back, keeping the other under her ass. Squashing her body into mine, I lift my hips and start a rhythm that can satisfy her ‘harder’ command. She grips my shoulder, moaning into my ear. I bite her neck, and she gasps loudly.

“I’m going to come, Ken,” she hisses into my ear, making me shudder.

I let go of her ass for a moment and pop my index finger into my mouth, wetting it generously. Then I put it back and stop any movements just for a moment. Enough to pop my wet finger into her free, tight hole. She lets out a surprised gasp and pulls away.

“Relax. Just relax, Josie,” I whisper encouragements into her ear, grazing her earlobe with my lips. “You’ll love it. I promise.”

It takes her a few seconds to stop squeezing my finger, and she lets out a loud exhale.

“Good girl,” I murmur, feeling her relax even more. “A very good girl.”

I go back to moving her body, slower this time, carefully keeping my hand on her ass cheek and my finger in her ass. She starts letting out tiny mewling sounds, and I increase the tempo.

Her body shudders, and I feel that she’s on the verge of coming harder than she’s ever done before. While moving her over my cock, I press her body into mine, giving her clit more friction, and she falls apart in my arms. She throws her head back, opening her mouth in a silent moan. Her whole body starts quivering as her pelvis comes down hard on my dick, squeezing me so tight, I come too, pumping into her while she’s still quivering in my arms.

When we are both spent, she drops on top of me. Her cheek lies on my shoulder while my hands make slow circles on her sweaty back.

“You did so good, Josie. So fucking good.” My voice is hoarse, and it’s painful to talk. I was wrong when I thought I had the strongest orgasm with her the last time because this one just took the cake.

She lets out a satisfied sigh. “You did alright too.”

I chuckle into her hair, pressing her into me harder. She pulls away for a moment to give me a quick peck on my lips, and this is when I notice it—the *smudged* lipstick all over her chin. *Fucking finally*. A feeling of total contentment settles over me at the job well done.

I don’t know how long we’ve been sitting like this, but a sudden phone call brings us back to reality. I glance at the clock on the dashboard—it’s way past one. Who the fuck is calling so late?

“I need to check it, Josie.” I carefully move her to the side, pull my pants up, and lean forward between the seats to check the log. Alex. Fuck. Something must be wrong. I quickly press ‘accept.’

“*Ken, come here. I need your help,*” his loud, scared voice breaks through the space.

“What happened?” I ask as I quickly start dressing, noticing Josie doing the same.

“*It’s Freya. Something is wrong, Ken. Something is wrong with the baby!*” The obvious fear in Alex’s voice makes my blood turn cold.

“Where are you?”

“*We’re at our cabin.*” Freya’s cry loudly crashes into the thick air inside the truck, and Alex’s voice turns desperate.

“Did you call nine-one-one?”

“Yes,” he growls. “*But there is a fucking fire somewhere, and all units are there.*”

“All of them?” I pause.

“*Yes! Not one fucking unit is available to save my wife!*” he yells.

Josie is already moving to the front between the two seats while I have to jump outside and get back inside because there is no way I can fit through there.

“We will be there soon. Hang tight. Call me if something changes. I need to call someone.” I hang up and tell Josie, “Pull the radio from the glove compartment.”

She quickly pulls it out and switches it to ‘on’ without me telling her how, while I’m making a U-turn and heading toward Little Hope.

“Channel 4.”

She switches the radio to the right channel and passes it to me.

“It’s Sheriff Benson. Anyone copy?”

“*You’re on, Sheriff,*” comes through static.

“I need an ambulance to Alex Crowley’s cabin. Now.”

A two-second silence tells me more than they could. “*We don’t have an available unit right now. Everything has been thrown to Springfield for the fire.*”

“How the fuck did we throw all our forces into helping another city and left ours without anything?” The anger is so obvious in my voice that Josie gently places her hand on my thigh.

Silence. “*The closest available unit ETA is about an hour.*”

“Fuck!” I yell and hit the wheel in aggravation, then click the radio again. “Make one available faster.”

“*Will try,*” comes a quick response this time, and I throw the radio between the seats in aggravation. Then I dial Alex.

“*Ken?*” comes his even more scared voice.

“The ambulance is about an hour away. Can you take her to the hospital?”

“*I tried, but she started yelling and crying when I touched her. She doesn’t let me lift her up, and she can’t walk herself. What do I do, Kenneth?*” he whispers into the phone. “*Tell me what to do.*”

I’ve never heard Alex sound so lost and scared, and to be honest, I’m lost too.

“We’ll be there soon.” I hang up and tell Josie without turning to her.

“Put the shirt on.”

She lets go of my thighs, quickly reaches behind us, and pulls the shirt she wore before from the floor. She’s coming inside with me no matter what, and I don’t want to be distracted with stupid possessive and, quite frankly, embarrassing thoughts when my brother needs my help.

When she’s fully covered and adjusts the seatbelt on herself, I press the gas pedal to the floor. “Hang tight, Josie. And send Archie a message to head to Alex’s cabin. It might be time.”

She quickly picks up the phone and taps the buttons. Once she’s done, she places it on her lap and stares ahead. I glance at her from time to time to make sure she’s not scared, but her face is full of determination without an ounce of fear. She trusts me so much, and it makes me feel like I can conquer the whole damn world if needed.

Chapter Thirty

JOSIE

Kenneth's profile is sharp, and the muscles on his cheeks are moving from grinding his molars into dust. He's focused on the road. I can feel his palpable fear for his brother and sister-in-law in the air, and I can't even imagine what he must be feeling right now.

We reach Alex's cabin in record time. When I used to see Kenneth driving so slowly around town and obeying rules, I thought he just didn't know how to drive faster. But seeing him now and how easily he orders a huge truck to go into turns without breaking a sweat tells me how wrong I was. Every movement is precise, every flick of his wrist sends the car into a perfect curve without wasting a second of precious time.

We don't even come to a full stop when Alex rushes outside, waving his arms. His hair is disheveled from probably constantly running his hands through it. His eyes are crazed and barely human.

"Here. Here!"

We run toward him, and he doesn't even give me a second glance. I'm dreading going inside, but when we step over the threshold, I let out a sigh of relief—Freya is on her fours on the floor, digging her fingernails into the fluffy rug by the fireplace and yelling at Alex. This is something I've seen before. Not in that precise setting, but close enough.

"You are not putting any more babies into me, you fuckin' huge brute!"

she instantly confirms my suspicions. Her voice reminds me of the movies where they exorcise demons from writhing bodies.

Alex is so scared that he rushes to Kenneth and grabs his shoulders, shaking him forcefully. “What do I do? What’s happening?”

Kenneth looks the same way Alex does—petrified. At this moment, he’s Alex’s brother and a future uncle-to-be. He’s not a sheriff. He’s not logical. He’s just a scared member of this family.

Understanding that there won’t be much help from these two, I rush to the kitchen and thoroughly wash my hands and arms up to my elbows, making sure to scrub every single inch with soap. Then I shake them and, without drying them on a towel, I move to Freya.

“When did the water break?” I ask.

She lets out a loud cry before speaking. “About two hours ago.”

“I’m going to check you, alright?”

“Do something, Josie. Please,” she begs, half crying. “I can’t take this pain anymore.”

I go behind her and lift her long night shirt that covers her butt. Then I pull her underwear down her thighs and push my fingers inside of her.

“What are you doing?!” a chorus of voices yells, sounding close to me. Like right behind my back, and one is more terrified than the other.

I turn toward two men with the widest eyes I’ve ever seen (not even Mama’s cows can compare to them, I swear).

“She is about to give birth.” Their absolutely horrified faces are priceless, and I’d love to take a picture right now if the situation weren’t so dire. Because I don’t think I’ll ever again see two of the largest male specimens in the universe nearly biting their nails when the person who should be allowed to complain is on all fours, trying to deliver a baby into this world.

“She can’t!” Alex cries out, pulling on his hair. “She needs to go to a hospital! We have a *birthing plan*. With a bathtub! And epidural! And... and —” he pulls the hair on his head so hard, I’m afraid he’ll take a chunk out, “and nurses!”

I snicker. “Well, your plan’s gone to shit because she’s nine centimeters dilated and about to give birth to your baby.”

He and Kenneth share scared looks. Alex’s mouth falls open as he tries to come up with something to say. It lasts until the moment Freya lets out another inhuman cry, snapping Kenneth out of it first.

“What do we do?” he asks, gathering himself together. His eyes are

quickly clearing from the livid terror.

“Boil water and bring clean towels.”

He nods and starts to run toward the kitchen when he pauses and cocks his head. “How do you know what to do?”

“I helped horses and sheep give birth. It can’t be that much different, right?” I give him an unsure smile, but it drops when I notice Alex’s horrified face.

He advances on me. “You are not touching my wife,” he growls with a threat.

Kenneth suddenly jumps in front of me. “I’ll forgive you for the way you’re talking to her just this time because you’re scared. But speak to her like that one more time, and you’ll be meeting your baby with a black eye.”

“Shut up, Alex!” Freya cries out, sticking her butt in the air even higher. “Sheep and horses are good enough for me.” She can barely finish before she yells and doubles over.

“Water! Towels! Now!” I snap them out of it, and they both run to the sides like roaches. Alex runs toward one of the rooms to get towels while Kenneth runs toward the kitchen for the water.

Freya’s face is pinched with pain I’ve never endured myself but have witnessed before. “Do you really know how to do it?” she whispers, glancing at the door where Alex just disappeared.

“You’ll be my first human,” I confess while checking her dilation again. “But I’ve delivered many animals before. Does that count?”

“That counts,” she laughs sadly. “Especially when I don’t have a choice.”

“You really don’t.” Then I move on my knees toward her front so she can see me when I talk. “You’re fully dilated, Freya, and it’s time to push. We don’t have monitors, and I’m not a doctor, so we can’t check on the baby and its heartbeat. You have to push with all your might. The faster, the better. Do you understand?”

She gives my serious face a quick assessment and nods. I move back to her behind and yell. “Alex, come over here!”

A scared shitless Alex comes running with a pile of towels in his hands. Right when he’s rounding the corner, he bumps into a table, and a beautiful lamp with big, white feathers on the sides falls on the floor, shattering into pieces. The cord follows, and when it unplugs from the wall with a pop, the lights go out.

“What the fuck, Alex?” we all yell in unison.

“Shit, shit, shit.” A sound of stumbling, kicking, something falling, another curse, and then a bunch of towels drops next to me. Then a loud *thud* sounds somewhere around us, from what I assume are Alex’s kneecaps. I say a silent goodbye to them, not sure they’ll survive tonight.

“What do I do?” he asks in a hushed voice.

“Get the damn lights back on!” I order him.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Alex starts mumbling while Freya lets out a loud growl.

“Get the fucking light on, Alex!” she yells.

