

A winter night scene with a cabin and snow-covered trees under a starry sky. The cabin is illuminated from within, and a Christmas tree is visible in the foreground. The background shows snow-covered mountains and a dark sky with stars.

*Whiskey*  
GIFTS

WHISKEY FALLS, BOOK FOUR

TARYN RIVERS

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BOOK FOUR

# TARYN RIVERS



Whiskey Gifts

By Taryn Rivers

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Edited by Katy Nielsen

Proofread by Elizabeth S. Shepard and Barren Acres Editing

Cover design by Lori Jackson

A WHISKEY FALLS NOVEL

Published by Taryn Rivers

[Taryn@tarynrivers.com](mailto:Taryn@tarynrivers.com)

To keep up with all Taryn Rivers books and news, subscribe to my newsletter at  
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## ABOUT WHISKEY GIFTS

*Small town charm meets big-hearted romance in this holiday tale of love, danger, and found family.*

### **Josie**

With a grandbaby on the way and my very own cowboy melting my heart with just a smile, this should be the best Christmas ever... but with my luck in love, I know it's too good to last. When a young runaway shows up with danger nipping at her heels, my doubts and insecurities become the least of my problems. It's going to take a Christmas miracle to keep her safe—and my heart from being broken.

### **Judge**

Josie's everything I've ever wanted for myself, but something is stopping her light from shining as brightly as I know it can... and it's not just because of the runaway we're trying to help. It's going to take every trick this ol' cowboy knows to save the girl—and Christmas, if it's even possible.

*To Lee*

*(My Josie, and the best ex-stepmom ever)*

*I swore I'd never write Josie's full story because, well, who wants to write a romance based around their mom? But here we are.*

*Merry Christmas!*

*Now pass me the brain bleach.*

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*This Christmas Day* by the Trans-Siberian Orchestra

*Don't Take The Girl* by Tim McGraw

*Into The Silent Night* by for King & Country

*You're A Mean One, Mr. Grinch* by the Small Town Titans

*A Country Boy Can Survive* by Hank Williams, Jr.

*Under This Ole Hat* by Sawyer Brown

*Santa Bring My Baby Back to Me* by Elvis Presley

*Christmas Eve/Sarajevo 12/24* by Trans-Siberian Orchestra

[Click here for the full playlist on Spotify.](#)



# THIS AIN'T CHILI

**J**udge

*Friday*

“We’re all gonna die. That’s all there is to it.”

If I wasn’t driving, I’d bang my head against the steering wheel. My mother handled the move from Texas to Wisconsin like a champ—until the first time it snowed. Now with a blizzard forecast for tonight, she’s in full-on panic mode. “Mom, it’s just snow and they get it all the time up here. We’ll be fine.”

“Did you not hear me? They’re calling for six to twelve inches! That’s a foot of snow in one go! I bet there’ll be power outages and then we’ll all freeze to death.”

I take in a deep breath and exhale slowly. “Aren’t you the one that told me West women don’t panic? A foot of snow is nothing up here. Even if there is a power outage, we’ve got a wood stove and plenty of firewood to keep us warm. We’ll be fine.”

“I guess you’re right about the stove, but I’m still heading into town to stock up on bread and milk. Six to twelve inches, son. We’ll be snowed in for months, just you wait and see.”

“They’ll have the roads plowed before you even get up in the morning. And there’s no need to go to the store—Josie went yesterday and stocked us up.”

“Didn’t I teach you anything?” she screeches. “You can never have enough bread and milk when winter weather is

coming in!”

I swear, if you look up drama queen in the dictionary, you’ll find my mother listed as the OG of them all. “If it’ll make you feel better to go buy bread and milk—even though we don’t need any—then knock yourself out. Just be back ’fore dark. I don’t want you out on the roads in case it blows in early. I’ve got one last run to make, then I’ll be home.”

“Okay, son. Be safe.” In a complete turnaround, her voice is much softer now.

“Always. Love you, Mom.”

“Right back ’atcha,” she says before hanging up.

I really do love my mom, but she’s a firecracker. Generally, this makes her a complete pain in the ass, but it’s also a good thing considering what brought our family to Whiskey Falls. That was a pure clusterfuck that most women in their seventies wouldn’t have handled well.

Not that I’ll ever regret moving here. Not after finding the woman I’ve been waiting for all my life.

The flickering of Christmas lights reflects off my windshield as I pull into the parking lot of Josie’s bar; lights I put up last week with the help of Kenny, the kitchen manager. Earlier in the year, if someone had told me I’d be freezing my ass off on a roof in Wisconsin this winter while decorating my woman’s bar for Christmas, I’d have laughed in their face.

Confirmed bachelor and proud Texan through and through, I never thought there’d come a time where I’d leave Texas—much less have a woman I called my own. After over fifty years of looking for the perfect woman for me and striking out time and again, I’d given up on it ever happening.

Not that I’m complaining, at least about the woman. The cold and snow—that’s a whole other kettle of fish.

After parking, I make my way to the door. A blast of warm air, along with the sound of Elvis crooning about Santa bringing his baby back, greets me when I step inside. As soon as my eyes adjust to the lower light, I look around and find

Josie standing behind the bar conversing with Henry, a regular here.

She looks exhausted, which isn't surprising since the flu has hit her staff and she hasn't had a day or night off in over a week. Tired or not, she's still beautiful, and has this inner glow that lights up everything around her. It may be a bit dimmed lately, but it's still there. That light is what drew me to her the first time I laid eyes on her, but it's her indomitable spirit that sealed the deal.

She looks up and, as soon as she spies me, graces me with a smile. "Hey, babe."

Instead of answering her out loud, I go straight to her and pull her in for a kiss. Like always, as soon as our lips touch, something settles inside me.

Once I've greeted her properly, I pull back and look down into her bemused baby blues, ignoring all the catcalls from the peanut gallery.

"Hey there, Sweetness," I murmur.

Her tired eyes crinkle. "Here for lunch?"

"Yeah. Can you get me something quick though? I've got to run a load to Green Bay. The quicker I get there, the faster I'll make it home tonight."

"You're in luck. With the first big storm of the season coming in tonight, the lunch special today is chili."

"First big storm my ass," I mutter while trying not to flinch at the idea of chili made this far north. Josie's one hell of a cook, though, so I'll give her the benefit of the doubt and try not to judge until I taste it.

Josie rolls her eyes. "Two or three inches does not make a storm. That's just a dusting."

"Where I'm from, a quarter of an inch paralyzes the city," I grumble.

"It snows in El Paso? Really?" Henry asks.

I turn toward him. "Not often, but sometimes, yeah."

He shakes his head. “Well, there you go. You learn something new every day.”

“That doesn’t mean anyone there knows how to drive in it,” I inform him. “The minute the first flake hits the ground, you’re taking your life in your hands if you get out on the roads.”

“Did Josie give you driving lessons when it snowed the first time then?” he asks, his heavy northern accent flattening those long o’s within an inch of their lives.

I shake my head. “I’m a truck driver—I already knew how. Now, if you see my mom out in it, you should probably get off the sidewalks. I’ve tried to teach her. Josie’s tried. Hell, even Mercy tried once she proved to Griff she had the hang of driving in it, but Mom’s hopeless.”

Josie snorts behind me. “Taking her out in the snow was the scariest moment of my life, which is saying something.”

Considering that this summer she was held at gunpoint by a crazy drug lord, she ain’t lying—that is saying something.

She squeezes my hand before pulling away from me. “Be right back. Gotta get your order in.”

Once she’s gone, I step out from behind the bar and grab a stool close to the register so I can talk to Josie as she works. I’m barely settled before my phone rings.

Pulling it out, I see it’s Tony Kane, the sheriff and Josie’s de facto son-in-law. “Tony, what’s up?”

“Dave Perkins just made bail,” he says, his voice grim.

Shit. Dave’s wife, Regina, and their daughter are staying at the farm where Josie and I live—a place we’re developing into a refuge for domestic abuse survivors.

“Have you called Bart?” I ask. Bart, the farm’s caretaker, will get everything locked down until I get there.

“Yeah, and Griff, too.”

That throws relief on me. Griff is the former sheriff and owner of the farm. It was his idea to turn it into a refuge for

women at extreme risk that the shelter in Shawano doesn't have the security to keep safe.

He asked me to come on board because of my experience working with The Underground, a nationwide organization that has relocated thousands of women who are survivors of abuse or trafficking, and keeps them hidden from the men or criminal organizations hunting them.

We're technically not open yet, as the new building he had built isn't ready for occupancy. Mom gave up her cottage on the property to Regina temporarily, and is now occupying the guest room of the main farmhouse where Josie and I stay.

Regina is our first resident, and sadly, she's a prime example of why we're doing this. This isn't the first time Dave's been arrested for domestic battery. He's been hauled in several times, but Regina has always dropped the charges and gone back to him.

The difference is this time she has a two-month-old baby that he threatened when he beat the shit out of her. The thought that her daughter could get hurt finally gave Regina the motivation to kick his ass to the curb for good.

Despite a restraining order, he followed her to her lawyer's last week, confronting her in the parking lot after she left. Things would have been a lot worse had Ted Wilson, Regina's lawyer, not been watching out for her.

I firmly believe anyone who breaks a restraining order should have to stay in jail until their case goes to trial, but it rarely happens like that. They actually held Dave longer than I thought they would.

"I'm at Josie's for lunch. I'll head there now," I tell Tony. Looks like my boss is going to have to find another driver to pick up that load in Green Bay. I've never called in sick before, but unfortunately he's an asshole on a good day. He won't give a shit about Regina's ex.

"Finish your lunch. I've got a deputy there now, and he's staying until backup shows," Tony assures me.

"Gotcha. I'll fill Josie in."

“Great, that saves me time. Call me if you need anything,” he says.

“I will. Thanks, Tony,” I reply.

I hang up just as Josie appears in front of me with a glass of water.

“Everything alright?” she asks as she slides it in front of me.

“Dave Perkins just made bail,” I inform her.

Her eyes widen. “Shit. Are we ready for this?”

“Hope so. With Dave being a former Navy SEAL, it’ll be a trial by fire for our security measures,” I grit out.

“Jesus. A SEAL?” Henry mutters, not bothering to hide he’s eavesdropping. “He’s going to be tough to keep out. I’ve never heard of him. Is he new around here?”

I shrug. “Depends on your definition of new.” As soon as Tony brought Regina to the farm, I started digging into Perkins. They moved here after he left the Navy to be closer to Regina’s sisters.

“He’s been here a year or so,” Josie answers. “I think he’s from the U.P. originally.”

“You need to be careful. Word’s been getting around about what we’re doing at the farm. I wouldn’t put it past Dave to show up here,” I warn her.

She nods. “I’m aware. I’ll be careful.”

“You going to be home tonight?” I ask.

She shakes her head tiredly. “No. Tina called in, and she’s running a fever.”

Shit. Tina is the new night manager. No way can Josie leave and not have a manager here.

“I’m sorry,” she goes on. “Sometimes being the owner sucks.” She says this like I’m going to be pissed at her over the situation.



I give her what I hope is an assuring smile. “It’s not your fault the flu is running through your staff like wildfire. Once I get everything settled at the farm, I’ll come help you close tonight in case Perkins shows up when no one else is here.”

“I’d appreciate it,” she replies, looking relieved.

Just as I’m thinking about leaning over the bar and kissing her, Kenny unceremoniously plops my chili down in front of me.

I look down at the bowl of macaroni swimming in a dark red sauce with what looks like hamburger in it, then back up in confusion. “I thought the special was chili.”

“It is chili,” Kenny growls.

I shake my head. “Chili doesn’t have macaroni in it.”

“Yes, it does,” both Kenny and Josie say at the same time.

I look up at them. “It sure as hell does not.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Kenny argues.

“I’m from fucking Texas, so I damn sure know what chili is.” I look back down at the bowl and shake my head. “And what it isn’t.”

Josie’s hands go straight to her waist and those baby blues shoot fire. “I know you’re not complaining about my food.”

“Son, I’d rethink your definition of chili,” Henry warns, his voice serious, but the grin on his face shows how funny he thinks this is.

But he is right that I’m skirting perilously close to the danger zone with Josie. I need to talk her down before she chucks a bottle at my head, so I hold my hands up. “I’m not complaining. It looks and smells great... but this ain’t chili,” I say to calm her down before her head starts orbiting Pluto.

“Well, what the fuck is it then?” Kenny demands.

“Hell if I know,” I say and take a tentative bite under the force of their glares. Flavor explodes on my tongue. There’s a chili-ish flavor to it that kind of reminds me of Texas

spaghetti, but maybe a little spicier. “It’s really good,” I say, then shovel another bite in. “It’s just not chili.”

Josie rolls her eyes, but her hands drop from her waist. “Lord, save me from opinionated Texas cowboys,” she grumbles, then walks toward a customer with an almost empty beer mug.

Kenny watches me for another beat, then mutters something under his breath before going back to his kitchen.

Henry shakes his head in wonder. “I think you’re the first person to complain about Josie’s food without getting banned for life.”

I shrug. “I didn’t complain, I just set them straight on what chili isn’t.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Riiiiight. You’ve got balls, I’ll give you that.”

With that, he takes a long draw off his beer, then gets up and heads to the jukebox, scratching his belly as he walks.

I grin into my bowl as I shovel more in my mouth. It may not be chili, but it’s still mighty tasty.

The lunch rush is in full swing by the time I finish eating. Josie hasn’t been able to talk much, so I content myself with watching her as she works.

She makes running a bar and grill look easy, joshing with her customers and making sure everyone gets served quickly and efficiently.

I almost miss it as I’m scraping my bowl clean, but I look up in time to find her watching me with a look of doubt and—fucking hell—is that fear? What I just ate churns in my gut like acid. I thought we were doing great, but maybe I was wrong.

As soon as her eyes meet mine, she pastes a smile on her face, covering it up, but I didn’t imagine what I saw. She’s been a bit on the grouchy side the past couple of weeks. I’ve been attributing it to the craziness at the bar, but that look—there’s something wrong. Seriously wrong.

As tempting as it is to drag her ass back to her office and question her, neither one of us has time.

Once I get her home tonight, she's got some explaining to do. I'm going to figure out what has her running scared, and I'm going to fix it.

It took me over fifty years to find the perfect woman for me, and I'm not letting her go.



SUCH A SOFTIE

## JOSIE

**F**riday

“Drive safe,” I say to the last customer before shutting and locking the door behind him. I go straight to the jukebox and unplug it, reveling in the carol-free silence. If I have to hear one more Christmas song, my head is going to explode.

With a new man in my life and a grandbaby on the way, you’d think I’d be overflowing with holiday cheer, but if my Christmas spirit gets any lower the Grinch is going to have to make room for me up on that mountain of his.

“How am I supposed to mop floors without music?” Gretchen whines as she wipes down a table.

“Figure it out,” I growl as I bag up the last of the trash and head down the back hallway, immediately feeling bad about taking my mood out on her.

An icy blast of air hits me as I open the door leading to the alley behind the bar. Propping it with my foot, I grab the trash and step through. The bitter cold seeps into my bones as I make my way into the dark night and toss the bags into the dumpster. Geez, I’m getting too damn old for this shit.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I mutter when I see a pile of boxes next to the dumpster. How many times do I have to tell the kitchen staff to break down the boxes and leave them in the shed for recycling?

I walk over to the boxes, muttering under my breath, then almost fall on my ass when a young girl jumps out from under them, startling the crap out of me.

I think we're both freaked out because we just stand there, staring at each other. She's young, and so tiny she barely reaches my chin. A blond lock of hair peeks out from under her cap, and her startlingly blue eyes are brimming with fear—but it's the huge black eye that has most of my attention.

Before I can say a word, her eyes dart toward the end of the alley, then she sprints around me, taking off toward the parking lot.

“Hey, wait!” I yell and run after her, which only has her pouring on the speed.

I'm breathing heavily by the time I get to the end of the alley, but she's nowhere to be found. My body shivers, the cold seeping in through my sweater as I do a sweep of the parking lot, looking for any sign of her. The storm will be here within the hour. That child needs to be somewhere warm and safe—not on the streets or hiding under boxes.

Headlights swing my way as a familiar black pickup pulls in. Relief hits me as I watch Judge step out of his truck. As a specialist in helping women and kids who find themselves in bad situations, I know he'll find her and fix whatever has her running scared.

And he'll deal with whatever rat bastard gave her that black eye, too.

A brown cowboy hat covers his dark hair, and a bulky coat hides his broad shoulders, but those gorgeous green eyes of his sweep over me, checking me from head to toe as he strides toward me.

All my life, I'd been into bikers and bad boys, but all it took was one look at Judge West and I was ready to save a horse and ride a cowboy.

When we were introduced, he stood up and I took him all in—the hat, the boots, the jeans he filled out so very well—he tripped my trigger in all the right ways. Then, instead of

shaking my hand, he lifted it up and kissed it, those jade green eyes never leaving mine.

For the first time in my life, I was gobsmacked by a man. I even blushed.

Me—Josie Olson—blushing like a giddy schoolgirl.

When he said my name in that deep Southern drawl of his, I almost spontaneously orgasmed on the spot. It's a wonder I didn't melt into a puddle of goo at his feet.

That he's just as beautiful on the inside as he is on the outside is the icing on the cowboy beefcake. Not a lot of men would repeatedly put their lives on the line for women they've never met, but Judge did it for years with The Underground.

Even though these past few months with him have been almost magical, I've never had good luck with men. Being with me isn't easy. I'm loud—some even say I'm obnoxious. I'm opinionated, was born without a filter, and rarely hold back. Then there's the fact I own a bar, which means hellacious hours and lots of drama from both employees and customers. Most men get sick of it after a while.

But instead of getting frustrated and whining, so far Judge just pitches in and helps. He seems perfect for me, but I can't help but worry he's going to figure out what a pain in the ass I am to be with and leave.

My heart tells me I've found the man of my dreams, but my head doesn't believe such a man exists.

As soon as he reaches me, he wraps his arms around me and his mouth covers mine as I melt into his embrace. It doesn't matter if we've been apart for the whole day or only fifteen minutes. When he sees me, he kisses me—and he doesn't give a shit who's around us or what's going on. Not that I'm complaining. The man knows how to kiss.

He pulls away and peers down at me. "Sweetness, why the hell are you standing out here in the freezing cold?"

"I startled a kid in the alley. She ran off before I could catch her."



He looks around, his gaze finally falling on the trees at the back of the lot where I'm sure the girl ran to.

"A kid at this time of night? That's not good," he mutters. "How old?"

I shrug. "Maybe twelve or thirteen. She's tiny so I'm not sure, and she was sporting a huge black eye."

"Show me where she came from," he says, and steers me toward the alley. "You still haven't told me why you're out here in the first place," he says as we walk, not hiding his exasperation with me.

"I was taking the trash out," I inform him, my voice a little on the snippy side.

He cocks his head and gives me a disappointed look. "I told you I was coming to help you close. What if it had been Perkins in that alley instead of the girl?"

I don't answer because he's right. I was so focused on getting shit done so I could go home and crash, I didn't even think about Perkins.

When we make it to the back of the alley, we find a backpack under all the boxes.

"You don't think she was going to spend the night under those boxes, do you?" I ask, completely appalled at the idea.

"No. She was probably searching them for anything she could use, and hid when you came out the door." He grabs the backpack, unzips it, and rifles through, pulling out clothes, some granola bars, candy, chips, and at the very bottom, a wad of cash. "Shit. Looks like she's a runaway."

My heart sinks at his declaration. That poor little girl... on the streets alone. God, I can barely fathom it.

He shoves everything back in the pack and sets it down where he found it. "Go back in where it's warm and call the sheriff. I'll look around, see if I can find her."

I want to roll my eyes at his bossiness, but do as I'm told. We need to find this kid before she freezes to death.

I pull out my phone as I head inside, groaning when Christmas music greets me as soon as I walk in the door. I take in a deep breath, close my eyes, and exhale before dialing emergency.

The blinking of the Christmas lights decorating the bar along with Burl Ives crooning about jolly Christmases is at complete odds with the circumstances as I report the girl.

After dispatch assures me they're sending someone out right away, I get Gretchen started on final prep for the early shift tomorrow before heading to the kitchen to move things along there. I want to get everyone home before the storm hits.

As I work, I quiz all of my employees, but no one has seen the girl before, or heard of any kids running away from home recently.

Things like this spread like wildfire in our little town, which means she either just ran away today and word hasn't gotten around, she's not from around here, or—worst case of all—no one gave enough of a shit about her to report her missing.

By the time I'm herding everyone out, I find two sheriff's cruisers in the parking lot.

"They'll find her," Gretchen assures me.

"I hope so," I murmur as I watch Judge walk out of the woods with Owen Anderson, a deputy sheriff. When they see me they veer my way.

"Be safe," I tell Gretchen before she takes off to her car.

"You too," she calls back.

"You find anything?" I ask Judge when they make it to me.

"No. She's either gone or hiding."

"Shit," I say, my heart sinking.

"We'll keep an eye out for her," Owen assures me. "Do some extra drive-bys of the bar in case she comes back."

My eyes meet Judge's. "I've got emergency blankets in my car. I can put them near her stuff."

His face softens. “Good idea. I’ve got one too.”

I look down, relieved she’ll at least have something to keep her warm if she comes back. “I can leave the door to the storage shed open. It may not be heated, but it’s solid and dry.”

“I’ll add a blanket to the pile, too,” Owen offers. “And I’ll make sure it’s the unmarked unit that comes by so we don’t scare her off if she’s close and watching.”

Judge puts his arm around me. “She’ll come back for her backpack, babe. And with the blankets and a place to hole up for the night, she’ll be okay.”

I melt into him, nodding my head into his chest as he steers me toward the door.

Once inside, he snags my keys so he can grab the blankets while I gather up some water bottles. I also pull down a thermos and boil some water to fill it with sweetened hot tea. While that’s steeping, I fill a bag with a sandwich, chips, and a slice of chocolate cake. I can’t add the ice cream that we usually serve with it, but I don’t think she’ll care.

When Judge returns with an armful of blankets and a flashlight, he sees what I’m doing and grins as he sets the blankets on the counter. “You’re such a softie,” he teases as he grabs a trash bag off the shelf.

“Fuck you. I’m a badass, and everyone knows it.”

“You’re right. You’re as badass as they come, darlin’, but you’re still a softie.” His eyes twinkle as he shoves the blankets in the bag.

The man thinks of everything. I’d have never thought to do that, so by the time she got to them, they probably would’ve been covered in snow and just as soggy as those boxes are gonna be.

Once done, I throw my jacket on, grab the thermos and food, then head outside to the alley with Judge trailing behind, carrying the bag of blankets.

We drop everything by the backpack and I tuck a note inside where I’m sure she’ll find it, then turn to Judge. “Do

you think she'll come back?"

"Yeah, if the cops stay away. She'll want her backpack," he answers as he puts his arm around me and draws me close.

I snuggle in. "It just feels weird walking away, knowing she's out here alone."

"Street kids are tough and you've done everything you can. Besides, the only way to guarantee she won't come back is to stay here and wait for her," he says, his voice low. "Let's get you home before the storm hits. You've got a big day tomorrow."

I sigh, knowing he's right. I've got a baby shower to attend and have to get up early to get the food ready. With one last look at the girl's backpack, I allow him to steer me away, even though my gut is screaming for me to turn around and continue searching.

Dread pools in my belly. I don't know why, but something tells me we need to find her... soon.

*Hi,*

*My name is Josie and I own the bar. I'm sorry I startled you and you felt you had to run away. In order to figure out who you are, we looked inside your backpack. We didn't take anything, and I promise it won't happen again, but it looks like you may be in some trouble.*

*If you need help or just someone to talk to, come into the bar or give*

me a call at 715-555-0168 anytime,  
day or night. I won't call the cops,  
I promise.

There's a storm blowing in tonight,  
so just in case you don't have  
anywhere to go, I left the door to the  
storage shed open and gathered up  
some blankets for you. There's also  
some hot food in case you're hungry.

If I don't see you, I'll leave  
you more food tomorrow night.

Be safe,

Josie Olson



BAH-FUCKING-HUMBUG

## JOSIE

**S**aturday

The sunlight glistening off the snow on the trees and bushes lining the lane makes for an almost postcard perfect view for my drive. As expected, the storm dumped over a foot of snow on us overnight, and they're predicting we're going to stay cold enough to keep it through Christmas.

I'm usually thrilled at the possibility of a white Christmas, but all I can think about is that poor kid out there in the cold.

Judge talked to Owen first thing, and he reported that everything we left for the girl disappeared shortly after we took off, but as far as he can tell she didn't stay in the shed. I guess in the scheme of things, this is both good and bad news. She may have spent the night in the elements, but she had hot food and blankets so she's probably fine.

I pull around the bend and Erick and Rose Beck's home comes into view. I was married to Erick's dad, Joe, for several years, and even though things didn't work out with him, I consider Erick and his half-sister, Bree, the children of my heart. Especially Bree, since her real mother was a screaming bitch and a horrible mom, so I was the closest thing Bree had to a real one.

Rose, a florist, has the house decked out in a shitload of lights, garlands, wreaths, and colorful ornaments, which brings even more attention to the stunning architecture of the structure. It's so damn festive, Mrs. Claus herself would be proud to call this place home. You just look at it and know



behind those doors you'll find hot chocolate, sugar cookies, and Christmas carols galore.

My lip curls up. Bah-fucking-humbug.

Instead of parking by the house I pull up to Rose's workshop, which is also tastefully decorated to within an inch of its life.

Mia, a friend of mine, pulls in beside me. I'm not surprised to see her here early. Not only are we splitting catering duties for the shower, she's Tony's mom, which makes her grandma number two.

I've been looking forward to this baby shower since I found out Bree was pregnant. It's time to set aside my worry over some kid I don't even know and focus on the blessings right in front of me.

I still get misty-eyed thinking of Bree having a baby. I never had children of my own—not because I didn't want kids—it just wasn't in the cards for me, but I'm going to be a grandma to this baby, and I can't freaking wait.

I've already crocheted three baby blankets—complete with matching booties. They're sitting in my back seat, neatly wrapped in both pink and blue since we don't know the sex of the baby, along with several other things I couldn't resist picking up.

Grabbing my purse and the bag with the presents, I hop out of my SUV, going to the rear and opening the hatch. Erick and Tony file out of the house; Tony going to Mia's car, Erick to mine.

Our trunks are full of food for the shower. I wanted to cater the whole affair myself, making all of Bree's favorites, but Mia insisted on helping. It's good we're friends, because she's the only woman in this town who won't back down from an argument with me... not that I don't think I could take her, but even I have to admit it'd be close.

"I got it," Erick says when he makes it to me and gently eases me out of the way.

“I can help, otherwise it’ll take more than one trip,” I argue as I try to grab a bag.

Erick snatches the bag out of my grasping fingers. “So I’ll make two trips. Go—get out of the cold.”

“Suit yourself,” I gripe, rolling my eyes at his bossiness, before turning on my heel and heading inside.

The scent of pine and cinnamon hits me the minute I step through the door of the workshop. Christmas tunes play softly in the background as I look around. Rose, her sister Poppy, along with Gray, Poppy’s toddler son, and Mercy, Judge’s cousin and the newest addition to our group, call out their greetings while they decorate a tree.

“It’s cold out there,” I state as I take in all the decorations. “Where do you want the presents?”

“They’re going to end up under the tree,” Rose directs, as she attaches a baby rattle to a bough.

I set the bag down on the floor out of the way, then pull my gloves off. “Mia’s right behind me. Where do you want us to set up the food?”

“The worktable,” Poppy says, gesturing toward the large table in the middle of the room. “And the cake can go on that table in the corner.”

I look to where she’s pointing and see they’ve already decorated both tables perfectly for a Christmas baby shower. The tablecloths are white, and topped by sage green table runners. Rosemary bushes adorned with sage ribbons and soft pink, yellow, and blue baby themed miniature ornaments finish out the look.

Grinch mood or not, even I have to admit the place looks spectacular. “Damn, Rose, you’ve outdone yourself. This is amazing.”

Rose looks around with a critical eye. “Poppy helped, but yeah. It’s turning out nice.”

The door opens and Mia rushes through, her hands full of presents, Erick and Tony behind her, both carrying boxes of

food.

“Oh my God, Rose! It looks fantastic!” Mia gushes after she gets a good look around. “Bree’s going to love it!”

I grab the presents from Mia, and she makes a beeline for the worktable. “Does this table have outlets?”

“It does,” Poppy answers as she helps Gray place a stuffed baby block on the tree. “We put slits in the tablecloth so you can tuck the cords in and they won’t clutter up the table.”

The boys set the bags down, and Mia and I get to work setting up the food.

“Where’s that hunk of burning love of yours?” Sandra, Erick’s mom, asks me.

Mercy rolls her eyes.

“Adeline was running late, so he’s waiting on her,” I answer.

Mercy shakes her head. “I swear, Aunt Adeline will be late to her own funeral. At least she’s not insisting on driving herself, so everyone on the roads is safe.”

I snort—she’s not wrong.

“Where’s Griff?” I ask, looking around, surprised he’s not here already. Joe was a load of fun but a horrible dad, so Griff practically raised Erick and Bree—with my help of course.

Mercy’s eyes soften. “He’s got Lucy. She was napping and is a bear if you wake her up before she’s ready. They’ll be here soon.”

“Lucy? A bear? I don’t believe it,” Rose scoffs as she adds a silver baby spoon to the tree. “She’s so good I’m gonna check her for wiring, make sure she’s not a Stepford baby.”

Mercy is technically Lucy’s great-aunt, but she and Griff adopted Lucy this summer after her mother died.

“Y’all don’t see Lucy’s meltdowns,” Mercy says. “Griff was gone last night, and it took me fifteen minutes to get her to sleep.”

“Oh, please. A whole fifteen minutes?” Poppy snorts. “It took me an hour to get Gray down, and then he woke me up at two this morning. I found him in the middle of his room playing with Legos while singing ‘Hell’s Bells.’”

“‘Hell’s Bells’?” I snort and bite my lip to keep from laughing outright.

She huffs. “Yeah, it’s Dad’s fault. He had it blasting last week while he chopped wood, so now Gray’s a diehard AC/DC fan, which Dad, the metalhead that he is, is encouraging every chance he gets. I told Mom that if Gray starts singing ‘Big Balls’ she needs to take some life insurance out on Dad because I’m going to murder him in his sleep.”

She shakes her head ruefully. “Since then, I’ve played nothing but Christmas carols at the house, but Gray still sings AC/DC songs no matter how many times I sing ‘Rudolph’ and ‘Frosty’ to him.”

The door flies open, letting in a blast of cold air as the men bring in the rest of the food, before they quickly purloin a few platters of food and disappear.

“I thought this was a joint baby shower,” Mia says.

Rose laughs. “Yeah, that got nixed. Instead of communing with us over baby booties, they’re going to watch the Badger game at the house.”

Not a big surprise there. Alpha males and baby showers, or any kind of shower for that matter, don’t mix.

“What time is Bree getting here?” I ask as Mia and I set up the cake. The party doesn’t start for another thirty minutes, but I know Bree wants to get here before most of the guests arrive.

“Any minute. Sadie texted a while ago and said she and Kat were pulling up to her house,” Rose answers.

Awesome. I can’t wait to see her.

My phone vibrates and I pull it out, hoping it’s not the bar. When I see my aunt’s name flash on the screen, I send it straight to voicemail and shove the phone back in my pocket.

“Who was that?” Mia asks, being her usual nosy self.

“No one important,” I tell her as I attempt to arrange some flowers around the cake... ‘attempt’ being the important word there.

“That better not have been that crazy aunt of yours,” Sandra says.

Instead of answering, I shove another flower stem under the cake stand—maybe a bit too hard as the head pops off.

“Wait, your aunt is still calling?” Mia asks with a lethal edge to her voice. “She’s not still blaming you for Clint’s death, is she?”

“Of course she is. Her latest bullshit is that she’s going to sue me for funeral expenses.” I angrily grab a rose to try again.

My cousin, Clint, used to be the night manager of my bar, but then he got caught embezzling from me. Instead of facing the consequences, he doubled down and damn near got me killed by a crazy drug lord. Instead, he’s the one who ended up eating a bullet, and, somehow, it’s my fault.

The thought has me popping the head off another poor flower.

“She wants you to pay for the funeral expenses?” Sandra growls. “She’s lost her freaking mind.”

I turn to Sandra and tilt my head. “Did she ever have one? She’s been batshit crazy since I was a kid. It’s one reason I felt bad for Clint and hired him.”

“Hell, you should sue her for having such a dumbass crook for a son,” Sandra spits out.

I pick up another flower, but Rose appears next to me and gently takes it from me. “How about I handle any flower decorating? Go grab yourself a drink, I think you may need one.”

I bite back a laugh. “Yeah, you may be right.”

“This is a happy day. Let’s drop any discussion over crazy aunts until later, shall we?” Mia says before Sandra can get started again.

“I agree,” Poppy adds, giving Sandra a pointed look when she opens her mouth.