Right at that moment, the front door opens with a loud *bang*. The light from outside illuminates Archie and Leila running inside while the former stumbles over the threshold and nearly goes down just like Alex has done. Leila lets out a loud yelp. Combined with rushed footsteps and groaning, I suspect they’re stumbling over each other, trying to untangle from the mess they’ve just created.

“What the fuck is happening? Why is there no light in here?” Archie sounds angry.

“Alex dropped a lamp, and it went out,” I explain. “Can you go check on it?”

“On it.” A phone light comes to life, and Archie’s form disappears behind one of the doors I assume is the basement.

“Can someone give me a phone light? Please,” I hiss loud enough for everyone in Little Hope to hear me.

“Oops, yeah.” Leila rushes closer with a light.

“Sure.” Kenneth pulls his phone out too.

“What do I do, Josie?” Alex asks in a panic. “Tell me what to do, and I’ll do it. Do we need wood for the fireplace? She might be cold. The baby might be cold. Freya, are you cold?” He jumps to his feet. “I’m gonna chop some wood. Yes, wood. Freya, do you want more wood?” He’s about to take off toward the door.

“Sit down, soldier! More wood is the last thing she needs right now,” I order, and he plants his ass back to the floor, making Leila snicker. I shoot her a glare, and she widens her eyes and bites her lip, trying not to laugh. Turning back to Alex, I tell him, “Give Freya your hand and let her break it.”

“Got it.” He nods and moves to Freya’s face. “Break it, babe. As many fingers as you want—I’ve got ten of them. Then we can move on to toes.”

Glancing at his face, I don’t think he’s joking; she grabs his hand in a death grip, letting out a loud cry.

Upon checking on Freya, I discover that the situation has progressed faster than I anticipated. “Kenneth, bring me clips or scissors and a rope or something.”

He gives me a questioning look before he runs somewhere, and after a sound of rampaging through kitchen cabinets, he brings back big scissors and a turkey rope.

“Soak them in alcohol.”

“Be right back.” He runs back to the kitchen and comes back a minute later with a bottle of vodka and a huge bowl. Dropping everything inside, he pours the alcohol and runs back to the kitchen for whatever else he needs to do. I don’t have time to check on his actions since my focus is on Freya’s... well, vagina in front of my face.

The light suddenly comes back to life, and rushed, loud sounds of footsteps are coming toward us from the basement.

“What’s wrong with her?” Archie drops to his knees by Alex’s side, who turns toward him with a divine smile on his face.

“I’m about to become a father,” Alex says in awe, his lower lip quivering.

“You are going to be a *dad*.”

Sniffling, Archie grips his shoulder, and they share a tender look that lasts forever until Freya apparently squeezes Alex’s hand and lets out a loud yell.

“You both shut the fuck up!”

Leila makes a whimpering sound and says, “Please, tell me I can wait outside. Please, please, tell me that.”

“You can wait outside.” I chuckle and go back to doing what I can to make sure Freya and the baby both get through this.

In the meantime, the support group in front of me is at its full force. “You’re doing it, Alex.” Archie keeps rubbing Alex’s shoulder, talking to him in a soothing voice. “It’s almost done.”

“Shut up!” Freya lets out an animal cry, making them both widen their eyes and pretty much piss their pants. I can barely contain my laughter at these two baboons. I wish someone would have recorded the whole situation for this baby to see when they are older. Because stuff like this doesn’t happen every day.

Ten minutes and a few broken fingers later, I’m sure, I hold a brand-new baby girl in my hands. She’s crying her lungs out, making every single person in the room start rubbing their misty eyes. I wipe mine with my shoulder since my job is still not done. Using the turkey rope to clamp the

cord, I clip the baby's cord before I wrap her into a blanket and move toward Freya's front.

"She wants to meet you," I say quietly, and she starts crying. "You need to turn so I can check on you. You're exhausted."

Still crying, with Alex's help, she turns and leans her back on Alex's massive body. I pass her the baby, and she takes her from me with shaking hands. I go back to checking on her when the sound of a siren cuts through the air.

"Fucking finally," I mumble because I sure as fuck don't know much about human bodies after a delivery.

The medics run inside. A woman in her thirties and a young man drop to their knees in front of me.

"Damn, who did all the work for us?" the woman asks, smiling.

"Freya did," I reply proudly.

The woman sends me a curious look before pulling gloves on and going to check on Freya. I don't know how many deliveries they go through during their shifts, but I guess it's a few since there aren't many doctors around.

"Rachel," Kenneth's trying to ask discreetly, "is everything okay?"

The woman—Rachel—glances at him briefly before saying, "I couldn't have done it better."

Feeling a gush of shyness, I look at Kenneth, who's watching me with such a proud look on his face, I'm sure I just grew angel wings.

While the medics are checking Freya and the baby and helping Freya to get rid of the placenta, I go to the kitchen to wash my hands. Only when the water hits my skin do I notice how much they're shaking. I grip the sink and hang my very heavy head low, trying to find my breath again. Suddenly, my neck can't hold it anymore.

To be completely honest, I didn't know if I could pull it off. Besides being rusty in the birthing department, I was also very scared because it was Ken's niece and his family.

Strong arms wrap around me, pulling my back into a hard chest. A soft kiss lands on the back of my head.

"Thank you," comes his gruff voice, and my hands begin shaking even more. He covers them with his and brings them under the warm stream of still-running water. He pumps some liquid soap into his hands, brings them back over mine, and starts lathering them.

"I'm so proud of you," he whispers into my ear, and I sag with relief. He

instantly takes my weight on, not letting me crumble on the floor.

After helping me wash my hands, he takes a paper towel and helps me dry them.

“Josie!” someone yells, and I can’t even understand whose voice it is because everyone’s talking simultaneously. “Fuckin’ bring me Josie!” another yell, and now I recognize Freya.

Rushing toward her, I find her on the stretcher, clutching her baby to her chest. Alex is by her side, and the two medics are about to roll her outside. She stretches her arm toward me. I take her hand, and she squeezes me tight, passing a silent message way louder than she could ever say with actual words.

“Thank you, Josie. Thank you so much.” She starts crying. “Thank you.”

A tear escapes my eyes, and I nod, suddenly not able to speak.

“Thank you,” she whispers again, and they roll her away.

When she and Alex are out of sight, we’re left in silence until Archie whistles.

“Wow. Alright, I think I need to take a breath.” He walks toward the couch, clutching his open palm to his chest. “I will not survive the same. I don’t think so.”

“Typical men.” Leila snorts, and I glance between them. Is she pregnant too? Because Archie looks positively terrified now, and it’s becoming worse and worse by the minute.

“Dare I remind you that you just hid outside?” Kenneth chimes in, getting a nasty look from his sister.

I laugh and walk toward the place where the magic of a new life just happened. I take one of the few clean towels that are left and start cleaning the floor. Because birthing anyone is a messy business.

“No, no, no.” Archie jumps from the couch and rushes toward me. “You deserve a rest now. You’re the star of the evening.” He helps me up to my feet by my arm.

“Freya is the star,” I correct him with a smirk.

“Alright, you’re the second star.” He turns toward Sheriff. “Ken, take her home and rub her feet. She deserves it.”

“She does,” he replies with affection and brings his hand around my shoulders. “Let’s go home.”

“Let’s go,” I reply tiredly and add mentally just to myself—*wherever that is*.

Chapter Thirty-One

KENNETH

I drive us to my house because there is no way she's staying alone tonight.

Neither am I. Witnessing my baby niece being born and seeing Josie welcoming her into this world did something to my heart, and now it aches.

Josie ditched the bloody shirt back at the cabin, and now she's sitting in that dress with her hands hidden under her thighs. Her gaze is trained ahead, but I don't think she's focused on anything. I put my palm up on her thigh, silently asking for her hand. She releases her hand and places it into mine. I give it a gentle squeeze.

"I'm so proud of you, Josie." My voice doesn't waiver.

"Yeah?" She turns her sad eyes to me. "How is that? You barely know me."

A ping in my chest. "You're wrong. I might not know a lot about you, but I know you. I. Know. You."

I feel her stare on the side of my face before she relaxes her hand in mine and leans back on the chair.

"Don't ever doubt that for a second, Josie. You did something amazing today, and I don't think anyone could ever forget that."

"I was so scared," she whispers after a pause. "I didn't know what to do, I'm not a damn doctor." I hold her hand, letting her talk her heart out. "I delivered foals, Kenneth. And sheep."

“I mean, we’re all mammals.” I try easing her mind which earns me a stare.

“It’s not the same, Ken.”

“But you said yourself it was,” I remind her.

“Because you both were losing your shit, and the ambulance wasn’t coming. What did you expect me to do?”

“To fall apart along with us.” I give her a lopsided smile. “That’s what everyone would do.”

“Nah, Freya didn’t. You know why? Because she didn’t have anyone growing up. I couldn’t do that to her and leave her with you guys,” she sends me a funny look, “who faint at the sight of blood.”

That makes me pause. “Did you grow up alone too?”

“No,” she sighs, dropping her head back to the seat. “I have a big family, but they are very... shall I say one-minded. They wanted me to stay on the farm, marry a local guy, and spend my life barefoot in the kitchen with a belly forever swollen with child. Nothing’s wrong with that life, but it’s just not for me.”

I clamp my jaw tight the moment I imagine her in someone’s kitchen with someone’s child. Being happy with another man.

And I don’t like it. I don’t like the burning it causes in my chest or the mayhem it creates in my mind.

“Were they bad to you?” I ask the dreadful question.

“No! No. They were not. Just strict.” Her chuckle is sad. “Very strict. You know, I grew up in a small town in Arkansas.”

She starts fidgeting with the hem of her dress, pulling it lower on her thighs as if she’s trying to cover them. Which should be absurd. But then her next words explain a lot.

“Our small town was not like... shall I say other small towns. It’s like a closed-up community of old-timers where only old people are allowed to have an opinion, and everyone should follow the rules. But as you know,” she looks at me from under her lashes, “I’ve never been good at following rules.”

I laugh. “I wouldn’t say *never*.” I subtly remind her about our time at the back of this car when she was so good at obeying, making her cheeks turn slightly pink.

“Well, I guess.” She snickers. “But I often ended up in the back of a cop car in my teens.”

I glance at her with a raised brow in shock, thinking I was her first back seat.

“Not that kind of *back!*” She smacks my shoulder. “I’ve always loved bright clothes and big hair. Well, I started as an emo kid, but graduated into the brightness later. And quite frankly, I’ve always had a big mouth.” My eyes quickly focus on her lips before they return back to the road. “And being different was... a crime.” Her voice turns sad, and her aversion to cops is starting to make twisted sense. “So I always was an outcast. Even in my own family.” She pulls the hem even harder, trying to cover her thighs. “We had a farm, and we all had to work on it. Which is fair, you know.” I don’t know who she’s trying to convince at this point.

“Did they ever,” I swallow before continuing, “hurt you?”

“Not physically, I guess. But locking me in a dark bunker for a day was a regular punishment for me. Sometimes I spent even longer there.” Then she adds with a dark laugh, “I guess it was like a cult or something, to think of it. Only we weren’t praying to ancient gods. Just maybe ancient times.” She shrugs.

“Josie,” I call her in a soft voice. “I’m sorry you had to grow up like that.”

“That’s okay. I am who I am because I had a childhood like that. Maybe if I grew up any differently, I wouldn’t have any ambitions and wouldn’t have moved to a big city to chase my dreams. Who knows.”

I squeeze her hand a bit. “I’m sure you’d be a kickass building engineer slash awesome home designer no matter what happened to you because you were made to be one.”

“Thank you.” She gifts me with a precious smile that somehow feels very meaningful. “My parents never wanted me to leave the town and become anything other than the extension of our family. That’s why I pay for my sister’s tuition far away from them.”

I glance at her in shock. “You have a sister?”

“I do.” She nods. “And three brothers. She is the youngest and reminds me a bit of me at her age—a rebel before she even knows it. But I didn’t want the same fate for her as every woman in that town. Being a guy is easier—at least they have control over their lives. And quite frankly, over their families. I didn’t want my sister to become one of the women in the kitchen, Ken. I couldn’t do that to her when I felt the taste of freedom.”

While she’s telling her story, we reach my house. I park in front of the

garage and turn toward her. “How did you get your parents to let her leave town then?”

She exhales loudly and leans the back of her head on the seat. “Through a lot of convincing and a hefty chunk of my sanity. I said I’d be paying for the schooling if they let her go. They said they would if they chose it themselves. But Ken,” she licks her dry lips, “she’s more brainwashed than I ever was, so she sees it as a betrayal. She thinks I convinced them to get rid of her, so she doesn’t speak to me. Ever.”

Her eyes are full of pain, and I see another side of Josie for the first time. A very vulnerable, insecure, and lonely woman who’s scared that her sister doesn’t love her. A woman who thinks her family cast her out.

“She will see it the way it’s supposed to be when she gets older.”

“Not if she goes back to our hometown. The only thing she has ever told me since she got into school is that she hates me and all big cities because they make people become assholes.”

“Then we convince her to come here.” Her eyes shoot to mine. “It’s a small town too, right? So it should be easier.”

She’s watching me, slowly blinking, while I keep going. “We will tell her that we want her here. That she’s welcome to live in our small town with us. Do you think it would work?”

She’s still watching me.

“Josie? What do you think?”

“I thi—” her voice breaks, “I think it might.”

“Good.” I give her a warm smile. “Now, let’s go inside and take a shower. We have a lot of...” a quick glance down at myself and then at her, “things on us.” I shudder at the thought of our evening and all the fluids that have dried out on our skin by now.

I go around the truck to her side and open the door. She’s waiting for me with her hands tucked under her thighs. I know she can jump out herself even in those heels she finally ditched, but she prefers my help. She *lets* me help her with a small thing like that even after she just told me her story. And even that little thing makes me feel like a fucking king.

I get her down by her waist, and we walk hand in hand to the house. She goes straight to the bathroom. Right before closing the door, she glances at me with a slight nod to join her. And I do.

We lather each other’s bodies, and we rinse the soap off. I urge her to turn around and pour shampoo into my hands. Running my fingers through her

hair, I massage her scalp, and she leans into me. Nothing of what's going on is sexual, but it's very sensual. We are experiencing this moment where she once again lets me take care of her, making all my primal urges come to the very surface, nearly threatening to explode within.

The full trust of her body after being so vulnerable with me means more than anyone could offer me. So I cherish every moment of it.

I rinse the shampoo off and apply conditioner, running my fingers through her inky strands, making sure every hair is covered. Then I wash it away.

She places her hands on the tiles, holding herself up. It's so late, and she's exhausted. I want to do more than just take a shower together, but not tonight. Tonight, it's about her.

Once we're done, I turn the water off and help her out of the shower. She makes a move to grab a towel, but I take it first.

"Let me," I whisper.

She's contemplating for a second before giving a subtle nod. I pat her body and hair dry and then help her into my T-shirt. Her eyes are half closed. The exhaustion of the evening and all the events has finally caught up to her. I bend and take her in my arms, making her let out a squeak.

"What are you doing?"

"Carrying you to our bed," I state the obvious.

"I'm heavy, Ken," she protests. "Let me go. I can walk."

"Be quiet, woman," I respond, getting mad at her stupid declaration, and keep walking.

"Did you just shush me?" Her voice is full of mockery.

"Is it working?"

She giggles. "Not really."

I let out a dramatic sigh. "Worth trying though. Maybe it'll work the next time."

"It won't."

"I'll still keep trying." I wink at her and put her on the bed.

She crawls to my side, where I usually sleep, and gets under the covers. "It smells so good," she mumbles and quiets down.

"Yeah, I just changed the sheets," I reply smugly, expecting her snarky reply about expecting guests or something. But she doesn't say a word because a loud snore comes from her cute nose. Josie's fast asleep.

Before I drift off, I think about how smart I was to run to the store for

new fabric softener so she could have soft, smooth sheets in bed.

Chapter Thirty-Two

J OSIE

I wake up being hugged by a heater. My back is sweating because it's pressed to a very warm body. A heavy hand rests on my hip, and I've been drooling on a huge bicep under my cheek. Trying to wipe it away discreetly, I accidentally wake up the man-heater.

"Hey." His morning voice is hoarse from sleep.

"Hey," I murmur back, recalling how I ended up here. The evening sure was full of events.

I can't believe I told him about my family and the way I grew up. One time, I shared it on a date, and the man excused himself to the bathroom. Needless to say, I ended up paying for the dinner because he never returned. So, I kind of decided to keep my lovers away from my upbringing to avoid being called crazy. Good thing I didn't tell all of the truth. Our town is like a cult itself, and those who didn't agree with the rules often stayed in their parents' dark basements and bunkers for two days in a row without food or water.

Or how one day I came to school wearing a short skirt I made myself from a curtain like Scarlett O'Hara, and the teacher called the sheriff, saying I was indecent. He took me in, shaming me the whole walk to his car, and locked me in jail until my father came to pick me up just to drop me off at the damn bunker for twenty-four hours until I agreed to throw away the skirt.

And I did. I threw it away crying, but I didn't have a choice. They broke me, and I was fifteen.

That skirt was the catalyst that made me decide to escape the town because not many people did. We grew up seeing *that* around us, thinking that way of living was normal. That having your own opinion was not allowed because everything was decided for us by our parents and then husbands.

I didn't want that. So I decided that I would escape the town and go to a very big city and never ever set foot in a small town again. That was promise number one.

The second promise was to never ever get married because I didn't want to be suppressed by someone with a dick. I didn't know it could be any different because I didn't see it around me, and by the time I figured that marriages could be healthy and normal, I was already dead set on my husbandless path.

And that's why I was scared of Kenneth Benson. I still am. He makes me forget about my rules and promises. He makes me want to become a wife and wait for him to come home from work. I want to have a belly with his kids inside. I want to stay in a small town because it feels like it might be my home.

All those things I despised.

Then why doesn't wanting all of them seem so wrong anymore?

"I need to go to the station now." He softly kisses my shoulder. "But then I'm gonna go to visit Freya and the baby in the hospital. Do you want to come with me?"

I turn slightly to see his face. "I'd love to, but maybe after you. I doubt she wants to see anyone other than family now."

He chuckles softly. "You are funny, Josie," he says vaguely. "I'll pick you up around eleven so we can go and get your things and then drive to the hospital."

With that, he gives me a quick peck on my lips, pushes away from the bed, and heads toward the bathroom in the primary bedroom. In black boxers. While he still has his morning wood.

My hungry eyes follow his butt until it disappears behind the closed door. Since when did I become so horny all the damn time?

The water runs for a few minutes, and then Kenneth comes out looking fresh and well-rested while I look like a zombie who's been dead for a few

years, I'm sure.

"The house phone works if you need to call someone. I can't leave you my phone because people keep calling me with their issues. Otherwise, I'd just give it to you until you get yours back."

He proceeds to put his uniform on without a care in the world like he just hasn't offered me the moon, pretty much. Did this man just voluntarily want to hand me his phone for like half a day? What if his booty call called him? Or someone else. I don't know, anyone. Doesn't he have any secrets?

"If Mrs. Roberts comes knocking on the door, you have free rein to send her on her merry way."

My ears perk up, and I sit straighter. "Really?"

"Yes," he chuckles. "Have fun." He buckles his belt, the same one he dropped on the floor when he was striding toward me like a predator. "Just remember she might start another rumor."

"I'm okay with that." I watch him expectantly.

He walks up to me. "I am too," he says and leans toward my face. "I'll pick you up at eleven." After a quick kiss on my lips, he walks out of the room, leaving me speechless.

I lie in his bed for some time before I peel myself away from the coziness and take another shower because I can't wake up without water pouring down on my body. Then I make a full carafe of coffee, grab a couple of cookies from a cabinet, and take a seat at the island.

A knock on the window startles me, making me spill my coffee all over the table.

"What on earth?" I turn toward the sound and find a big, gray bird sitting on the sill. He taps his beak on the glass again. I rush toward it and carefully open the window. "Look at this beautiful bird. How did you get in here?"

The moment the window is fully open, he takes off and flies right inside, grazing my face with the tip of his wing.

"Alright, then." I close the window and walk to the kitchen because this is where my morning guest took his stance. Right next to my uneaten cookie.

"You can eat that," I point my finger at it, "but then you have to leave, or Kenneth will kill me."

The bird, who looks like a big-ass gray parrot, blinks at me with his beady eyes and starts eating the cookie.

"Such a good boy." I take a slow step toward him. "I am Josie. And what's your name?"

He lets out a throaty squeak. I don't know why I expected him to answer, but after all the stories about the magical moose and actually meeting him, I half expect every animal here to talk because Frank sure looked like he understood every single word I said.

In the meantime, he finishes the cookie and looks up at me.

"Do you want another one?" I ask, knowing he's not going to reply. And when he doesn't—no surprise there—I walk to the cabinet and pull more cookies. Crumbling a few of them, I put them in front of him. Probably, sugar is not the healthiest option for a bird, but I didn't have a chance to think. He pecks on a few crumbs before he turns around. And if I'm not mistaken, he looks damn offended.

"Fine! I'll look for something else."

Ravaging through the fridge, I keep one eye on my guest, who's watching me with an unhealthy interest. When I pull an apple out, the bird pads his clicky feet toward the edge of the island table. I wash the apple and cut it into pieces. Then I take one and offer it to him with an outstretched hand. He slowly approaches the apple, therefore my hand. I hope I'm not making a mistake, and by the time our meeting is done, I'll still have all my fingers attached.