Before I make it to the refrigerator, the crunch of gravel has me looking through the window, and I see Sadie’s bright red pickup pull in. “They’re here,” I say, excitement in my voice, and veer toward the door.

By the time I make it outside, Tony is at the truck door. I have to work at keeping the “*aww*” in when Tony holds Bree close, his hand on her belly, after helping her down. Tony was Bree’s first crush, one she never got over, but she still led the man on quite the chase once he got over the fact she was his best friend’s baby sister and went after her.

“So damn sweet,” Sadie drawls as she shows up by my side.

I nod my head as I watch the couple. When Tony pulls away, I get a good look at her and let out a startled breath.

Bree is pale—too pale—and she looks exhausted. The first six months of her pregnancy were rough because she had nonstop morning sickness that was so bad, she lost weight instead of gaining it. She even spent a few days in the hospital because of it. But once she made it to her third trimester, she blossomed. In fact, she’s gained back all the weight she lost and then some. But now...

“Hey, sweetie,” I say as I grab her hand. I almost wince when her tired eyes meet mine. “Let’s get you out of this cold.”

I move to the side so she can get by me instead of pulling her into a big hug like I want to.

Tony gives me a grateful look as they pass by, then Sadie and I follow them inside.

“Oh, my goodness! It looks amazing,” Bree exclaims as she turns around, taking it all in.

Within a couple minutes, Tony has her out of her winter gear and sitting in a comfortable chair with her feet up.

“You got this?” he asks Sadie after he has her settled.

“Yeah,” Sadie answers, her voice low. “I’ll stick close.”

“I’ll be with Erick at the house if you need me,” Tony says.

“I’ll take good care of her,” Sadie assures him.

Tony leans down and kisses Bree on the forehead, then murmurs something in her ear that has her lips quirking up.

“Go, baby, I’ll be fine,” she assures him. “Besides, Sadie’s worse than you. She won’t let me get away with anything.”

“Don’t forget to check your pressure,” he says quietly, but not quietly enough that I can’t hear.

*Her pressure? What the fuck?*

Bree rolls her eyes. “I won’t. Now shoo! It’s girl time.”

With one last look at her, Tony turns and heads out the door. Knowing I won’t get shit out of Bree, I follow him.

“Pressure?” I ask once I shut the door.

He takes in a deep breath. “Yeah. Her blood pressure has been a little high, but they’re keeping an eye on it.”

Tony, who’s usually unflappable, looks worried despite his words.

“What’d Sadie say?” I ask. She’s a nurse practitioner, so she’ll know if there’s something to worry about.

Tony shrugs. “That they’re monitoring it and not to panic.”

“Well, until Sadie panics, I’m not panicking, and neither should you.” It’s a lie—I’m totally fucking panicking—but he doesn’t need to know that.

He nods. “That’s what we keep telling ourselves, but Bree was a preemie, so we worry.”

I draw close, putting my hand on his arm. “And look at her now. She’s fine, and that baby will be, too. We’ll all make sure of it.”

He takes another breath in, then drapes his arm around my shoulder. “I know. It’s just... she’s my everything.”

I lean into him, wrapping my arm around his waist. “I know, sweetie, but she’s tough. And a little over a month from now, we’ll have a beautiful baby girl to spoil the shit out of, and this will be nothing but a blip we’ll never think about again.”

“You mean a boy to spoil,” he teases.

“Nah, it’s a girl. I know these things,” I say as I lightly slap his side.

We both look up as two cars pull down the drive. “That’s my cue to get out of here,” Tony says.

“We’ll take care of her,” I assure him as I pull away.

“I know.”

“Does Griff know?” I ask.

He nods. “Yeah. We debated telling him, but he took one look at her yesterday and cornered me. He’s handling it, though.”

I’m not surprised they thought about not telling him. Griff’s lost so much in his life, and he’s extremely overprotective of Bree, Mercy, and Lucy. And me, too. We’ve been good friends since we were kids, so he’s like a brother to me.

Another vehicle pulling down the drive has me squeezing Tony’s hand and letting him go. I look up to see it’s Griff pulling in, with Judge and Adeline right behind him.

“Send Judge and Griff up to the house when they get here,” Tony calls over his shoulder as he takes off.

“Will do,” I holler back, as I watch Judge go to his mom’s door.

I’ve never seen a man treat his mother like Judge does his. Even when he’s at his most exasperated with her, he treats her with respect—and believe you me—Adeline can work his last nerve.

As soon as he has her out of the truck she goes straight to Griff, who is getting little Lucy out of her car seat.



“There’s my baby girl. Look at you—pretty as a picture,” Adeline coos, as she reaches for Lucy.

Griff shakes his head, but relinquishes Lucy to her great-great-aunt.

“We’re going to have so much fun today,” Adeline gushes to Lucy. “And soon, you’re going to have another baby girl to play with.”

“No way, Adeline,” Griff growls. “God knows I don’t need any more girls. It’s a boy, I can feel it.”

And they’re off on the same argument they’ve had since Bree announced she was pregnant.

Judge looks over his mom’s head and winks at me, which hits me in all the right places, then escorts her and Lucy up the steps. Griff follows closely, diaper bag in his hand.

The sight of Griff with the girly pink bag never fails to make me smile, so despite all the shit swirling around, I’m grinning like a loon as I follow them inside the workshop.

After greeting Bree, Griff turns away, his eyes meeting mine, and my heart clenches because he doesn’t hide the worry in them. He may be ‘handling’ Bree’s pregnancy difficulties, as Tony says, but it’s an extremely loose hold.

Once Judge has Adeline and Lucy settled, he comes straight to me and kisses me stupid, ignoring the catcalls and whistles from the women.

As soon as I tell him that Erick and Tony are at the house waiting on him, he’s out the door.

Mercy comes up behind Griff, grabbing his hand, and I see his gaze soften before he turns away.

I take a deep breath in and then exhale before heading toward my girl.

No matter what else is happening around us, today is a day of celebration and we need to get to it.



NO USE BORROWING  
TROUBLE

## JUDGE

**W**alking in the main house, I follow the sound of voices to the basement den where I find Erick, Tony, and Tony's dad, Patrick, along with several members of the local MC, the Forsaken Aces.

I didn't see any bikes out front, but that's not surprising. With Tony being the current sheriff and Griff being the former, the Aces—being an outlaw MC and all—don't advertise their ties to them.

A chorus of hellos greets me as I make my way to the bar and grab a beer out of the refrigerator.

"How's the shower going?" Erick asks.

I shrug. "It was just getting started when I left."

Griff makes it downstairs, heads straight to the bar, grabs a bottle of scotch, and pours himself a double.

Erick watches, his eyebrow shooting up. "Everything okay?"

Griff looks at Tony, but nods. "Everything's fine."

Erick's eyes go hard. "Let's try that again, and you can cut the bullshit this time."

Tony leans forward. "It's going to be okay, but Bree's blood pressure is a little high. There's concern, but the doctor is monitoring it."

Erick's mouth goes tight. "And I'm just now hearing this because... why?"

“Because Bree doesn’t want everyone freaking the fuck out,” Griff growls.

“Sadie says not to panic,” Finn—Erick and Bree’s cousin and president of the Aces—cuts in. “That it’s not unusual, and she’ll keep an eye on it.”

Erick’s head whips around. “How the hell do you know before me? I’m her fucking brother.”

Finn nonchalantly shrugs his shoulder, like he doesn’t have a six-four, pissed-off and concerned brother glaring at him. “Because Griff called Sadie when we were practicing a new song and I’m a nosy bastard, so I wore her down until she told me.”

Erick turns to Tony. “So Sadie’s not concerned?”

“Yes and no,” he answers. “She says that more than likely it will be fine, but we need to keep a close eye on it.”

More than likely—that doesn’t sound good. I watch as Griff takes a healthy swig of his scotch and wonder if I should abandon my beer and switch to the harder stuff.

If anything goes wrong with the pregnancy, it’ll hit Josie hard.

I shake off my bad feeling. No use borrowing trouble. If something happens, I’ll be there to help pick up the pieces.

“You guys need to calm your asses down. Bree’s going to be fine,” Finn declares. “No fucking way is Sadie going to let anything happen to her or that baby, so let’s do what we came here to do—celebrate—not sit around stressing over something that probably isn’t a big deal and we have no control over, anyway.”

“What he said,” Ghost, one of the Aces, agrees.

After that the conversation turns to the game, so we watch while annihilating the snacks I assume Tony or Erick stole from the shower.

Eventually, Erick walks over and sits down next to Tony. “What are you getting Bree for Christmas?”

Tony shakes his head. “I have no idea. Everything I come up with is baby related, but I think I want to get her something just for her.”

Erick sighs. “I don’t know what to get Rosalie either.”

Tony cocks his head. “Rose is easy. Just get her a new gun, or throwing knives, or something like that.”

He’s right. Rose, raised by an avid prepper, would probably love a new weapon of any variety.

Erick rolls his eyes. “Right, because nothing says romance like a Colt Python .357 with a stainless four-inch barrel.”

“Well, that was oddly specific,” Tony points out as he studies Erick, then a slow grin appears on his face. “Admit it. You already got her one, and now you’re having second thoughts.”

Erick’s jaw tightens. “Maybe.” Then, as one, both of them look at me. “What are you getting Josie?”

My lips quirk up. “I found a jeweler in Door County on one of my runs. She made a kick-ass bracelet I think Josie’s going to love.”

“Does she have a website?” Tony asks.

“She does. It’s too late for special orders, but she has some pre-made stuff that’s nice. You might find something.” I turn to Erick and continue, “She also does engraving. She could engrave the Python for you. I bet Rose would love that—especially if you picked up some earrings or something for her stocking.”

“Stocking?” Erick asks as Tony groans. “Seriously?”

I shake my head at them. “What are you guys—amateurs? You need to fill their stocking for them on Christmas morning. Doesn’t have to be expensive; just fun stuff or their favorite candy. Shit like that.”

“He’s right, boys,” Griff says, then turns to me. “But how the hell did you become the expert on what to do for a woman at Christmas? According to Mercy, you’ve never had a steady one.”

“I have a mother who never lost hope of me settling down, so she’s been giving me lessons on how to treat a woman my whole life.” Even with over fifty years of lessons under my belt, she’s so damn determined I don’t fuck things up with Josie that she’s reminded me no less than six times in the past month about the stocking.

During halftime, I move to the couch by Tony. “Any news about that girl Josie saw last night?”

Tony shakes his head. “No, although a couple of people have come forward to say they’ve seen her around the past couple of days. We snagged her picture off of the bar’s surveillance camera in the alley. Owen’s done some searches, and there’re no recently missing kids matching her description anywhere.”

“Which means she’s been on the streets a while, or no one has reported her missing,” I point out.

His face is grim as he nods his head. “Yeah.”

“Josie said she had quite the shiner,” I tell him.

“Yes, but we don’t know if that happened before or after she ended up on the streets,” Tony says. “Owen also talked to the runaway shelter in Shawano. She’s not one of theirs, and none of the people who saw her recognized her. We’re a small town, so I don’t think she’s from around here.”

“Why here?” I mutter, before looking up at Tony. “There’s a fair number of runaways in El Paso, but they tend to go to the bigger towns where they can easily disappear... so why Whiskey?”

Tony shrugs. “I don’t know, but I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I,” I say.

Tony clasps me on the shoulder. “We’ll find her, and we’ll take care of her.”

“Take care of who?” Griff asks, bringing everyone’s attention to me, so Tony and I fill them in on the girl, and how the search is going.

“Anyone check the campgrounds?” Griff asks. “Most are closed for the season. Might be a good place for a kid on the run to hole up, especially the ones with bathrooms and showers.”

Tony nods. “That’s what my men are doing today.”

“Josie didn’t sleep for shit worrying about that kid,” I tell them. “If it wasn’t for the baby shower, I bet she’d be out looking for her.”

“I have my men and Whiskey PD on the lookout. They’ll find her,” Tony assures me, “then we can figure out what she’s running from and fix it.”

“Let’s hope you’re right,” I answer, but after years of working with The Underground, I know there are some things you can’t fix. But at least we can get her to a safer place than the streets. Anything’s better than the streets.

“Everything quiet at the farm?” Erick asks. “Any sign of Perkins?”

I shake my head. “Nope, not yet. So far, it appears he’s lying low.”

“We’re running shifts: two men patrolling, and one on the cameras,” Finn says. “If Perkins shows, we’ll be ready.”

They may be one-percenters but the Aces have zero tolerance for men who abuse women or children, so they’re handling the security for the farm. As retired Delta Force Operators, they’re uniquely qualified at keeping people safe from those who are hell-bent on doing them harm. Even so, we’re keeping our partnership on the down low.

“Either Bart or I will be on property at all times in case he shows,” I add.

Finn nods. “Did Dad give you any problems yesterday when you called in?”

Showing how small a town Whiskey Falls is, Tor, my boss, is Finn’s father.

I shrug. Tor was a dick about it, but I’m not telling his son that. “He wasn’t happy,” I answer, and leave it at that.



Griff's eyes whip to mine and his jaw tightens, but he says nothing.

I didn't realize how good I had it in Texas. I was an independent contractor taking loads when and where I wanted, which worked great with my work with The Underground.

Sadly, my rig was a casualty of war—torched by the drug cartel—along with my house. And since both were acts of arson, the insurance company is dragging their feet on paying out. They will eventually, they have no choice. In the meantime, unless I want to dig into my retirement funds, I need to work.

At first, I was thrilled to find a job so quickly, and most of the people I work with are great. I like not being gone all the time over the road, especially with Josie and I being so new. Coming home every night has been amazing. It's too bad Tor is such a dick.

Deciding to steer the conversation off me, I sit back and change the subject. "I've been looking into Perkins. Do we need to worry about him recruiting one of his SEAL buddies to help him get to Regina? Most of his former team members seem to be good men, but there's one I don't like the looks of."

That particular one seems to be cut from the same cloth as Perkins. He's single now, but his last girlfriend ended up getting a restraining order against him before eventually moving out of the state, presumably to get away from him.

Every eye in the room turns from the game to me.

"You looked into his team?" Ghost asks.

"And found something?" Shadow adds, sounding incredulous.

"Well, yeah. I investigated Regina, too. I learned a long time ago that we have to know who we're up against—and who we're protecting. Surprises in this business can be deadly."

"I thought you were out of The Underground," Erick states.

I take a swig of my beer, then set it down. “I am, but that doesn’t mean I lost my contacts.”

“Huh,” Erick mutters before exchanging a look with Griff.

I wonder what that’s about, but don’t ask. If they want to share, they will. “Anyway, Brett Hebert is who I’m nervous about. He and Perkins are tight. He lives in Pulaski and has had several domestic violence arrests. Charges always end up being dropped, though.”

“We’ll keep an eye out,” Finn assures me, “and I’ll get Keys on Hebert. He only did a cursory look at Perkins’ team, so I’ll get him to dig deeper. Maybe we can find something to use as leverage to make sure he keeps his ass out of it.”

“Let me know if you find anything else,” I say, and Finn nods.

I lean forward and snag a chip, dragging it through the dip before popping it in my mouth. I sit back just in time to watch the Badger quarterback make a picture-perfect pass into the hands of a receiver in the end zone, tying up the game.

I’ve got a Delta team covering the farm, and the sheriff’s office is searching for the girl. I’ve done everything I can do at the moment, so it’s time to chill out and try to enjoy the game while I wait for my woman.

My woman. God, I love saying that. And when this shower’s over, I’m hoping Mom will go to Mercy’s so I can take Josie home and peel off that sexy-as-fuck dress she’s wearing, and we can do a little celebrating of our own.

“You’re on Adeline duty after this is over,” I tell Griff. “Josie and I need a break.”

It’s only been a few days since Mom moved in with us, but even with Josie being so busy, Mom’s cramping our style.

Griff’s lips quirk, but he nods. “You’ll owe me.”

“Fine,” I say with a shrug. It’ll be worth it.

I glance at my watch, noting it’s barely been thirty minutes since I left her. Let’s hope this shower doesn’t last all dang afternoon.

Hopefully, once I get Josie home, I can loosen her up with an orgasm or three, then we can have that talk.

Between Regina, the runaway, and the flu going around at the bar, Josie has enough swirling around her. She doesn't need to worry about us, so I'm going to take that off her plate, whether or not she's ready to talk.

## A TEST

Frustration eats at me as I watch Josie's taillights disappear down the lane. Just as the baby shower was winding down, she got word that two more employees came down with the flu and called in sick for tonight. So not only am I not getting to see firsthand what she was wearing under that dress, we won't be able to have that talk.

With a sigh, I turn on my heel and head inside. I rid myself of my coat, boots, and gloves in the mudroom, then head straight to the kitchen. I hope my nose isn't playing tricks on me and the delectable odor wafting through the house really is what I think it is.

Once Mom heard Josie was working this afternoon, she decided to come home instead of going to Mercy's. I find her standing at the counter, taking the lid off a crock pot.

"Please tell me that's cowboy stew," I say as I peer over her shoulder.

"It is. I put it on this morning before we left for the shower," she says as she gives it a good stir. "It's too bad Josie had to go to the bar. She's missing out. I just have to get the cornbread made and then we can eat."

"She can have some for lunch tomorrow," I assure her. "After eating some of this, she'll be begging you for the recipe for the bar."

"You bet she will. Now go find something else to do so I can get this done." She pops me with the dish towel in her hand when I don't move fast enough.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say as I head to the back porch. I can bring in some wood while she works.

A short while later, I wash up while Mom pulls a pan of perfectly cooked cornbread out of the oven. I serve up the stew while she cuts us slices of cornbread, then we both grab seats at the counter.

Just as I dip my spoon into the stew, a perimeter alarm goes off on my phone. Well, shit. By the time I set my spoon down, my phone is ringing.

“What do we have?” I say as soon as I answer it.

“Breach, east gate. One man on foot. Doesn’t look like Perkins though,” Ghost says.

“I’m on my way. Don’t approach. Let’s not alert them that the Aces are running security yet.”

“I agree. Poe’s your backup. He’ll only show himself if he has to,” he says before hanging up.

“Trouble?” Mom asks as I stand.

“Maybe. Call Regina. Tell her to get to the safe room, and then you do the same. Stay there until you hear from me or Ghost that it’s safe to come out.”

At least I don’t have to worry about Bart and his wife. They left to run some errands in town as soon as I arrived.

One thing I can say about Griff Daniels—he doesn’t mess around with security and safety. As soon as we decided to turn this place into a refuge, Griff retrofitted all three existing homes on the farm with safe rooms before they broke ground on the new building.

Mom nods, reaching for her phone. I stop off in the mudroom to grab a shotgun out of the safe. I’ve got my pistol on me, but the shotgun provides an intimidating visual that will hopefully get my point across without me needing to fire off a shot.

I also grab a comm unit and insert it in my ear. “I’m on.”

“Asshole is walking in like he owns the place. Not trying to be stealthy at all,” Ghost grumbles.

“A test,” I state.

“More than likely,” he answers.

“Well, let’s give the man a show then.”

Ghost guides me to where he is and I instantly recognize him as Bret Hebert, Perkins’ teammate. I watch him for a minute, noting how he’s ambling along like he’s out for an afternoon stroll, but I can tell he’s alert and on edge.

I rack the shotgun before calling out. “That’s far enough.”

Visibly surprised, his head swings in my direction as his hand makes a slight movement toward his waistband before he stops himself.

I step out from behind the tree I’ve been observing him from. When he sees my shotgun aimed toward him, his hands go up.

“You’re trespassing,” I say.

He shakes his head. “I am? Sorry. Didn’t realize this land was posted. I just saw a beautiful forest and decided to check it out.”

“The first clue should have been the fence and no trespassing signs posted everywhere. The second was the gate you had to climb over to get to this point.” I gesture with the shotgun. “Hands behind your head and get down on your knees.”

Instead of doing as ordered, he cocks his head and studies me. “You sure got out here quick. Cameras?”

“You have two seconds to comply. You don’t, I’ll take you out.”

“You’d shoot me in cold blood?”

“You’re trespassing and you’re armed. Do what you’re told, and you’ll make it out of this alive. Now, one...”

He goes down to his knees and puts his hands behind his head. I circle behind him and pull the gun out of his waistband, transferring it to mine before stepping around and facing him.

He looks at me, a cocky grin on his face. “What now?”

“Now we wait,” I say.

“For who? Daniels?”

I lift my brow. “Well, how ’bout that. You do know who’s property you’re on.”

Realizing he fucked up he loses the cocky look but recovers quickly. “You never answered me. Cameras?”

I just stare at him.

Giving up, he tries another tactic. “Are you going to introduce yourself? A man likes to know who’s holding him at gunpoint.”

I don’t say a word, I just continue to watch him, ready for anything.

“Not very talkative, are you? With that accent, though, you aren’t from around here. Oklahoma? Wait, no. Texas?” he asks, not giving up.

Still, I just stare at him.

His jaw tightens. “You don’t know who you’re messing with. I could take you out in a heartbeat.”

He could try, but he’d fail. But I don’t verbalize that.

The distant wail of a siren disturbs the quiet of the forest. His eyes widen for just a second.

When the siren gets close and stops suddenly, he jerks his head up to me. “You called the fucking cops?”

I shrug. “Well, that is what you do when faced with an armed intruder.”

Within minutes, two deputies show. One immediately goes to Hebert, puts him in cuffs, then pats him down, finding a knife in his boot.

I carefully pull the man's pistol out of my waistband and hand it over to the other deputy. "He had that on him and knew that this is Daniels' land."

"This is stupid," Hebert argues. "The most you can get me on is trespassing, and that's a misdemeanor. I'll get a slap on the hand."

The deputy shakes his head. "You're armed and on a former sheriff's property—that slap is going to sting. Criminal trespassing will get you up to nine months in jail and a ten thousand dollar fine—and I wouldn't be so sure that's all you'll be charged with. The prosecutor here can be very creative."

"Shit," Hebert mutters as he's stood up. "I didn't sign up for this." He levels a glare at me. "We figured you'd just chase me off the property if I was found."

Jesus. *This* guy's a SEAL? How the hell did this idiot get through the selection process? "We? Who are you working with?" I ask.

His mouth slams shut as he realizes he said too much, again.

"Not answering that, huh? Tell me this instead—what were you planning on doing if you weren't found?"

He looks from me to the deputies. "I'm not saying anything else until I get a lawyer."

One of the deputies grabs his arm and leads him off.

"We'll be in touch," the other says once they're gone. "Tony said to keep him in the dark about who you are as long as possible. Won't last long though, since you're a witness."

"If he did any homework at all, he already has a good idea of who I am. We're just trying to keep them off balance. Hopefully this'll be enough to rethink helping his buddy out any more. I'd rather deal with one SEAL than two."

"Dude's an idiot. I doubt he did his homework. We'll hold him until his arraignment on Monday. He'll probably make

bail then. Be careful; he may be gunning for you once he gets out.”

“I will. And thanks,” I assure him.

He nods. “I’m heading out. Watch your back.”

“Always,” I say.

He turns on his heel and hurries away, probably to catch up with his partner.

Once he’s completely out of sight, Poe shows, shaking his head. “The deputy was right. Hebert was really surprised he ended up arrested. He’s pissed.”

I clasp Poe on the shoulder. “No matter. Whatever he does, we’ll be ready. Thanks for having my back.”

He grins. “No big deal. It was getting boring around here.”

Lord save me from gung-ho Delta Operators. “I’ll take boring any day.”

“Me too. Good job, Judge,” Ghost says over the comm unit. “As soon as Hebert’s gone, I’ll give the all clear to the women.”

“I’ll check on Regina on my way back to the house,” I inform him. “Mom made some cowboy stew and cornbread. Y’all stop in for a bowl when you get a break.”

“Cowboy stew? Sounds good. I’m due for a break now,” Poe says.

“Fucking bottomless pit. Don’t eat it all,” Ghost mutters.

Poe laughs. Damn. Maybe I shouldn’t have offered. I need to set some aside for Josie before the vultures get it all.

As we walk back to the house, I think about how this went. We didn’t do too bad, and we gave nothing away. Not bad for our first test, but the next time won’t be so easy.

If it was just me, I’d relish the challenge, but with Mom and Josie living on the property, I don’t like this shit at fucking all.



I need to make sure they don't become collateral damage when Perkins makes his next move.

Hey there,

Tonight, you've got some of my homemade chicken noodle soup. There's a flu going around, so I've made several batches for everyone down with it. Just in case you get it, I got you some ibuprofen and cold meds to keep on hand.

Ziggy Larson brought you a cold weather sleeping bag. He owns the pawn shop in town and may seem like a grumpy old man, but he's really sweet. If you ever find yourself in trouble, he'd be safe to approach. Or you can call me. I'll be around if you need me.

The offer is still open for you to come in and talk. No judgment, no cops. You have my word. Ask around about me and you'll find out I'm not a bullshitter, and I never break my promises.

Hope to see you soon.

Be safe, "

Josie

715-555-0168 - Call if you need  
anything.



WE NEED TO TALK

## JOSIE

**W** *ednesday*

“Wow. It’s been a minute since I saw you behind the bar,” I say to Mia as Judge helps me out of my coat. Tonight’s my first night off in forever and the last thing I want to do is cook, so Judge and I came to Mia’s for Italian.

Mia gives me a tired and slightly grumpy look. “Seems the flu moved from your place to mine. Adriana went down like a rock today.”

Adriana is Mia’s daughter, and she runs the bar most nights. “Oh no. I’ll drop off some of my chicken soup for her tomorrow. It did wonders for my crew when they had it. It’s the only thing several of them could keep down.”

Mia shakes her head. “Thanks, but I sent Patrick over with some chicken pastina soup. She’ll be fine in no time. I made two batches of it today and sent it home with my crew. We don’t call it Italian Penicillin for nothing.”

“I made a couple of batches today too, but my crew seems to be finally over the flu, for the most part.” I cock my head. “Maybe I should sell it in to-go containers since half the town is down with that crap.”

Mia perks up. “That’s not a bad idea. I may do the same. Since you’re here for dinner, I’ll send some out so you’ll know what a real healing soup tastes like.”

I roll my eyes, then grin at her. “I’ll put mine against yours any day. In fact, I challenge you to a chicken soup cook-off.

We can hold it at the Christmas Market this weekend. We'll let the town decide who wins and donate the proceeds to the shelter."

Mia's eyes glint with challenge. "You're on for Sunday. The mayor is here tonight, so I'll let him know we'll need a booth."

I'm sure the mayor is going to be thrilled at a last-minute addition to his carefully planned booth layout, but like everyone else around here, he knows that when Mia wants something it's easier to just give it to her. The woman is a bulldozer.

"Sounds like a plan. Go ahead and send your soup out. I want to know just how badly I'm going to kick your ass this weekend."

She shakes her head and shuffles off to the back. Shortly after, a server shows us to our table. After we order, I laugh when we get minestrone instead of chicken soup. No worries, though. I'll just send someone over for some of her chicken soup tomorrow. It's not like she won't get an order of mine, just in case I decide to tweak my recipe.

When I'm done with my soup, I lean back, wine glass in hand. "Any new sightings of our girl today?"

Tony's been updating Judge daily. It's been over four days, and we have no idea where this girl is hiding. She's been all over town, but seems to have an uncanny ability to disappear before the deputies can get to her.

Judge nods. "Tony said she popped into the Kwik Trip on the south side today. Got some candy bars and some chips." His eyes harden. "Argued when the clerk told her it was on the house, said she pays her way. The clerk had to work at convincing her nothing would be expected in return for the food."

My heart sinks. "Shit. That means someone tried to take payment in other ways."

He nods. "Yeah, but that's not a surprise. She is on the streets."

I slump down. “I know. I was just hoping she hadn’t been through that kind of crap.”

His eyes soften on mine. “Sweetness, with what we’re starting at the farm, you’re going to witness firsthand the full depravity of the human race. Unless you want to get crushed under the horror of it all, we can’t get bogged down by what they’ve suffered through. Nor should we think of people like our girl as victims. We have to treat them like the survivors they are, so they’ll see themselves that way, and come out the other side of their ordeals healthy, whole, and safe. Only then will they be able to thrive in the future.”

He’s right. I’ve got to harden my heart a bit if we’re going to do this. Not to the women and kids we’ll help, but toward the circumstances.

Like he can read my mind, his eyes glint with approval. “So... any more gifts show up in the alley today?” he asks, steering us off the hard stuff and toward a happier subject.

My lips tip up. “A cold weather tent. At the rate the townspeople are leaving gifts for her, she’s going to have the Taj Mahal of campsites wherever she is.”

It doesn’t surprise me at all that once word got around about the girl, Whiskey Falls decided to adopt her. Sunday night, it was a sleeping bag. Monday was a cooler full of venison sausage left by a local butcher shop owner. The silver lining to the cold is that with temps staying below freezing, she won’t have to worry about ice or the meat going bad. Yesterday the girl scored a bag full of toiletry items and first aid supplies, courtesy of the local pharmacy.

Tonight, she’s getting a tent. And just like every night, there’ll be a bag from me with hot food, including dessert and a thermos of hot chocolate. And, of course, a note. Not that I’m sure she’s even reading the damn things.

I debate telling him what I did today, but he’ll find out anyway, so I ’fess up. “I ran by Bloom and we put together a little mini-Christmas tree for her, complete with battery operated lights.”

His eyebrows shoot up, and he tries and fails to hide his smirk. “You got her a Christmas tree? Babe...”

I hold up my hands. “I know it’s silly, but she’s just a kid. Every kid needs a tree, even if it’s just a tiny one.”

He cocks his head. “So do adults, but I don’t see one up at our house.”

This is why I didn’t want to tell him about the tree for the girl. I’m not only *not* in the mood, I’ve been too damn busy to get one up for us. But I also feel bad because it’s not just me this year—it’s also Judge and Adeline.

I’ve had some great excuses, especially when the flu hit, but they were wearing thin even before everyone got sick. “Tomorrow night, let’s go by my house and get my ornaments out of the attic. We can go to the local tree farm Saturday morning and cut a tree.”

His eyes narrow on mine. “Won’t you be making soup then for your little challenge on Sunday?”

I shrug my shoulders. “I can get the kitchen staff to get it started for me while we get the tree. Don’t forget, I’m closing both nights this weekend. It’s market weekend, so it’s all hands on deck.”

Our Christmas Market attracts artists and vendors from all over, which brings out the tourists in droves. Once they’re done shopping, they’ll be hungry for something more substantial than the typical market fare of *glühwein* and warm spiced nuts. I usually have *schnitzel* on special, along with some hunter’s stew. And no matter how much we make, we’ll run out before the night’s over. It’s one of our busiest weekends of the year... which will hopefully make the constant damn Christmas music worth it.

The server swoops in and takes our empty plates, refills our drinks, then is back with our entrees. All conversation stops as we stuff our faces.

I don’t moan when the first bite of lasagna hits my tastebuds, but it’s close. Damn, Mia can cook.



Judge must feel the same way about his steak, because he practically inhales it. Once we're done, after the dishes are cleared and we're waiting on our desserts, tiramisu for me, hazelnut panna cotta for Judge, he utters the most dreaded words in the English language.

“Sweetness, we need to talk.”

I go ramrod straight as my heart starts beating out of control. Shit. I bet this is that other shoe I've been waiting to drop.

The clearing of a throat has us both looking up at the mayor.

“Hope I'm not interrupting,” he says. “Mia told me about a soup cook-off you two are having on Sunday.”

I'm so damn relieved, I'm tempted to stand up and kiss the man.

Mia appears and they both sit down so we can figure out what we need for our booth.

I want to smile when our desserts arrive just as we finish up our plans. This means we'll be too busy eating to talk.

Finishing up our desserts takes forever because after the mayor stopped by, everyone else decided they could too. Most wanted to talk about the girl, but a few had already heard about the soup challenge, which is great. If word gets around, maybe we'll have a good turnout.

By the time we're walking out of the restaurant, my ass is dragging and I'm peopled out. We're barely out of the parking lot before I'm nodding off.

I could fight it, but I don't. Being awake and alone in the truck would give him a chance to have that talk. No way am I ready for that to happen.

I can only think of one reason for him to want to talk—he's going to break things off. After all, it's par for the course for me. After Joe and I divorced, I was through with marriage, but that doesn't mean I stayed away from having relationships.

All Joe's talk of finding his one had me looking for that perfect partner. I thought I'd found it several times, but no matter how hard I tried, they always got tired of me, my schedule, or both, and walked. Funny how when I finally faced the fact that I'm too old and set in my ways for any man to ever want to stay with me, Judge walked through my door.

I need time to figure out how to keep him from walking right back out of it before this talk happens.

I just found him, and I refuse to lose him.

*Hello,*

*For your culinary pleasure today, you get some lasagna from Mia's Place. She sent it over just for you, along with a slice of her chocolate torte. Brace, because her torte is chocolate heaven. Between it and the hot chocolate, you're going to be in a sugar coma, but it'll be worth it.*

*I hope the lasagna is still warm when you get it. It may not look pretty shoved inside that thermos, but it tastes so good, you won't care.*

*The toiletries are from the owners of the drugstore in town. My friend Rose owns Bloom, and we put together the Christmas tree for you. It even has battery operated lights in case you*

don't have access to power. Just something to brighten up these long, cold nights.

Anyway, when I got back to the bar someone had dropped off an all-weather tent for you. Word's getting around about you. I hate your situation, whatever it is, but you picked a good place to land. Whiskey Falls is small, but we take care of our own here.

If you need anything else, let me know.

Be safe,

Josie

715-555-0168

PS: I figure there's no way you can carry all that back with you without making two trips, so now you have a wagon to help you carry stuff. Consider it an early Christmas present.

PPS: If you go in the bar and I'm not there, all of my staff are good people, especially Kenny. He's the big guy covered in tattoos that

runs the kitchen. He looks mean, but he's a big teddy bear. Plus, he's been where you are. If you find yourself in trouble and I'm not close by, you can trust him.



# OVERKILL

## JOSIE

**T** *hursday*

Bree dunks her last fry into the buttermilk dressing then pops it in her mouth, a look of pure bliss on her face as she chews. Right after she got pregnant she kept talking about how she craved a ribeye steak dinner from the Faded Rose, one of her favorite restaurants in Arkansas. I'm not sure which part of it she craves more—the steak or the steak fries dipped in buttermilk dressing—but she almost cried the first time I made it for her.

Tony, trying to head off making regular trips to Arkansas just for steak, begged me to figure out how to make it just like they did. Griff tracked down the owner's number. I called him, and, once I explained who it was for, he gave me the recipes. Seems he's very fond of Bree, although I had to swear that I'd never divulge the secret recipes to another soul.

Since ribeyes aren't exactly healthy to eat every day, she's only allowed to satisfy the craving once a week. Although I do send her home with the extra dressing, which, according to Tony, she dips all kinds of weird things into to eat.

She gives me a side eye. "Don't think you got one over on me. I can tell you skimmed on the salt."

"That didn't stop you from eating every last bit of it," Sadie points out before I can.

"Did you even breathe between bites?" her cousin Kat asks.

Bree huffs. “Still. A little salt never hurt anyone.”

“Unless they have high blood pressure,” Sadie argues.

“Whatever,” Bree grouses. She still looks tired, but her color is better. She pushes her empty plate away and takes a drink of her sweet tea, another craving of hers. I had to learn how to make it right, since, according to Adeline, no one up North can. Though I think I do a pretty damn good job, unlike Adeline *I* don’t add enough sugar to put someone in a diabetic coma with their first sip.

My phone vibrates in my pocket and I pull it out. Not recognizing the number, I shove it right back in. I finally blocked my aunt’s number, and she’s been calling from all her friends’ phones. So now, local or not, I don’t answer unless I know who it is. And even if I do know them, if they’re a friend of Aunt Matilda’s, I let it go to voicemail. Nine times out of ten it’s Aunt Matilda leaving the message, and each one is getting shriller and more desperate than the last. Geez, I need the crazy bitch to give up.

When I look up, I find Sadie watching me, her mouth tight. “Your aunt?”

I nod. “She’ll give up some day.”

“Right,” Sadie says, the word dripping with doubt.

“It’s too damn quiet in here,” Kat announces before hopping off her stool and heading to the jukebox.

“On that note, I’ll be right back,” Sadie says, before heading toward the bathroom.

A tourist settles in the barstool a couple spots down from Bree.

“What can I get ya?” I ask.

“I’m waiting for someone. I’ll just wait until they get here to order,” she answers before turning to Bree. “When are you due, honey?”

Bree’s hand goes to her belly, and she smiles. “January thirty-first.”



“Oh, not too long, then,” the woman says. “You’re in the home stretch. Is this your first?”

“Yes, ma’am, and we can’t wait.”

The woman smiles indulgently. “I remember those days. Get your sleep while you can, because once that baby gets here, it’ll keep you on your toes.”

Henry lifts his glass, so I head over to get him a refill. I chat with him for a second before making my way back to Bree, just in time to hear the woman say, “Yeah, labor was awful. Twenty-four hours of pure agony ending in me getting torn all to hell and having to get ten stitches,” she lowers her voice, “down there. Never was quite right after that.”

“What the fuck?” I yell as I notice how pale Bree is. “I will never understand why the hell women like you think it’s okay to share shit like that with poor unsuspecting expectant mothers. Do you not see how fucking wrong that is?”

She raises her hands. “I was just...”

“No! I don’t want to hear it. In fact, get the hell out of my bar and don’t come back! I’m not serving some clueless bitch who gets off on trying to scare my baby girl.”

“What? You’re kicking me out?” she shrieks. “But I’m meeting my husband and our friends here for lunch and drinks!”

I lean forward, spearing her with my hardest look. “Not anymore, you’re not. Now I’ve told you once to leave; I’m not telling you again.”

With a huff, the woman stands up and grabs her purse. “I will not be giving you a good review online.”

I straighten up and raise my brow. “I don’t give a shit.”

As she stomps off, Bree chuckles. “A bit of an overkill, don’t you think?”

“What she said,” Kat adds, hopping on the stool next to Bree, although from the grin she’s sporting, she enjoyed the show.

I curl my lip up. “Nope. I realize I’ve never given birth, but anyone with any sense should know how crazy it is to tell stories like that to soon-to-be mothers. If they want to swap stories, they can wait until after you’ve popped that baby out and have a story of your own to tell.”

Not to mention I don’t like hearing about all the things that could go wrong when Bree goes into labor.

“Shit, Josie. Your language goes all to hell when you’re in mama bear mode,” Henry calls out. “It’s sweet.”

“Shut up, Henry!” I grumble, as the rest of the patrons point out it’s not all that great any time. I’d argue with them, but they’re right. Still, what do they expect? I run a biker bar, it’s not like I’d talk like a dainty little princess.

At this point, Bree and Kat are all-out laughing, something I haven’t seen Bree do a lot of the past couple of weeks. It makes it worth dealing with the whacko.

“Laugh it up, sweetie. Bitch is lucky I didn’t throw a bottle at her head,” I say, my lips twitching.

“What’d I miss?” Sadie asks as she walks up.

I shrug. “Nothing much. Just people being dumbasses.”

“Did you throw any bottles?” Sadie asks. “I’m gonna be pissed if I missed any action.” Love her to death, but she can be vicious.

“Nope. I haven’t given out any concussions today—yet.”

“Yet,” Bree mutters.

“You know, you’ve had a short fuse lately,” Kat points out. “Everything okay?”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m a ray of fucking sunshine. People just need to quit being dicks.”

Kat snorts. “If you say so.”

All three girls look at me dubiously, but thankfully let it go.

We all chat with Henry until Tony walks in. As soon as he gets to Bree, he gently pulls her hair back and kisses her cheek. “Sorry I missed lunch, Beautiful.”

“It’s fine, honey. Josie and the girls kept me entertained,” she tells him with a laugh.

“I bet.” He looks at me, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “By the way, I just chased away a seriously pissed-off woman in the parking lot who wanted me to come in here and force you to serve her.”

I curl my lip up. “Like you could force me to do anything.”

“I told her she’s lucky you didn’t brain her with a beer bottle, and to move along. She’s gone now.”

“Thanks, sweetie. I’ve got some hamburger soup simmering on the stove that’s ready now if you want to eat before you two head out.”

He glances at his watch. “We’ve got about ten minutes, so if it’s ready now, I’ll take you up on that. I’m starving.”

I hustle to the back and get his soup, grabbing a hot roll Kenny just pulled out of the oven to go with it. I make it back just in time to say goodbye to Kat and Sadie, who are both heading out. While Tony eats, Bree fills me in on how the nursery is coming along.

As soon as he’s done, he bundles her up and escorts her out the door. He’s taking her to her office until it’s time for her doctor’s appointment this afternoon. Laila, her aunt and office manager, will keep an eye on her while she’s there. If Tony, Griff, and I had our way, she wouldn’t be working at all, but Bree swears she’ll go crazy if she’s stuck at home for the next six weeks so we’ve reached a compromise—she gets two hours a day at the office.

We have a steady stream of diners for the rest of the afternoon, so I stay busy until Judge shows a little after five. After I make sure the kitchen has everything they need for the dinner rush, I head to the office to get my things.

Judge comes up behind me as I’m bent over, grabbing my purse out of the desk drawer. I straighten up and revel in the

feel of his hard body behind mine. He tugs my hair out of the way and his warm lips caress my neck, causing a delicious shiver to hit me.

“Mmm,” I hum as I turn in his arms and find his twinkling eyes on mine. “Mom’s got a date tonight, so we’re on our own.”

“Ooh,” I lick my lips and waggle my eyebrows. “You gonna do bad things to me tonight while your mama’s away?”

His hands skim my curves as they make their way down to my ass. “Sweetness, I’m going to do *very good* things to you while Mom’s gone.”

I widen my eyes, going for an innocent look. “I don’t know. You know I’m a good girl... I don’t want to do anything that could get us in trouble.”

He chuckles, dark and deep, then gives me a nip at the crook of my neck, sending shivers all the way down my spine. “Oh, yeah. You’re gonna be my very good girl tonight.”

I lean into him and burst into giggles. “Jesus. Who’d have think that at our age, we’d be sneaking around just to get laid?”

He shakes his head into my neck. “I’m calling Marcus on the way to your place. I’ll pay the overtime if that’s what it takes to get the shelter finished and Mom back into the cottage.”

“I’ll help,” I murmur. I’ve grown close to Adeline over the past few months, but damn, she’s quite the cockblocker.

He gives me a squeeze before pulling away. “Let’s go get the tree shit, then get home. Hopefully it will be a successful date, and we’ll have a few hours to ourselves.”

Missing his warmth and heat already, I grab my coat off the back of my chair and put it on. He guides me out the door to the main room and I call out my goodbyes, then we’re off.

Hi,

Tonight you get hamburger soup just like my grandma used to make, and I threw in some rolls and Christmas cookies from the bakery. Enjoy!

Poppy, the co-owner of the flower shop, went into Green Bay and picked you up some clothes—long underwear, sweats, and warm hoodies. She wasn't sure of your exact size, so if you write me back with them, we'll get you some jeans along with some warm boots.

This weekend is Whiskey Falls' Christmas Market. We'll have a boatload of tourists in town, so be careful.

Also, I should have asked this before, but is there any food you can't or won't eat? I hate the idea of sending you food you don't like, or that may give you an allergic reaction or something.

If you want, leave me a list of supplies and I'll pick them up for

*you tomorrow. I can even drop them  
off somewhere else if there's an  
easier place for you so you can avoid  
the crowds.*

*Let me know.*

*Be safe,*

*Josie*

*715-555-0168*

## **T**HERE'S NO ONE HERE BUT US

I may be a modern, independent woman, but I love how Judge walks me to my car and puts my seat belt on me before he kisses me stupid. Talk about making a girl feel special.

“I’m following you, so don’t break any land speed records, okay?”

I roll my eyes. Where I’m always in a hurry, Judge never speeds. At first, I thought it was because his job and tickets don’t mix but really, it’s his personality. It doesn’t matter where we’re going, he wants to enjoy the ride.

Once he’s in his truck, I pull out of my space and we head toward my house.

Usually, I’ve got too much shit to do to lollygag around, but tonight, going slow doesn’t bother me. I haven’t spent a night at my house since the day the cartel broke in and held me hostage. Honestly, even if Judge breaks up with me tomorrow, I’m not planning on ever going back. Not after what happened.

Within five short minutes I’m turning on to my road. As I drive down the lane, the trees that used to be so welcoming now feel ominous. After parking I sit there, staring at the house, trying to shake off the feeling of dread.

The house is an old Craftsman that backs up to the river, and I've painstakingly restored it over the past two decades. It used to be my sanctuary after the hard days and nights required to turn my bar into the success it is now. It pisses me off that the place I considered my refuge is now permanently tainted.

I need to figure out what I'm going to do, not only about my house, but my living situation. Yes, I've stayed with Judge every night since that day, but he hasn't asked me to officially move in.

Now that he's making noises about having a talk, that invite may never come.

A knock at my window startles me out of my thoughts, and I look up to find Judge's concerned eyes on me. I take in a deep breath, then unbuckle my seat belt and open my door.

He steps back, but not far enough for me to get out of the car.

He leans down, meeting my gaze. "Baby, there's no need for you to go inside. Just tell me where the ornaments are and I'll grab them for you."

I shake my head. "No. I'm a grown-ass woman; I need to be able to go into my own fucking house."

"Honey, even as strong as you are, what you went through was rough, so give yourself a break."

I gently push him back before getting out of the car. "It's been months. I need to get over myself."

He sighs but steps out of my way, and then shuts the car door behind me before grabbing my hand and walking me up the porch steps.

He waits patiently while I unlock the door but gently pulls me back and enters in front of me.

I step into the mudroom behind him. Even with the light on and Judge with me, doom and gloom press down, almost suffocating me. I want to turn around, run back to the car, and drive away as fast as I can.

Judge gives me a sympathetic look. “Why don’t you wait here while I check the house since no one’s been here in a while?”

“I’ll stick with you, thank you very much,” I reply, not wanting to be here alone. “Besides, can’t you feel the emptiness of the place? There’s no one here but us.”

Well, no one but the ghosts of my cousin and the other assholes that died here that day, but I don’t say that out loud, mainly because I don’t want to freak myself out even more.

Judge—being Judge—shows he’s aware that I’m not handling this well and grabs my hand. “Alrighty then, we’ll stick together. Now, where’s the attic access?”

“Closet of the back bedroom,” I inform him with a wince, since that’s the very room my cousin ended up dying in.

“Fuck me,” he mutters, then he draws me into his arms. “Seriously, Sweetness... The boxes are labeled, right? Why don’t you go back to your car and let me get them?”

As much as I want to take him up on that, I lift my chin. “No, we’re doing this together. Besides, I’m not sure if they’re labeled; not to mention I’ve got a bunch of old Christmas crap up there that doesn’t need to be brought down.”

His arms tighten against me, then he lets me go. “If you’re sure. Let’s get it over with.”

No, I’m not sure. I’m seriously contemplating forgetting about my ornaments and just buying all new ones, but I’ve got ornaments in there that Bree and I made when she was little. There’s no way they won’t be on my tree this year.

Straightening my shoulders, I look up at him. “Let’s do this. I’m not giving up one more iota of my life to those assholes.”

Judge’s eyes warm. He turns, and still holding my hand, leads me to the back bedroom, turning on every light on our way through the house. I’m not sure it’s enough to chase the demons haunting this house away, but it’s something.



In short order, Judge has the closet open and the attic ladder pulled down. Before I know it, I'm following his fine ass up the ladder.

It only takes me a minute to point out the area I have all the Christmas boxes in. "Leave anything marked 'village.' I don't have the time or energy to put it up this year."

"You sure? I can put it up for you if you'd like."

"I'm sure. Bree loves it, but it's a huge pain in the ass. We made an event of putting it up together every year, but that's not going to happen this year with her practically on bed rest."

He grunts but doesn't comment as he pulls boxes out, setting them up by the steps.

When I see a couple filled with outside decorations, I shove them back. "Really, we just need the tree ornaments. Oh, and the box marked table decorations. I think that will be enough for this year."

He stops what he's doing and studies me. "There's a lot of stuff here. You must really be into Christmas."

I shrug as I look at the piles of boxes. "Yeah, usually, but it's always been centered on Bree for me. She's got Tony now and his family, so even if she wasn't having health issues she wouldn't be around as much. Next year with a baby to spoil, I'll pull out all the stops. But I think it's okay to scale it back this year."

He searches my face before finally nodding his head. "If that's what you really want, that's what we'll do. But say the word and I'll pull the rest of it down and we can decorate the whole farmhouse with it."

He shuffles all the boxes back, pulling out the ones I indicate, then I climb down the ladder and he slides boxes to me. A few minutes later, we've got them carefully stowed in his truck.

I'm doing the right thing by scaling back—my heart just isn't into it this year—so then why do I feel so damned guilty all of a sudden?

As I'm pulling out behind Judge, a flash of movement in the side mirror catches my eye. It takes a second for my brain to register that what I'm seeing is our runaway peeking around the corner of my garage. When she sees me looking at her she darts into the woods, disappearing into the trees.

Without thinking, I slam the car in park and hop out, running toward where she disappeared and calling out. By the time I make it to where she was, she's gone.

"Was that the runaway?" Judge asks, appearing by my side.

"It was, but she ran away."

He looks around, then back at me. "She's checking you out."

I scrunch up my nose. "You think so? Maybe it was just a coincidence."

He shakes his head. "I don't believe in coincidences. Running after her probably didn't help your case much, you probably scared the shit out of her."

Damn. He's probably right.

He puts his arm around me and draws me close, kissing my head. "Don't be too hard on yourself. Your notes must be working if she's checking you out. You might try getting a little more personal in them. Let her get to know you and build up some trust. In the meantime, I'm going to ask Finn if his guys can help track her down."

I nod my head into his chest. "That's a good idea."

He pulls back from me and scans the woods one last time before pulling my hand and leading me to the car. "Let's get you home," he says as he opens my door.

Once I'm buckled in, he gives me a cocky grin. "It's going to take everything I have not to break every speed limit out there on the way home because I'm ready for our night to really begin."

Just like that, my pulse quickens. Is it crazy that it revs my engines that Mister Cautious Driver himself wants to break

speed limits just to get me in the sack? “I have so many plans for you tonight.”

His eyes darken. “And I’ve got some plans of my own, baby.” He leans down and captures my mouth with his, demanding entry with his tongue. The kiss is hard and hungry, giving me a taste of what’s in store for me when we finally make it to his place.

He pulls away. “See you at home, Sweetness.”

Turning on his heel, he double-times it to his truck and hops in. I barely have time to get my car started before he’s hauling ass down the driveway.

It doesn’t matter how much shit is swirling around, I still drive all the way to Judge’s place with a huge smile on my face.

I can’t fucking wait for some alone time with him.



BABY, YOU CAN GET LOUD

## JUDGE

**P**ulling around the bend, I groan when my headlights shine across Mom's little SUV in the driveway. *Are you fucking kidding me?* By the time I'm parked and out of my truck, Josie is standing by her car and glaring at the SUV.

We'll just have to wait until after Mom has gone to bed, then figure out how to be quiet... because after a week of her coming home late every night and passing out almost immediately, I need my Josie fix.

"What are your feelings about gags in the bedroom?" I ask and she bursts out laughing.

"I guess it depends. Do you want just a gag, or are you going to let me tie you up, too?"

I shake my head and laugh. "No, for you, because, baby, you can get loud. Don't get me wrong, making you scream is hot as hell, but not when my mom is around. The woman has no filter, and I do not want to hear her commentary on my sex life."

Josie's shoulders start shaking. "Geez, knowing Adeline, she'd rate our vocal performance."

I shudder at the thought. "It's a wonder I don't need psychiatric help after being raised by her." I throw my arm around her shoulders and steer her toward the door. "I'm starving. Let's scrounge something up for dinner, then I'll bring in the boxes."

When we make it to the kitchen we find Mom pulling a casserole from the oven, a deliciously familiar smell wafting through the kitchen.

“I thought you had a date,” I say in greeting.

She scrunches up her nose in disgust and slams the oven door shut. “I did. Then I found out that his idea of a fun date is playing bingo at the casino and hitting up the buffet there.”

She throws the pot holders down in disgust and immediately places her hands on her hips. “Bingo and a buffet! That’s an old people date. I may be getting on up there in years, but you’re only as old as you act. And once you start doing old people shit, you’re sliding down a slippery slope. First, it’s bingo, then it’s *Murder She Wrote* reruns. Next thing you know, you’re slobbering into your cheerios in a nursing home. So, no, siree. No bingo for me.”

Josie looks at Mom and laughs. “Okay, then. No bingo and no *Murder She Wrote*. Noted. Now, what’s in that casserole dish? It smells yummy and I’m starving.”

“West Texas Spaghetti,” Mom and I say at the same time.

“You’re in for a treat,” I inform Josie. “It’s amazing.”

Mom beams with pride. “I put the garlic bread in when I heard you guys pull up. It’ll be ready in a jiffy, so y’all go wash up.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say.

Mom’s spaghetti is a poor consolation prize for alone time with Josie, but it’s something at least.

After washing up, Josie and I set the table. We grab our plates while Mom takes out the garlic bread and then pulls the foil off the top of the casserole.

“Are those black olives?” Josie asks, not hiding her surprise.

“Sure are,” Mom answers her as she spoons out a healthy serving for herself before passing the spoon to Josie.

“Huh. I’d have never thought to add those to spaghetti.”

“Just wait ’til you taste it. It’s comfort food at its best,” Mom informs her. “Perfect for a night when you realize the cute guy you had a date with is a closet fuddy-duddy.”

“Definitely a comfort food occasion,” Josie agrees as she spoons out her own serving. “If it makes you feel better, you probably dodged a bullet with that one.”

Mom sagely nods her head. “I think so, too. I mean bingo... that’s a sure sign he’s crappy in the sack.”

I close my eyes and shake my head. “Really, Mom?”

She throws her hands up. “What? You can be such a prude. I just said what everyone was thinking. Bingo and buffets scream Snoozeville in bed. I’m seventy-five years old. I don’t have time for bad sex.”

“Nobody has time for bad sex, I don’t care how old you are,” Josie agrees with a grin.

“Can we please stop the sex talk until after I’ve eaten?” I beg.

Mom chuckles. “So sensitive, but whatever.”

“Judge and I picked up my Christmas decorations tonight,” Josie tells her as she shoves the casserole toward me. “What do you say Saturday morning we go Christmas tree shopping? There’s a tree farm out on County A that’s not too far. They even have hayrides.”

I’m so thankful for the change in subject I could kiss her, but I don’t because that would just get Mom back on her favorite subject.

“Cut our own tree?” Mom sounds intrigued. “We’ve never done that.”

“I guess there wouldn’t be any tree farms in El Paso,” Josie says.

Mom grabs a couple of pieces of garlic bread and hands the basket to Josie. “The only place to cut down a tree is in the Lincoln National Forest, which is about an hour and a half away. We never had time to mess with that, though I would have loved to.”



Josie grins as she grabs bread for herself then passes the basket over to me. “You guys are in for a treat, then.”

We all dig in and Josie’s eyes widen when she takes her first bite of spaghetti. “Wow, this is really good.”

“Did you think it wouldn’t be?” Mom teases.

“I gotta admit, the olives worried me.”

Mom and I laugh. “Yeah, I can see where some would think it’s an odd combo, but it works.”

Talk stops as we stuff our faces. After everyone has had second helpings, Mom heads to the living room to watch her shows while Josie and I handle the dishes.

Once that’s done, we grab a couple of beers and bundle up before heading to the porch, something we started doing in the evenings after we moved in. It hasn’t happened much at all the past couple of weeks with Josie’s hours, and I’ve missed it. Although, once Mom is in her cottage, I’m going to talk Josie into sitting in front of the fire for our evening downloads rather than coming out here to freeze our asses off.

“How’d your day go?” Josie asks once we’re settled into the porch swing, a blanket across our laps.

I shrug. “Same old, same old.”

She cocks her head. “That doesn’t sound good. Problems with Tor?”

“He’s still pissed I took off early the other day. He doesn’t give a shit that I was needed here, or that Kat had no problem finding someone to handle my load.”

She takes a swig of her beer. “Geez, he’s such an ass. Has been since the day he was born.”

I lean back and stretch my legs out in front of me while Josie settles into my side. “I talked to the insurance company. It looks like they’re finally done with their investigation, so I should get a check for my truck in the next few weeks.”

Josie looks up at me with her eyebrows raised. “Oh. Does that mean you’ll be buying a new one?”

I sigh. “I don’t know, but I really don’t want to go back over the road again.”

When I lived in Texas The Underground was my life, and helping women was my calling. Being a long-haul truck driver was just a means to an end. Back then, I had no reason to mind being gone so much.

I look down at Josie, my arm pulling her in closer. Now I have every reason to want to stay close to home. Josie’s the biggest, but the refuge is right up there, too.

Working for Beck Transport would be perfect if Tor wasn’t such a dick. I wish he’d retire and let his daughter take over, but if wishes were horses, beggars would ride.

Tor isn’t going to change, and neither am I. If I stay, I’m going to end up punching the asshole, and then Tony’ll have to arrest me.

“So you’re going to stay at Beck?” Josie asks, sounding dubious.

I shake my head. “No, my days at Beck are numbered. I’m going to look for something new next week. Maybe find a freight-broker who handles local deliveries, something like that.”

“Kat’s going to be heartbroken. She says you’re one of their best drivers.”

“It’s too bad she’s not in charge. She does almost everything anyway, not that her dad notices.”

Josie rocks us faster, something she does when she’s agitated. “Yeah. Tor’s an idiot for not officially making her manager. He’s already run Marcus off. I’m not sure how much longer Kat will stay unless he recognizes all she does and actually pays her what she’s worth.”

“Then it really is time for me to find something else. Without Kat, things there will go to hell in a handbasket.”

“You’ll find something,” she assures me.

Easy for her to say. She’s not fifty-two years old and looking for a new job.

The barn door opens and Bart steps out. When he sees us he raises his arm up and hollers, “Tell your Ma that spaghetti was delicious. Lisa’s going to be asking for the recipe.”

“Will do,” I holler back. “She’ll be thrilled you liked it.”

Bart nods, then heads into his cottage. I’ve grown to like the man. When I first met him, I wasn’t sure about him. He’s my height but has about seventy-five pounds on me, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen him in anything but overalls and boots. He can be gruff and doesn’t talk a lot, especially at first. He’s got the midwestern farmer persona down pat, that’s for sure. But as he’s become comfortable with me, he’s come out of his shell a bit. He’s actually pretty damn funny.

His wife, Lisa, is an absolute sweetheart. She and Mom have hit it off, although sometimes I see Lisa looking at her like she’s an alien from outer space or something. But then, most people do that with Mom at some point. Anyway, they spend a lot of time together, working in the garden this summer, canning things this fall, or riding horses whenever they get the chance.

No matter how strong Mom is, losing everything in El Paso and having to run for our lives was tough for her. Being back on a working ranch has been extremely therapeutic. I think it’s given her a new lease on life, which, for someone in her seventies, is an amazing thing.

“You should talk to Griff,” Josie says. “He knows everyone and will know who’s hiring.”

“I’ll do that,” I tell her and take the last swig of my beer.

We sit there in the quiet, just rocking away for another few minutes before Josie stretches. “We should probably go in. It’s getting cold even for me, so I know you’ve got to be freezing.”

“I’m alright as long as I’ve got you to keep me warm,” I murmur as I steady the swing so she can stand.

Her eyes warm before she busies herself by folding the blanket and setting it on the back of the swing. “So... what are the chances your ma will go to bed early?” she asks.

I let out a long, mournful sigh. “Slim to none.”

Her shoulders sag. “I was afraid you’d say that. I guess we can watch some TV while we wait.”

“I guess,” I mumble as I lead her back inside.

When we get to the living room, we find Mom cuddled up in a recliner.

I grab a pillow and settle in on the couch, pulling Josie down next to me.

“What are we watching?” I ask as I look at the TV and see a couple on the screen, taking a ride in a horse and carriage, snow swirling around them.

“Jesus, Mom, are you watching a Christmas romance movie?” I ask incredulously.

“Yes. Lisa got me addicted. Give them a chance; they’re pretty awesome.” She turns in her chair and looks at Josie. “They used to make me sad since I was convinced my only child was going to be a bachelor forever. But now that he’s found you, I can watch ’em without getting all weepy about the thought of him spending his life all broken and alone like me.”

Oh, fuck my life. I can feel Josie shaking next to me.

“Point of order, Mom, you never married, you’re rarely alone, and you sure as hell ain’t broken.”

“Now if only I could figure out how to get a grandkid out of you,” Mom goes on like I never said a word.

She did not just say that. I lean my head back, staring at the ceiling, looking for patience and finding none.

“Well, Adeline,” Josie begins, “hate to break it to you, but if you’re hoping for me to pop out a baby, you’re gonna be disappointed. It’d definitely take a Christmas miracle for that to happen.”

Mom lets out a drama-filled sigh. “Yeah, I figured. I guess I’m going to have to be content with little Lucy as my only grandbaby, which is a damn shame. A woman like me should have scads of grandbabies to spoil.”

Poor Lucy. She has no idea the scope of the job she has in being Mom's only grandchild. I may have to buy her extra presents to compensate.

"I'll share mine with you," Josie assures her. "Not sure about Tony and Bree with the trouble she's been having with this pregnancy, but I bet Erick and Rose will breed like rabbits once they get started."

Mom looks over at her and gives her a huge smile. "I'll take you up on that. I've heard grandbabies keep you young, and I'm all for that. I think you're right about Rose and Erick—the man is a veritable Viking. One look and you can tell he's shooting out super sperm. Poor Rose will probably pop out twins on a regular basis."

"Jesus, Mom! He's practically Josie's son. I'm sure she doesn't want to hear that shit."

Mom shakes her head. "She's got eyes in her head, don't she? She may have had a hand in raising him, but she knows exactly what I'm talking about."

Josie is looking down, her hand over her mouth. She finally gets it together and looks up at me, her eyes sparkling with laughter. "She has a point. All the Beck boys are like that. In fact, Joe, Erick's dad, was second generation Norwegian on both sides. His grandparents met on the boat on their way over."

"That is so romantic!" Adeline squeals. "And it means Erick really is a Viking."

"You know, this movie looks really interesting. Maybe we should watch it," I state, really wanting to get off the subject of Erick Beck.

"Oh yeah," Mom says. She turns the volume up and is blessedly quiet for the five whole minutes before the movie ends. As the credits roll, I get my hopes up she'll head to bed, only to have my hopes dashed when she looks at her watch. "It's only nine o'clock. We've got time to watch another show."

She clicks through to the search menu and I groan when she types in “Viking.”

Josie gives up trying to keep a straight face, and throws her head back and laughs.

While Mom flips through the Viking offerings, Josie gets up to go make popcorn. Ten minutes later, I’m watching a Finn Beck lookalike lay waste to a legion of soldiers while Josie cuddles into me, munching on popcorn and drinking hot chocolate.

Not a bad place to be, but as soon as this show is over and Mom goes to bed, I can finally do something besides cuddle with her.

An hour later, Mom is dozing in her chair, so I gently wake her up and send her off to bed.

Then I pull Josie up, taking the opportunity to hold her tight to my front when she’s standing. “Let me make sure everything’s locked up. I’ll meet you in the bedroom,” I say, then drop a kiss on her neck.

She moans, tilting her head to give me better access. “Sounds like a plan.”

Her hands wander down my body, ending up on my ass, to which she gives a squeeze. “I’ll be waiting,” she says with a wicked grin, before sauntering down the hall toward our room.

I look at our empty mugs and the popcorn bowl. Normally I’d carry them to the kitchen and put them in the dishwasher, but fuck that. I’ve got the woman of my dreams waiting for me.

I don’t run to the front door to check it... it’s more like a fast jog. I do the same with the back door, and finally, I’m at our bedroom door. When I open it, my dick instantly goes to attention when I find Josie on her side on the bed, wearing nothing but a smile.

Fuck yes. My sex kitten has come out to play.

Damn, I am one lucky man.

My hand goes to my shirt and I pull it off as I walk toward the bed. Just as I reach her and I get my hand on my belt, my phone rings.

I glance at the clock, and with how late it is, it's important.

Fuck my life.

I pull the phone out and see Finn's name.

I meet Josie's eyes again and find the sex kitten look gone, concern in its place.

I take a deep breath before answering.

"This better be fucking good," I growl.

"The alarms just went off at Josie's house."

Shit. She must sense something, because her eyes narrow on mine.

"Anything on the cameras?" I ask.

"No. But she only has cameras on the front and back door. We didn't put her system in."

"Okay, I'll meet you there," I respond before hanging up and looking at Josie. "The alarm was tripped at your house."

Her eyes instantly harden. "I'm going with you."

I shake my head. "I need you to stay here with Mom and Regina, just in case this is a ploy to get us off the property."

"The Aces are here," she points out.

"They are, but if something happens I'll feel better knowing you're with Mom and keeping her from panicking while the Aces take care of business."

Really, I want to make sure there's not an ambush waiting for us at Josie's house, but I don't tell her that.

Her eyes blaze with fury. She knows I'm full of shit.

"Sweetness, please," I whisper. "Take care of my mama so I can take care of whatever the hell is going on at your place without having to worry about you being caught in the crossfire—or held at gunpoint."

The memory of seeing her being held hostage by a crazed drug lord haunts me to this day. I'm not deluded enough to think that I can keep any and all danger away from her—not with what we're doing. But I can damn sure fucking try.

Something in my voice must have gotten through to her because she closes her eyes and nods her head.

When she opens them again, I can see the frustration she's feeling. I'm going to pay for making her stay behind, but I'll pay any price to keep her safe.

It's only been a few months, but in that short time, Josie has become my world.

Come hell or high water, I'm going to make sure she stays in it, healthy and whole.

## S MART GIRL

When I'm close to Josie's I see Shadow standing on the side of the road, so I pull in and roll down my window. He points to a barely noticeable drive. "Park down there," he orders. "We're walking in."