He grabs the apple piece from my hand with his beak, places it under his toes, and starts eating. Hmm, handy and smart. I slowly return to my coffee, and we finish our food in silence, where the only sounds are the clicking of his beak when he's eating and my mug when it meets the table surface. I hate to say it, but he's a better companion than some people are.

By the time he's done with the apple, I feel so comfortable I forget he's a bird. Maybe I remember, and that's why I start talking.

"You know what? You should stay here because I can talk to you about Ken and his big dick. It's not like I can talk to Leila about it," I snort, rolling my eyes. "Or Alicia. To think of it," I'm trying to recall all our conversations, "I don't think we've ever discussed her man's magic abilities, you know. So I guess I'm kind of banned from discussing Ken's with her too. Which brings me to you." I point my index finger at him. "You are the best companion a lady can ask for. You can listen, nod your pretty head, and will always keep my secret. Won't you?"

The bird tilts his head to the side.

"Yes, you will. You are the perfect therapist and girlfriend." I lean toward him over the table. "So I can discuss all the veins and grooves of Sheriff's

giant dick, and no one will know about it. Right?”

He agrees with me, of course. I can tell.

I check the fridge for any food for myself and find only healthy options. After the night I had, I want junk and grease and sugar. I'll probably ask Kenneth to stop by to pick up a Lonely Kurt from Marina's diner.

At ten-fifty, a car parks outside, and Kenneth comes in. I rush to the door and lean on the doorframe, not knowing how to greet him. Because I don't know what we are.

“Hey.” I decide to go with a soft smile.

“Hey,” he replies in that raspy voice of his and walks toward me, where he wraps his arms around me, pulling me into him. “I've missed you.”

His lips cover mine in a gentle kiss, completely different from the possessive devouring he did the last time. I like this kiss. I like how gentle this big beast can be, and I like the contrast between them.

“I've missed you too,” I whisper into the kiss. “But I had company.”

He pulls away, groaning. “Did Mrs. Roberts visit again?”

“No,” I giggle. “Someone else.”

With that, I lead him to the kitchen, where the gray feathered friend is still walking on the table.

“Again?” Kenneth asks, sighing.

“What?” I whip my head toward him. “What do you mean?”

“This parrot has been coming here for some time now. He knocks on the window, raids my fridge, and leaves. Sometimes he harasses me in town.”

I can't help but giggle. “No way. This tiny, cute creature is not able to harass anyone.”

“You just watch.” He sends the bird a silent warning. “He'll be doing the same to you.”

“Do you know if he belongs to someone?”

The bird suddenly flips his wings angrily and lets out a loud squawk of protest, so I instantly fix my mistake, thinking that he might be triggered by the word if he was held captive or something.

“I mean, do you know where he lives?” I eye the bird carefully, who seems to calm down a bit.

Kenneth shrugs, slowly walking toward the table. “No one's reported a missing gray African parrot, so I guess he probably flew here from another town.”

“I've always wanted to have a parrot.” Then I add, laughing, “When I

have a home for myself, you know.”

“About that.” He turns serious. “I hope you can stay here.”

“Until when?” I ask softly, not trying to be sarcastic but genuinely trying to figure out what’s really happening between us. “We both know I have an expiration date here, in Little Hope.”

He circles the table and comes to stand next to me. “Where are you going after this project, Josie?”

I swallow, giving myself time to reply. “I guess back to New York.”

“What’s waiting for you there?” His intense eyes move between mine.

I shrug one shoulder. “What’s waiting for me here?”

“I am,” he replies firmly, completely sure of his words. “This town is not going to cut your wings.” He gently touches the side of my face. “And if they try, I’ll lock their scissors away in a jail.”

I laugh, making a snorting sound. “You are very romantic, Sheriff.”

“I aim to be.” He pulls me by my hand to him. “But really, there is a place for you here if you want.” His neck moves with a swallow. “With me.”

“Ken—” I whisper.

“Just promise to think about it.” His voice is quiet, almost pleading as he fixes a lock of my hair behind my ear. “We can bring your sister here after she’s done with school too.” His eyes find mine, communicating more than he’s saying. He’s totally using my sore spot, and he’s not ashamed of it.

“Okay,” I reply with a sigh. “I will think about it.”

“Good.” He smiles and places a tentative kiss on the side of my lips. “Now, let’s go load your stuff in my car and visit Freya and the baby in the hospital.” Then he turns toward the parrot. “You can stay here, but don’t shit anywhere. Got it?”

The bird just blinks silently at him, but Kenneth takes it as a yes because he gives a short, satisfied nod and pulls me outside.

Chapter Thirty-Three

J OSIE

On the way to the house, Kenneth holds my hand the whole time. It's enough for me to completely forget the greasy food I was craving; his hand on mine is just as comforting. Better than any burger or New York pizza.

When we reach the house, I walk toward the trailer slowly, feeling a haze wash over me as if I were walking into the Twilight Zone. Yesterday, I went to a bar with my friends, and today, I'm moving into Sheriff Benson's house.

I still can't wrap my head around his feelings for me. Honest to everything, I thought it was purely carnal, and he just needed to scratch an itch. It became something else to me, though I'm not sure when. Maybe it was when he fucked me on the table. Or maybe it was even earlier when he offered me, a stranger in need, a safe place to stay. That night showed me how a real man would treat someone, and I was instantly hooked without even comprehending what would happen in the future.

I could tell yesterday that it was a breaking point. The way he looked at me changed. On the way home from Freya's, I could feel the heat of his gaze. It wasn't like before. No, it wasn't pure lust. It was safety. It was home. It was a desire for something more. It was consistent and protective.

He became possessive and edgy at the bar. Needy.

Is that what I really want? I've dealt with protective men from small towns before. Back home. Having someone be so protective at first is great,

but there's a fine line between protective and oppressive, and once they cross that line, they can't really go back.

As I reach the door to the trailer, I reach out to grab the handle but stop, turning around, my shoulders squared. Kenneth is so close he has to steady himself to not smack into me.

"Is everything okay?" His worried eyes soften my resolve, but not enough to back down from my decision.

"I can't stay with you," I blurt out before I change my mind.

"Why?" His forehead wrinkles in confusion.

I blow out a puff of air. "Because, honestly, up until yesterday, or even this morning, I didn't know if you even liked me."

His eyes narrow as he takes a step toward me. "Make no mistake, Josephina." His voice drops even lower. "I like you. I like your sass." He brings his face to my neck and inhales deeply. "I like your smell. I like how you act so tough and rowdy when you're so good at obeying when I tell you too." I feel his tongue run up the side of my neck. "I like everything about you. Even the things I don't like." Another lick. "But guess what, Josie? You like it too."

My breath hitches because he's right. I turn into a puddle of goo when he's like this. I feel his lips next to my ear, his warm breath sending shivers down my spine.

Suddenly, he pulls back. "I'll give you your space if you need it. But I'm not a patient man, Josie. I want this, and I'm willing to show you how much."

I didn't think it was going to be so easy, but maybe he's not exactly ready to jump headfirst into this. Whatever this is.

"Okay, thank you." I bite my lower lip. "What do we do until then?"

His eyes turn wicked.

"Until then, Josephina, we fuck."

And fuck we did. Everywhere. For the next ten days, we screwed on every surface of the trailer, the Ghost House, and his home.

Despite my desire to have my own space with the trailer, I've stayed at his place most nights. He's stayed at the trailer a couple of nights, but the bed isn't exactly wide enough to fit two people, especially when one of them is

the size of Kenneth Benson. Additionally, Kenneth runs hot. Temperature hot. I can't canoodle with him the whole night without feeling like I desperately need a cold shower from the sheer amount of heat. I end up waking up covered in sweat, crawling out of bed, desperate for some chill air.

We visited Freya and the baby at the hospital, and I was met like a hero. Alex squeezed me so hard I thought he cracked my ribs. Kenneth had to pull me away, and I could feel his chest rumble in a quiet territorial growl meant just for me. I loved it.

I've noticed that he's very possessive, and it should have totally scared me off, considering I detest possessive guys. Or used to. Somehow, it feels good when the sheriff doesn't want to share my time with anyone else.

And somehow, it doesn't feel suffocating. It feels good. He's not trying to control me, my decisions, or the people I spend my time with. He simply wants to be around me. Turns out, ten days is more than enough time to cure my fear of being oppressed by a man. The only negative is that I've been yelling about my desire to leave this small town and dodge a long-term relationship from the rooftops, and explaining my change of heart may be hard. He may not believe me. I don't know how to take my words back without sounding hypocritical.

So I just go with the flow, hoping the situation will resolve itself with time.

Kenneth tells me that his mom is planning a huge dinner at her place after Freya settles into her new role a bit more and that she asked him to invite me. From what he's said, she's been trying to meet me for quite some time now, but he kept making excuses. He would either divert her attention elsewhere or tell her I was too busy with the Ghost House. I'm not quite sure how I feel about him doing this, if I'm honest. Is he ashamed of me? I don't know. I'm not sure I want to know the truth.

Since the permits got approved the week after I submitted them, Jericho and I agreed to have his crew come at some point during the week after they finish their current project. When I mentioned him to Kenneth, he tensed up. But not for the reasons I suspected.

Turns out, Sheriff Benson is well aware of Jericho. Not only as the sheriff but as Kenneth, the man who personally knew Jericho while serving in the army.

That was a huge surprise—I didn't know Kenneth served, but to think of it, I still don't know much about him. He doesn't share many details about

himself willingly, and we mostly discuss work, friends, and funny stories that have happened throughout our lives. But nothing too deep. Our communication is still a work in progress.

Jericho is coming today to do a last run-through before he brings his crew in, and Kenneth insists on being present.

The second we hear the contractor's truck rumble up the dirt road, Kenneth pushes away from his car, taking his place next to me, dropping his heavy arm over my shoulder. I try to shake it off, sending him an evil stare, but he doesn't budge. He doesn't even look my way. All his attention is focused on the man swaggering toward us.

His eyes jump between Kenneth's hand and his face, and once they land on me, he smiles.

"Hey, Josie." He turns his head slightly to Kenneth. "Benson. I heard you became a sheriff."

Ken nods and tightens his hold on my shoulder. Jericho notices the move and gives a short nod with a subtle smile.

Baboons and their pissing matches. I roll my eyes, pushing away from Kenneth, who lets me go this time.

"I heard you'll be helping *my* woman." My head swivels toward Kenneth so fast I give myself whiplash. "Keep it clean, and we won't have a problem."

"I don't think we will."

They both hold each other's stares, and I can feel the steam building within me, threatening to whistle from my ears. When I have enough, I push Kenneth, my fingers bouncing off his hard chest. "Okay, Sheriff, it's time for you to go rescue some kittens or help find a newspaper thief. I have to get to work."

Kenneth folds arms over his chest, smiling at me. "I will. Once we get your stuff in my car, so I can drop it off at home."

"Are we back to this again?" My eyes flicker to Jericho. "Can we do this another time?"

"Actually, Josie," Landell chimes in when no one asked him too, "Benson is right. You can't stay out here with my crew." His gaze darts to the side guiltily.