I nod and pull down the track, if you can call it that. It's rough as hell, but when I get past the tree line it opens up and I see two parked trucks.

As I exit my truck, Shadow and Ghost suddenly appear by my side, and I have to force myself not to jump. "Country has eyes on the house," Shadow informs me, his voice low. "He doesn't see any activity, either inside or outside. He's waiting on us before going in."

"Can you be quiet?" Ghost asks. "Otherwise, let us check it out, then we'll call you when we know it's clear."

"This ain't my first rodeo. I'll be fine," I answer.

Ghost's eyes sweep me over in clear assessment. When he gets to my face, he searches it. He must find what he's looking for, because after a 'follow me' motion, he pivots on his heel and heads into the woods.



I follow, paying attention to where I'm walking so I'm not snapping twigs and alerting anyone around that we're coming.

It's several minutes before I see the house through the trees. Josie's been a good caretaker of the century-old home. It's too damn bad her fuckup of a cousin ruined it for her. At least he paid for his sins by getting his fool head blown off.

Ghost stops us before we get to the clearing. We wait for a full minute before I see the barest flash of movement from a spot across from us. Ghost motions toward the house before taking off, running low.

I follow, having no problem keeping up. We get to the back porch, keeping our steps light. I've already pulled the key out of my pocket when we get to the door and quickly unlock it before slipping into the dark house, going to the right. He comes in behind me, going left. We silently clear the house, room by room, finding nothing.

We meet back in the living room where Shadow joins us. "I checked the garage and the outbuildings. No breaches."

"House was clear too. False alarm?" Ghost questions, doubt in his voice.

I shake my head. "I bet it was the runaway. Josie saw her here when we came to get her Christmas ornaments earlier. When Josie clocked her, she took off into the woods. She probably came back and tried the door."

"I heard Josie's been trying to make friends with her. Maybe the girl's checking her out," Shadow says.

I nod. "That's what I think. Josie's been writing her a note every night, trying to get the girl comfortable with her, talking about people in town that are safe. I'm hoping one of you guys can try to track her down. The cops are striking out. I may not be from around here, but I know the weather isn't going to get any better as we get deeper into winter. We need to get this kid out of the elements."

Ghost looks at Shadow. "I've got it."

Shadow shakes his head, resigned. "I'm the better tracker. I'll handle it."

Ghost gazes at him, clearly not happy with his answer. “I’m no slouch and you know it. It’s a preteen girl, and she’s probably scared shitless. Let me take this one.”

Shadow opens his mouth, but Ghost holds a hand up, stopping him.

“Let me try for a couple of days. The minute it looks like it’s going south, I’ll bring you in.”

Shadow’s hand goes up and he rubs the back of his neck while looking at the ground before he finally sighs. “Fine. But you call me at the first sign of trouble.”

Instead of answering, Ghost just nods, but that’s good enough for Shadow.

“Let’s do one last sweep outside, then head out,” he says.

Ghost and I nod, then we split up.

We do one last check of the exterior of the house, checking all the doors and windows while Ghost walks around the garage and other outbuildings, and then we all make our way back to our vehicles, gathering by the trucks.

“Where did Josie see the girl earlier?” Ghost murmurs, his voice barely audible.

“North end of the garage,” I say, keeping my voice low as well. “She ran into the woods when Josie saw her.”

He nods. “I’ll look for her tonight.”

“Josie’ll be relieved knowing you guys are on it,” I tell him as snow falls all around us. “The deputies can only do so much, especially when she has an uncanny ability to sense when the cops are around.”

He chuckles. “Smart girl. Keep your phone on, I may be calling.”

I nod my head. I hope so. Time is running out, and I do not want to have to tell Josie we were too late to help the girl.



# RULES

## JOSIE

**F**riday

The alarm goes off way too damn early, and I reach to quickly turn it off. I should be proud that I even remembered to set the damn thing. I waited up until Judge called and gave the all-clear for my house, but then the late nights and long days caught up with me and I was dead asleep by the time he got home, torpedoing our plans.

It's a testament to how tired Judge is that he doesn't move when the alarm goes off. Deciding I'm going to be the one to hit the bathroom first so he can get a few more precious minutes of sleep, I slowly untangle myself from him and ease out of bed.

I almost make it when he rolls over, and his sleepy green eyes hit mine.

"Morning, Sweetness," he rumbles.

"Morning, babe. What time did you get in?" I ask.

He lazily stretches. "Fifteen minutes after I called you. You were dead to the world."

"Sorry," I mumble as I stand up.

His sleepy smile turns sexy. "I know exactly how you can make it up to me—morning sex."

I grin, liking his idea. "You know, I can't think of a better way to start the day. Just need one minute," I say as I head toward the bathroom.

“I’m timing you,” I hear him answer just as I shut the door.

After I’ve taken care of business and brushed my teeth, I step out of the bathroom and find him still in bed, the sheet down around his waist, glasses perched on his nose while he glares at his phone.

My heart sinks. Oh, geez, not again. But when he looks up and sees me standing there with my hair piled on top of my head in nothing but my birthday suit, his eyes go from annoyed to smoldering hot in half a second flat.

“Damn. You are the sexiest woman I’ve ever laid eyes on,” he drawls, his voice husky and low, hitting me right in the good spots.

He jackknives out of the bed and stalks over, leaning down and kissing me on my neck as his hands map out my curves, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake.

“Be right back,” he murmurs, then steps back and goes straight to the bathroom, leaving me standing there breathless and wanting while I curse nature’s call. Thank God he wastes no time, and he’s back out before I even think about crawling back in bed to wait for him.

I hear the shower going and want to stomp my foot. I don’t want to get up and ready for the day. I want sex, dammit.

My frustration must show on my face because he chuckles before pulling me in his arms, and then his mouth is on mine. Our tongues dance together while our hands explore our favorite parts of each other’s bodies.

Now this is more like it.

He leaves my mouth and makes his way down my neck, immediately zeroing in on that spot that always revs my engines. At my moan, he lifts his head. “Let’s take this to the shower. But, baby, you need to keep quiet or I’ll have to find a way to keep that gorgeous mouth of yours busy.”

My heart rate quickens as I nod and allow him to lead me into the shower.

Instead of going back to where we left off, he grabs my soap. “Let’s get you all squeaky clean before I dirty you up.”

“As long as I get to do the same to you, too,” I answer.

He lathers up the soap, then his hands are on my neck, slowly massaging the soap into my skin. “Oh, you’ll be doing me alright.”

I blindly reach down to grab his soap, then run my hands down his back, closing my eyes as he finishes with my neck and his strong hands skate over my shoulders and arms, down to my breasts.

He spends a lot of time making sure my breasts are good and clean.

I’m not sure how long we take to lather each other up, but I know he’s a lot more meticulous than I am about making sure he doesn’t miss a spot. It’s understandable since it’s hard to concentrate on washing him down when his slippery fingers keep zeroing in on my clit.

One finger, and then two slips inside me and slowly pump, but as soon as I arch my head back and let out a tiny moan of delight, he immediately stops.

“Okay, Sweetness, time for some ground rules.”

I can only let out a nod as his fingers start slowly pumping again as his thumb circles my clit.

“First rule is that if you make a sound, I stop. Got me?”

I lean my head back against the shower wall, close my eyes and nod, not trusting myself to stay quiet.

“Good,” he whispers.

I open my eyes. “What’s the second rule?”

His lip tips up. “I haven’t decided yet.”

His fingers twirl and give me the lightest pinch, and I have to grit my teeth to keep any sound from escaping.

He stops, causing my eyes to fly open, and I glare at him in confusion. His only reaction is to smirk at me before he starts

working me over. He ramps up the speed, only to slow it down when I get close.

Such a damn tease.

Just when I think I can't take anymore, he withdraws his fingers and I almost mess up by groaning in protest.

"Sit on the bench, baby," he orders. "I think you're clean enough, but I need to rinse you off before I have my breakfast."

Oh yeah, I'm definitely down for that, so I scramble to sit down. Once I'm settled, he grabs the detachable head and turns it on, adjusting it to the massage setting before kneeling down in front of me.

"Your knees," I protest.

"You think I'm going to notice my knees when I've got you in front of me and your taste on my lips? No fucking way," he says, then he turns the shower head, circling my clit with the spray while he runs his fingers through my sex. Soon those talented fingers slip inside of me again as the hard spray gets closer and closer to where I so desperately want it.

I make the mistake of letting out the tiniest moan of pleasure, a squeak really, and he immediately stops.

"That was barely audible," I protest.

"Rules, Sweetness."

I lean back, settling in. Once he's sure I've gotten his point, he gets back to business. An orgasm hits with almost no warning, and it takes everything I have not to groan out loud, but I don't. Instead, I ride the waves, letting them carry me away on a sea of bliss.

As soon as the last tremor hits, he shuts off the detachable head and replaces it with his mouth.

Holy fucking shit. I don't know how I stay quiet while he feasts, but I manage... somehow. I should get a damn medal for this.



Soon, orgasm number two barrels down on me, and it's a big one. I don't know that I'll be able to hold it in.

"Judge," I whisper, trying to convey my desperation, but he gives me no quarter, licking, sucking, and devouring every inch of me until I barely know where I am, other than it's my new happy place.

Suddenly he stops.

"No," I whisper-yell, but I'm not even sure he hears. Instead, he yanks me up, turns me around, and bends me over while ordering me to brace my hands against the wall.

Then, with no warning, he thrusts all the way home.

"Fuck, yes," he whispers. His hands dig into my waist as he increases his speed.

I'm so damn sensitized at this point that every thrust is a delicious torture I'll happily submit to every chance I can get.

My orgasm takes no time to ramp back up, so big, I know it's going to roll over me like a freight train, and I'm going to be flattened in its wake.

"Oh, God," I whisper loudly and clamp my mouth shut, when without missing a beat, he slaps my ass hard. I should be pissed, but I'm just thankful he doesn't stop powering into me. Besides, it kind of does it for me—not that I'll ever tell him that.

"Damn, Sweetness. You just clamped down on me hard—I think you liked that," he murmurs.

It figures. My only answer is a muted grunt as the orgasm finally hits me so hard that it's good he has ahold of me, because otherwise, I'd be collapsing into a boneless heap of jelly on the shower floor.

Spasm after spasm hits me as the orgasm keeps going while Judge increases his speed. Just when I think I can't take any more, his fingers tighten their hold on my hips, and he lets out a muffled grunt of his own.

The hot water pelts down on us as we both try to catch our breath.

“Rule number two,” he says as he gently slips out of me. “I want to eat my breakfast in the shower every day.”

My eyes pop open when he pulls me up and into him, front to back. I lift my arms and wrap them around his neck.

“Damn, I needed that. Needed you,” he whispers into my ear, suddenly serious.

I close my eyes as his words penetrate.

He needed me.

God, that feels good.

“Ditto,” I whisper back.

He turns me around, wrapping his arms around me, then laughs into my neck. “I’m serious. I think we need to start our days like that every day.”

“It’s a plan,” I murmur as I watch him pick up my soap again and work up a lather.

“Time to clean up my mess,” he says as he reaches down.

We may be late for work, but I don’t really care.

This will definitely be worth it.

## S HE HAS TO BE

“Hey, sweetie, it’s just me!” I yell out as I pull off my coat and boots in Tony and Bree’s mudroom. Tony called earlier to tell me Bree’s been put on full bed rest until the baby gets here. As soon as the lunch rush was over, I hurried here to check on my girl.

With six weeks left until her due date, this will be torture for someone as active as Bree.

“I’m in the living room,” she calls. When I get there, I find her curled up with a book in a rocker recliner. There’s a fire going, and the only lights on are the white ones on the Christmas tree. The Trans-Siberian orchestra’s “Christmas in Sarajevo” plays quietly in the background, one of her favorite holiday songs.

“This is new.” I point to the recliner as I lean down and give her a hug.

“Griff got it for us. It’s not my style, but he said we’d appreciate it when the baby is fussy in the middle of the night. There’s another one in the nursery,” Bree explains.

“He’d know,” I reply as I spy the empty glass next to her and pick it up. “What are you drinking?”

“Sweet tea. There’s a pitcher in the fridge.”

I should have known. “I’ll be right back,” I say, as I head for the kitchen.

“Pour yourself a glass, too,” she orders.

Once I have our teas poured, I set hers on the side table by her chair, plop down on the couch, and stretch out my legs, wiggling my toes. “It feels good to get off my feet. Lunch was nuts. All these tourists in town are going to drive me crazy. It will be a miracle if I make it through this weekend without killing someone. I’ll be glad when the weekend is over and we can get back to normal.”

“As normal as Whiskey Falls can be,” Bree quips, then she sags down in her chair. “I can’t believe I’m going to miss Christmas Market weekend. I won’t be able to pick up an ornament for this year,” she complains, her voice wobbling.

When Bree was a kid and lived with her mother during the school year, she always missed market weekend since her school didn’t let out in time. But since she graduated high school, she hasn’t missed one yet. She always picks up a handmade ornament that represents something special from her year.

“I’ll pick one up for you, I promise, and I’ll make sure it’s extra special.” Reaching over, I pat her hand. “Now, what did the doctor really say? And don’t feed me the same shit Tony tried to—that it’s just a precaution.”

She sighs, then levels her eyes on mine. “You can’t freak out, but they’re having a hard time controlling my blood pressure. There’s concern that I could develop preeclampsia.”

My heart sinks, but I keep my face even. Preeclampsia is serious. Deadly serious. “Why aren’t you in the hospital?”

She winces. “I did end up spending the night there last night, but I’m stable for now.”

Instead of blowing up over the fact that she was in the hospital and didn’t tell me, I focus on what else she said. “For now?” I murmur.

“Yeah,” she whispers. “I’m on blood pressure meds, and they gave me a round of steroids to help their lungs strengthen —” My heart drops, but she holds her hand up before I can say anything. “Just in case. The longer I can keep this baby inside me, the better chance it has. The plan is to induce at around thirty-seven weeks if I haven’t delivered by then. At that point, the babies should be fine, even if it’s early. Yes, bed rest sucks, but I’m going to do everything I’m supposed to and give this baby all the time it needs.”

I blink as I take in the fact she pluralized some words in there, but I shove it to the back of my mind. I’ve got bigger fish to fry. “So whatever happens, we’ll have a baby sometime in the first week of January?”

She takes a deep breath as she looks down, her hand cradling her belly. “Yeah. In three short weeks, I’ll be a mom.”

She looks up at me, stark terror in her eyes. “Josie, I’m so damn scared.”

In a heartbeat I’m off the couch and kneeling by her chair, wrapping my arms around her and drawing her close. “I know you are, sweetie. But you got this. Even if the worst happens and they have to take the baby tomorrow, at thirty-four weeks it’s got more than a fighting chance. It’ll be fine. You were born a lot earlier than that and look at you now. This baby is gonna be perfect, just like its mama.”

She nods into my neck. “I hope so. But what if I suck as a mom? My mother was awful. What if I turn out like her? What if I screw this up? I mean, hell, they’re not even out yet, and I’m already fucking things up for them with my blood pressure.”

I shake my head. “Okay. First, you are not fucking anything up—this is not your fault, and when it’s over with, we’ll have a beautiful baby to spoil. And just think, you’ll have one hell of a birth story to swap with crazy women like the one yesterday.”

I take in a deep breath. “As for the rest, honey, your mother was a raging bitch even before Joe knocked her ass up. You are nothing like her. If you think about it, she’s given you a great example of what not to do.”

I lean back, settling on my heels, then put my finger under her chin, making her look at me. “When Joe and I got married, you were just a tiny thing. It’s not like my mom was a stellar example either, so when you showed up for your summer visitation that first time, just like you, I was scared shitless that I’d fuck things up. But Griff pulled me aside and told me all I had to do was love you, that the rest of it would work out—and he was right.” I give her an encouraging smile. “It’s clear you already love this baby, so you’ve cracked the motherhood code. You’re going to be a great mom, I promise, because, sweetie, you already are.”

A single tear falls down her face, and I reach up and catch it. Bree never cries, so even one tear is a big deal.

“Hey, buck up, buttercup. You can’t be getting upset under my watch or Tony’ll try to stop me from coming back,” I gently admonish her.

She gives me a tremulous smile. “Try?”

I give her a just as shaky one back. “Yeah. Nobody keeps me from my baby girl—not even our fearless county sheriff.”

Her arms wrap around me, pulling me back in, and she squeezes me tight. “Thank you,” she says. “You’re shaping up to be an awesome grandma.”

I close my eyes, fighting back tears of my own. “I love you.”

She nods. “I love you too.”

With one last squeeze, I pull back. “So... you said *they*,” I place my hand on her belly and smile, trying to hide my shock.

“There’s more than one?!”

“Oh, shit.” Her hand goes to her mouth, and she shakes her head. “Don’t you dare tell anyone. It’s supposed to be a surprise.”

“My lips are sealed,” I promise. “But if you think after they’re born that I’m not going to rub it in Mia’s face that I knew before she did, you’re crazy.”

She rolls her eyes and snuggles back into the chair. With a last pat to her hand, I move back to the couch.

“God, I hope they’re both girls. Griff’d shit a brick having more girls to deal with and fuss over. C’mon, give me a hint. I won’t tell.”

She shakes her head. “Oh, no you don’t. It’s a surprise.”

I cross my arms and give her a mock glare. “Fine. Be that way.”

Her lips tip up. “Enough about me. How are you and your cowboy doing?”

I flip a hand out. “Great. Everything’s perfect.”

She cocks her head and raises an eyebrow. “Josie...”

“No. Really. He’s... he’s my dream man, and not just because he’s hot as hell. He’s good down to his soul. A real-life hero. And he puts me first in every way.”

Her eyes narrow. “I feel like there’s a ‘but’ in there somewhere.”

“No. No but.” I sag back on the couch. “God, I love him so much. It’s just... these things never work out for me, so I keep wondering when the other shoe is gonna drop.”

Her face softens. “Josie, that man looks at you like you’re his entire world. The other shoe is not going to drop. Quit expecting the worst. You need to sit back and enjoy the ride. As Dad would say, you’ve found your one.”

I nod my head. “Easy for you to say. You’re married and procreating with your first and only love. I’ve had over fifty

years' worth of Mr. Wrongs in my life. It's hard for me to believe that I've finally found Mr. Right."

She barks out a laugh. "Who are you talking to? I was so scared to believe someone like Tony would love me, he had to surprise me with a wedding to get me to marry him."

She's got me there. "Well, it's good he did since he knocked you up. Griff would've had you both saying your 'I dos' at gunpoint if he hadn't."

"True," she agrees, then leans forward. "I mean it, Josie. Don't let your fears screw things up between you and Judge. He's perfect for you, and I think you need to hear this. You're perfect for him. You deserve everything he has to give you and more. Believe in that."

I close my eyes and nod. Jesus, my girl knows me too well.

"I won't fuck it up," I say, hoping I'm not lying to her.

Once again, she narrows her eyes on me. "See that you don't. I think Judge will make a great grandpa. And watching him compete with Griff will give us years' worth of entertainment."

I laugh. "You're right. Geez, these kids are going to be so damn spoiled."

"Like you won't be right there spoiling them along with their grandpas," she points out.

I shrug. "I'll probably be worse."

We talk for a few more minutes, but then she yawns and I notice she's gotten kind of pale. Sitting up, I look at my watch. "I'm going to get your dinner going before I head back to the bar. Why don't you get some rest?"

She looks like she wants to argue, and I cock my head and raise my brow. Her shoulders sag, but she picks up her book and leans back. "I'll be good."

A little while later, Tony walks in just as I'm finishing up in the kitchen.

"Something smells good," he says.

“I have pot roast and dumplings in the slow cooker for tonight. I just put the dumplings in so give them about an hour. You’ll probably have enough leftovers for tomorrow, but if not, I’ve got chili and cornbread in the refrigerator. I put notes on them with instructions on reheating them.”

He rubs his belly. “Between you and my ma, I’m going to have to spend some extra time working out until this baby is born.”

“And after. The first few weeks are going to be hectic for both of you. We’ll keep it up for a bit.”

He smiles. “I’m not complaining.”

My phone, which is sitting on the counter, vibrates. I glance at it and decline the call when I see *unknown number*. Matilda’s only tried three times today. Maybe she’s finally wearing down.

Tony cocks his head. “Matilda?”

I nod. “Yeah, but she’s starting to slow down on the calls. Maybe she’s finally giving up.”

He looks doubtful. “Say the word and I’ll bring her in. This shit has to stop.”

I agree, it does. But as much as I dislike her and no matter what she’s done, she’s not only family, she lost her son. That’s pretty steep payback for being a raving bitch so I shake my head. “She’ll get tired of harassing me eventually when she realizes it’s getting her nowhere. Until then, it’s pretty damn easy to ignore her.”

“Still, it’s harassment, which is pretty fucking ballsy considering the circumstances. She’s got a week. If the calls keep coming after that, I’m stepping in.”

Knowing he’s reached his limit, I don’t argue. I just nod my head.

“Let’s talk about Bree. You doing okay with all this?” I ask.

His face goes grim. “We’ve got a great doctor and Sadie is also keeping an eye on her. She’s actually packing a bag right



now and staying here until after the baby is born.”

“But—” I begin, but Tony interrupts me.

He rubs the back of his neck. “But preeclampsia is dangerous and things can go south quickly. If I had my way, we’d be doing it today. But even though it’s more dangerous for her, Bree wants to go as long as she can so there is less chance of complications. I couldn’t talk her out of it.”

And she’s worried she’ll be a bad mother. *As if.*

I walk over and put my hand on Tony’s arm. “What can I do to help?”

He takes in a deep breath. “Sadie and I both have to work. I’d feel better if we could have someone here with her most of the time. Just in case...” his voice catches.

“Consider it done. I’ll get with Sadie and we’ll figure it out. Mia, Kat, Mercy, and Laila will help too.”

Tony looks so relieved, I hug him. “We got this,” I assure him. “She’ll be fine.”

“She has to be,” he replies.

He’s right. I can’t let anything happen to Bree. It’s not just me that’d be devastated... it’d be Tony, Erick, and Griff too.

She means so much to all of us, we can’t lose her.



# DINNER AND A SHOW

## JOSIE

**F**riday

Even though I have a reliable night manager, this weekend it's all hands on deck because of the Christmas Market. Add in that it's Fish Fry Friday and the fact that we've got a new band coming in—things are going to be crazy.

I check everything in the bar area before bustling over to the backroom where I have tables for diners who don't want to eat in the bar. Once I'm sure everything's set, I head to the kitchen where I find Kenny hard at work.

"Everything good?" I ask.

He throws a hand up. "Why're you even asking me that? You know it is."

I swipe my towel at him. "Just making sure I don't need to help with anything."

He rolls his eyes. "You worry about the servers, and I'll worry about the kitchen."

"I mixed up extra batches of brownies and gingerbread this morning and had the morning shift double up on the whiskey sauce."

Kenny nods. "I saw that. Probably a good idea. Now scoot, I got shit to do," he states and makes shooing motions with his hands.

With anyone else I'd fire them on the spot for kicking me out of my own damn kitchen, but Kenny is the kitchen

manager for a reason. He may look scary as hell with his tattoos and the sheer size of him, but I wouldn't trust anyone else with the job. When he's here, I cede all kitchen authority over to him.

He's been with me for decades. He found some trouble when he was a kid, and once he got out of jail no one would give him a shot but me. He started out as a busboy and worked his way up. Since then, he's got my back and I've got his.

"Fine, I'll go," I huff. "I know when I'm not wanted."

He rolls his eyes. "And you need to quit kicking people out. You've almost doubled last month's number and the month isn't over yet. I'm not sure what's going on with you, but next time count to ten or call me and I'll handle it."

"Whatever," I grumble. Almost double—really? Damn. Maybe my mood is making me short-tempered.

"Hey, Josie, the band's here!" Tina yells from the kitchen door.

"On my way," I answer before looking back at Kenny. "Let me know if you need me."

"Same," he says before turning and grabbing a spoon to stir something on the stove.

I walk out and go over to the lead singer of the band. He's tall and lanky, but built. Despite it being December, the sleeves of his Metallica tee are cut off, showcasing his muscular arms. With his longish black hair, brown eyes so soulful you could drown in them, his well-trimmed beard, and the muscles on him, the women are going to go wild. Especially since, according to Erin, they're damn talented.

"Thanks for giving us a shot," he says after I introduce myself. "Since it's Christmas Market weekend, are we expected to play a lot of Christmas music?"

I curl my lip up at the thought. "God, no. You play more than one an hour, I'll never hire you again. We're mostly blue collar and bikers here. Make your playlist accordingly."

“Thank fuck,” he mutters, the relief clear on his face, and I laugh.

“It’ll take us about twenty minutes to set up,” he informs me.

I glance at my watch. “Good, then you’ll have time to grab something to eat before you start. On the house.”

All smiles now, he thanks me again, then goes to help his buddies unload.

Tina comes up, dramatically fanning her face. “Holy shit, he’s hot. Who did you say sent them our way?”

“That’d be Erin Savage up in Wit’s End.”

Tina grins. “Isn’t she the one that’s with the hot Delta guy that was in the papers? The one who was wounded overseas?”

“Yep, that’s her.” Erin has been here several times, but leave it to Tina to remember her by the man she’s with—not that Trek isn’t memorable. He seems nice enough, but he definitely has a dangerous edge to him. I wouldn’t want to cross him, that’s for sure. He is intense. Erin, a former Night Stalker pilot, can handle him though. She is one badass woman.

Tina waggles her brows. “Well, let’s hope the band plays as good as they look. Tips will be through the roof.” With that said, she walks off to check her tables.

Sadie and Kat walk in and head straight for me. “Hey, girls. Here for dinner?”

Kat, whose attention goes to the stage, nods. “And a show. Damn, Josie, where’d you find them?”

“Erin sent them.”

Sadie grins. “I’m going to give her a big hug when I see her. New eye candy is always appreciated.”

“Well, between Bree being down and you playing more at the Aces’ bar, I need to get some new bands in,” I explain.

Kat smirks. “Right. You needed new blood in. It has absolutely nothing to do with the fact it looks like every single

one of them could star in a men's underwear ad."

I shake my head and grin. "Nope, nothing at all." I toss some coasters out, then grab a couple beers and pop the tops off, setting the bottles in front of them. "Seriously though. Erin sent me a video, and they're pretty good. Not as good as us, of course, but they'll do."

Kat picks hers up immediately, taking a long drink. "God, I needed this. It's been a day."

I eye her closely. "Everything okay?"

She flips her hand out, visibly frustrated. "Just Dad being Dad."

Tor is such an idiot. "Gotcha. You need to talk—you know where I am."

Her face softens. "I know. I'm fine, really. Or I will be."

The determination she says it with does not bode well for Tor. "Are you two eating at the bar, or are you gonna grab a table?" I ask.

"We'll grab a table," Sadie replies. "Rose and Erick will be here soon, along with Mercy and Griff. They're waiting for Adeline to show. She's watching Lucy tonight so they can have some adult time."

"You want some cheese curds while you wait?" I ask.

Kat nods. "Yeah, I'm starving. I didn't get lunch today."

"Me either," Sadie adds. "With the flu that's going around, the ER has been crazy."

Kat scrunches her nose up. "Maybe Dad will get it and I can have a break from him for a few days."

Sadie's eyes shoot up. "Man, that's vicious. This flu is brutal."

Kat rolls her eyes. "He'd be fine. He's too mean for something like the flu to take him out."

Shaking my head, I point to the corner by the stage. "You guys take that table. I'll send out another round with your

cheese curds when they're ready."

"Thanks, Josie!" Sadie says gratefully as she heads toward the jukebox while Kat grabs their beers and claims their table.

I barely have their order in when the dinner rush starts in full force, keeping me busy for a good while. I notice Griff, Mercy, Erick, and Rose slip in and sit with the girls. Finn and Shadow show and grab a pub table in the back, situated perfectly so that Finn can keep an eye on Sadie. He needs to get off his ass and quit watching, and actually start pursuing her, or someone else is going to swoop in.

Once the band gets going, the dance floor fills up. From the video Erin sent me I have high hopes, but sometimes bands will have one or two songs they perform exceptionally well and the rest suck. So far, so good, though.

"They're not bad," Griff says as he slides onto a barstool directly in front of me. That's high praise coming from him.

"They're not. I may add them to my rotation."

I finish the order I'm working on, handing it off to a server. "You need drinks for you and Mercy?"

He nods. "Yep. Figured I'd save Tina the trip; she looks swamped."

He's not wrong. "Appreciate it. I was with Bree earlier. She's holding up, but I'm surprised Sadie's here and not mother-henning her."

"She wanted to give Bree and Tony some alone time, so she dropped her bags off then came here for fish fry. I bet she won't stay too long, though."

I won't take that bet. Those two girls are thick as thieves, have been since the day they met. Neither girl had easy upbringings, and both are extremely protective of the other. Hell, Sadie moved up here when Bree did, which says a lot.

Griff rubs his neck. "I don't have a good feeling about this. I'm with Tony—I wish she'd let them induce. She's far enough along the baby will probably be fine."



I shake my head. “Probably isn’t good enough. Not for her. And as much as it sucks, that’s the way it should be.”

Griff sighs. “I know, I just don’t like it. And since she’s an adult, I can’t make her do my bidding or ground her to her room. Whoever the hell said things get easier when your kids grow up was an idiot.”

I set the last drink on the tray then reach over and grab his hand. “She’ll be fine,” I reassure and squeeze his hand. “She has to be. I won’t accept any other outcome.”

“Me either.”

I shove his drinks toward him. “Go and try to have a good time. You’re glowering at everyone and it’s scaring my customers away.”

His lips quirk up as he looks around at the packed bar, then back at me. “I think you’ll be okay.” He grabs his drinks, then heads back to the group.

After, I’m so busy I lose track of time. There’s finally enough of a lull I hit the bathroom and when I get back, I find Judge checking the beer case.

“Glad you finally made it,” I say after I give him his hello kiss. I glance at my watch and see it’s almost eight o’clock. “You’ve had a long day.”

He opens the case and starts rearranging bottles, making room for more. “Tor’s playing games. Had me pick up a load right at five, then haul it out to Gresham. Kat called when I didn’t make it back before closing to find out where the hell I was. When I told her, she was pissed. Said the load could’ve waited until Monday and that Tor knew that. I guess this was my payback for taking off early last week.”

My eyes widen. “Seriously? He can be such a dick.”

He nods. “I’m done. I don’t give a shit it’ll be Christmas Eve, I’m putting in my notice first thing Monday morning. Life’s too short to work for an asshole.”

I reach up and rub his shoulders. “Fuck, baby, I’m sorry. At least now you only have to deal with him for a couple more

weeks.”

He shakes his head. “My guess, he’ll tell me to pack my shit up and go when I give notice. We’ll see.”

He leans down and nuzzles my neck. “Guess I’ll be a kept man until I can find something else.”

I snuggle in close and bring my lips to his ear. “I can think of several different ways you can earn your keep.”

A banging sound behind us startles me. “Hey, blondie! Quit flirting and start doing your job!” a man yells from down the bar.

I count to ten before turning around and glaring at the jerk. “You holler at me like that again, and you’ll get your beer alright—right upside your head. Now sit there like a good little boy until I can get to you.”

Judge shakes with laughter behind me. “He’s an ass, but I’m not sure he’s worth the hassle of braining him.”

I keep glaring at the idiot until Judge turns me in his arms.

I look up at him. “He ruined our moment.”

He leans down and his lips hit mine in a quick but hard kiss. “It’s all good, Sweetness. The night will be over soon enough, and then we can have more than a moment, yeah?”

“I guess.” Knowing orders are probably piling up, I let him go. “I should get back to it, anyway.”

“I’ll restock your beer and ice,” he says and gives me a squeeze, then goes back to making a list.

I leave him to it, going to the opposite side of the bar first. The idiot can cool his jets until I’m good and ready.

I notice that before Judge goes to the stockroom, he stops and speaks to the guy. I’m not sure what he says, but the man’s hands go up and he shakes his head vehemently. God, I love my man.

It’s a good five minutes before I make it to the asshole to get his order. I throw down a coaster, then look at him. “What’ll you have?”

“Uh, a Budweiser?” he says it like a question. “And I’m sorry for earlier. I didn’t realize you were the owner.”

Okay, that’s it. Kenny’s just going to have to deal with record numbers this month because I’m down to my last nerve and this man just got on it. “So, you’re only apologizing because you were rude to the owner?” His eyes widen as I lean in. “You’re lucky I *am* the owner, because if I’d have heard you speak that way to one of my employees you’d have been tossed out on your ass—literally. Instead, I’m going to let you walk out under your own power. Now get the hell out.”

The man’s face turns red. “Bitch! You kept me waiting all this time just to throw me out?”

“You heard her. Get the fuck out, or I’ll throw you out,” Judge growls from behind me.

Seeing Judge, the guy pales and nods, then jumps off his stool and runs out the door.

Judge’s arms wrap around me from behind. “What did he say? Because I warned him that he had to be nice. Do I need to go teach the fucker some manners?”

I lean back into him. “No, but he only apologized because he found out I was the owner—like being an asshole to one of my servers would’ve been okay.”