"Why?" I cross my arms over my chest, mimicking Kenneth as I cock a brow. "Are they dangerous?"

"No." He shakes his head fiercely. "But they're out of the big city, far

away from any..." he shares a look with Kenneth, "entertainment. And you're a beautiful woman." I feel Kenneth stiffen next to me. "They would never do anything to hurt you, of course," he says as Kenneth opens his mouth, "but I don't want them flirting with you all day." He sends Ken a side-eye. "And I don't need to have a talk with the sheriff after."

Why do I feel like I've walked into a trap?

"I'll wear a potato sack," I reply sarcastically. I don't know what he's talking about. Like they can't control themselves around anyone with a vagina?

They both snort.

"I doubt it would help," Jericho murmurs and then adds louder, "It's best if you move in with Benson."

I glance at Kenneth fast enough to catch the stupid smile on his face, but when he sees my pinched, angry glare, he bites his lip, trying hard not to laugh.

"Is that so?" I ask him.

"You heard the man." He spreads his arms with a wide smile on his stupidly handsome face.

I groan—inwardly—and shift my attention to Jericho. "I'm paying you, not him. Be wise where your allegiance lies."

He's trying really, really hard not to laugh when he says, "Yes, ma'am."

When I turn toward Kenneth, I find him entering the trailer. Sighing like a diva in an old, black-and-white movie, I address the other soon-to-be thorn in my side. "Sticking to sausages, I see."

Jericho gives me a long and meaningful look before speaking. "He was on my side of the courthouse when I was convicted."

With that, he walks toward his truck as I head inside the trailer to figure out what damage Ken has done so far and find him shoveling all my clothes into bags he found in the small closet. All my designer clothes are shoved inside without a care in a world.

"Ken!" I rush to him. "Be careful! Please!"

"Oh." He gives me a cheeky smile. "Sorry. I'm just trying to finish everything as soon as I can. I gotta run to town—I have a new hire coming in today."

I put my hand on his, stopping the man from ruining the rest of my clothes. "I'll finish it myself, and you can pick me up later when you're done. Okay?"

His eyes soften, the evil, playful glint in his eye fading away. “Okay.”

I keep my hand on his, squeezing it lightly, trying to draw his attention. “But I don’t appreciate manipulation. Please, never do it again.”

His Adam’s apple bobbles with a swallow. “I can’t promise that.”

My heart skips a beat. “What do you mean?”

His face dips in front of mine, his eyes piercing my soul as his large hands grip my hips. “It means that I’ll do anything I can to get you into my bed.”

“I’m already in your bed, Kenneth.” I roll my eyes.

“Permanently, Josie.” His eyes dart between mine. “I need you there permanently.”

Swallowing at the intensity of his voice, I can’t find the right words to reply to him. It seems as if he’s run out of them as well because all he can do is lean down for a quick peck on my lips. “Call me when you’re done.”

When Kenneth leaves, Jericho and I run through our plans one more time before his crew arrives in two days. But the man himself stays to start the demolition right away. He gets here early every morning and leaves late at night.

We’re going to start with changing the foundation and then the roof. When it’s settled, we’ll move to the wiring and plumbing. And after that, we can start working on the inside of the house. Once it was all mapped out, I started seeing the light at the end of the very dark tunnel I’d been burying myself in for months now.

Since Kenneth tricked me into moving in with him, I’ve stayed in the guest bedroom just to teach him a lesson. It’s been two days, and I still haven’t talked to him. My only silent companion has been the parrot, who I’ve found is an excellent listener and keeps my secrets. For some unexplainable reason, Kenneth lets him stay. The first morning I stayed at his place, I saw the big softie taking the seeds out of an apple before he offered it to the bird. I don’t know if he’s given him a name since I’m not talking to the man, and the bird never responds because he clearly can’t talk, so I just keep calling him ‘Bird.’

A month has passed, and we have settled into a cozy routine. Kenneth and I both wake up at six in the morning, one of us gets breakfast ready while the other takes a shower. Then he drops me off at the Ghost House where Jericho's crew performs miracles at the speed of light without sacrificing quality. Every single day I see him and his men work, I know I made the right choice.

I also know I was totally tricked because every single guy on the crew is polite and respectful. Not once have I noticed a dirty look sent my way, and I've been working around rough and crude men for long enough that I've encountered plenty of the type. I love this job despite all of that, but sometimes it gets to me. Working here, in this remote location, hasn't made me feel icky even once.

Maybe it has something to do with the stern looks Kenneth sends at everyone when he picks me up every single evening. He's very territorial of his space and people and made sure to mention that I'm the only person he'd give up his side of the bed for. It's adorable really—how much he likes all his cups arranged one way and his plates another. He likes the pillows on his couch at a certain degree. He also likes his bathroom sink free of clutter.

Or he used to like all of that, because since I moved in, he doesn't have any of that. I like mismatched mugs more than I like his expensive tea set with golden flowers on the bottom. I like cushions to not just be pretty but also comfortable, and that doesn't happen when they're sitting stiff behind my back. I also love my lotions and makeup, but Ken's bathroom cabinet had zero space available, so I had to improvise. I see the way his jaw sets every time he goes to shave, but I just shrug, reminding him he chose it himself. He usually slaps me on the ass, and I end up bent over the sink and him with his pants down around his ankles. Needless to say, I make sure to stick around when he shaves.

I've also learned that he doesn't like to share me with anyone. Even Alicia. He gets grumpy when I choose to go to her house for a movie. I got mad at first, thinking he was trying to control my freedom, but soon I came to understand that it's just his love language.

Not like we've shared love proclamations, but we care for each other. Dare I even say deeply. So eventually I gave up on constantly fighting him on that and sometimes invite him over when Mark is there too.

When Kenneth first saw our choice of movie for the evening, he was terrified. But twenty minutes into *Mean Girls*, he is popping popcorn into his mouth from the giant bowl he placed on my ankles that rest on his lap and discussing theories about how the movie will play out. He and Mark even start arguing at some point over the protein bars mentioned in the movie. Alicia and I are both snorting from laughing at them, scaring the crap out of their dog Ghost.

And I still haven't met his mother.

Chapter Thirty-Four

KENNETH

“Alright, my friend.” I spread my arms on the table in my office, gripping the edge in anticipation. “What can you tell me today?”

“Ken big. Huge! Big! Good!” the parrot says, constantly nodding his head. “Ken does good.”

I lean back in my chair with a satisfied smile on my face. “That’s true. Ken can do some good.”

“Ken’s dick. KEN’S DICK!” he yells at the top of his lungs, causing a few loud snickers. Seems like my employees like eavesdropping.

“I can attest to that.” That sounded awfully like Jennica’s voice.

“I see you have too much free time on your hands. Maybe I should fire Brad,” I yell so they can hear me.

“Why me? I’ve been quieter than a mouse. Fire Lily,” Brad says, throwing our new receptionist under the bus. “She likes to talk a lot.”

That’s true. Since Brad got here, he seems like a changed man. Maybe he needed someone with good morals around him so he could follow their lead. Regardless, he was a good hire. Reliable. After a few days of being late, I swear he’s become the employee of the year.

And the quiet girl turned out to be very mouthy. I like it. She didn’t let Brad down gently when he threw a suggestive remark on their first day and left him speechless before I could even intervene. Jennica’s always watching

her like a proud mama, pressing her hand to her chest. I'm happy with our new people—they definitely make our life easier.

Jennica finally got laid by her husband as she reported the morning after. And to be honest, I couldn't even blame her for announcing it. I've got plenty of that waiting for me at home, and if I could, I'd shout about it from the rooftops too.

At the thought of Josie in my home and bed, something warm spreads inside my chest. I like driving to the Ghost House to pick her up. She's usually wearing her jean overalls with a bunch of tape, nails, and even a hammer or two sticking out from the multiple pockets, her curls tied to the top of her head with a red ribbon, and it's sexy as fuck.

I like how her eyes shine when she sees me. I like how she jumps into my arms every single evening.

She's funny if she thinks she's going back to New York. At least, not alone. I've browsed a few possibilities for myself and called a few friends. The people of Little Hope need me, but if she thinks she absolutely cannot be happy here, I'll move to the big city with her.

"Ken is dick!" the parrot reminds me in case I've forgotten in the past ten seconds that my team has been snickering at me.

"When did she say it?"

"Ken's dick!" he repeats, well, like a parrot.

"You," I point my index finger at him, "need to tell me when she said that."

"Giant dick! Ken's giant dick!"

I groan in frustration and wave him away. "Begone, hateful creature."

"Dick!" he yells one last time before he flies away.

Jennica's smug face shows up in my line of vision. "When will you tell her that the damn parrot is spying on her?"

"He's not spying," I reply, rearing back. "Why would you say that? He just likes to talk."

"To you." She laughs, shaking her head. "He likes to talk to you."

"Well, it's not my fault he refuses to speak to her." I can't believe I'm advocating for a bird.

"You're in so deep, Boss, it's hilarious." She leaves my office, laughing like an evil witch.

She's right, though, I am in deep. In fact, so deep that I don't think I can climb out of it. Mom invited us all to a barbeque in their backyard that she's

throwing for Alex's baby. She's been trying to meet Josie for such a long time, and I had to keep putting it off. My mother can be very intense when it comes to her children getting married, and I don't want to scare Josie off when she thinks she's leaving Little Hope without me. After the horror stories she told me about her hometown that sounds more like a cult than a regular place, I'm sure she has an aversion to the idea of marriage.

I had one too. Or I thought I did. Now I'm not opposed to the idea at all, but I'm afraid she is. Especially with the way I tricked her into moving in with me. I just couldn't wait anymore, and a bunch of horny, lonely guys moving their shit next to her trailer seemed like a good moment to push my agenda. I might have pushed a bit too far because she wasn't talking to me for two days, cooped up in her room.

It's then I discovered that she talks to the parrot. He comes to find me when she's not around and snitches on her. At first, it was funny, but then it became one of the highlights of my day until I went to pick up Josie. And then it just became a habit. He usually tells me good things that stroke my ego, but today the information was, well, not that.

While I wallow in my sorrows, I shoot Josie a few messages, but they go unread. By the time two o'clock rolls around, she still hasn't replied, and I begin getting nervous.

At two fifteen, the parrot comes back, knocking his beak against the window. The moment I open it, it flies in, yelling from the top of his lungs, "MARK GOOD. SO GOOD MARK. HARD MARK!"

My blood turns to ice at first, but a few seconds later, when his words register completely, it begins boiling. I grab my keys and run past my team as they watch me, eyes wide, and climb into my car.

On the way to the Ghost House, I do something I've never done when I'm not on a call—I turn the siren on. When I reach the road toward the house through the woods, I turn it off. A couple of guys are working on the big logs outside, Landell and his truck are nowhere to be seen.

I square my shoulders and head toward the door. When I pass the window, I hear her voice.

"No, Mark. It's huge. It won't fit."

"I know how to use it, Josie. Be quiet and hold still."

A sudden ringing starts in my ears, and I rush inside.

"Mark, don't push so hard!" Josie's raised voice booms through the empty space.

“I know how to push, Josie! Stop telling me what to do!”

I locate the door, take a deep breath, and push it open.

And come to a stop.

Josie is on her knees...

... holding a long and large piece of carved wood in her hands, trying to hold it still perpendicular to the floor while Mark tries to push a round piece of wood the same color on top of it. Seems like they are trying to assemble a table or a stand or something.

“What happened?” she cries out when she sees my crazed eyes. “Are you okay?”

The damn bird chooses this particular moment to fly in and land on my shoulder, yelling the same mantra that sent me into this frenzy. “MARK GOOD. SO GOOD MARK. HARD MARK!”

Josie and Mark’s eyes both instantly widen. Then Mark lets out a loud chuckle, followed by an explosion of laughter. And I could join him and laugh off the situation if not for Josie’s slowly narrowing eyes. It’s like she’s zeroing in on the target. Me.

“You must be shitting me,” she hisses as she stands up, holding the same piece of wood that happens to be a table leg, apparently. “The little shit can talk?”

“He does.” I swallow. “Sometimes. Some stupid stuff,” I add quickly. “You know, like today. Like right now, you know. He’s just being stupid.”

“I. Don’t. Know,” she says through gritted teeth, slowly moving toward me with a table leg in her hand. “Did you think I was rolling in the hay here with Mark?”

“No, Josie. I mean, maybe.” I rub my eyes in frustration. “I don’t know. Okay? I don’t know where you stand and if you want to stay or not. I mean, we didn’t even discuss if we are exclusive or not. Are we? Exclusive?”

“I’m outta here.” Mark quickly slips past me, mumbling under his breath, “Idiot. We voted an idiot for a sheriff.”

I give him a side-eye, silently promising we will be finishing this conversation.

“I don’t know, Kenneth, because we never talk about feelings or *stuff*,” Josie declares loudly, creating quotation marks in the air.

“We do,” I contradict stubbornly, because we *do* talk. All the time.

“We talk about anything but us.” She throws her hands in the air in frustration. “Since you declared that I’m moving in with you like a

Neanderthal, we only talk about work and the nice people of Little Hope, but not a word about *us*.”

“Not true.”

“It is true, Kenneth. I mean, I haven’t even met your mom, you know. And that’s pretty difficult to do in a small town where she’s actually trying to meet me. Are you ashamed of me?” Her old insecurities peek through her tough facade as her voice breaks.

“Josie,” I sigh and walk toward her. “That’s not it. It’s actually the opposite.”

“Really? Because we only see each other at night. And every time your mom has dinner at her place, you find an excuse not to go just so you don’t take me with you. The last time I tried talking to you about New York, you shut me down because you clearly weren’t interested in my life before.”

I press the heels of my hands into my eye sockets, hard. Clearly trying to gorge them out. “I didn’t want to listen because in every freaking story, your dipshit ex, Dandy,” I change his name on purpose, “was playing a big damn role. When you talked about your work, the fucker was there too!” I nearly yell in frustration. “But that’s not the fuckin’ reason, Joz. I didn’t want to hear about your life in New York because your eyes shine so bright when you do. And I just know, *I know*, you were happier there than you’ll ever be here. And I know you’ll leave.”

She watches me, slowly blinking and looking completely dumbfounded as I continue.

“And about the dinner? I’ve been trying to protect you from being put on the spot. The moment you step foot in my mom’s house, she’ll be trying to put a wedding dress on you. And trust me, Josie, I know how much you don’t want to stay in a small town. I heard you loud and clear. So forgive me for sparing my family the future disappointment when you leave after they all fall in love with you just like I did.”

“You—” She clears her throat. “You love me?”

“I do.” I sigh in defeat. “And unfortunately, I don’t know what I can do to convince you to stay here.”

“You just did.” Her eyes turn shiny with tears.

I don’t think I heard her right. “What?”

“You just did. I mean, you just did something to convince me to stay.”

“A love declaration?”

She shrugs. “I don’t need much.”

I step up to her and place my hands on her shoulders. “I’m sorry for running over here like a madman.” I take a deep breath before saying something I’ve never said before. “I didn’t know where you stood, and I felt insecure. It’s...” I chew on my cheek, looking for the right word, “a new feeling for me. One I’d rather not revisit.”

“Ken,” she sighs with a *loud* smile that says it all, “you have such a big dick, you shouldn’t even know what the word ‘insecure’ means.”

And just like that, she once again makes light of the situation.

“Wait a minute.” I pull away, remembering what the parrot was saying before. The little shit didn’t finish the sentence at all, completely messing with the meaning. I’m never listening to that bird again.

“What happened?” Her brows pinch together with worry.

“How do you feel about parrot soup?”

Josie throws her head back with a loud laugh, making all the insecurities fade away.

Chapter Thirty-Five

J OSIE

It's been a few days since I found out the damn bird has the ability to spill all my secrets, and I'm on the hunt. But the feathery thing is missing. He clearly got word that I was out for his blood, so he disappeared into thin air. At least he's not showing up around me. Kenneth swears he hasn't seen him either, but I don't trust him anymore because he has a soft spot for the damn gray rooster.

Today is the day I officially meet Kenneth's family. Well, I've already met Leila and Alex (obviously), but today, I'll get to meet the rest. Their mom is finally given free rein to throw that barbeque for Freya and the baby, and the whole town is invited.

It's the end of September, and the air might get chilly in the evening, so they decided to host it inside the house as someone grills outside. I'm nervous about what I should wear since it's a family gathering, and I need to impress everyone. But I feel like I'm my best powerhouse when I'm wearing heels. But heels are bad when you go to someone's house and ruin their hardwood floor. Not even mentioning the sound I'll make with all that clicking.

Impress his family with the power of an outfit or impress them with 'me'? The choice is obvious. I sigh, pulling on my white sneakers.

"Are you ready?" Ken asks as he walks into the bedroom.

“I don’t know. What should I wear?” I stand up from the bench once I’m done tying my shoelaces. “Is this okay?” I smooth my black slacks and silky red shirt with my palms.

He smiles and comes up to me. “Are you nervous?”

“No. Yes! No!” I shake my head, trying to stop this mumbling. “No, I’m not okay, and yes, I’m nervous. I’m meeting your family for the first time. What if they don’t like me? Do I move out? Do you move in with me later? Do we even see each other after that?”

He takes my shoulders and pulls me into his embrace. His chest rumbles with silent laughter as he kisses the top of my head. “They’ll love you, Josie. If we ever have a fight, they’ll stand by you and kick me out of this house. Trust me.”

“But that’s not fair,” I say, pulling away a bit so I can look at his face. “It’s your home.”

“Ours, Joz. It’s ours.” He gives me a gentle kiss on my lips, lets go of me, and heads toward his side of the walk-in closet. Funny how his single kisses are always gentle, but every time we fuck, the kisses are consuming. I thought I wouldn’t like these tender touches and cheek kisses, but turns out, they spice up my life just as much as his animalistic fucking does. Go figure.

Kenneth moves around in the closet for a few seconds before he comes out with a box in his hands. He silently walks to me and places the box on the bed.

“What’s that?”

He nods toward it. “Open it.”

Intrigued, I carefully pull the cover off and gasp. “My power mules!”

I grab my shoes and start inspecting them. They’re in pristine condition. Pristine. I don’t see a single indication that they survived a bear attack and a mud drowning. Hugging them to my chest, I turn to Ken with misty eyes. “Thank you,” I whisper breathlessly.

His clean-shaven cheeks turn a soft shade of pink as he nods.

I instantly ditch the sneakers and pull my mules on. This, right here, is how I feel powerful and indestructible.

“Do you feel better now?” he asks with an amused voice as he watches me dance in front of the mirror.

“Much better!” I run to him, and he catches me as usual with his steely arms. I wrap myself around him, trying to imprint my body on him. “Thank you so much, Sheriff.”

The kiss I give him after that nearly makes us late, but his satisfied look when I fix my red lipstick in front of the mirror is totally worth it.

When we arrive at his parents' house, there's no parking available, and every single spot on the street and nearby driveways is taken. So we park far and walk, holding hands, while he gives me a quick rundown on everything I might have missed about his family.

Right before Ken is about to open the front door, it flies open, and a tiny, red-headed woman who looks a lot like Leila greets us with the widest smile on her face. Stella, Ken's mom.

"Josie!" She rushes toward me, and before I can even say a word back, she's hugging me like I'm her long-lost child. "I'm so happy to *finally*," she shoots a glare at Kenneth, who has the decency to look ashamed, "meet you! Come in. We've been waiting for you and weren't sure if he snatched you away."

She wraps her arm around me and leads me inside, totally ignoring Kenneth. The entire place is packed with people talking. When they see me, they call out my name with a wave, and I wave back. When we enter the kitchen, Alex's eyes go wide for a second before he pumps his fist in the air.

"Pay up!" he cries out, his palm outstretched and open.

A younger-looking version of Alex, who must be Aiden, takes a twenty from his pocket and puts it in Alex's hand with an eye-roll. Leila does the same with a loud sigh as Alex hugs her, only making him laugh harder.

"Oh, shit." Justin comes from the living room. "We won?" He looks at Alex, who's standing there with a shark smile on his happy face.

"Oh, no. I lost." Kayla follows Justin and pushes a twenty into Alex's hand. "And, oh, yes, Sheriff finally found his balls," she snickers, sending a look Kenneth's way.

Archie lets out a loud snort while Kayla moves toward Justin, who wraps his arm around her shoulders and tucks her in under his arm. A look of pure adoration descends on his face when he presses his nose into her hair. She wraps her arm around his torso as a happy smile stretches across her beautiful face.

"I had faith in you, Kenny. I did," Kayla says, trying hard not to laugh. "But after the rumor about your activities with Joz on the table at Donna's coffee shop, I figured you wouldn't show your face in your mama's kitchen."

"I bet his mama's kitchen's seen worse," Archie chimes in, making Stella giggle loudly, which makes all her kids groan in unison.

“You fuckers.” Kenneth walks up to me and takes a stand by my side.

I glance up at him. “What’s happening?”

“They made a bet,” he explains, annoyed.

“How does it feel, bro?” Alex chuckles as he puts the money into his back pocket. When he sees my confusion, he tries to explain. “Ken and everyone else here made a bet about me proposing to Freya. And now he’s on the receiving end of the same thing.” Alex cackles.

“What did you bet on?” I ask, curious. For a moment, it felt weird, but now that I see it’s not ill-natured, it sounds hilarious, actually.

“I was the only one who had faith in you. Not like you returned the gesture, fucker,” he mumbles, looking at Ken.

“Language!” Stella yells and smacks the back of Alex’s head with a towel.