“I’ll let it go, then,” Judge mumbles into my ear. “Enough about him,” he pauses and points to the band, “Erin did good. They sound great.”

I nod, and since everyone seems happy right at this second we take a moment to enjoy the music. True to their word, they’ve kept the Christmas music to a minimum. They did do the Small Town Titans’ version of “You’re a Mean One, Mr. Grinch,” but even I had to admit that it freaking rocked.

They start in on Santana’s “Smooth,” and Kat and Sadie head out to the dance floor. Usually they’re on the stage playing, so tonight is a rare moment when they can get out there and let loose. Both girls can move, and they’re putting on quite the show as they undulate to the sexy beat of the song.

I glance over at Finn and, as expected, he's zeroed in on Sadie. Shadow nudges him and points to the lead singer who's watching the girls with a smile that—even from as far away as I am—I can tell is full of intent. Finn narrows his eyes on him before standing up.

“Well,” Judge murmurs, “that’s not good.”

He's right, it's not. Kat is Finn's baby sister, Sadie's the woman he's considered his for years even if he hasn't acted on it. It doesn't matter which girl the singer is focused on; he's screwed if he does anything other than look.

Finn stalks over to Sadie, Shadow on his heels. Sadie clocks him before he's even halfway there. She shakes her head at him before twirling around, showing him her back while twisting her body in ways that will have every guy in here wishing she was theirs.

Judge and I both chuckle at her way of handling Finn.

Kat laughs in her brother's face when he makes it to them. Finn, not skipping a beat, grabs Sadie by the hips and fits her body to his, front to back. Kat lets out a whoop as Shadow gets close to her and starts dancing.

This is a smooth move on Finn's part. Rather than try to force the girls off the dance floor, he's making sure everyone knows that they're off-limits.

I notice Finn run his hands down Sadie's hips while glaring at the lead singer. Since Sadie has her back to him, she doesn't see it. The singer lifts his chin before looking elsewhere. Message received.

“Crisis averted,” Judge says, then pulls away and pats me on the ass. “Let's get to work, Sweetness. I'll handle the folks at the bar if you want to focus on the orders from the floor.”

“Perfect. That way I can let Adam take a section, since we're so packed. Now that everyone is mostly finished eating we're going to be busy.”

I turn and kiss him on the cheek, then tell Adam to get with Tina so she can assign him a section.

Over the past few months, Judge has helped out many times. He's got pulling a beer down pat, and can now make most mixed drinks—although anything out of the ordinary he hands off to me.

I never have to ask, if he's here, he just wades in. I've mentioned putting him on the payroll so he can at least get paid for his time, but he's always said no. I think that needs to change, at least until he finds a new job.

About a half-hour later when the band takes a break Sadie pops by to say goodbye. Rose and Erick aren't too far behind her. I grin when I see the lead singer chatting up Kat on his break.

Guess he's not as scared of Finn as he probably should be.

Mercy and Griff, enjoying their night out, settle in to stay, heading out to the dance floor as soon as the band cranks up again. It's been so long since Griff's had a woman, I'd forgotten how well the man can dance.

After everything he's been through, I love that he and Mercy found each other. Just like her cousin, she's beautiful both inside and out, and is his perfect match in every way.

I look over at Judge, and like he senses my gaze, his eyes meet mine, and he gives me a slow, sexy smile full of promise for later.

I'm so fucking gone for him—why can't I trust that he's just as gone for me?

I notice Henry waving his empty glass at me.

With a sigh, we break apart and get back to it.

I'm working on an old-fashioned a while later when Tina calls to me from the end of the bar.

I walk over to where she's standing with a man I don't recognize. He's tall, broad, heavy browed, and square jawed. Some women would say he's good looking in a rough way, but something about him has my alarm bells ringing.

Tina looks at me, her face closed off. "This guy's looking for his daughter."

Shit. Hopefully it's not our girl he's looking for.

Normally I'd shake his hand, but he's giving off such a bad vibe, I don't want to touch him. Instead, I nod my head at him. "Josie Olson, I'm the owner. How can I help?"

He looks me up and down in a calculating way I don't appreciate at fucking all. "Roy Crews. Like she said, I'm looking for a girl—er—my daughter." He points to Tina. "She says she hasn't seen or heard of any strange girls around, but I thought I'd check with you." He shrugs and shakes his head. "Kids nowadays. Clara got mad about being grounded and took off. I just want to find her before she gets hurt."

He's trying to put on a worried parent act, but something feels off. Way off.

I shake my head. "Sorry, but I haven't seen or heard of any runaways around. Whiskey's small, so if there was one I'd know about it." I grab a pen and pad from under the bar and shove them toward him. "Hate the thought of a kid out there alone though. If you'll leave your name and number, I'll ask around. If I hear of anything, I'll give you a call. Did you say your daughter's name is Clara?"

I catch a flash of anger on his face before he wipes it away, replacing it with a rueful look. "Yes. She's twelve but thinks she's thirty. Her mother took off, and Clara's been struggling ever since."

Geez. Her mom took off and left her with this asshole? "I'm so sorry," I reply. "That must be rough."

"Yeah, well, we're better off without the bitch," he growls, and something about the way he says it has my hackles rising.

A hand settles on my shoulder. "Everything okay here?"

I look up at Judge. "This is Roy Crews. He's looking for his daughter that ran away from home. I was telling him I hadn't seen or heard of any runaways around."

Judge looks from me to Roy. "A runaway? Have you reported it to the police?"

Roy shakes his head. “No. Like I was telling Josie, Clara’s had a rough year, and she’s gotten into a little trouble. Another strike and she could end up in juvie. I really don’t think that’s a good place for her. I’m hoping to find her before she gets picked up by the cops.”

She’s been on her own for days, and we’ve had some deadly weather. He should have reported her missing days ago.

“I understand,” Judge tells him. “Juvie can be a rough place for kids. You got a picture? I’ll let everyone know and we’ll keep our eyes out.”

“I don’t, but she’s twelve, with light blond hair, and blue eyes. She’s a little thing—maybe five feet tall and skinny.”

No picture. Who doesn’t have pictures of their kid? This is sounding more fucked up by the second.

I point to the pad. “Go ahead and give us your information. We’ll ask around and call if we hear anything. Everyone comes in here, both tourists and locals, so if she’s around, we’ll hear about it.”

Roy nods his head. “I appreciate it.” He grabs the pad, writes his name and number on it, then shoves it back toward me. “Thank you. I just want to get my, uh, daughter home,” he says, tripping over the word ‘daughter’ again.

“Hope you find her,” Judge tells him as he picks up the pad and tears off the sheet with the guy’s information, putting it in his pocket. “You want a beer? Maybe some dinner?”

The man shakes his head. “No. I’ve been on the road all day so I’m gonna head back to the hotel. The clerk there hasn’t seen her either. I guess I’ll hit up some other places in town tomorrow. Do you have any suggestions?”

Relief flows through me that the clerk didn’t tell him she was here. I shake my head. “Not really. We’re kind of gossip central here since most of the townspeople stop in at least once a week. I really think you should talk to the sheriff tomorrow. He’s a good guy. I can’t see him putting her in jail for running away.”

He clenches his jaw before nodding. “If I don’t find her tomorrow, I’ll think about talking to him.”

“Well, good luck finding her,” I say, then let Judge lead me away. We stop when we get to the end of the bar and watch as Roy makes his way to the exit.

As soon as he’s out the door, Judge calls Adam over. “You good to take over the bar for a few minutes?”

Adam nods. “Yeah. It’s slowing down and my tables are set.”

“Good. We’ll be in the office if you need us,” he says, then turns to me. “I’m getting Griff and Mercy.”

“Okay,” I agree. “I’ll talk to Tina, then meet you there. She didn’t tell him anything, but I want to see what he said to her.”

He nods, then stalks off toward Griff and Mercy’s table.

I track Tina down and quiz her before I head to the office, meeting Judge, Mercy, and Griff in the hall on my way.

We file into the office and Judge shuts the door, then looks at Griff.

“Did you see the guy we were talking to?”

Griff nods. “Yeah.”

“He’s looking for a runaway that matches the description of ours.”

Griff’s eyes raise up. “Is he now? Did you tell him about the girl?”

“Hell no. I don’t like his vibe.” He pulls Roy’s information out of his pocket. “Got his info. I’m checking him out before I tell him anything.”

I lean against the edge of my desk before chiming in. “He claims she’s his daughter, but I’m not buying it. He doesn’t have any pictures of her, and couldn’t even say the word ‘daughter’ without stuttering. Something about him feels way off—even Tina thought so. She said he gave her the heebie-jeebies. It’s why she didn’t tell him the girl was here.”



I look at Griff. “He claims the mother took off last year. The way he talked about her, though,” I shudder. “I don’t know. I don’t have a good feeling.”

Judge hands Roy’s info over to Griff. “You recognize that area code?”

Griff nods. “Milwaukee County. Doesn’t mean that’s where he lives now, though. And I talked to Owen earlier—there are still no reports of a girl matching our runaway’s description anywhere in the state.”

I cross my arms. “He said that she’s been in some trouble and he doesn’t want her to end up in the system, but it’s the middle of winter. You got a twelve-year-old out on the streets in this weather, you get all the help you can get to find her, fuck the consequences. Juvie is better than dead.”

Griff looks down at the paper. “I say we both look into the guy. Let’s meet up at my house in the morning, say around ten, and compare notes. Can you get info that fast?”

Judge nods. “Yeah. Are we bringing Tony in on this?”

“I’ll call him.” Griff says. “If the guy makes a report, I don’t want them to tell him she’s been seen yet. He’ll give Whiskey PD the heads-up and get the word out to make sure our people know not to talk if he asks around town. Best case is this guy moves on while we’re looking into him.”

Judge nods. “Tony won’t have to tell him we’ve seen her?”

“No,” Griff answers, “especially if he’s not really her dad. But we should know that soon anyway—if he even told us his real name.”

Mercy comes over and puts her hand on my shoulder. “You okay? You’ve become attached to the girl.”

I give her a wan smile. “Yeah, but I’m worried. We need to find her and get her out to the farm where we can protect her, at least until we know her story and what we’re up against.”

“Hopefully we’ll have her by tonight,” Judge says. “Shadow and Finn are planning on following her after she shows for her nightly pickup tonight. They won’t try to grab

her here in case she gives them the slip. We still want this to be her safe place.”

“You still writing her a note every night trying to befriend her?” Griff asks.

“Yeah,” I answer.

“Step it up tonight,” he orders. “Tell her about the farm, her safe places. Let her know we’re on her side, and give her somewhere else to pick things up. It’s likely Crews wasn’t here by coincidence. I’ll let Finn know they need to be on the lookout tonight for trouble.”

“Should she tell her Crews is in Whiskey?” Mercy asks. “That way, she can be on guard.”

Griff and Judge look at each other.

“If she knows he’s here, she’ll run,” Judge points out.

Griff strokes his beard, then shakes his head. “Yeah, we can’t risk her running to God knows where. Don’t tell her.”

I look down, not liking that decision but agreeing with it.

“You good with that, Sweetness?” Judge asks.

I shake my head. “No, but I don’t want to risk her running either.”

“It’s decided then,” Judge declares. “I’m going to go talk to Finn.”

“Tell him to call me,” Griff says.

“Will do,” Judge agrees. He comes to me and drops a kiss on my forehead. “Stay back here as long as you need. I’ll check on the bar, then get with Finn.”

“Thanks, babe,” I tell him, then watch as he takes off.

When the door shuts behind him, I look up at Griff. “I really have a bad feeling about that man. Are we going to find her in time?”

His face tightens, and he looks at Mercy first, then at me. “We’re going to do our best. That’s all I can promise,” he says, his voice gentle.

I wrap my arms around my middle. "I know."

The Aces are on it. Finn and his men will pull out all the stops—and they're Delta Force. This should be a walk in the park for them.

So why do I have this feeling of gloom and doom all around me?

Because I know how wrong this can go, that's why.

*Hey there,*

*I am so sorry I scared you off last night. I didn't mean to yell—I just reacted and didn't think. I'd love to talk to you, so next time, maybe stick around. Again, no cops, no judgment—just someone to talk to, and maybe help you out.*

*You may not realize this yet, but you picked the right alley to be in that night. It's apparent you're in trouble, and I happen to specialize in helping people in trouble. In fact, some friends of mine and I are opening up a home for survivors of domestic abuse who need a more secure place to stay than the local shelter while they wait for their abusers to be brought to justice.*

It's a farm with horses, cows, and lots of acreage around it. No one gets in there without us knowing. It would be a safe spot for you to hide from whatever has you out on the streets. Think about it.

I do have some good news. The sheriff's department and Whiskey PD have agreed that my bar, my houses—both the place you saw me at last night and the farm—are safe places for you, along with the local grocery stores and gas stations. If they see you there, they won't try to talk to you or pick you up. As much as we all want you off the streets, no one wants you to feel like you have to go elsewhere. Being on the streets is dangerous anywhere, but places like Green Bay and even Shawano can be extremely dangerous for a young girl on the run.

I said before, Whiskey takes care of its own, and if you haven't figured it out yet with the tents, sleeping bags, clothes, etc., we've adopted you.

Let me know if you need  
anything, or feel like you're in danger.

Be safe,

Josie

715-555-0168

PS: Enjoy the broasted chicken. It  
comes from Connie's Tavern. She sent  
it along with the Black Forest cake.  
No one does broasted chicken like her,  
and it's good cold too, so she sent  
extra.

PPS: If you ever need a safe  
place to go while you're in town, Ted  
Wilson's law office or Bloom are good  
choices. They'll help you out, no  
questions asked, and they can protect  
you if you need to hide from someone.

PPPS: Word has gotten around  
about us putting goodies for you in  
the alley every night, and we had to  
chase off some kids looking for  
freebies. Tomorrow night, I'll put  
your nightly haul of goodies by my  
garage in the corner you were standing  
at last night.



JUST AN OL' COWBOY

## JUDGE

**S**aturday

Fuck, I'm tired. I slam my hand on the alarm while Josie groans next to me. We didn't get home until after two, and I was up researching Roy Crews while waiting to hear from the Aces until after four. Unfortunately, the girl never showed for them to follow her.

I tossed and turned the rest of the night, thinking of all the different things that could mean. Now it's eight and I need to check in with a few more contacts before I meet with Griff.

"God, I'm getting too old for this shit," Josie grumbles from beside me.

"Go back to sleep, Sweetness. No reason for you to get up yet."

"We promised Adeline we'd go cut down a tree," she reminds me. "I know you've got your meeting with Griff, so I'll take her."

I shake my head. "No fucking way you're cutting down a tree without me. We'll do it tomorrow."

She winces. "I've got the soup cook-off tomorrow."

I roll over, pulling her into my arms. "Sweetness, I think you need to either cancel the cook-off or have Kenny handle it. With the Aces on the case they'll find the girl soon, and you'll need to be available for her when they do. Add to it that you're



trying to keep Bree covered, and it's busy as hell at the bar. You're spreading yourself too thin."

She plops her head back on the pillow and sighs. "Mia'll rub it in my face if I don't show."

"No, she won't. My guess is that she's just as worried about Bree as you are, and when you tell her about Crews showing last night she'll be begging to help. Seriously, call her and see what she says."

"I hope you're right, or else I'll hear about this shit for the next twenty years," she whines and sags in my arms. "Anything new come in after I crashed?"

I settle in, picking up a lock of her hair and twirling it in my fingers. "The Aces confirmed Crews doesn't have the girl. My guess is she saw him at the bar or in town. You need to prepare in case she's already run."

Josie stiffens in my arms. "God, I hope not. We may never find her if that's the case."

"Finn has all the Aces on it now. Everyone in town knows and is on the lookout. Even if she tries to leave the area, they'll find her. She's on foot, so she won't get far."

"Unless she hitches a ride with someone passing through," Josie points out, fear in her voice. "We're crawling with tourists. She could even stow away in a truck bed or something."

I pull her close. "She could, but they'll still find her. Roy Crews is just one man, and he's no match for us. As long as we keep eyes on him, the girl should be fine."

Both my phone and Josie's ring at the same time. I let her go and we both grab them.

I look at the screen and see Shadow's name.

"Did you find her?" I ask when I pick up.

"No. I'm calling because Bret Hebert is parked at the main gate."

Fuck, I do not have time for his shit. “I’ll be out there in a minute. Keep your eyes open. My guess is that this is a ploy, so Perkins may be around.”

“Keys is watching for that. If Perkins tries something, we’ll take him out. Poe is your backup at the gate, and Griff is on his way. He wants you to take your time and keep Hebert busy until he gets here. Owen’s on his way, too.”

“Gotcha,” I say before hanging up. This torpedoed any chance of breakfast in the shower. *Fucking Hebert.*

While Josie talks to Regina, telling her to get into the safe room, I text Mom and warn her.

We both hastily throw on yesterday’s clothes and grab our pistols.

“Get to the safe room, baby. I’ll let you know when the asshole’s gone,” I say as I check my weapon.

She holsters her pistol in her bellyband then looks up at me, her eyes glittering with challenge. “I’m not hiding in the safe room. I’m going with you.”

I wrap my arm around her. “I’d really feel better if you stayed back here to keep an eye on Mom. She’s gotten close to Regina, and I don’t need her going off half-cocked with some cockamamie plan to mete out some justice of her own. Besides, Griff is on his way.”

Her eyes go wide. “Oh shit. Griff and Mercy were over at Bree’s this morning making breakfast. He’s got to be beyond pissed that he had to leave.” She grins. “Do I have to stay back? I want to watch Griff kick some ass. I don’t get to see that very often.”

I lift my brow, trying to look insulted. “What makes you think *I* wasn’t planning on kicking this guy’s ass?”

Not buying my lame attempt at making her feel guilty, she shrugs. “I don’t care which one of you does it. I wanna watch.”

Giving up the act, I laugh. “So damn blood-thirsty.”

“With asshats who beat on women—you’re damn right I am.”

I shake my head. “Sorry, babe, I need you to corral Mom. You’ll have to make do with watching the camera feed.”

Her shoulders sag. “Fine.” She comes up beside me and cups my face with her hands. “Be safe, baby.” She goes up on tiptoe and gives me a quick kiss, before backing away.

I give her an appreciative smile, then head out to confront Hebert, game face on.

I hop in my truck, put my comm unit in, then take my time driving out to the gate. When I make it, I find Hebert in front of the gate, leaning against his truck with a shit-eating grin pasted on his face.

I throw my truck into park, then get out and walk up to the gate. “You’d think a couple days in county and a court date for criminal trespassing would get it through to you that you’re not welcome here,” I say and shake my head at him. “Really, I thought SEALs were smarter than this.”

His grin wavers for a brief moment against the insult, but then he recovers. “I’m just here checking on my old friend, Regina. I heard she was here.”

I shake my head. “Yeah. Funny thing though—when I told her about you trying to sneak onto the property, she made it clear that she doesn’t like you.”

He cocks his head. “Well, that’s too bad because I like her just fine and I’m just trying to make sure she’s okay. Besides, she doesn’t need to hide out here with strangers. She can come to me. I can keep her safe.” He looks me up and down. “A lot safer than you, that’s for sure. I am a Navy SEAL after all.”

God, what an asshat. “Yeah... she’ll pass on that.”

He kicks off from his truck and stalks toward the gate. “I’m afraid I can’t take your word for that. I don’t know a damn thing about you, so I need to hear it from her. After all, how do I know you aren’t holding her hostage here? I’m really concerned, you know, being an old friend and all that.”

He leans over the gate, and his eyes go hard. “You need to tell her to come on out so I can talk to her. It’s time for her to quit this foolishness and go home. You do not want to fuck with me on this. She’s out here in five minutes, or I’m coming in to get her.”

I cock my head and look at him, and he grins like he’s already won.

Well, we can’t have him thinking that, so with no warning I punch him square on the jaw, putting all my power behind it.

Not expecting it, he goes down like a ton of bricks, out cold. Shadow chuckles in my ear. “Damn, Judge.”

“Not grinning now, is he?” I mutter as I open the gate.

Griff pulls in behind the truck, gets out, and surveys the scene. “What the fuck happened?”

“He threatened me, so I punched him.” I look down at the guy. “Once.”

His gaze sweeps over Hebert, then over to me. “A SEAL? In one punch?”

I shrug. “I used to do some fighting in my younger days.”

He shakes his head. “Seriously.”

We both look up when a sheriff’s cruiser pulls in, parking behind Griff’s truck.

Owen hops out. “Damn, Griff. You didn’t waste any time.”

Griff chuckles. “Wasn’t me! This was Judge. One punch.”

Owen whistles, then steps over to Hebert.

The guy starts coming to, so we all watch as his eyes open and he looks around wildly. When he sees Griff, he scrambles up.

“You’re Griff Daniels.”

“Yep, and you’re trespassing on my land... again.”

Hebert’s hands go up. “I was just trying to check on a friend and he punched me for no reason.” He looks at Owen

and seems to register the badge. “I want to press charges for assault.”

Griff looks at me, his eyes twinkling. “This true?”

I cross my arms. “He thought that just because he’s a SEAL I’d be so scared of him I’d throw open the gate and let him go get Regina.”

“So he threatened you?” Owen asks.

“Damn sure did. It’s on camera. I can have the feeds sent to you right away. He even leaned over the gate when he did it, got right in my face.”

I put my hand over my heart. “I felt very threatened. He is a SEAL, after all.”

Griff’s shoulders shake with laughter as Owen pulls his cuffs out, grabs Hebert by the arm, turns him around and slaps them on him. “You’re under arrest for trespassing, terroristic threatening, and whatever the hell else I can think of between here and the jail.”

Hebert argues. “Trespassing? I never made it past the gate!”

“My property starts at the road, asshole. The main road,” Griff informs him while Owen pats him down.

“We got Perkins,” Shadow says in my ear. Griff looks up at me, and I notice the comm in his ear too. He pulls out his phone and starts typing.

“We got him from behind,” Shadow says. “He’s out cold and tied up. He’ll have no idea who got the jump on him when he comes to. I’m sending a location pin to your phones.”

Griff grins, then types again.

My phone rings and I open it. “Yeah?”

“We’re going to claim Bart found him on the property, snuck up on him, and coldcocked him from behind. You need to let Owen know about Perkins. We’ve got him tied up and leaning against a tree. I’ll send you coordinates.”

“Really?” I say, acting surprised. “Owen’s here. I’ll let him know. We’ll get someone out there to help you as soon as we can.”

I look up at Griff and Owen. “Seems Dave Perkins cut the fence and tried to sneak in. Bart got him. He’s out cold and tied up.”

Owen straightens up. “He broke the restraining order? Let me get another unit out here.” He looks at Griff. “You got him so I can go get Perkins?”

“Yeah,” Griff says. He turns to me, looking concerned. “You know where they’re at?” I nod, and his lips quirk up. “Go with Owen. After all, Perkins is a SEAL too. You may be needed to subdue him once he comes to.”

Hebert’s gaze jerks to me. “Who the hell are you?”

“Just an ol’ cowboy,” I drawl, then shoot him my best country boy grin.

Griff laughs outright, shaking his head. “I’ll meet you at your house when I’m done here.”

He turns to Hebert. “First, though, I’m going to have a chat with this idiot.”

Poor Josie. She’s not going to know whether to follow me on the cameras, or watch Griff rip Hebert a new asshole. I laugh all the way to my truck. Owen hops in with me and we head out.

At least after this Perkins will have to cool his heels in jail for a while, since he broke the restraining order.

Now we can concentrate on finding our girl before it’s too late.



HEAD OFF THE LITTLE FILLY  
AT THE PASS



## JOSIE

“We’re good. As soon as we get both Perkins and Hebert off the property I’ll let you know, but they’ve both been neutralized for now,” Griff’s voice rumbles through the phone.

“Let me guess, Perkins tried to sneak in while Hebert kept Judge busy at the gate?” I say, and see Adeline shoot up from her chair, grabbing the shotgun and taking off as fast as she can.

“Yeah, but we got him.”

“Shit, Adeline’s got a shotgun and she’s heading your way. I gotta go corral her.” Corral... Geez. Judge is rubbing off on me.

“Well, you better head the little filly off at the pass,” Griff fakes a drawl, then cracks up.

“Oh kiss my ass,” I say before hanging up and running after Adeline.

“Adeline! Stop right there!” I shout as I chase her out of the house. Damn, she’s fast for her age.

“That man is lower than a snake’s belly in a wagon rut. The only way to take care of a son of a bitch like that is to put him six feet under,” she says as she marches down the driveway.

“Maybe so, but I don’t care what anyone says—orange is not the new black—and you won’t look good in it.” Catching

up with her, I gently pull the shotgun out of her hands.

“Oh, shut your mouth, little missy. I look amazing in orange.”

I lean back and sweep her from head to toe. “An orange jumpsuit, though?” I cringe and shudder. “I think even you’d have a hard time making that look smart. Besides, if you’re in jail you won’t be here for the next woman that needs our help.”

I wrap my free arm around her and guide her toward the cottage where Regina is. “Let’s go check on Regina. She could probably use a friend right now.”

I knock and wait patiently for her to come to the door. After a couple minutes, I’m just about to pull my phone out to call her when she shows at the door, baby in her arms. Her tear-stained face speaks volumes as to why she took so long to answer.

“Hey there. I thought we’d come keep you company until Dave is off the property.” I silently swear to myself when I see her alarmed face. “It’s all good. Griff has him, and he’s not getting away.”

She points down. “Then why do you have a shotgun?”

I cut my eyes over to Adeline, who has the grace to look sheepish, then back to Regina. “Because Adeline wants to go hunting.”

Regina’s big brown eyes go wide as she gapes at Adeline. Then she bursts out laughing. “God, Adeline, as much as I wish someone would shoot the asshole he’s not worth going to jail over.”

Her laugh startles the baby, who opens her eyes and looks around. It’s a wonder that Cassie is so easygoing, since her ma’s been through so much shit since she’s been born.

Regina steps back, opening the door wider. “Come on in. We’ll wait it out together.”

I enter, Adeline on my heels, and we go straight back to the living room. The cottage is a small one bedroom, perfect

for Adeline, but a little tight for a young mother. With Cassie only being two and a half months old though, it's working for her for now.

It's quite old, but Griff sent in the Beck crew to remodel it once it was decided Adeline and Judge would live on the property. It now sports an open floor plan with lots of West Texas flair.

Like she does any time a baby is around, Adeline commandeers the baby and coos to a delighted Cassie while Regina makes us tea. Once Regina shows back up with our tea and a bottle for Cassie, Adeline hands Cassie off to me and excuses herself to go to the restroom.

It takes me a second to get Cassie situated with her bottle.

"I hate that I couldn't breastfeed her, but Dave threw a fit after the first two weeks. He felt like it was taking too much time away from him," Regina mutters while watching me feed the baby.

Geez. Dave was more of an asshole than I thought.

"At least I got a couple of weeks in," she adds.

"I've heard it's not all it's cracked up to be," I say gently.

"I can't say I'm sad that I missed sore nipples and all the leaking at inappropriate times, but I would have liked to have had at least six weeks. It's supposed to be so much better for the baby." She leans back in her chair and takes a sip of tea before cocking her head. "You're good with her... but you never had children?"

I'd always thought I'd have kids someday, but after seeing how hard it was on Bree and Erick having such a shit dad, I decided there would be no kids for me unless I found a man who I was a thousand percent sure would be a great father. That man never showed until it was too late. If there was ever a man I wish I could have kids with, it'd be Judge.

When I realize I haven't answered Regina's question, I shrug. "No, at least none by blood, but I've got Bree and even Erick to some degree, although his mom is great. With Joe

being so useless as a father, it was all hands on deck to help raise both of them.”

Her lips tip up in a gentle smile. “That’s what I love about Whiskey Falls. I know if I stay I’ll have lots of help with Cassie, and not just from my sisters.” She takes a deep breath. “But if the judge lets Dave out again, I’ll get with The Underground and go somewhere else. I’ll do anything to keep Cassie safe.”

I think about how banged up she was when she first came here. He’d beat her so badly she had to be hospitalized. It’s a miracle Cassie wasn’t hurt, but Regina protected her. I still can’t believe they let an animal like him out on bail.

“He’ll do time—especially now that he’s broken the restraining order again. And after he serves his sentence and gets out, you’ll always be welcome back here if need be until we can get his ass locked up again.” *Or six feet under where he deserves to be.*

Regina shakes her head sadly. “Dave wasn’t always like this,” she begins, and sags down in her chair. “I thought he was a good man. I loved him. But when he got back from that last deployment...”

I lean forward. “Honey, you can’t help who you fall in love with. You didn’t do anything wrong. He’s the asshole here.”

She looks at me and shrugs. “I guess.”

The poor girl is going to need some serious therapy to get past all this. I wonder if we can find some therapists to volunteer their time with Regina and future residents? I scratch a call to the women’s shelter in Shawano onto my list. They probably have resources we can tap into.

Adeline comes back in and immediately reaches for Cassie. I’d put up a fight but my phone vibrates, so I begrudgingly hand her over and pull it out. When I read the message, I sigh and stand up.

“Judge just gave the all-clear. I’m needed at the house.”

“You go on, hon,” Adeline says. “I’m going to finish my tea, then I’ll be in the barn with Lisa and Bart if you need me.”

I give Regina a warm smile. “Catch you later.”

She nods. “Thank you for checking on me.”

“Any time you need us, just call. We’re here for you, yeah?”

“I know. I’ll see you later.” With a wave, I head to Judge’s.

The message said he, Griff, and Shadow are waiting for me.

God, please let this not be bad news.



THAT DOESN'T SOUND  
GOOD

## JOSIE

**J**udge, Griff, Finn, and Shadow are standing around the kitchen drinking coffee when I get to the house. Judge eyes the shotgun and lifts his brow.

“Your ma,” is all I have to say. He sighs deeply but doesn’t say a word as he grabs the shotgun from me and sets it on the counter after double checking the safety.

“Is Regina okay?” Griff asks.

“Yeah, although she said that if the judge lets Dave out again she’s contacting The Underground,” I answer as I pour myself a cup of coffee.

Finn shakes his head. “No. The whole reason we’re doing this is so the women of this county don’t have to give up everyone and everything they know and love just because of abusive assholes. If Perkins gets out again, we’ll handle him.”

The way Finn says it makes me think their way of handling it will be a more permanent solution than arresting him again would be. Maybe even the dead kind of permanent. This should horrify me, but in this instance, it doesn’t in the slightest.

“Why the hell did he get released after the first time he broke the restraining order?” Shadow asks.

“Fucking Thornton,” Griff growls. “The governor appointed him to fill Judge Vradenburg’s seat when he medically retired. There’ll be an election to permanently fill the vacancy in the spring, and I guaran-fucking-tee he’ll get



voted out. I've already got someone in mind for running against him, but until then we have to deal."

Whoever Griff has in mind will be a shoo-in, but it sucks that we have to wait to get him in office.

"Why the hell did the governor pick him in the first place? Doesn't he usually run those by you?" Shadow asks.

Griff shakes his head disgustedly. "He did. His record as a prosecutor in Brown County was stellar. He looked great on paper and the governor owed him a favor, so I didn't object. I should have dug into him deeper. I won't be making that mistake again."

Judge pulls out a chair for me, and I sit down. Once the men all join me at the table I look at Griff expectantly. "What's up?"

He leans back in his chair, settling in. "Perkins will be locked up until his trial now, but I still want you to be careful at the bar in case any of his other SEAL buddies decide to get involved."

Judge leans forward. "I'd feel better if Kenny's with you at the bar when I can't be. And I want you carrying every day."

I roll my eyes at him. "I own a biker bar—I carry every day anyway. Now, let's talk about the girl. What did you find out about her?"

"You go first. I want to hear what you found," Griff says, gesturing toward Judge.

Judge settles back in his chair. "Clara Butler, twelve years old. She's originally from Appleton. Mother's name is Jill Butler—there's no father listed. Had Clara when she was eighteen. Parents aren't in the picture, no siblings. Worked as a waitress at a truck stop. As far as I can tell, she's a loner. She hooked up with Crews sometime during the last six months and moved from Appleton to Milwaukee this summer to be with him. Filed a notice of intent to homeschool when they moved, so if Jill is missing there's no close friends or family around to report it."

Griff cocks his head. “Explains why no one has raised any flags about Clara. How the fuck did you find all that out overnight?”

Judge shrugs. “I can’t divulge my sources. Let’s just say my contacts are thorough.”

“But homeschool records?” Finn asks.

Instead of answering, Judge takes a sip of coffee and sets it down. “Jill’s car hasn’t moved from their driveway in over a week. There’s been no movement at the house in days.”

“We’ve got someone checking in with her job this morning,” Griff says. “Should hear from them soon.”

Judge picks up his phone and texts someone. “I’m having my guy stand down, then. Too much interest could tip Crews off that someone’s looking into things.”

Griff chuckles. “You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you? What did you find out about Crews?”