“Sorry,” he chuckles sheepishly. “But anyway, I said you’d bring her here while everyone else,” his eyes dart around, “thought you’d ditch us and lock your woman up in your sex dungeon.”

Stella starts giggling again, making everyone groan. Again. I feel like I’m in a sitcom from the eighties, and I’m totally loving it.

“Mom, no,” Aiden says.

All of us suddenly feel incredibly hungry because a tall man comes in from outside carrying a huge plate of steaming grilled food. My mouth instantly waters.

“Dad, that smells gross!” Leila cries out and runs out of the kitchen. Yep, pregnant. And nope, not everyone feels hungry, apparently, just me.

“Oh, you must be Josie. Hello.” He places the plate on the table, and his hand goes into his back pocket, producing a wallet. Taking a twenty out, he stretches his arm silently toward Alex, who pockets the money with a shit-eating grin.

“I’m proud of you, son.” Keith, the father, winks at Kenneth, who snorts loudly in return.

“I didn’t notice that,” he replies, pointedly looking at Keith as he puts his wallet back into his pocket.

“Semantics.” He cackles and leans on the counter. “So, Josie, how are you liking Mrs. Roberts so far? Had any recent activities in that naughty swing you installed in your house?” he asks, trying very hard not to laugh.

I roll my eyes. Apparently, no one will let us live down this rumor that started it all.

“Plenty, Mr. Benson. Plenty.” I smile back with all my teeth, and he laughs.

“You’ll do just fine here.” He pushes from the counter and heads toward the living room. “Where is my granddaughter, Freya? Stop hiding my baby away from me.” His voice booms through the space, making everyone laugh.

“He’s been crazy about this baby,” Stella explains while she fixes the veggies on the table. “Freya went to feed her in peace since everyone’s been doting on them, and Alex here was going bananas.” She keeps chopping the food like a pro. “By the way, will I ever have another grandbaby?” She looks at us from under her treacherous lashes.

Kenneth wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me into him. “You will.”

I freeze and glance at him. “She will?”

“She will,” he confirms firmly, holding my eyes steady.

“She will,” I finally repeat and relax into his embrace, noticing everyone’s curious eyes on us.

The rest of the day goes by perfectly without even one broken lamp. We mingle with friends and neighbors, eat delicious food, and spread funny rumors. I like this small-town life and don’t know why I ever wanted to leave.

Epilogue

JOSIE
A few (however many it is) months later.

I look at the sign that just got delivered with stars in my eyes. *HopeWorks*. The name of my very own company, and I couldn't have done it without this little town and everyone in it.

Even Mrs. Roberts, who eventually warmed up to me and now stops by every other morning at *a decent hour* for a cup of decent joe—she's still on Donna's shit list and can't get a decent blend. I don't know what happened between them, but Mrs. Roberts clamps down like a shell every time I ask, so eventually I gave up on trying to figure it out. That doesn't mean that she's stopped spreading rumors about me and Ken's activities, but I've kind of grown to be fond of them. It's part of the local charm at this point.

“Crack ass. CRACK ASS!”

I look up from the sign I'm caressing with my fingers to find our foul-mouthed parrot sitting on the windowsill, wondering where he might have come from with this new insult. I'd love to say we adopted him, but I'm sure he thinks he adopted us. Anyway, after a couple of weeks of wallowing from his betrayal, I forgave him. Which made Kenneth so happy I instantly figured out he was harboring the traitor behind my back. Apparently, Bird has been Kenneth's snitch for some time now, and they both enjoy their codependent existence.

By the way, we still don't call him anything other than Bird because

every time we come up with a name for him, he gets offended and leaves. So Bird it is.

“What do you need, Traitor?” Or that. He actually responds to that name too.

“Food, woman. FOOD, WOMAN!” He knocks his beak so angrily against the surface as if I’m the intruder here.

I open the window to let him in and go to cut some fruit for him.

“Need big dick,” he yells, flying next to my face and flipping the strands of my hair with his wings.

I snort, recognizing where it came from. “And just where might I find that?”

“Sherrrrriff. Sherrrrriff big dick.” He nods his head rapidly in a parrot dance.

“Tell Sheriff Big Dick to come do his dirty work himself and not send you to get him out of the doghouse.” I start angrily chopping apples. Kenneth’s been in a foul mood for the past week, antagonizing everyone else in the station and at home. I don’t know what’s going on, but he’s sleeping on the couch. Well, not really, but he’s sleeping in the guest bedroom without any access to my fine prime rib.

“Need dick. Dick. BIG DICK.”

I roll my eyes at the little thing—I’ve been trying to teach him good words, but Bird refuses and always goes back to his dirty sailor ways. It’s embarrassing really. I have to lock all the windows when we have people over because the bird starts talking.

One time, Kenneth’s parents were here, and I let the parrot inside when he knocked because I thought it would be cute to have a pet in the house. It was not. The little jerk flew around the house, yelling, “Good girl. Hard. Good girl. Take it.” I thought I was going to die from mortification. His mother was sitting there with red cheeks, and his father could barely breathe from laughing so hard. I learned my lesson, and now the parrot is our dirty little secret.

I place the fruit in front of him, ignoring the little thing’s chattering when my phone rings.

“Hey, Jennica!” I say cheerfully when I pick up.

“*Oh God. Josie, you must do something. I beg you.*”

“We beg you,” another female voice calls out, and I suspect it’s Lily.

“*Yes, we beg you. Do something or we will poison your boyfriend. He’s*

been a menace for the past week, and today he's driving us all up the wall."

"I've noticed it too. Do you know what might be going on?"

The two-second pause says that Jennica might be onto something, but she's forever loyal to Kenneth and will not tell me a thing if he doesn't want her to. But she's worried. And pissed if I suspect correctly. I can keep him in the doghouse longer, but if I'm honest, it'll lead to me suffering even worse than him. His unhappiness doesn't bring me pleasure, so I decide why not.

"I'll be there in a few. I have something to mail out, so I'll stop by right after."

A loud exhale of relief nearly knocks me down through the phone. I can almost feel it here. *"Thank you. Dinner's on me."*

"I'll take you up on that," I promise before the call goes dead. I like Jennica. She's hilarious and has always been on my side. And I always remember loyalty, especially if it's given even before it's been deserved.

I grab the checks I need to mail out to the new suppliers I've established since Archie's house has become a well-known success, and my business is booming. We've established a good working relationship with Jericho Landell and his crew and look forward to our bright future together.

I've got a few of my old clients seeking help with projects that Randy's designers failed. I wasn't petty about not taking them because I need jobs, and it's just a business after all. Slowly and steadily, I'll build a name for myself, I don't have any doubts about that. Especially when I have a support group of amazing people who can lift me up when I'm down and celebrate my victories when I'm up.

My sister called me for the first time in years. When I picked up the phone, I didn't know what to say or how to behave, but she made it easy by quietly thanking me for paying for her schooling. I could barely push 'you're welcome' through my spasming throat. After that, the call was silent for a minute until I remembered Kenneth's words and asked her if she ever wanted to visit. She was so happy with my invitation that the conversation just flowed until I heard a loud ring. Then she said she needed to go to her class, but she'd call someday again.

I was expecting to have to wait months, but she called me only a week later. Ken said she needed time to process that I was in her life—something she didn't know she had before. So I gave her time. After that second call, we've been talking twice a week. With every call, my soul becomes lighter. It's like I'm rediscovering my family again. Or what's available of it, so to

speak. I'm still not talking to my parents or brothers, but I hope maybe I'll visit them one day. With Kenneth by my side, of course. Because no one would want to talk smack when a very intimidating man like Sheriff Benson is backing me up.

Life is good. And I miss Sheriff's body and his giant dick, if I'm completely honest. So I need to figure out what's going on and fix this.

After I mail out the letters, I drive to the station. Brad the Dread, as Jennica and I call him since he became so scared of Kenneth's wrath that his face turns pale when he messes up at work, is nowhere to be seen. The cute, perky receptionist, Lily, is vigorously typing something on her computer. She's completely hidden by the pile of papers and so immersed in her work, she doesn't even notice me come in.

I walk past her, trying not to disrupt her workflow, and move toward Ken's office. His door is closed. When Jennica sees me approaching, she throws her arms in the air in a victorious gesture.

"Is he in there?" I nod at his office.

"Yep. Cooped up since morning. Already bit Brad's head off and nearly chewed mine."

"I was wondering where Brad is." I chuckle.

"Licking his wounds." She throws her thumb behind her back, pointing at the window. "Or a severed head," she adds, wincing.

"Please keep people out, would you?" I ask her with a suggestive brow.

She places an open palm on her chest. "Anything for you, my queen," she replies with a not-so-subtle wink, making me snicker, and grabs the remote from her desk, increasing the volume on the mounted TV.

I square my shoulders and walk inside the room, locking the door behind me. The atmosphere is grim. Heavy. Kenneth's sitting at his desk, writing something in a journal they keep here for records as old-school folks do. A thundercloud is over his head, mirrored in his hazel eyes. His brows are drawn together. And I'm actually getting a bit nervous because I don't know what's been happening with him.

When he notices me, he lifts a brow for a second and goes back to writing, totally dismissing me.

Hmm. *All right, Sheriff, the game's on.*

I slowly walk to the window separating his office from the rest of the station and flip the blinds closed. Then I walk to the other one, doing the same. The sound of my heels clicking on the floor finally draws his attention.

He hasn't dropped the pen, but his eyes are on me.

"What are you doing here, Josie?"

As I walk past his desk, I trace the edge of it with my finger. "I came over here to perform a rectal exam to figure out what crawled up your ass," I declare with a raised brow of my own.

He finally puts the pen down and leans back in his chair.

"And that's why you locked the door and shut the blinds?" The corner of his lips quirk up.

"Do you want them to witness the historical moment?" I counter, making his lips twitch. "I didn't think so."

I place my leg between his massive thighs and lean my ass on the desk in front of him. His eyes dip down, scanning my whole body before returning back to my face.

"What do you need, Josie?" His voice is huskier now. Lower.

"To remind my good boy how bad he can be."

His eyes widen as I push away from the desk and drop to my knees between his legs.

"Joz, what are you doing?" He grabs my shoulders, nervously looking at the door. "We can't do it here."

I respond to him with a wicked smile, pressing my index finger into his abdomen, urging him to lean back and relax. His stomach is steely under my touch, and I push harder. He glances at the door one more time before licking his lips.

"Fuck, Josephina. You can't tease me like this."

Josephina.

"I'm not."

I slowly work the buckle of his belt and then the zipper while maintaining eye contact. His eyes are blown. I pull his rock-hard cock free. The size and perfection of it never cease to amaze me.

I run my fingers over its length, observing a powerful twitch in my hands.

"Joz." His voice is gravelly with need.