Judge’s lips tip up before he gets serious again. “Roy Crews, thirty-five, born and raised in Milwaukee. Father was Milwaukee PD, killed in the line of duty. Brother is a captain, and there are also several cousins on the force. Roy didn’t go into the family business. Instead, he’s a fabricator, and has worked in several factories, never staying in the same place for more than a year or two. He was laid off from his job two weeks ago. He’s had several domestic complaints filed against him, but all were dropped within days.”

Griff’s phone dings and he looks down at it, his face tightening as he reads it. “Jill Butler quit her job almost two weeks ago through a text message.”

Shit. My money is on Crews sending that message.

Judge pulls his phone out. “I’ve got someone who can check the house if you don’t.”

Griff shakes his head. “There was no one home at four this morning. Looks like some kind of struggle happened in the living room. There’s a lamp broken, furniture’s in disarray. What they believe is Clara’s room has been tossed.”

I let out a sigh. “I wonder if the struggle was with Clara or Jill?”

“Or both?” Judge adds. “We need to find Clara. If something happened to her mom and she saw it...”

“She’s not at any of the campgrounds,” Finn says.

“We’re checking vacant houses in the area now,” Shadow adds, “but she could be anywhere.”

I shift in my chair. “What if we go ahead and put the things she didn’t pick up last night along with a new note by my garage, where I saw her on Thursday?” I ask. “To get this far away from home and be able to evade the cops like she has, she’s a smart girl. She might check there. I can put stuff out at the bar too, just in case last night was an anomaly.”

“Good idea,” Shadow says. “We can put a tracker in her stuff.”

I shake my head. “If she finds a tracker, she’ll never trust me again. Tony brought this up before, but I shot him down. Nothing she gets from me can give her reason to cut me off. I’m all she’s got right now.”

Shadow holds a hand up. “I’ve got access to better stuff than Tony. She won’t find it, I promise. She’ll never know.”

Judge leans over, putting his arm around me. “Sweetness, we need to find her before Crews does. We’re running out of time.”

I sag into him. “Okay,” I look at both Shadow and Finn, “but I’m trusting you to not fuck this up.”

Finn nods. “We got this, Josie. I’ll send over a couple of duffel bags. You can check them out yourself. If you can find the trackers we’ll go a different route, I promise, but you won’t be able to find them—and neither will she.”

“Fine, send them to the bar.” I turn to Griff. “Are you guys done with me? I need to get going.”

Judge squeezes my shoulder before he withdraws it. “Go ahead and tell her Crews came by the bar in your note. If you don’t and she saw him, she’ll be suspicious.”

“Are you sure?” I ask.

He nods. “Yeah. My gut is telling me she saw him.”

As much as I worry she’ll use it as an excuse to leave town, I feel better about not keeping it from her. “Alright then, we have a plan.”

“Hopefully, if we don’t find her today, she’ll pick up stuff from either your place or the bar and we’ll have her before the night is over,” Griff says.

I stand up. “I hope you’re right.”

Judge stands up with me.

“I’ll walk you out, baby.”

After he helps me into my coat, he does just that. Neither of us say anything until he gets me to my car.

He pulls me in for a hug. “We’ll find her.”

I say nothing, just nod into his chest.

He gives me a squeeze, then lets me go. “Stay alert. I’m going to help look for Clara today but if you need me, call me. Otherwise, I’ll come in before dinner to help with the crowds.”

I go up on tiptoe and kiss him on the jaw. “Thanks. We’ll need it.”

He dips his chin down and captures my lips.

“Anytime, Sweetness,” he murmurs against them, before his tongue sweeps in and he kisses me properly.

Then he puts me in my car, and with another peck on the lips, sends me on my way.

As I drive down the lane, I say a little prayer. “Please, if you’re listening, watch over her and keep her safe.”

I’d like to say my little prayer gave me peace of mind, but it didn’t.

Not at fucking all.



# A QUESTION

## JUDGE

**A**fter watching Josie drive off, I walk back into the house. I warm up my coffee before sitting back down at the table. I look between Griff and the Aces. “Are we planning our search?” I ask.

Finn shakes his head. “You’re with me today. We’ll be searching the rural areas east of town.”

Alrighty then. “I assume we’re not just kicking back and drinking coffee here when we’ve got a girl to find, so what’s up?”

“I wanted to talk to you about a job,” Griff says. “I was going to do it when we met at my house, but we’re here now.”

I nod my head. “Great. I was planning on calling you this week to see if you knew anyone who was hiring, anyway.”

“First, a question,” Shadow cuts in. “You walk like someone who’s trained in martial arts. You know how to stay quiet, even through the woods. I rewatched the gate feed. You knew exactly where to hit Hebert to take him down with one blow. You’re not military, I checked, so where’d you learn your skills?”

I set down my coffee and sit back. “Mom ran her family ranch until her parents died and her brother kicked us out. She was hired onto another outfit owned by a Vietnam vet, a Green Beret. After he got back from the war, he came into some family money so he bought a ranch out in the middle of

nowhere, which, with the paranoia he brought back from the war, suited his needs perfectly.”

I smile, thinking of the crotchety old man. “Problem was, he didn’t know shit about ranching and was about to go belly up when he hired Mom on. His idea of paying her back for saving his ass was to take me under his wing and teach me everything he’d learned as a Green Beret—and then some.”

Griff leans forward. “So while he was teaching you how to be a snake eater, did your Ma teach you everything she knew about ranching?”

“That she did,” I answer.

He nods his head. “When I originally talked to Mercy about building a refuge here, I mentioned expanding the farm operations, specifically adding more horses in for breeding and for therapy. Now that the main building is almost done for the refuge—it’s time to focus on the farm. I want you in charge of that.”

“What about Bart?” I ask. “He’s been the caretaker out here for years. Wouldn’t he be the logical choice to head up any expansion?”

Griff leans back in his chair. “Bart’s looking to retire soon. They’ll still live here—that house is theirs as long as they want to live in it. But he’s getting on up there in age and wants to slow down some and go part time. I figure he’ll always help on the farm as long as they’re here, but he would love to hand the reins over to someone new.”

When I moved out here, it was with the understanding that Mercy and I would be partners in running the refuge. I knew Bart would retire at some point, but figured that was a long way off.

“It’s going to take some cake to get a horse operation off the ground. We’d need a new barn, and good horses aren’t cheap—especially if we want to breed them. If you want to expand into therapy horses, I’ll have to find a trainer for that. It’s outside my wheelhouse.” I shake my head and give him a doubtful look. “You were raised on a farm. You know it’s hard



to make money even with cattle. But horses don't make money, they cost money. Think of them as huge money pits that shit and eat."

Griff chuckles. "I've heard all this before. The refuge has an anonymous donor who'll underwrite the new barn and any horse stock you and Adeline purchase. The cattle will bring in enough to pay your salary, which won't be as much as you were making in Texas, but when you factor in perks like free housing, I think it'll even out."

Sitting back I stroke my beard, thinking about his offer. "Taking over the farming operation is a big step up from the head of security. I'll need to talk to Josie before I agree to anything."

Hell yes, I want to take the job, but I still need to run it by her before I say yes.

Griff and Finn look at me with approval in their eyes. Shadow just smirks. "Pussy-whipped."

I nod my head. "Damn straight I am." I turn to Griff. "Just to clarify something, if Bart's still part time, I'm not sure there's enough to keep me busy year-round."

Griff smiles. "With the skills you have, we'll keep you busy. Don't forget you'll still be head of security for the refuge. Since you're so good at it, you can take on the background checks. There'll also be times that the Aces will have other things going, so you'll have to handle some of the surveillance when we have guests in residence, that kind of thing. Plus, Erick and I are swamped. I may bring you in on the occasional job as an independent contractor. Don't worry, I'll get my money's worth out of you."

Working with Griff and Erick? Now that sounds interesting. I briefly wonder about what the Aces could be getting up to that Griff would know about, but quickly dismiss it. It's none of my business.

"Like I said, let me talk to Josie and Mom, and I'll get back to you. In the meantime, we've got a girl to find."

Finn nods. “Finish your coffee, then let’s go. We’ve got a long list of places to check.”

I drain my cup, then stand. “Let’s do this.”

Within minutes I’m in Finn’s truck, heading toward the main road.

Not caring that I might look like an idiot, I smile into the windshield. Perkins and Hebert are behind bars, and I just got offered my dream job. So far, it’s shaping up to be a good day, even with the crappy beginning.

Let’s just hope that continues to hold and we find Clara before Crews does.

Five hours later, we’re walking up to structure number fifteen on our list with nothing to show for our efforts. As with all the places we’ve checked out, we’ve parked down the road and walked in, just in case we come upon her. Snow is falling, and the forecast says tonight will be our coldest night yet—reminding us that even without the possible threat from Crews, Clara is in an exceedingly dangerous situation.

Word from the other teams is that they’re striking out too, nor has she been sighted in town. It should *not* be this damn hard to find a twelve-year-old girl.

We’re at an old hunting cabin in a veritable swamp. Nature is retaking the place with bushes growing up through the porch, and more than one tree leaning against the structure. It’s good it’s so fucking cold, because if we were in Texas this would be chigger and tick central.

The front door has a tree leaning against it, so there’s no way we’re getting in through there without getting chainsaws involved. Finn signals he’s going left and I go right, as we carefully check to see if there’s any side doors while peeking through windows. As far as I can tell, the place is deserted.

When I reach the back of the house, I hit pay dirt. The snow around the back door is tamped down, signaling someone has been here. When Finn appears around the corner, I point to the snow.

He eases up to the window next to the door and peeks in. I sneak around to the other side, looking through that window, finding it deserted.

“The rooms I checked are empty,” he whispers.

“Same,” I whisper back.

“We go in, then. On three,” he says.

We each pull our weapons, then he counts down with his fingers. One... two... On three, he reaches over and turns the knob, finding it unlocked, so he eases it open. We wait a beat, listening for any movement. When there is none, he slips inside, going left. I’m right behind him and take the right.

We check the entire house. Clara is nowhere to be found, but we find a cold-weather tent in the back bedroom and several of the blankets we gave her that first night, along with a duffel bag with a change of clothes, some cash, and some food.

“She’s been here,” Finn says.

“Yeah. But I don’t think she’s staying here.” I gesture toward the blankets. “This feels like an emergency stash.”

“I agree,” he says. “This is good, though. If she’d skipped town already, she’d have come and gotten the cash.”

“What twelve-year-old has a fallback hidey-hole?” I murmur, looking over her things.

“A fucking smart one,” Finn answers, “who’s terrified of something.”

We leave the way we came. Finn goes to his truck and pulls out a camera and a phone. “Check the perimeter while I set this up. If she comes back here, we’ll get an alert.”

While he does his thing, I walk around the back of the cabin, doing my best not to leave tracks. Finding an old trail leading into the woods, I follow it a good way until I see it... a thin, solitary tire track. She’s got a bicycle. There’s no way she’s been hauling around tents on a bike, but it explains how she’s been disappearing so quickly when she shows in town.

She probably stashes the bike out of sight, but close by for fast getaways.

I shake my head, but smile.

Smart girl, indeed.

Now we just have to find where the hell she's really holed up at.

## D ON'T STRESS

The hot water feels so good I groan as it washes over me. Finn and I have been all over Falls County, crawling through dusty barns and old houses, but other than the stash we found there was no sight of Clara.

Not only were the campgrounds a bust, the Aces have been checking out vacant vacation rentals with no luck. Tomorrow we'll check out vacant houses both in and outside of town, but it's like we're trying to find a needle in a haystack.

I'm worried she saw Crews and retreated to her hideout to wait him out. I hate the thought of her going hungry and thirsty because she's too scared to come out of hiding. I really hope she shows up to get supplies.

The Aces are going to keep looking while I help at the bar. I've got two duffel bags in my truck for Josie to pack shit in for tonight. We had a huge discussion on whether to have someone watching at both places, but decided against it. Clara is wily, and something tells me she'll smell a tail immediately.

We have cameras in the alley behind the bar, but sadly there aren't any near the garage at Josie's house. Josie nixed putting any new cameras out just in case Clara is watching. We'll just have to rely on the trackers if she takes the bait.

I finish showering, then quickly get dressed. If I want to get to the bar before the dinner rush, I need to get going. I find Mom in the kitchen drinking a cup of tea.

"I'm heading to the bar. Are you home tonight?" I ask.

“No. I’m meeting someone at Josie’s for dinner and then, if there’s live music, I’ll stick around for a while.”

“Do you need a ride? I can carry you home when you’re ready then head back,” I ask.

She looks up. “I was hoping you’d offer. Rose said they’ll give me a ride home tonight. That way, I can have a drink or two.”

“Sounds good, but if you’re riding with me, we need to get a move on. I told Josie I’d be there before the dinner rush.”

She stands up, smoothing down her shirt. “Let me go fix my lipstick and I’ll be right out.”

True to her word, within minutes we’re in the truck and on our way.

“Is Josie okay?” Mom asks.

Age has not diminished Mom’s sharpness, nor her ability to sense when things aren’t quite right. I should have figured she’d notice something off with Josie, even as little as she’s been home. “She’s got a lot going on right now, so she’s a little stressed.”

She nods, staring off into the fading light. “I’m surprised she hasn’t put her house on the market yet. But then, now that I’m staying at your house I noticed that other than her clothes, she really hasn’t moved anything out to the farm.”

My eyes cut to her before I quickly get them back on the road. “I assumed she didn’t want any reminders of what happened in that house.”

I glance back over, and she’s looking at me like I’m the dumbest idiot ever.

“Her asshole cousin getting his brains blown out would be enough to turn her off her house, yes, but you think she’d abandon all the things she’s collected over the years?”

Shit, when she puts it like that...

“Son,” she continues, “she hasn’t even brought her pictures here... or her pots and pans and kitchen shit. She’s a

chef—she'd at least grab her good knives.”

She turns in her seat and looks at me square on. “You do want her living with you, right?”

“Of course, I do. I plan on spending the rest of my life with her,” I say.

“Well then, have you ever officially asked her to move in with you? Sure, after the mess with the cartel you brought her home, but have you discussed your living situation since then? Does she realize she's actually living with you, or does she think you're just letting her stay there out of pity for her situation?”

I blink. Fuck me, she's right. I've really screwed the pooch, if that's what has her upset. “I—uh—well, now that you mention it—”

She cuts me off. “Judge West! No wonder she's been quiet lately. You can't just take this kind of thing for granted. You've left the poor girl hanging. You need to tell her what your intentions are and lock her down or, son, you're going to lose her.” She turns back toward the window and huffs. “Boy, if you mess this up, I'm going to be very unhappy with you.”

“Calm down. I'll talk to her tonight. I guess I thought she knew I want her right where she is.”

Mom turns back toward me and glares. “She's not a mind reader!” She grabs her purse and searches through it. “I'm texting Rose and seeing if she has any flowers lying around that you can give her. I cannot believe you.” She finds her phone and pulls it out before looking up at the ceiling of the truck. “Lord, forgive me for raising an idiot for a son. I tried my best, but it obviously wasn't good enough.”

I throw a hand up, then let it bang back down on the wheel. “Give me a break, Mom! I've never actually lived with a woman before, besides you and Mercy. This is all new to me but I'll fix it, I promise”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Watch your tone, young man.”

Young man... it's like I'm fifteen again and just got caught drinking moonshine with my buddies in the hayloft.

She shakes her head and transfers her lethal gaze from me to the phone. "Clueless. He's utterly clueless. Where did I go wrong?" she mutters under her breath as she jabs at the phone, I assume telling Rose how much of a dumbass I am.

Thankfully, the bar comes into sight, so I put my blinker on and pull in, park, then turn to her. "Not a word to Josie. I'll talk to her tonight."

She tosses her phone back in her purse, then rounds on me with her finger out. "You're damn tooting you'll talk to her tonight. I won't say anything to her, but you'd better fix this. I'd hate for you to lose the only woman of yours I've ever liked."

At this point, there's only one thing I can do. "Yes, ma'am," I meekly say before I exit the truck, then go around to help her out. It takes forever to get her to our usual table because of all the people she has to stop and talk to, but I eventually get her settled. It's early so no one's here yet, but Mom'll be fine on her own.

Now I can go hunt down my woman. She's not at the bar so I check the kitchen with no luck, but I finally find her in her office.

She looks up and smiles when I walk in. I go straight to her, pull her up, wrapping my arms around her, loving the feeling of her in my arms after such a frustrating day.

"Sweetness," I murmur.

"Sorry you didn't find her," she says. I've been texting her all day, keeping her up to date.

"The Aces are still looking," I say. "Hopefully they'll have better luck tonight."

"Any word about what Crews has been up to?" she asks. "According to the tracker he's been canvassing people around town." Not wanting to tip him off, the Aces put a tracker on his truck and have backed off a bit. They do put eyes on him

every couple of hours, though, just to make sure he doesn't have the girl.

She sags against me. "That's something, at least."

"Griff called someone he knows in Milwaukee, and they're working on trying to find Jill Butler. I expect there will be a missing person's case opened soon, if they haven't already. They're just trying to keep it on the down low so Roy Crews' family members on the force don't hear about it."

"Is it bad that I'm hoping Jill ran out on her own kid?" she asks.

"Versus Crews possibly killing her in front of Clara? No," I answer.

She takes in a big breath. "True." She shakes her head, then looks at her watch. "I need to get out there before they get swamped."

I lean down and place a gentle kiss on her lips. "We'll find her, baby."

She nods. "I know we will."

She pulls away and steps back. "Go sit with your Ma. I'll send Gretchen out to take your order."

"Sounds good, I'm starving. Send me whatever's quickest and after I've eaten I'll help behind the bar."

"Awesome. Sadie called and she needs to play, so when her and Kat get here I may hit the stage with them if we aren't swamped."

Knowing she probably needs to get lost in the music as much as Sadie does, I nod. "You play, I'll hold down the fort."

Before she takes off, I pull her in for one more kiss. "Tonight, after we close, you and I are going to have that talk."

She stiffens in my arms. "Fine."

I lean back and push back a lock of her hair. "Don't stress, it's all good."



She nods woodenly. “Whatever you say. I’ve got to get to work.”

Before I can get a word out, she pulls away and walks out the door. Damn.

I shake my head. No matter. I’m not letting a damn thing distract me from talking to her tonight. Come hell or high water, by the end of the night, Josie’s going to know she belongs with me.

In my house.

In my bed.

In my heart.

And I’m not taking no for an answer.



FUCKING EVERYTHING UP

## JOSIE

“**Y**ou and I are going to have that talk,” I mutter, repeating his words as I walk away. “*Don’t stress, it’s all good,*” I go on.

Like those aren’t famous last words.

I guess this is it. Tonight’s my last shot at convincing him to keep me around. I really hoped he’d ask me to move in with him after the trip to the house to get the Christmas ornaments but he didn’t say a word, which, if you think about it, speaks volumes.

I can’t even blame him. The bar has been an absolute nightmare the past couple of weeks. Actually, it’s been months since I had to hire and train Tina to be the night manager. Just as I got her settled in, the flu hit. For Judge, this has been one hell of a rude awakening as to how a life with me will be.

I round the corner of the hallway and go behind the bar, giving Tina a chin lift to let her know I’m on. I immediately do a quick look at supplies to make sure we don’t need anything before the dinner rush starts.

“Tina, we’re good on everything but brandy,” I call out. Lord help us if we run out of brandy and can’t make old fashioned. There’d be a riot.

“Got it!” she hollers back. “I’ll pick up some extra cherries while I’m back there.”

“Good idea,” I reply as I make my way to a couple of tourists who just sat down at the bar. “What can I get you?” I

ask.

“Two Spotted Cows, please,” the man orders.

I pour their beers and set them down in front of them. He throws a twenty on the bar. I take it, and hand him his change.

When I turn, I go dead still when I find Aunt Matilda standing at the bar, glaring daggers at me.

Oh, for fuck’s sake. I do not need her shit, especially tonight.

“I’ve been trying to call you,” she sneers.

“I know, but I’ve got nothing to say to you.”

She visibly stiffens, and her glare gets even more lethal. “Well, I’ve got plenty to say to you. And if you won’t listen, maybe your customers will.”

I reach for a bottle, but a hand wraps over mine. “I’ve got this, Sweetness. She’s not worth the hassle,” Judge murmurs in my ear, his presence at my back instantly calming me.

He straightens up behind me, his warmth calming the riot of emotions running through me. “Turn your ass around and walk out that door,” he orders Aunt Matilda, “or I’ll put you out.”

Matilda transfers her glare from me to Judge. “This has nothing to do with you. This is between me and my niece.” She turns to the couple I just served. “Do you know what kind of woman she is? She assaulted her own cousin at this very bar. Now he’s dead because of her, and she won’t even pay for his funeral.”

The couple looks from her to me. The man picks up his beer and takes a long drink, sets it down and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “She pours a mean draft. That’s all I give a shit about.”

“Next round’s on the house,” I tell him, and Aunt Matilda gasps.

“Sweet,” his date says.

“My son is dead,” Matilda hisses.

I stare down my aunt. “The reason I’ve been avoiding you isn’t because I’m ducking out on any so-called responsibility I have toward Clint. It was out of respect for the fact you lost your son. But now that you’ve brought it to my business the gloves are off, so I’m gonna be blunt.”

I put my hands on the bar and lean forward. “Clint was a complete waste of oxygen. He stole from me after I gave him a hand up, and then he tried to *kill* me. I’d like to say I’ve lost sleep over his death, but I haven’t. Not a fucking wink,” I grit out, my voice dead even, “so get this through your head, Matilda. There is no fucking way I’m paying a dime toward his funeral expenses. And you and me? We’re done. You’re just as dead to me as Clint is.”

Matilda gasps then she just stares at me, anger and malice written all over her. “I can’t believe you just said that to me.”

“Not another fucking word,” Judge says before stepping away from me and rounding the bar, heading for my aunt. Before he can get there, Sadie and Kat appear behind her.

“No need to take out the trash, big man,” Sadie says as she grabs Matilda’s arms from behind. “We’ve got this.”

“Before you go,” Griff growls from the side, “Matilda, you should know that it was only at Josie’s request that you didn’t get your ass hauled in for your part in Clint’s embezzlement scheme. Nor did she take Ted Wilson’s advice to sue Clint’s estate for the amount owed to her. But after this little shit show, I’d quit worrying about funeral expenses and start worrying about how to pay a lawyer.”

“My part... you’ve got nothing on me,” Matilda sneers.

“He may not, but I do,” Owen Anderson adds, entering the conversation from his spot farther down the bar. “I’ll be calling the D.A. first thing.”

“There’s no way,” Matilda sputters, her voice wavering.

“We have Clint’s phone and his computer. He saved everything, including text messages,” Owen counters.

Matilda goes sheet white as he continues. “You may not have personally stolen the money, but you knew about it, you

encouraged it, and you took some of it. The only reason your ass isn't sitting in jail is because Josie felt sorry for you and told me to drop it."

She looks up at me, her sneer gone, panic written all over her face. "I... I'm sorry."

"You're damn right you are," Judge growls, "a sorry excuse for a fucking human being. Get out and stay out—and that includes your daughters. She's done with the lot of you." He nods to Sadie, who turns Matilda around and marches her out of the bar.

Once he's sure she's gone, he rounds the bar again, coming straight to me. "Tina, we're on break," he says, then puts his arm around my shoulders and pulls me from behind the bar, heading toward the office. I can feel the fury emanating off him with each step we take.

"Babe, the bar is filling up," I say.

"Fuck 'em. They can do without you for a few minutes."

We hit the office and he pulls me in, slamming the door behind us. In a blink I'm wrapped in his arms. "Jesus, baby. Please tell me that bitch and her daughters weren't the only family you have left."

I shake with silent laughter. "Blood, yeah. Matilda and her daughters are the last of that den of vipers, but I've got all kinds of family, starting with Bree, Erick, and Griff."

I pull back, holding up a hand, counting on my fingers. "Rose, Mercy..."

"Me," he cuts in. "You've got me."

I look up at him as hope swells in me, but I need to hear him spell it out. "Do I? Because you keep mentioning you want to talk, which usually means I'm about to get dumped."

He closes his eyes as he takes in a deep breath. When he opens them again, they're filled with regret. "You and I, Sweetness? We're good. In fact, until lately, I thought we were great."

He rakes a hand through his hair. “Is this what’s been bothering you? You think I’m gonna leave you?”

“I—uh...” I start, but then nothing else comes out.

He tilts his head and his eyebrow goes up.

I slump in his arms. “It’s been over six months. With the other men I’ve had in my life, that’s when everything goes to shit.”

He leans back and stares at me, his eyes glittering with purpose. “Sweetness, before me, you were with the wrong men. Now you’re with the right one.”

“I’m sorry. I’m fucking everything up,” I whisper, feeling stupid for doubting him—doubting us.

The weight of his gaze gets even heavier. “I waited over fifty years for the right woman to come along and baby, you were worth the wait.”

He takes in a deep breath and exhales slowly before cupping my face with his hand and looking deeply into my eyes. “Brace, Sweetness, because I’m fixing to lay out all my plans for you. Before the week is out, you’re officially moving out of your house and into mine. By this time next year, you *will* be my wife.”

My heart stutters at his words. After Joe, I didn’t think I’d ever get married again. Hell, I didn’t think I’d want to—but with this man, I’ll need to invest in good track shoes because if it’s him waiting for me at the end of the aisle I’ll be sprinting down it as fast as I can.

With these words alone, he’s already blown through every wall I’ve tried to erect to keep from getting hurt, and he’s not done yet.

“If you think I’m going to walk away, you’re dead fuckin’ wrong. It’ll never happen. And warning, Sweetness, I won’t let you leave me, either, especially over bullshit like me not being clear about how much you mean to me.”

He leans forward, placing a kiss on the very corner of my mouth. “My world’s always been dark, but the night I met you



it was pitch black,” he whispers against my lips before pulling back. “But one look at you, and you lit it up like the brightest summer day. No way am I giving up your sunshine, baby. That’s not ever going to happen.”

Jesus, he’s killing me. I can’t take anymore or I’ll be a blubbering mess, so I do the only thing I can think of to get him to stop. I go up on tiptoes and slam my mouth on his. He immediately opens and I sweep my tongue in as his hand moves to the back of my head, pulling me in closer, deepening the kiss.

Despite everything spinning out of control around us, in his arms, tasting him, feeling him, for the first time in weeks, months, *years* even, everything in my world feels right. With this man at my side, I can weather any storms coming my way.

I pull back, looking up at him. “God, I love you.”

Relief shows across his face and his arms spasm around me as he buries his head into my neck.

“Fuck, Sweetness, I love you, too.”

We stand like that, just holding each other, the only sound the low thrum of music pulsating through the door, until someone knocks.

“You two done? It’s getting busy as hell out here and I am not a fucking bartender!” Kenny calls through the door.

Judge pulls back and stares down at me. “I suppose throwing you over my shoulder and carrying you back home so we can celebrate alone is out of the question?”

I sigh. “Yeah... Christmas Market, busiest weekend of the year... Missing runaway to gather shit up for. As tempting as it is to say fuck it and leave, I can’t. I’m so sorry, babe.”

He smiles, shaking his head. “Nothin’ to be sorry about. There’s always later. We’ll just have to be quiet again.”

“It’s a date,” I say, then peck him on the lips and step back.

He throws his arm around my shoulders and I open the door to see Kenny standing there, looking extremely worried.

“You okay?” he asks as he examines me from head to toe.

“It’s all good,” I assure him, meaning it for the first time in weeks.

His eyes narrow as he searches my face. Finally, he nods. “Good. Then get your ass back to work. The servers are underwater out there and I’ve got to get back to my kitchen.”

He turns on his heel and stalks off. Judge and I walk out the door, then stop short when we find Griff, Mercy, Erick, Rose, Finn, Adeline, Kat, Sadie, and even Owen Anderson standing in the hallway, all looking just as worried as Kenny.

Judge chuckles. “You were right. You’ve got all kinds of family at your back.”

“Yeah. Aren’t they awesome?”

“That they are, Sweetness. That they are.”



# HOLDING OUT

## JOSIE

**I**t's getting close to eight. The dinner crowd has finally dispersed but the jukebox is thumping, the drinks are flowing, and the crowd is settling in for the fun part of the night.

Kat and Sadie are setting up on stage with Finn and Erick. Bree's a powerhouse on stage and we're going to miss her, but we've got plenty of vocal talent to fill in the void.

Tina, Judge, and I are behind the bar getting caught up.

Since Matilda got thrown out of not just the bar but my life, I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I guess I didn't realize how much my crazy family has been dragging on me all these years. I'm not close to any of them. My dad took off before I was even born, and as for my mom—I imagine she was better than foster care, but barely.

Honestly, she was worse than Matilda. I spent a lot of time at my friends' houses growing up because my home was not a good place to be. Mom wasn't abusive per se, she just had no use for me and let me know it as often as she could. The day I turned eighteen, I packed my shit up and couch surfed until I'd saved up enough money waitressing to get my own place.

I figured evil would never die, so it was a surprise when Mom dropped dead of a heart attack at forty, just a few short years after I left home. I should have cut off my family then, but they were all I'd ever known so I put up with them. Of course, once the bar became a success they were a lot nicer. Go figure.

I ended up firing Clint's sisters when they worked here. Lazy doesn't even begin to describe them, and they were both straight-up bitches like their mom. But Clint—although he could be an ass—was a hard worker. Plus, I felt sorry for him having a mom and sisters who were so damn mean. It's too bad he was working hard so he could fleece me.

Beer hits my hand and I realize I've overfilled the mug I was pouring. Shit, I need to get it together.

I finish filling a tray with drinks and slide it to Gretchen.

"God, my feet are already killing me," Gretchen says as she picks it up, "but the tips are freaking awesome!" It's her first time working a market weekend so I get her enthusiasm.

"Welcome to Christmas Market weekend," I tell her.

"It'll be worth it. At this rate, I may make enough to take care of my entire Christmas present budget in one night," she says, a big smile on her face.

"Crossing my fingers for ya," I tell her as she turns and sashays off. Adam quickly takes her place and rattles off an order.

I'm working on it when Judge comes up beside me. "I'm gonna take a quick break. I'll be right back."

He leans down, placing a quick kiss on my lips before taking off.

I get back to mixing drinks, thinking nothing of it until the lights lower and piano music plays. Startled, I look up at the stage and see the band assembled in their usual spots, except Sadie's on the piano and Judge is in the front, sitting on a barstool, Sadie's guitar in his hands, staring straight at me as he sings the intro to Joe Cocker's, "Have a Little Faith In Me."

Holy shit. He's been holding out on me... and oh, my God, the man was sex on a stick before but sitting on that barstool with his cowboy hat and boots on, strumming that guitar... he's so damn hot I'm starting to combust just standing here.

By the time Judge gets to the chorus, I'm walking toward him, my eyes never leaving his.

His voice has a deep, mellow tone to it with just a touch of rasp as he sings each line like it's a straight-up dare to me. The crowd parts when I reach the stage and he looks down at me, a knowing smile on his face.

Tears flood my eyes and my hand comes to my mouth as each word he sings repairs every hole life has ripped into my heart. When Kat starts in on the guitar solo, Judge sets his guitar down and hops off the stage. Then I'm in his arms, his mouth on mine, while everyone yells and whistles. Not caring about the crowd, I sink into it.

"I love you," he murmurs into my lips, rocking me to the music as Erick takes up singing.

"I love you, too," I say back as the tears pour down my face. "But, fuck you. You made me cry."

"Sounds like a plan," he chuckles as his hands come up and wipe my tears away. "I plan on fucking you all night long after I get you home."

Then he pulls me close, swaying us to the music as he sings the last of the lyrics into my ear.

I didn't think he could be more perfect, but now knowing that he not only can sing but can also play guitar—if I hadn't already fallen hard for him, I'd be a goner. Sitting around a fire playing music with someone you love is one of my all-time favorite things to do.

The song ends and he holds me for a couple of beats longer before we break apart.

"Hate to say it, Sweetness, but you should probably go fix your eye makeup before you get up on stage."

I give him a mock glare, but then ruin it with a snuffle. "Alright."

"I'll go help Tina," he tells me. "We'll dance again after we get home."

My belly flutters at his words. It'd break Gretchen's heart if I chased everyone out, shut the bar down, and dragged Judge

home so I could have my wicked way with him, so I guess I'll have to be patient.

With one last kiss, he sends me off with a pat on the ass. I roll my eyes at his ridiculousness, but have to admit that I love it.

I hit the office, grab my makeup repair bag, and do the best I can with it in my tiny little mirror.

When I come out, I run into Adeline leaving the women's bathroom.

"Judge was holding out on me," I tell her with a smile. "All this time, I had no idea he plays."

"Oh, sugar, didn't you know all cowboys have poet's hearts?" She squeezes my arm. "I'd stay and chat, but I've got a hot one on the hook out there. I better get back before one of those other hussies tries to snap him up."

I watch her power walk down the hallway back to her latest victim, a bemused smile on my face. Sadly, I don't get two steps away before Roy Crews appears at the end of the hall, blocking my way and not looking the least bit happy.

Shit. I make my way toward him, stopping a healthy distance away.

"Hi, Roy. Had any luck finding your girl?" I ask.

"No. It's funny, though. Before I got to town, two different people told me they'd heard about a runaway matching Clara's description here, specifically mentioning this bar. But since I got here, no one knows a damn thing. It's almost like the whole town is conspiring against me."

I shrug my shoulders. "Sorry. Maybe she was just passing through when those others saw her. I've been asking around, but no one has seen her."

He studies me, doubt and frustration written all over him. "Why do I have the feeling you're lying? You wouldn't do that, would you?"

I straighten my shoulders. "No way in hell would I ever let a runaway child stay on the streets without doing everything I



could to get her somewhere safe.”

Roy studies me, his entire body tense.

“I’m sorry you haven’t found her,” I say. “I still have your number and I’ll call if I hear anything, but I need to be getting back to work.”

He doesn’t move. Instead, he flexes his hand open and closed, forming a huge fist while he glares at me, not bothering to hide the monster lurking in those ice-cold eyes.

Knowing you can never let a man like this see fear, I raise my brow, hoping he backs down, but mentally preparing to protect myself if he makes any moves toward me.

“Everything okay here?” Judge asks from behind Roy.

Relief pours through me at the sight of him and Kenny, both looking at Roy with lethal intent.

“It’s fine,” I say, my voice tight. “Roy here was just asking about his... daughter.”

Roy turns, facing Judge and Kenny. “Josie was telling me she hasn’t heard a thing about Clara.”

“I’ve been asking around, too,” Judge says. “No one has seen her. My guess is that if she was here, she’s long gone. Try Shawano, or even Green Bay. Both have shelters there.”

“I’ll do that,” Roy says as he finally steps to the side.

Judge passes by him, coming straight to me. “Good luck,” he says over his shoulder as he gently guides me back down the hall to the office, Kenny following behind us.

“That did not look good,” he states when we’re in the office.

“It wasn’t,” I say. “He’s suspicious and clearly doesn’t believe me. For a minute there I thought he was going to come at me.”

Judge and Kenny exchange looks.

“Until we find Clara and deal with Crews, I’m on you,” Judge declares. “I don’t trust that he won’t try to find you

alone.”

I should balk at this, but I’m relieved. I did not like the look in that man’s eyes at all. And now, after seeing the evil lurking there, I very much doubt the story that Clara’s mother ran off.

“I’ve got to get on stage. Can you tell Griff? We need to find Jill Butler—or get the Milwaukee PD to open an investigation. She—” I falter and shake my head. “I don’t think anything good has happened to her.”

Judge nods. “I’ll text him to meet me here.” He looks at Kenny. “Can you escort her to the stage? Let Erick and Finn know not to let her out of their sight.”

Kenny nods. “That motherfucker isn’t getting anywhere near Josie again.”

Judge leans down and kisses my forehead. “Go. Play. De-stress. I’ll be out as soon as I talk to Griff.”

“Okay,” I murmur. With a last squeeze of his hand, I walk away, Kenny at my back.

We need to find Clara before Crews does. I have no doubts that man is a stone-cold killer, and he doesn’t need to get anywhere close to that little girl.

*Clara,*

*I hope you’re okay. We’ve been worried about you. I’m guessing you saw Roy Crews when he came in looking for you, and that’s why you’re lying low. I don’t blame you. The man gives me the creeps. The only good thing is I know your name now, and it’s a beautiful one.*

No one is telling Roy anything and we're keeping an eye on him, but I'm begging you to come to me. I can help. If not me, then most of the townspeople would love to help. We are not going to let Roy take you away, but it will be easier to keep you safe if you're with us.

Once we get you safe and Roy out of the picture, we'll figure out how to keep you that way. I promise.

I know it's hard to trust anyone when you're in a situation like yours, but you can trust us. Ask anyone around.

Please, find me. Let me help you.

Be Safe,

Josie

P.S: The bar is no longer safe.  
I'll leave your care packages here at the house from now on.



THE HOUSE IS ROCKIN'

## JUDGE

**N**ot able to help myself, I watch Kenny escort Josie all the way down the hall and to the main room before I step back in the office and shut the door.

Pulling my phone out, I text Griff. Within minutes he shows and I explain what happened. “I’m glad Kenny and I showed up when we did. I don’t think he would’ve assaulted her at the bar, but he was doing his best to intimidate her into telling him where Clara is.”

“She okay?” Griff asks.

I scoff. “Yeah. Josie doesn’t back down for anyone. If he’d have made one move toward her it wouldn’t have gone well for him.”

He chuckles. “That’s Josie. Crews fucked up by trying anything with her.”

“Yep. Now she wants you to step up your efforts to find Jill Butler. Even get an investigation opened if you have to. She thinks something happened to her.”

Griff sighs. “Yeah, I agree. There’s been no activity on her bank account or her credit card. You add that with the obvious struggle at the house, and there’s certainly enough to open a missing person’s case.”

“Can you do it without the original report leading back to here?” I ask. “With Crews having family on the force, we risk them telling him who called it in. I don’t want him knowing we’re on to him just yet.”

“Yeah. I can make it look like an anonymous tip came in. I know someone who can handle it for us and hopefully get into the house before Crews’ family hears about it. No reason to give them a chance to clean up behind him.”

“That’s what I’m worried about,” I say.

“It’s late, but I’ll get the ball rolling as far as I can tonight. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Thanks, Griff,” I say.

We’ve got several hours to go before closing time. Hopefully we can get through it before any more disasters happen.

I grin as we make our way back to the bar, unable to let the weight of all these worries overshadow how jazzed Josie will be after playing. We’ll have to be quiet, but tonight’s going to be all kinds of fun after we get home.

Especially since we’re celebrating the fact that it’s now officially *our* home.

By the time I’m back behind the bar, Erick is singing a rocking version of Stevie Ray Vaughan’s “The House is Rockin,’” and Josie is killing it on the piano. The lack of tension in her shoulders as she plays tells me that she needed this just as much as I thought she did, if not more.

Tina is behind on drinks but we get caught up in short order. I’m surprised when the band mixes in some Christmas tunes to their set list, although I shouldn’t be. I chuckle and shake my head. Maybe now that we’ve got our shit straight, Josie’s finally in a festive mood. Before I know it, Tina signals last call and the band is playing their final song.

Finally.

It takes too damn long to get the last customer out the door. While Josie cashes out the servers, Kenny pulls me to the side. “Tina and I have it. Take Josie home. She’s got to be exhausted after everything that’s happened.”

“Are you sure? Don’t forget, you’re taking over the soup cook-off at noon.”

He nods his head. “I got it, and I’ll handle opening tomorrow too. I don’t want to see her here until after two, at the earliest. Tips are so good that Gretchen wants to work a double tomorrow, so she’ll be in for lunch. You take Josie and your ma and put a tree up in the morning. Christmas is almost here, for fuck’s sake.”

I clasp him on the shoulder. “Thanks, man.”

Knowing Josie’ll want an update on anything the Aces have learned, I shoot a text to Shadow as I head toward the office. Since we were worried that Roy Crews may be watching Josie, we decided she didn’t need to drop off the bag at her garage, so Shadow took that task on instead. He assured Josie that no one would see him do it, including Clara. With a nickname like Shadow, I figure he’ll make good on that promise.

Shadow immediately texts back that the packages are deployed. They haven’t found Clara yet, but Crews is back at his hotel, alone, so we’ve done everything we can with the girl. Bree is stable for now. Perkins and Hebert are sitting on their asses in jail and will both be staying there for the foreseeable future. Mom should be snoozing away. Now I just have to collect my woman, get her home, and get the party started.

When I enter the office, Josie’s just closing the safe and her light is shining brightly when she smiles up at me.

I stalk over and pull her out of her chair, straight into me, getting a quick taste of her lips.

“Kenny has declared you done for the night. We’re leaving your car here and I’m taking you home,” I say.

“Remind me to give him an extra Christmas bonus,” she says, a smile in her voice. “He should have been off hours ago.”

“Grab your coat, Sweetness. We’ve got a celebration to start.”

She pulls out of my arms and leans down, snagging her purse out of a drawer.



I grab her coat and help her put it on before donning mine. Then we're off, calling out our goodbyes on our way out the door.

I'd like to say I didn't break any speed limits on our way home, but I'd be lying. With every mile we drive my need to be inside her amps up, so by the time we turn onto the lane of the farm I'm burning with need.

"Can they not make that stupid gate open faster?" she gripes, and I look over at her and grin. Seems I'm not the only one.

When the gate opens enough for me to slip through, I shove my foot down and race down the lane. I know whoever is on surveillance tonight is probably laughing their asses off, but I don't give a shit.

As soon as I park we're racing into the mudroom, shoving out of our coats and shoes. Then we sneak into the main part of the house, doing our best to keep quiet as we pass Mom's door.

Finally, we're in our bedroom with the door shut, and she falls into me.

Before we get started, I pull back. "I'm sorry, baby."

She looks up, puzzled. "For what?"

"For ever giving you reason to doubt. I should have asked you to move in with me instead of assuming that you knew I wanted you here."

Her face softens. "You've got nothing to be sorry for. I should have brought it up, but I was too chicken."

I shake my head before nuzzling her neck and licking and kissing my way up to her ear, nibbling on her lobe. She lets out a little moan and I grin.

My hands sneak under her shirt and I grab the bottom and edge it up. She lifts her arms and I pull it off, then step back.

Her hands go to my shirt, undoing the first couple of buttons, but I move them away and pull it over my head—along with the T-shirt I have on under it.

Her eyes darken as she takes in my bare chest.

“Take the rest off first, Sweetness,” I order, before she can get distracted exploring.

She immediately complies, her clothes flying off while I shed my jeans, then she takes the few steps back to the bed. As soon as the back of her knees hits the mattress she falls backward on it with giddy abandon, then shimmies her way to the middle. Once she’s settled, she gifts me with a come-hither look that has my dick hard as a rock and pulsating with need.

Instead of falling on her like a crazed man I stand stock-still trying to get myself under control, which is damn hard with her sprawled out in front of me, waiting for me to make my move.

Her lips tip up, then she cups her breasts, showcasing them invitingly.

“What you waiting for, cowboy?” she asks, her voice husky.

I didn’t think I could get harder... I was wrong.

I shake my head and chuckle. “I’m trying to get in control so that this isn’t the shortest make-up sex in the history of man. You’re not helping any.”

I reach down and grab her ankles, shoving her legs apart so that I can settle between them, sitting back on my heels. Watching her work her breasts, I trail my fingers up her legs.

“I’m going to slow this down some,” I whisper, as I lightly move my fingers across almost to her center, then back down again.

She shudders with need, her eyes locked on mine.

“You already wet for me, baby?” I ask as I brush my fingers back up her thighs, getting close to her pussy before moving them up to her stomach.

“I’ve been wet since you sang to me,” she says.

“Let’s see how wet,” I murmur as I move my hands back down and part her legs wide, then skate my fingers across her

crease.

Her hands stop massaging her breasts, so I stop and raise a brow at her. Knowing me so well, she immediately starts plucking her nipples.

“Fuck yes, you’re wet,” I say as I dip a finger into her, swirling it around before moving up and circling her clit.

“Mmmm,” she hums, and I stop.

“Remember the rules, baby. You make noise and everything stops.”

“Okay,” she whispers.

“Good girl,” I say, starting my swirls again. “I need a taste.”

I gently pull her folds apart then lean down and swipe my tongue between them, the flavor I’ve come to love so much exploding across my tongue.

She writhes beneath me as I tease her with long, sensual licks. Then I sneak a finger inside her, slowly pumping while I feast.

Her hands come down and she grabs on to my hair as her breath quickens.

I torture her like that for a good while, loving her little gasps as she twists and squirms beneath me. When I finally suck her clit in she explodes on my tongue, letting out the tiniest of groans.

Being the good man I am, I let that slide as I work her through the orgasm. When the spasms subside I pull my fingers out and then work my way up her body, licking, sucking, and nipping until I make it to her luscious breasts. I graze my teeth over one, then the other before sucking a nipple in, hard.

She inhales sharply, and I let the taut bud go with a *pop*, before doing the same with the other. Continuing my journey upward, I work her neck and then finally take her mouth while I settle fully between her legs.

“God, I love tasting me on you,” she murmurs.

I grin against her lips, then, with no warning, I pull her close and roll us over, eliciting a startled gasp out of her.

“Ride me, baby,” I whisper.

Once she has her bearings, she slowly slides down my length. Her warmth feels so good, I lean my head back and let a hiss of a breath out.

When she’s fully seated she stops and I open my eyes, finding hers on mine, that wicked grin I love so much back on her face.

“Yippee ki-yay,” she whispers, then she braces her arms on my shoulders, and, with no preamble, is off at a full gallop.

My hands automatically go to her hips, and I’m holding on with everything I have as she takes me on the ride of my life.

Time stands still as she undulates over me, swiveling her hips faster and faster. Knowing I’m not going to last long, I reach up and start working her clit.

“Oh, shit,” she whispers. For a bare few seconds she loses her tempo, then doubles her efforts.

“Give it to me baby,” I say, and she tightens around me.

“Fuck, yes,” I murmur, as she spasms, and her rhythm goes all to hell. It doesn’t matter though, because when her orgasm hits she takes me right along with her.

She collapses on top of me and we lie there, panting in each other’s arms, catching our breath. Then laughter bursts out of me.

She lifts her head up, confused. “Why the hell are you laughing?”

“Yippee ki-yay?” I say, then shake my head.

She sucks her lips in as her whole body shakes. “It fit.”

“Can’t argue with that.” I put my hand behind her head and pull her down, swallowing up her laughter with a kiss.

Soon, I have her moaning low again as things heat up.

Right before I enter her a second time, I pull back and give her a grin of my own as I whisper, “Yee-fucking-haw.”

## **S** HE DESERVES A SHOT

*Sunday*

Both Josie and I are dragging this morning as we walk in the kitchen to find Mom standing at the stove, flipping pancakes. We maybe got two hours of sleep before Mom woke us up, but it was worth it.

“Do you think they’ll have any good trees left?” Mom asks Josie. “It’s kind of late to be getting one.”

“Oh, it’s not uncommon around here to wait until the last minute to get a fresh tree,” Josie assures her. “A lot of people won’t take the tree down until Epiphany, so if they’re using fresh they don’t get them until right at Christmas. Trust me, there’ll be plenty of trees.”

“Oh good,” Mom says. “I was worried we’d be stuck with some sad little Charlie Brown tree.”

Josie chuckles. “Even if we end up with one of those we’ll make it pretty. I promise.”

Mom flips another pancake onto a plate. “It’s ready. Come and get it.”

We both shuffle to the counter, grabbing plates but waiting while Mom grabs a couple of pancakes and some bacon. Soon we’re all sitting around the table, buttering up our pancakes.

“You’ve got quite the sweet tooth, don’t ya?” Josie remarks as she watches Mom drown her pancakes in syrup.

“Sure do,” Mom answers with a smile. “How else am I going to stay so sweet?”

I roll my eyes and grab the bottle from her, not putting quite as much on mine as hers. “I should probably give you a speech about taking care of yourself, but you’re healthy as a horse so keep on doing whatever you want.”

“Like I’d listen anyway,” Mom scoffs, then shoves a dripping bite of pancake in her mouth.

Once we’ve eaten and the dishes are done we’re in my truck, heading for a Christmas tree farm.

True to Josie’s word, the place is packed when we get there. Overly excited kids run around as we make our way to the barn.

The owner greets Josie with a hug. “I was wondering when you were going to show,” he says.

“Yeah. It’s been crazy with the flu,” she tells him.

After introductions, we soon have hot chocolate in our hands as we hop on a wagon hooked to two draft horses with festive garlands adorned with bells around their necks, and a bored-looking teenager holding on to the reins.

We sit on hay bales with thick blankets around us and soon we’re off, the horses’ hooves clippety-clopping, their bells jingling. I feel like we’re in one of those holiday romance movies Mom’s been watching.

I may be dog tired, but Mom’s excitement level is still about ten times higher than all the sugared up rugrats running around.

Josie snuggles into my arms and looks up, giving me a megawatt smile, and suddenly I’m not tired anymore. I’m fully in the moment, hoping I’ll remember this feeling of contentment for the rest of my life.

Just as I’m worrying about Mom getting too cold, the wagon stops. “Are these about the size of tree you want?” the kid asks.

I look around and see we’re in an area where most of the trees are around eight feet tall. “Perfect,” I answer, then pull the blanket off my lap and hop down so I can help Mom and Josie.

The kid pulls a saw and a tarp off the wagon, and we walk around as Mom and Josie look for the perfect tree. After rejecting several that had nothing wrong with them, we come

across one they both *ooh* and *ahh* over while they circle it several times.

I circle around it myself, thinking it looks exactly like the others, but whatever. Once the kid and I look through the branches for critters, we deem it the one.

The kid lifts the saw toward me. “Do you want to cut it?”

I’m about to tell him to do it since he’s probably an expert, but then I see Mom, her hands clasped together, practically jumping up and down.

“This is so exciting!” she says.

“Wait, do you want to cut it?” I ask, dubiously.

“Oh, hell no,” she says, laughing. “I’m not getting down in the dirt. But we’re not cutting our own tree if he does it, so I want you to cut it.”

Well, nothing to it then. I’m glad I put on the heavy-duty long johns this morning, because that ground’s gonna be cold.

The kid lays out the tarp before giving directions. “Cut it straight across and as low to the ground as you can.”

With my marching orders, first I get on my knees, then I get down low and start cutting. It goes a lot easier and faster than I thought it would. The kid holds the tree steady until I’ve cut it all the way through, then we both lay it down on the tarp, and he drags it back to the wagon.

It’s a much shorter ride back to the barn, thank goodness. While they shake out the tree, Mom grabs Josie.

“They’re taking pictures with Santa over there. I got a good look at him earlier—he’s a hot one.”

Josie looks over where Mom points, then back at Mom. “You want your picture with Santa?”

“With that silver fox... Damn straight, I do.”

The owner laughs while I shake my head.

Ignoring us, Mom grabs Josie’s arm and sashays her ass over to Santa. Thank God there’s not a line of kids to watch

the spectacle Mom makes as she gets on the poor guy's lap. We can hear her peals of laughter all the way over here.

"Sorry. Mom's never really outgrown her teenage years," I say to the guy.

He chuckles. "I know your pain. My mom's been here three times just to sit in his lap. I'll be lucky if she doesn't get us slapped with a sexual harassment suit."

We both shake our heads. In a short time, the tree has been shaken, wrapped, and securely placed in the back of the truck. I collect a giddy Mom and an amused Josie, herd them to the truck, and we're on our way back home. We're all singing "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" along with Dean Martin before we're even back on the main road.

I glance over at Josie, loving how fetching she looks with her sparkly eyes and flushed cheeks, her light shining as bright as ever.

I'm so damn relieved we got our shit straight before Christmas.

A short while later, I pull up to the front of the house and see Shadow waiting for us on the porch. By the time I'm out of the truck, he's at Mom's door helping her out. When Josie gives him a worried look, he shoots her an assuring smile back.

Whatever has him waiting for us, it's not dire.

He helps Mom up the steps and she heads inside, then he's back at the truck looking at Josie. "Good news is Clara's still in town because she got the goodies you left her at your house. The bad news—she took the stuff, but left the duffel bag."

"You are shitting me," Josie says.

"Nope," Shadow replies. "The kid is smart—I'll give her that. I couldn't find any sign of a trail telling me which way she went after she left your house. I walked all over those woods, and didn't find any bicycle tracks either."

"I don't know whether to be impressed or annoyed," I say as I unhook a rope strapping the tree in place.



“I’m both,” Shadow admits as he goes to the opposite side of the truck bed and unhooks another one before pulling it free. “We may have to give her an honorary position on the team when we find her. The kid has skills.”

He sets the rope down, then turns to Josie. “I’ve got a question. Once we find her and get her problem with Crews taken care of, what happens to her? Since her mom’s missing and Crews is out, she’s going to end up in care.”

Josie looks up at me, worry written all over her. “We don’t know shit about this kid, other than she’s got a healthy fear of law enforcement and is good at hiding.”

I rub my neck while I think. We planned on her coming here until we got her safe, but long term is a big commitment. “You’re right. She could be mean as a snake, but she’s sharp as a tack, she’s tough, and she’s had it rough.”

“She deserves a shot,” Josie says, her voice quiet.

“That she does, Sweetness.” I turn to Shadow. “We’re licensed for foster care in Wisconsin. Griff helped us through the process just in case we end up with a future resident in the hospital who has kids that need protection. Bart, Lisa, and Mom, too. Barring her being a serial killer, she can stay here.”

Shadow visibly relaxes. “It’s crazy. I haven’t even laid eyes on her other than in surveillance videos, but I’m becoming rather fond of the sneaky little shit.”

Josie playfully gives him a shove. “She’s not a little shit.”

He cocks his head. “She’s not even five feet yet, and she’s got all of us running in circles looking for her. Look it up—that’s the definition of little shit.”

Josie rolls her eyes. “Adeline’s got homemade gingerbread in there that smells amazing, and we’re about to decorate a tree. Want to come in?”

Shadow grins. “Homemade gingerbread? I’m in.”

“Mom’s gingerbread is legendary,” I tell him as I lower the tailgate. “But to earn a piece, you’re gonna have to help me haul in and set up the tree.”

He looks at the tree, which looks a lot bigger now than it did on the farm, and then back at me. “I should have known there was a catch.”

“There always is, buddy.”

“I’ll go get some hot chocolate on while you guys deal with that,” Josie says, then practically skips in the house.

Shadow watches her. “It’s good to have her back. I was getting worried.”

I grin, agreeing completely, then grab the tree and pull it forward.

“Now we just need to find Clara before something happens to her, so Josie’ll stay this way.”



WHAT TRACKER?

## JOSIE

**S**unday

Willie Nelson sings “Away in a Manger” as we drive toward the bar, and I’m actually singing along. It’s about time the Christmas spirit hit me, since tomorrow is Christmas Eve. We had a blast decorating the tree this morning. It was a little bittersweet for Adeline as all her Christmas decorations were destroyed earlier this year, but we had a good time making up new traditions for our little family—starting with Adeline’s gingerbread.

I’ve never been all about gingerbread, but I’m a convert now. I actually ate three pieces, and she’d made homemade whipped cream to top it, perfectly sweetened with a hint of vanilla bean. It was pure Christmas in every bite.

As we drive by the lake, Judge points out a couple of fishermen already braving the ice. “I don’t know about this going out on the ice and fishing. Sounds like a recipe for disaster.”

“Soon there’ll be ice shanties out there, and people driving their vehicles across the lake,” I tell him. “We’ve been warmer than usual during the daytime, though, I think it’s a bit early yet to trust the ice. Especially on the river.”

“Driving across the ice...” He shudders. “That’s nuttier than an outhouse at a peanut factory. And what do you mean it’s been warm? I’m freezing my ass off.”

I shrug, ignoring his whining about the cold. “We have to go to the ice races. They put studded tires on the race cars. It’s always a good time.”

“Race cars on ice. That’s insane,” he mutters as we pull into the bar.

Even though it’s a little after two, the parking lot is almost full. That’s a typical Christmas Market Sunday. I see Kenny and Tina’s vehicles as we drive around to where the employees park. They must have already run out of soup at the cook-off. Hopefully they’re going to tell me I kicked Mia’s ass, which would be the cherry on top of my so far stellar day.

Judge parks and we go in through the back door, stopping at the office to shed our coats and gloves. Once I head to the main room I laugh, because the little elves went Christmas crazy while I was gone. The number of lights has doubled, and there is an actual tree in the corner.

I shake my head and look at Adam. “You guys have been busy.” He shrugs and points to Gretchen, who is standing by the register in an elf hat.

She gives me an impish grin. “It was Henry’s idea. He had the tree and a box full of empty miniature booze bottles that I prettied up and put hangers on. I had some extra garland at home, and now we have a tree.”

I point at the presents under the tree wrapped in various patterns of wrapping paper. “Are those empty boxes for effect, or are they for the Christmas gift exchange?” Every year on the first Monday after New Year’s Eve, I have a staff party to celebrate the end of the crazy season, and we have a Dirty Santa gift exchange that can get cutthroat, but is always a good time.

She shakes her head. “Nope. Those are for the little runaway... Not just from us, but a lot of our regulars have brought in gifts, too.”

Moisture floods my eyes, and I have to blink it away. “God, I love this town,” I say.

Judge's phone rings and he pulls it out, glances at it, then me. "Griff," he says as he answers, then walks toward the office.

I watch him go knowing he'll fill me in when he can, so I turn back to Gretchen. "Did lunch go okay without me?"

"Of course it did," she grins. "The place didn't burn down or anything."

"Funny. I'm heading to the kitchen. You need anything from the back?" I ask.

She shakes her head and waves me off. If she keeps improving, I may give her some more duties, which would mean more time for me. Score.

I head back to the kitchen, finding Kenny stirring a pot of hunter stew.

"How did the cook-off go? Did we win?"

He bursts out laughing.

"Nope," he says, and my stomach drops.

I lost? That's inconceivable.

Kenny takes one look at my face and laughs even harder. "Don't look so sad! Everyone came in, got their samples, declared how great they both tasted, and refused to vote against either one of you—even when we said it would be anonymous."

My mouth drops open. "What about the tourists? They wouldn't have cared."

Tina walks up to us and answers for him. "Word spread throughout the market. The tourists thought it was hilarious—although you actually had one vote against you. Some woman came by griping about getting kicked out of the bar, but Mia's crew agreed her vote shouldn't count because she didn't even try the soup. She just filled out a vote card, threw it in the jar, and walked away."

I roll my eyes. What the fuck ever.

“I can’t believe they refused to vote. I never took Whiskey Falls residents for wimps.”

Gretchen breezes through just in time to hear me say that. “Weren’t you just saying how much you loved this town?”

“I can love it and still think it’s full of wimps,” I grouse.

Done with this, I turn back to Kenny. “I’m grabbing some of that stew and taking it to Bree’s before we get busy. Everything good back here before I go? Do you need anything?”

“Why do you keep asking shit like that? They may be your recipes, but I’ve perfected making them and have this kitchen running like a well-oiled machine. I’ll pack you up some goodies for Bree while you go check on the front. Now, scram so I can get some work done.” He shoos me out and I can hear him grumbling as I walk away.

“Don’t forget, I need three servings since Sadie’s there!” I call back over my shoulder.

I check the back room, seeing Tina and Gretchen have it turned over and ready for the dinner crowd already, so I head to the office to check on Judge.

I want to know what Griff had to say.

I find Judge sitting in my office talking to Finn. They both look up when I come in.

“Don’t get up, babe. I’m only checking in before I run to Bree’s with some dinner for them.” I walk over to him and place a light kiss on his lips. “What did Griff want?” I ask as I sit on the corner of the desk.

Judge looks grim. “Both Jill and Clara Butler are now officially missing and considered endangered. Milwaukee PD is also looking for Roy Crews as a person of interest in their disappearance.”

“But that’s good news, right?” I ask.

“It’d be great news if Roy hadn’t ditched the tracker on his truck and disappeared,” Finn says.



I stare at him in disbelief, then I explode. “Are you shitting me? How the hell did he even know there was a tracker? He doesn’t strike me as overly smart.”

“He was obviously tipped off about the investigation and probably paranoid so he looked,” Finn explains. “He actually put the tracker on his bed at the hotel. He wanted us to know he found it.”

“Is Tony going to have to explain the tracker when the asshole finally gets arrested?” Judge asks.

Finn shakes his head. “What tracker?”

Judge’s lips tip up. “So now we’re looking for Clara and Roy. Hopefully he’s not as good at hiding as she is.”

“Let’s hope,” I mutter.

“At least now I don’t have to worry about asking questions and tipping Crews off. I’m going to dig deeper and find out everything I can about Roy, Jill, and Clara,” Judge says. “Can you handle the bar without me this afternoon while I make some calls?”

I nod. “Yeah. Find Clara. She’s the most important thing right now.”

“I’ve got my guys searching empty houses in town now. We’ll find her,” Finn says.

I take in a deep breath. “I hope so—I’ll let you two get back to it. We need to find her before Roy does.”

They both nod.

I stand up, give Judge another kiss, then leave them to it. I try not to panic as I walk down the hallway.

It was easy to think everything was going to be okay when we had tabs on Roy Crews.

But now...

Now I’m scared.

HIN ICE

**T** Business has been steady this afternoon since I got back from checking on Bree. She told me she was fine, but her swelling is getting worse. I didn't stay long—not because I was busy—but because she looked exhausted and I didn't want to overtire her.

I pretended not to notice how stressed Sadie was. When I tried to corner her, she told me everything was as good as expected, and that she was on it.

It's taking everything I have not to panic. I keep telling myself I can worry about the what-ifs, or I can hope for the best while burying myself in work, trying not to completely freak out. It's working, but just barely.

The dinner rush is just getting started when I feel Judge's presence at my back as he brushes my hair aside and lays a kiss on my neck.

I turn around and, after getting a real kiss, ask, "Did you find out anything new?"

"I learned our girl is smart. Despite moving around a lot she's kept straight A's in school."

"You already got her grades?" I ask.

"Schools just aren't that hard to get into," he says. "I've even talked to a couple of her teachers. They loved her, but weren't sure about her home life. According to them she never came to school with bruises, but she'd show up hungry and in dirty clothes almost every day. Neither of the teachers I spoke to ever met the mom."

"Shit," I whisper.

"They said she's exceptionally intelligent and very sweet. She'll read anything she can get her hands on, both fiction and nonfiction. They both described her as a good kid, but said she was starting to withdraw. They've been worried ever since her mom pulled her and moved." He cups the side of my face. "We'll find her."

"Yeah," I say.

His lips tip up. “At least now we know she’s not mean as a snake or a serial killer.”

I smile. “There’s that.”

He places a sweet kiss on my lips. “Everything’s going to work out, baby, for both Clara and Bree.”

“I know. I won’t accept anything less,” I tell him.

We work side by side through the dinner rush. With no live band, the jukebox has been going nonstop with nothing but Christmas music.

Judge stops and cocks his head. “Jesus, is that...” He flinches. “William Shatner singing ‘Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer’?”

“With Billy Gibbons,” Tina informs us. “I think it’s hilarious.”

I scrunch my nose up. “I’m not sure I’m all about it.”

“Hey, now! Say what you will about Shatner, but Billy Gibbons classes it right up,” Judge says, sounding affronted.

I roll my eyes. “Says the Texan who will love ZZ Top ’til the day he dies.”

I’ve discovered that Judge’s tastes are eclectic. His first love is country, but he loves some “good Southern rock,” as he calls it. Thank God, because although I like country music I can only handle so much of it.

When Dean Martin’s version of Rudolph plays immediately after Shatner’s, I look over to Tina. “How many versions of Rudolph did we load into that thing?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. I put Gretchen in charge of the jukebox.”

“Well, that explains things,” Judge says, chuckling.

For the next few hours there’s not a lot of talking as we work. We’re packed, but at least everyone is in a festive mood. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, so I see lots of Santa hats, Christmas sweaters, and people ready to get their holiday on.

It's nearing eleven o'clock when I ring the bell for last call. There are several groans, but market weekend or not, I close early on Sundays.

Thankfully, after Judge ushers the last of the customers out cleanup goes fast, and soon we're getting in our vehicles and I'm following Judge home.

Snow is falling. I'm guessing we've already gotten an inch tonight, and will probably get a couple more before the night is through.

For once, I don't have any music playing. I'm just enjoying the quiet and the now rare opportunity of being by myself. I'm thinking about Clara, and where she could be hiding. Then Finn's words hit me... they're looking at empty houses in town.

We know she's not camped out at my house—it was empty, but what about my garage? It's huge. The man that owned the property before me had a race car so he converted the barn into a garage that rivals any man cave out there. Three bays, a storage room, and a loft. It even has a full bathroom. There's also no alarm on it, and no cameras either.

What if she's been under our noses all this time? I hit the button on my steering wheel and call Judge.

“Something wrong, Sweetness?” he asks when he picks up.

“I think I know where Clara could be.”

“Where?”

“My place.”

“Really? Your house was empty when we were there,” he says, sounding dubious.

“The house was, yeah, but did we check inside the garage? That's where we saw her near and she found the stuff Shadow left, no problem, but he couldn't find footprints leading away. What if she never left? The garage has a full bath and an interior room with no windows, even a loft—lots of places to hide if someone is doing a cursory check. It's also heated.

Since she's not using the tent, wherever she's hiding must be inside."

"I peeked in the garage, but didn't go over every nook and cranny. It's worth checking. Let me call Finn," he says.

"It's probably nothing, but... I've got this feeling we need to go now. It's not far," I say, surprising myself with the pleading tone in my voice.

"We'll go with your gut, baby."

Relief hits me as he slows down in front of me, then executes a U-turn. I follow close behind and we're off to my house.

For whatever reason, he stays on the line, even though we aren't really talking.

"Shit," he says when we turn on to my driveway. He immediately pulls to the side of the road and stops.

"Fresh tracks, only one set. I'm calling Finn to see if it's one of them."

"Okay. Hurry," I say, dread pooling in my belly as I check out the tracks he's talking about. It's only been snowing a couple of hours, but there's enough to see one set of tracks clearly.