I love it. I forgot how much I love to have him at my mercy like this. At this point, I've forgotten why I sent him to the couch. Why would I do that when I could have *this* every night? *Stupid, stupid Josie.*

I cover the head with my mouth as I watch his face. I know how much my red lipstick drives him insane, so naturally, I made sure to apply it before I came here.

I've never been able to fit him into my mouth, but I've got hands, so I make it work. And looks like my work pays off because I needed to work my magic just for a few minutes before he warns me.

"You need to pull out if you don't want to swallow," he says in a low voice so no one in the office can hear us.

I smile with his dick in my mouth, making him growl and start lifting his hips to help me.

"But you never want to pull out, do you, Josephina?" He grips my hair in his fist and starts guiding me the way he wants me. "You like swallowing my cum like a good girl, don't you?" His voice is so low and growly, just the way I love it the most.

Here's my bad Kenneth.

He wraps my hair around his fist and starts moving himself inside of my mouth faster, making me tear up a little.

"I'm going to cum, and you're going to swallow. All of it. Do you hear me?"

I try nodding, but I'm at his mercy, unable to do anything on my own at this point. A few pumps in, I swallow every bit of his pleasure and frustration, making his muscles spasm for a few seconds before he sags with relief.

He tucks his cock back in and pulls me up, planting me on his lap. His nose comes to my neck, where he starts sniffing my skin.

"I've missed you this week," he whispers.

"What happened with you?" I ask quietly, drawing small circles on his back.

"I'm—" he sighs but doesn't say anything else.

And then something pokes into my butt. I wiggle, thinking it might be the belt, but no, it's something bigger.

"Seriously? Already good to go for another round?" I giggle, lifting my ass and pushing my hand into his pocket, trying to tickle his unregistered weapon. But I discover something entirely different.

Pulling out a small, velvet box of a super-bright pink color, I stare at it like it's a snake.

"What is this, Ken?" I whisper in fear.

He exhales loudly. "This is the reason I might have been a bit edgy this week."

"What?" I look into his eyes. "I don't understand."

His brows are pinched together in concentration. He's chewing on the side of his cheek, contemplating if he should tell me what's going on. He'd better since I'm holding a huge fucking rock in my hands. When he finally makes a decision, he moves his hand to my waist, holding me still.

"I'm ready for the next step, Joz. I know what I want, and it's you. But I don't know what you want, and it makes me jumpy."

"Grumpy, you mean?" I ask with a lopsided smile.

"That too." He nods with a chuckle. "I've recently discovered that I can't bear the idea of you leaving Little Hope. Or me. Ever. But I don't know where you stand with all of it. I know we discussed that you might be staying, but I don't know if you've maybe changed your mind."

"Why didn't you ask then?" My voice is barely above a whisper.

"I don't know." He shrugs those massive shoulders of his.

"Maybe you weren't ready?" I ask, suddenly realizing that the idea of him popping the question a few months ago would have scared me to the hills. But today, I'm more scared of the idea that he won't ask.

"I am, Josie." He tucks a lock of my hair behind my ear. "But I'm not sure if you are."

I swallow a sudden huge lump in my throat. "I am," I whisper back.

His face instantly brightens. "Yeah?"

I nod. "Very much. I thought you'd never ask."

He lets out a husky laugh and pulls me into him. "You have no idea how much I've been rehearsing this moment, trying to come up with the right way to propose. And now I totally butchered it."

"You haven't. Ask me."

"Now?"

I shrug. "I think it's perfect timing."

His neck moves with a rough swallow as his eyes dart between mine. Finally, he takes a deep breath. "Josephina Monroe, will you make an honorable man out of me and give me your hand and heart?" His voice is throaty.

I start giggling before I lift my hand to his face. "Yes, Kenneth Benson, I will make an honorable man out of you and marry you."

"Thank fuck!" Jennica cries out from the other room, making us both laugh.

"Nothing is sacred in this town?" I ask quietly as I touch my forehead to his. "Nothing but our sex swing apparently. How did they find out by the

way?”

He chuckles. “The Bird must have spread the rumors.”

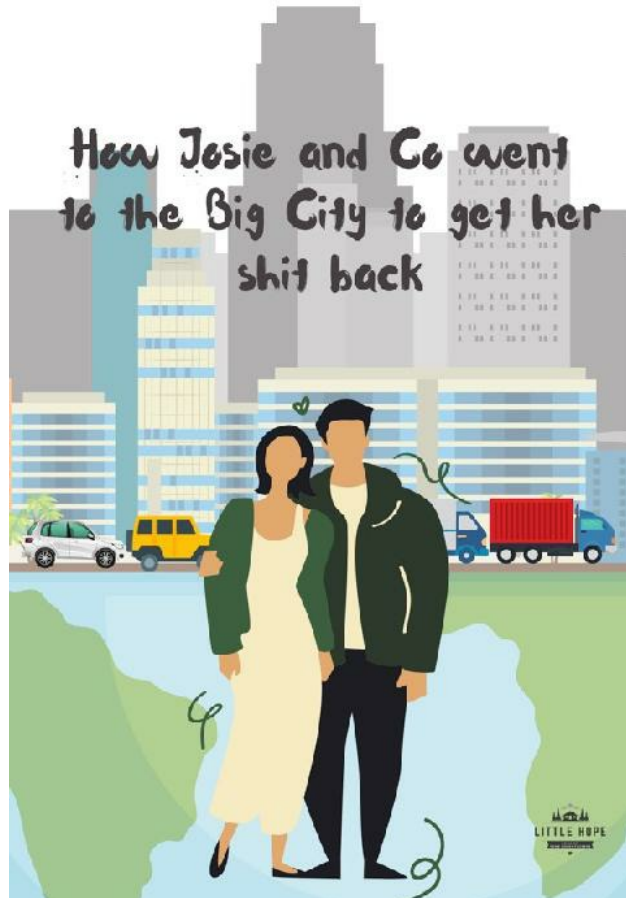
“We should reconsider the parrot soup,” I say with a sigh.

“We totally should.” He laughs and presses his lips to mine.

Bonus Story

ARIANA CANE

How Josie and Co went
to the Big City to get her
shit back



Welcome or Welcome back to Little Hope!

Want to see how Josie and the whole crew went to New York to get her

shit stuff back? Or how Randy the Ex Asshole got what he deserved? You can find this bonus story (4.5k words) [here!](#)

If you're reading the paperback, you can find the bonus story by going to my website www.arianacane.com—the story will be on the 'Home' page or under 'Extras' for Little Hope series.

Acknowledgments

Well, it's been something different for me, and I totally liked doing it. I hope you enjoyed the result too. As you can see, Kenneth's story hits small-town vibes better. And we all needed something lighter after Archie. So we got a pierced dick. :)

But it's all side stories; the primary goal of this part is to say thank you.

I want to start by saying thank you to YOU. Yes, you. Whoever you are and wherever you are. Thank you for picking up my book and giving it a chance. Either you're new to Little Hope—welcome and thank you for coming here! Or you're a returning citizen—welcome back and thank you for sticking here! No book happens without a reader. So, you are the reason I write.

If you see your name multiple times, then you totally rock!

A huge thank you goes to my PA Sarah Crouse. As always. I don't know what I'd do without you. Quite literally. You've been with me from the very beginning, and if you think you're going somewhere... well, you don't! LOL

Jennifer—YES, YOU. Thank you for your constant support and loyalty.

Meaghan, thank you for believing in me even when I don't.

Darlene, you are my bat bitch.

To Priya—I can always rely on your love for Little Hope. And Justin. We both love Justin and all his nine inches.

Janine—your love for my boyz keeps my heart from freezing over.

To Tricia, who took on an impossible task. Thank you!

To my supporters who quite literally keep coffee in my cup: Tricia, Priya, Shannon, Janine, Christina, Hailey, Meghan, Cris. Thank you! I use a lot of caffeinated fuel. Besides keeping my coffee coming, you keep me... well, I could say 'coming' to my senses (you see what I did there? wink-wink) and keep writing. Every single one of your comments and messages helps me to finally stop procrastinating and go back to writing the damn book.

To Tracey—for all you do to keep me entertained :) And for helping me to polish Daddy Kenny. You totally deserve that spot on that 'special' page.

To Lauren. THANK YOU!

To Aiden. Accidental name matching is totally coincidental! Thank you for setting the 'building record' straight.

To my street team, a group of awesome people (the order of names is out of order, duh): Jenny, Tricia, Steph, Cheryl, Tracey, Priya, Josie, Traci, Dar, Jen, Cristina, Preet, Crystal, Heather, Nikita, Stacey, Erin, Shannon, Anshul, Andrea, Rose, Christina, Jennifer, Marisa, Meaghan, Trinity, Hailey, Molly, Tessa, Lindsey. I hope I didn't forget anyone, and I double-checked with the group. But these days, I barely remember my own name, ha-ha, so please forgive me if I messed up!

To my whole ARC team, who spend their valuable time reading my books when they could be doing something else. Thank you!

If you don't see your name for some reason (the only explanation is that my distracted self forgot to type it), you're still here!

Thank you all! I'll forever be grateful to everyone who helps me and everyone who reads my books.

~with love,

Ariana, Frank, Ghost, Midnight, Bird the Snitch (the new addition), and all the bears of Maine.

Also by Ariana Cane

The World of the Fallen Gates series

Dystopian, paranormal, urban fantasy romance series

Tale of the Deceived, Book 1 of the duet

Story of the Forsaken, Book 2 of the duet

-vampires, werewolves, faes

-true enemies to lovers

-the life after the world has ended

-super slow burn

-one bed

-true series

-scorching tension

-tons of secrets

Little Hope Series

Small town, slow burn, contemporary romance stand-alones

Haunted Hearts, Little Hope Series, Book 1

Alex and Freya

-one bed

-grumpy-sunshine

-strangers to enemies to lovers

-an ex-Navy veteran with PTSD

-woman on the run

-woodchopping

-cabin in the woods

-damaged MMC

-all the bears of Maine

Guilty Minds, Little Hope Series, Book 2

Justin and Kayla

-true bully romance

-groveling

-tattoo artist-waitress/mechanic

-miscommunication for a good reason
-wildlife of Maine

Broken Souls, Little Hope Series, Book 3

Mark and Alicia
-fireman and author
-strangers to neighbors to lovers
-hurt/comfort
-trauma recovery
-man's best friend
-protective MMC

Fragile Lives, Little Hope Series, Book 4

Archie and Leila
-enemies to lovers
-one bed
-cabin in the woods
-age-gap
-brother's best friend
-the most beloved character
-wildlife of Maine
-trauma recovery/PTSD (MMC)
-lots of tattoos and piercings (MMC)

Hidden Fears, Little Hope Series, Book 5

Kenneth and Josie
*-pierced *eggplant**
-longtime bachelor
-strangers to enemies to lovers
-forced proximity
-curvy heroine
-sheriff/designer
-wildlife of Maine
-hilarious small town situations
-mind relax after 'Fragile Lives'
-slow burn