Someone is here, and they haven't left.

It's not even a minute later when Judge gets out of his truck and walks to my car, so I open my door.

"No, baby. I need you to get out of here. It's not the Aces—it's Crews. As soon as they saw him on the cameras, they headed this way. I'm going to go check it out, but I need to know you're safe."

I shake my head. "No. We go in together. She doesn't know you but she knows me, even if it's only through those notes. If she's here, she's got to be terrified. You're gonna need me."

His mouth tightens. "Fuck." He scrubs his face. "You're going to follow me if I try to leave you here, aren't you?"

“Yep. She needs me, I know it.” We stare at each other for just a beat, then he nods.

“Get your gun. You follow me and you do everything I tell you to do.”

“Yes, sir,” I say. He shakes his head, but smirks.

I grab my gun out of the console, check it, then shove it in my coat pocket. I forgo gloves in case I need to shoot. Thank God I’m wearing my comfortable boots today. They’re not only warm, they’re waterproof.

Judge takes off through the woods at a jog, and I follow. Three minutes later, I’m struggling not to breathe too loud. Jesus, I need to get into shape.

We come to the edge of the woods and can see my house. There’s a jacked-up fancy Ford truck with big tires parked in front. Figures he’d have something like that. Then I notice my broken front window. That son of a bitch!

“Maybe he’s still searching the house,” I whisper.

“Wait here while I check it out.” Judge says.

Suddenly the side door to the garage flies open and Clara runs out, Crews right behind her.

“Shit,” Judge whispers.

“She’s heading for the river!” I cry out, and we both take off at a run, guns drawn.

“Hold it, Crews!” Judge shouts.

Crews turns our direction and a shot rings out. We both drop to the snow-covered ground.

Oh, my God, the asshole’s shooting at us!

Clara pours on the speed, running out onto the ice. Crews follows her, but now she’s got a decent lead on him.

I’d shoot the asshole, but I’m scared of hitting Clara.

The farther she gets from the shore, the more I panic. It’s been too warm. That ice will be thin at best in the middle.

Judge and I make it to the riverbank just as there's a loud crack. Both Clara and Crews immediately stop. They face each other, Clara near the middle of the river and Crews, gun in hand, nowhere near far enough away from her.

"Where's my money, you little bitch?" Crews yells.

Judge has his gun out, aimed straight at Crews. "Drop it, Crews, or I'll drop you."

"I don't have your money!" Clara yells back. "Mom took it. Why can't you just leave me alone?"

Oh my God. Did her mother steal money and leave Clara to deal with the consequences?

Another loud crack has Clara yelping and staring wildly around.

"Clara!" I yell out. "I'm Josie. Lie down, sweetie. That ice isn't solid yet, so distribute your weight as evenly as you can. I don't want you to fall through."

"Drop it, Crews." Judge repeats.

"Fuck you!" Crews yells. "This little bitch stole from me and I'm not doing anything until I get my money back!" He takes a step toward Clara, and the ice cracks even louder.

Clara whimpers, but she carefully gets down on all fours and then lies down.

"That's it, sweetie. Stay just like that. I won't let that asshole near you. Just don't move." I level my gun at Crews. "You take another step, and I'll shoot."

"You don't have the guts," he sneers.

What an idiot.

The sound of trucks pulling down the lane is music to my ears, but I don't dare turn to see who it is.

Crews looks behind me. "Goddammit!" He turns back to Clara. "This is your fault! You and your fucking mother!"

Roy takes another step toward her, and both Judge and I shoot just as the ice gives way beneath him.

Clara screams and the fear in it pierces my heart.

“Stay still, sweetie. Don’t move!” I call out to her.

Crews thrashes around in the hole, but the ice near Clara seems to hold—for now.

Finn runs up, stopping by us at the bank while taking the situation in. “Jesus Christ.”

Crews is shouting, and I glance over to see him desperately trying to haul himself out of the hole to no avail.

“I’m calling 9-1-1” Finn says. “We need rescue out here in case Clara goes in.”

Another loud crack tells me that we don’t have time to wait for rescue.

“Okay, Clara, let’s get some distance between you and that hole. I need you to slowly roll to your left, sweetie,” I call out.

She lifts her head up and looks at me, her face sheet white. “Roll?” she asks.

“Yes. Roll, like a log. Keep your weight distributed and roll over.”

“O—okay,” she says, then rolls her body over once.

“Great job, sweetie. Let’s do that twice more and get a little bit farther away.”

I can hear the cracking of the ice as Crews once again tries to pull himself out, only to have more ice give way.

Clara whimpers again, but rolls once, then twice.

“Awesome, Clara. You’re doing great. Okay, now I want you to carefully scoot around so that when you roll next, it’s toward me and the shore. Can you do that?” I ask.

Judge reaches over and grabs my hand. “I’m going to get some rope,” he says.

“There are life jackets in the garage. We can throw Crews one to keep on until rescue gets here.”

“For Clara, you mean. Because I couldn’t give a shit if Crews drowns,” Judge murmurs.



“I got it,” Finn says before taking off.

Clara finally maneuvers her body to where she’s parallel to the shore.

“Perfect, sweetie. You’re being so damn brave. Okay, now I want you to roll toward me.”

Another loud crack has us both gasping, but she bravely rolls over.

My heart is in my throat as she ever so slowly and carefully moves toward the shore. I walk down the shoreline until I’m in line with her, encouraging her as she rolls, trying to ignore Crew’s shouts as they get more and more desperate.

It’s painfully slow going as, after every roll, she stops and looks up, making eye contact with me.

Finally, she’s close enough for me to grab her and pull her the rest of the way straight into my arms.

I fall down on my ass, cradling Clara in my lap, and she bursts into tears. So I sit there rocking her as she burrows into me, assuring her over and over again that she’s safe, and telling her how brave she is.

Judge sits down behind me, wrapping his arms around me, giving me his warmth and strength while I comfort Clara.

Finn gets back with the rope and a life jacket, but it’s too late. Crews went under one last time, and didn’t come back up.

Good riddance.

Once I get Clara calm, Judge helps us stand. I get us brushed off, then look down at Clara, giving her a gentle smile.

“Hey, there. I’m Josie. It’s nice to finally meet you, Clara.”

She takes in a deep, shuddering breath and nods.

“Let’s get you in the house and warmed up. I think I may have some hot chocolate in the cupboard. It’s the powdered kind, but it’ll do for now. We’ll get you the good stuff later.”

Judge leans down and sticks his hand out. “I’m Judge, and I’m with her.”

She gives him a nervous look but finally takes his hand, and he gently shakes hers.

“It’s good to finally meet you, sweetheart. We’ve been looking all over for you.”

“I know,” she whispers. “Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. You were keeping yourself safe the only way you knew how, and you did a great job of it,” Finn says from the side, and she jumps.

She looks up at him and her eyes go wide as red creeps up her cheeks. Not an unusual reaction when it comes to girls getting a load of Finn for the first time.

He gives her a cheeky grin. “I’m Finn, and you are one hell of a hider. I’m impressed.”

I chuckle. “We’re going in for some hot chocolate.”

Sirens sound in the distance. Finn glances toward the drive and sighs. “Yeah, good idea. You go get the little wild child warm, and I’ll deal with the cops before sending them your way.”

I put my arm around Clara’s shoulders, and Judge puts his around me as we head to the house.

I keep having to look at her to see she’s really here and safe. That was so close. We could have lost her.

“It’s all good, Sweetness. She’s safe now,” Judge murmurs, proving without a doubt that the man can read me like a book.

I nod my head, then guide Clara up the steps and into my house. First, I need to get her warm, and then get her story.

It’s pretty damn obvious it’s not a good one.



JUST SAY WHEN

## JOSIE

**M** *onday*

“Pour me one of those, please,” Judge asks when he walks in and finds me getting my second cup of coffee.

I grunt before grabbing a mug from the cabinet and doing as he asks. I’m so tired—I don’t think there’s enough coffee in all of Falls County to wake me up this morning.

It’s too damn early to be up considering we didn’t get in until after two, but neither one of us wanted Clara to wake up before we did, so here we are.

I’d like to say that Clara was so overcome with relief at being rescued that she opened up to me and told me her story, but other than saying what’s absolutely necessary, she’s been mum.

Worse, Owen Anderson came in with a CPS agent to question her and the second she found out who they were she shrank into herself and clammed up. Owen tried asking about her mom, but she got an almost manic look in her eyes and shook her head.

Owen took it in stride. He didn’t push, instead asking her if she wanted to stay with me and when she nodded, the CPS agent gave her approval for Clara to come home with us.

While the rescue team searched for Crews’ body, we brought Clara here and settled her into the other spare bedroom.

With everything that's happened, I had a hard time leaving her in that room all by herself. One of my biggest worries is that she'll run again, but Judge reminded me we've got a top-of-the-line alarm on the house. The minute a door or window opens it will go off.

Still, I tossed and turned all night, worried about what's next. I mean, she saw Judge and I shoot Crews. Is she going to be scared of us now? I would be if I were her.

Plus, they still haven't found Crews' body. With the river iced over it could be a while, maybe even until the Spring thaw. Is that going to mess with her mind? Do I need to reassure her he's not coming back? There's no doubt he's dead. Once he went under the ice, it was game over for him.

"Sweetness, it's too dang early for your brain to be working that hard," Judge says before taking a sip of his coffee.

Adeline rounds the corner into the kitchen wearing a white fuzzy bathrobe with hot pink flamingos all over it, along with matching slippers. She shuffles into the kitchen and blinks when she sees us. "Goodness. You two look rough. Did I miss a fun party last night?"

"Not hardly," Judge says, his voice wry.

A door opens and shuts down the hallway. Clara must be up.

Adeline looks confused. "Did you bring home company?"

"We found Clara last night," Judge informs her.

Her eyes widen and she looks toward the hall just as Clara appears, looking sleepy and ruffled in the way-too-big T-shirt I gave her to wear to bed last night.

Clara stops short when she sees Adeline in her fluffy robe and ridiculous slippers.

"Well, hi there, sugar. I'm Adeline. You must be Clara," Adeline greets, her Texas twang out in full force.

Clara nods then gives me a look that's both confused and a little whacked out.

“Adeline is Judge’s ma,” I explain.

“Yes, ma’am. That’s my boy.” Adeline bustles into the kitchen and goes to the refrigerator, opening it to peruse its contents. “You’re a bit young for coffee, so how ’bout some homemade hot chocolate?”

Clara just stands there staring like a deer in the headlights, not moving a muscle. When Adeline raises a brow and smiles encouragingly, she finally nods, though she’s clearly still unsure.

Adeline turns back to the refrigerator, pulling out the milk and a huge jug of chocolate syrup. “Are you hungry? I was gonna warm up some gingerbread... if those bikers left us any, that is.” She shakes her head. “I thought ranch hands could put away the grub, but I’ve learned they ain’t got nothing on those biker boys.”

“Mom,” Judge says, “they’re all retired Delta soldiers. I don’t think ‘biker boys’ quite fits.”

Clara turns to me, her eyes wide.

I just give her a shrug with a grin.

Adeline waves a hand dismissively at Judge as she pops the lid off the gingerbread pan. “I’m seventy-five years old. They’re boys to me, soldiers or not.” She turns to Clara and smiles. “We’re in luck! They left us some. Would you like some gingerbread for breakfast, Clara? I’ve got homemade whipped cream to top it. Nothing soothes the soul and sets up the day like homemade gingerbread—especially on Christmas Eve.”

Shit. It’s Christmas Eve, and I now have a twelve-year-old to take care of.

I look at my watch. I need to get to the bar to help set up for our annual Christmas Eve buffet, but that’s going to have to wait.

“Did you sleep well, sweetie?” I ask.

She looks up at me and shrugs. Geez. I need to quit asking yes or no questions or this kid’s never going to talk.

Adeline plates up four slices of gingerbread and heats the first one in the microwave while getting the whipped cream out of the refrigerator and stirring it around.

When the microwave dings she swaps the plates, pulling the warm gingerbread out as the smell of cinnamon and ginger envelops the kitchen.

I pull the chair out next to me and pat it, and Clara sits down. Adeline sets the gingerbread down in front of her along with a spoon, and brings the bowl of whipped cream over.

“You strike me as a girl who likes some cake with her whipped cream. Am I right?” Adeline says.

Clara’s lips twitch and she nods.

Digging the spoon in the bowl, Adeline smiles at Clara. “Now just say when.” She plops a heaping spoonful on top of the cake. Then goes for another and another. Before the fourth, Clara holds her hand up, but Adeline shakes her head. “Gotta say the word.”

“When,” Clara says, her voice raspy.

Clara dips her spoon in the cream and takes a bite. Her next, she gets a small bit of cake and tastes it, her eyes lighting up.

“You like?” I ask.

She nods her head.

“It’s the best,” I tell her. “I’m gonna have to steal the recipe from Adeline.”

Clara gets a huge bite and shoves it in her mouth.

I look at Judge, who takes a sip of his coffee and winks at me. Sitting back in my seat, I try to decide how best to proceed, but Judge beats me to it.

“You like horses?”

Clara looks at him like he’s crazy, then nods.

“Would you like to go check on the horses with Josie and me before we head to town?”



“You really have horses?” she asks in a voice just above a whisper, then looks up at me. “You weren’t just trying to get me to come in?”

I shake my head. “Everything I wrote to you was the truth, but I’ll let you find that out for yourself. Eat up, then you can get dressed and we’ll head out and introduce you to Sunshine and Royal.”

Last night we’d grabbed her backpack from the garage before we came back here. I’m not sure how clean her clothes are, but we’ll take care of all that today.

She shovels that cake in her mouth so fast it’s a wonder she doesn’t choke. She jumps up as soon as she’s done.

“Take a quick shower and make sure you brush your teeth,” I instruct her. “There’s shampoo and stuff in the shower.”

With a nod, she runs off.

“Not much of a talker, is she?” Adeline says after she’s gone. “What happened to her?”

I let Judge explain what happened last night while I eat my gingerbread. Living through it the first time was awful. Listening to Judge tell his mom about it, I have to fight not to hyperventilate at all the things that could’ve gone wrong. I just have to keep reminding myself that she’s here now, and she’s o.k.

When he’s done, Adeline’s face is hard. “Thank God you two got there when you did. But she hasn’t told you what happened to her or her mom?”

“No. She completely shuts down when she’s asked,” I explain.

Adeline leans back in her chair, her gaze settling on me. “She’ll talk, eventually. You’re just going to have to earn her trust first.”

I sag down in my chair. “Something tells me that little girl hasn’t had many people, if any, that she could trust in her life.”

“Isn’t it good she’s landed with us then? You’ll have her sorted in no time,” Judge says, his voice gentle.

I hope like hell his faith in me isn’t misplaced, because that’s going to be easier said than done.



## SANTA DRINKS WHISKEY?

**J**osie  
*Monday*

“What do you think of this design, Josie?” Clara asks as she holds up a Christmas cookie in the shape of a snowflake with an intricate design piped on it.

I look up from wiping down the bar. “That’s gorgeous, sweetheart,” I tell her and mean it. The kid has a knack with decorating.

She turns it and looks at it critically like she doubts my word, then carefully places it on a platter next to several others, each more beautifully decorated than the one before. Then she gets started on another, this one in the shape of a tree.

After meeting Royal and Sunshine, which was quite the experience as Clara was both in awe and intimidated, we came to the bar, not only to work the lunch rush but to set up for the Christmas Eve buffet I host every year for my regulars.

I started the tradition to make sure that people with no family like Henry wouldn’t be alone for Christmas Eve, but it’s turned into a yearly celebration for my Whiskey Falls family. I can’t think of a more perfect event to introduce Clara to the town—so long as they don’t overwhelm her with their excitement right away.

Judge dropped Clara and me here, then he and Adeline took off for some last-minute gift shopping so Clara will have presents from us to open in the morning.

Since all afternoon people have been stopping by and dropping gifts under the tree, they'd better hurry or there won't be anything left in town to buy. Clara keeps glancing at the growing pile, her curiosity evident.

I've been working the bar while overseeing the prep for the buffet. Clara has turned out to be an efficient little helper, though she's still not talking much. So far, she's doing what's asked of her, but watching us with a mixture of distrust, caution, and—every once in a while—a glimmer of hope.

It's only when Kenny brought out a tray of fresh-baked cookies along with several bags full of different colored icing that I finally saw a spark of excitement in her, which has me hoping that the key to Clara will be art. I've already texted Judge suggesting art supplies for under the tree if he can find any.

"Hey, Josie," one of two sheriff's deputies calls as they walk in the door. "We'll take whatever's on special that's quick."

"You got it," I tell them. After I get them seated and take their drink orders I glance over at Clara, seeing her eyeing them with a blank face.

Damn. Is her caution around law enforcement because she was a runaway, or is there something else going on? Time will tell, I guess.

"Time to shut it down," Tina says, walking by me with a large red and green sandwich board sign declaring we're closed for a private party.

I glance at my watch, seeing it's already four. Time flies, I guess.

My phone rings so I pull it out of my apron and see Tony's name on the screen.

"Merry Christmas! What's the verdict?" I ask.

"I'm sorry, Josie, but it's a no," he tells me and my heart sinks. Damn, I hoped they could at least come for dinner.

“She’s got a bit of a headache, so we’re going to have a quiet night in tonight. Why don’t you stop by tomorrow? I’ll call you when we’re up. Oh, and Sadie said to tell you she’s going to hang out here tonight.”

My eyes narrow at his words. Despite the casual way he said it, for Sadie to not even stop by has my alarms ringing.

“Is Bree really okay?” I ask.

He hesitates, not answering at first. Finally, he sighs. “There’s concern, but we’re watching her.”

“You say the word and I’m there,” I tell him.

“I know,” he says, his voice low, “and that’s appreciated more than you’ll ever know. When she goes into labor, you’ll be one of the first to know. She’s going to need her mom with her.”

My eyes get misty at his words.

“Now don’t worry about us; Ma’s bringing us dinner before she comes to your place. You’ve got a kid to wow so concentrate on that. With the intel coming in, this may be the first good Christmas Clara’s ever had.”

I look over at Clara, sitting on her knees on a barstool and bent over a cookie, piping bag in hand, total concentration on her face.

“Will do,” I whisper.

“See ya tomorrow, Josie,” Tony says before hanging up.

I stare at the phone a minute, then with a sigh set it back down on the bar.

“Are you okay?” Clara asks.

I turn and find her watching me, so I give her a smile that I hope is an assuring one. “Yeah. That was Tony. He’s married to my girl, Bree. She’s pregnant and not feeling well tonight, so they aren’t going to make it. You’ll get to meet her tomorrow, though. We’ll go there after we open presents in the morning.”

“Presents?” Clara asks, her voice rising.

“Well, yeah. It is Christmas Eve, and I have it on good authority Santa is stopping by the farm tonight.”

Her eyes go guarded. “I’m twelve, not five. You don’t have to play Santa for me. Besides, I’ve always known there’s no such thing as Santa. Mom made sure of that.”

It takes everything I have not to show my horror. Instead, I just casually shrug. “Well, at my house Santa’s real. We’ll be putting a couple of those beautiful cookies of yours out, along with a shot of whiskey. Maybe even some reindeer food out on the porch, too. Gotta take care of the poor things hauling Santa’s fat heinie across the world in one night.”

“Santa drinks whiskey?” Clara asks.

“In Wisconsin he does,” I answer. “It’s cold outside. He needs something to warm him up besides milk.”

Clara sucks her lip in, then a little laugh escapes. “You’re kind of funny.”

I give her a big smile. “I try. You good out here for a minute? I need to go check on the kitchen.”

Her gaze darts to the deputies and her mouth tightens, but she nods at me before getting back to her cookie. I glance over at Gretchen and she gives me a chin lift, letting me know she’ll keep an eye on her. With the deputies here, I don’t want her running off.

Judge and Adeline show about an hour later, and Adeline goes straight to Clara. Judge comes straight to me so he can give me my hello kiss.

“Mission accomplished,” he whispers in my ear. “The presents are wrapped and under the tree, including a couple from Santa.”

“Thank you, babe. From her comments, I don’t think she’s ever had much of a Christmas.”

He settles his arms around me. “Well, that’s about to change. Now, what can I do to help you?”

I give him a list, then we get to work. Everyone will be here soon.

A short time later, Griff and Mercy show. Clara immediately takes to Lucy and seems to get along with Griff and Mercy. Of course, we don't tell her he's a retired sheriff.

I pull Griff aside. "Did Tony call you?"

"Yeah, and I don't like it. I've never spent Christmas Eve without Bree. I was going to stop by, but Tony told me not to. That she needs rest. For her to skip..." he shakes his head. "I don't have a good feeling."

"She'll be alright," I say, as much to myself as him.

"She'd better be," he growls, but pats my shoulder and goes to talk to the deputies who are finishing up their early dinners.

Rose and Erick arrive and within minutes, Rose is showing Clara pictures of Ares and Athena, her sled dogs, while she regales her with tales of winning the Iditarod.

"Shit. If Rose keeps this up and Clara stays with us, we're going to have to build sled dog kennels," Judge says with a laugh.

"I like Rose's dogs," I reply, "although they seem like a lot of work."

Bart and Lisa arrive with Regina and her baby in tow. With Dave Perkins locked up for the foreseeable future, Griff declared it safe for her to get out and about. Mercy immediately takes Regina under her wing.

Color me surprised when I look up to see Clara has both babies by the tree, Lucy crawling around her feet on a blanket while Regina's baby girl watches the tree lights twinkle from a baby carrier. Clara looks like she's enjoying herself.

I smile. So she's artistic and good with kids... I can work with this.

Within a few minutes, the place is filling up. Henry, Griff, and Judge are laughing in the corner with Ted Wilson, the local lawyer. Then Mia and Patrick show and Adriana, Tony's sister, comes in with Kat and Marcus.



Family members of my staff arrive, and the owners of the butcher shop, the drugstore—even Dan, the pediatrician, shows, along with Ziggy Larson, who immediately makes a beeline for Henry.

Gretchen, Adam, and I keep the drinks flowing while everyone talks and dives into the trays of appetizers placed around the bar.

Just as the last of the food is put on the buffet table, Finn walks in with the Aces—twelve in all. Geez, those boys have perfect timing when it comes to showing up when the food does.

I glance over at Clara and see her staring in shock and awe at the Aces. They're something to behold when it's just one but all twelve at once are quite the sight, that's for sure.

I look around, taking in all our friends and family, smiling and laughing, the Christmas music playing in the background... This is what Christmas is all about. I just wish we weren't missing Bree, Tony, and Sadie.

Kenny rings a bell, and everyone turns their attention to him.

“Food's up! Get it while it's hot,” he declares.

Judge walks over to Clara, who looks a little overwhelmed and leads her over to the plates.

I walk over to Kenny. “Tell the staff to get out here to eat. It's all family tonight. Everyone can serve themselves for a while.”

“You betcha,” he says, then takes off to the kitchen. When his three helpers come out, everyone cheers and claps, letting them get in line ahead of them.

Soon, except for the music softly playing in the background, the noise dies down while everyone stuffs their faces, including me.

I'm finishing up my second slice of pie when Shadow shows up at our table, holding up one of Clara's cookies. “Did I hear you decorated these?”

Clara's ears turn red, but she nods.

"They're almost too pretty to eat," he tells her.

"You can eat them," she says, her voice barely audible. "They're really good."

He takes a bite and chews, his eyes lighting up before he swallows. "You're right, they are. Awesome job, sweetheart. I'm glad you've come in from the cold."

He gives her a wink, then saunters off toward Finn and Kat.

I put my arm around Clara, and she stiffens. Oh dear. We're going to have to work on that. Instead of moving it away, I lean down and point toward the presents. "Those are for you."

She looks at the presents and her eyes widen, then she looks back up at me. "From you?"

I shake my head. "No. We have some for you, but you'll get ours in the morning. Those are from the people of Whiskey Falls. We can open them tonight, that way you can thank them in person."

She looks at the crowd, and sheer panic crosses her face.

I squeeze her shoulder. "Or we can open them later, after most of these people leave. Then you can thank them later, maybe one at a time."

She nods her head. "That! I want to do that."

I laugh. "Yeah, I would have done the same thing. It's all family here but still, I get that they can be a lot."

So instead of opening presents, we all go to the front room and I choose some rocking Christmas tunes on the jukebox and turn it up.

Soon, everyone's either talking, dancing, or doing both at the same time.

Tina, Adam, Gretchen, and I get everyone fresh drinks, and then the party really starts.

“Baby, It’s Cold Outside,” starts playing, and Judge grabs my hand and leads me out to the dance floor. I wrap my arms around him and we dance close. “Merry Christmas, Sweetness,” he murmurs in my ear.

The music changes to the Brian Setzer’s Orchestra “Boogie Woogie Santa Claus,” and he immediately shows me that his mama really did raise him right by making sure he can dance, as he twirls me around the floor.

Griff and Mercy join us, and Mercy and I both laugh when the men dip us at the same time.

Finn whirls Clara around right next to us, and she gives me a bright smile. Her beautiful face is transformed and it goes straight to my heart. It’s a gift, really, and one of the best I’ll ever have.

I look up into Judge’s face and his eyes soften on mine.

Then I hear a phone ring. Normally I’d ignore it, but something has me paying attention so I search for it, then realize it’s Finn’s.

In a smooth move he twirls Clara to us, then pulls his phone out. Instead of glancing at it and putting it away, he answers.

Whatever he hears has him stiffening, then his gaze cuts to me, then Griff, and it hits me with absolute certainty that something is terribly wrong.

“No,” I whisper.

Shadow comes up and gently takes Clara’s hand while Finn and Griff come to us.

Judge pulls me in tight and we face Finn together.

“We’ve got to get to the hospital. Bree—” Finn stops, his voice catching. “Sadie said to get there now.”

“No. No, no, no,” I whisper.

“I’ll drive. My truck’s out front,” Finn continues.

“I’ll meet you out there. I’m getting our jackets and her purse,” Judge says, then takes off at a run.

Griff and I both stare at Finn, then at each other.

“We’ll follow you,” Patrick says, showing up next to us, Mia by his side.

“I’ve got Lucy, Adeline, and Clara,” Mercy says. “I’ll get them settled at our house, then I’ll meet you at the hospital.”

“No,” Clara says, grabbing my hand. “I’m staying with you.”

I look down and see her panicked face and take a deep breath. “Sweetie, I need you to go with Adeline.”

She shakes her head. “I’ll be really quiet, I promise. I won’t get in the way. Just... just, please, don’t leave me.”

I lean down. “I’m not leaving you. Even if you go with Mercy, you’ll still come home to the farm.”

“Please don’t send me away,” she whispers, and the way she says it tears through my heart. *Fuck.*

“Okay, sweetheart. If you need to stick with me tonight, then that’s what you’ll do.”

She sags against me in relief.

Kenny shows at our side. “You go, I got this. Keep us posted.”

Judge must have been at a full run, because he shows up, our coats and my purse in his hand, then we’re out the door.

As Finn said, he’s parked right out front. Griff hops in the passenger seat, while Judge, Clara, and I pile in the back, me sitting in the middle since neither Judge nor Clara seems willing to let go of my hands.

As soon as Judge shuts his door, Finn has us roaring off. The Kanes are right behind us while Kat, Adriana, and Marcus are behind them in Kat’s car, with Erick and Rose bringing up the rear.

Instead of turning toward the hospital, Finn takes us to the highway, then floors it.

“Where are we going?” Griff asks, and I can’t miss the panic edging his voice.

“They’re transporting her to Green Bay,” Finn says. “There’s a Level III NICU unit there.”

Panic hits me, and I have to work to breathe. NICU. Jesus, this is really happening.

I close my eyes, trying not to hyperventilate.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Get your shit together.

Your girls need you—both of them.

I open my eyes again to find Judge looking down at me, those green eyes on mine full of concern.

“I’m okay,” I whisper.

He searches my face, then nods.

“Do I want to know how fast we’re going right now?” I ask.

“No,” Griff grunts as he texts someone.

Soon I hear a siren, and then a state trooper passes by, pulling in front of us with lights flashing. It takes a second to sink in that he’s leading the way, not stopping us. “We have an escort?”

Judge nods. “Seems so.”

Clara’s hand tightens in mine, but she doesn’t say anything.

“Is Bree going by ambulance?” I ask.

Finn shakes his head. “No. They’re airlifting her. She’s probably there already.”

Shit. That means she’s really bad.

“They wouldn’t have airlifted her if she wasn’t stable,” Judge points out. “They’d have waited until the baby was born and airlifted it.”

“I hope you’re right,” I murmur.

I look out the window, watching the trooper as we fly down the road.

And then I pray.



WAITING



## JOSIE

**T**he elevator opens to a large waiting room on the maternity floor of the hospital. We go straight to a desk where the volunteer sitting there looks up with a smile.

“Briana Kane,” Griff says.

Her smile falters, then she points down a corridor. “Take the first left and go straight into the waiting room back there. I’ll let them know you’re here. Someone will be out in just a minute to update you.”

“Thanks,” I tell her as we walk by, trying not to think about what it says that they’re putting us in a private waiting room. Maybe they’re worried about the crowd that’s coming... or the worst has happened and they don’t want to give us the bad news in front of all the other families out there with women in labor.

Oh, God.

Breathe in...

Breathe out...

Do not fucking panic in front of Clara.

Jesus. What the hell was I thinking letting her come with us? The poor kid has been traumatized enough. It’s too late now, though.

We walk into the room and it’s much larger than I thought it would be. No one sits; we all stand around awkwardly

staring at each other, waiting for someone to come tell us what's going on.

Finally, a door opens and Sadie walks in, coming straight to me.

Griff shows and moves to Judge's side.

Sadie swallows then meets my eyes, regret and guilt written all over her. "Bree is being prepped right now for an emergency C-section. She took a turn this evening. Her headache got worse, nausea set in, and her blood pressure spiked—all classic signs of the preeclampsia getting worse. Unfortunately, I—" She stops and looks down, before going on, "I waited too long, and she lost consciousness."

I let go of Clara and Judge to grab Sadie's hand.

"She's alive," I state, and Sadie nods.

"Did she have any convulsions? Seizures?" I ask, knowing that these could signal full eclampsia, something that could have long-lasting effects.

She shakes her head.

"So she's here, she's as stable as they can get her, and they're going to do a C-section, after which not only will she start recovering from the preeclampsia," I pull her close, whispering the rest in her ear, "but we'll have babies who, because of Bree's determination and your care, have a good shot of not only surviving, but thriving."

I hold her tight as tears prickle my eyes. "Thank God you were there. She'd have waited longer if she could've and you know it, and who knows what would've happened then? We owe you the world, honey."

She nods into my neck before stepping back. "She's not out of the woods yet," she warns.

"We know," Griff says. "But we also know that if she tries to die on you, you'll yank her ass back here from the ever after and won't let her go."

She takes in a deep breath. "This is true."

He gently pulls her out of my arms and into his, then he whispers something in her ear before letting her go.

She looks around at everyone before turning to me. “She wanted you with her, but she can only have two in the room. She’ll want you when it’s done, though.”

“I’ll be here waiting.”

With a nod, she turns on her heels and goes back through the door she came in.

Judge pulls me over to a chair. “C’mon Sweetness, it could be a while.”

I sit, ending up with Judge next to me on one side, Clara on the other.

Griff moves to a wall where he has a clear view of the door Sadie went through and leans against it, his face stony, like he’s steeling for the worst. For his sake I hope Mercy gets here soon.

Mia and I exchange looks, but neither of us says anything. There’s nothing we can do at this point but pray, wait for news... and hold on to the hope that for Christmas this year we’ll get a couple of healthy grandchildren.

It hits me that Mia still doesn’t know about the twins. As tempting as it is to spill the beans, I keep my mouth shut. Tony and Bree need to share the news on their timetable.

As we wait the room fills up with our friends, and a lot of Bree’s real father’s family, including her Uncle Tor. He wasn’t my favorite person before Judge started working for him, but I really don’t like him now. Thankfully the Becks set up on the other side of the room, although Tor sends irritated looks toward Judge occasionally—probably because he called in sick today, and when Tor argued Judge quit on the spot.

Mercy finally comes rushing in, going straight to Griff.

Clara stiffens next to me when several sheriff’s deputies show. I look down at her and raise my brow. “They’re friends, sweetie, and you’re not on the run anymore. They’re not going to arrest you, I promise.”

Owen shows, first speaking to Griff before settling in by the other deputies. He looks surprised when he sees Clara, but says nothing. When she sees him, he gives her a reassuring smile before she turns away.

As I look around at all the people here who love Bree I think about how for years, because of her real mom and the way Joe and his family treated her, she thought she wasn't lovable—no matter how much Griff and I tried to show her otherwise.

Good Lord was she wrong.

Griff stays focused on the door the entire time we wait, which feels like hours.

Finally, Tony comes through wearing scrubs, looking like he's gone ten rounds in an MMA fight. Griff and I both go to him, Judge and Clara following close.

Tony looks around. "Bree's critical but stable. The babies are in the NICU."

There's a collective gasp at the word 'babies.'

He looks from me to his mother. "The babies—they're holding their own—but I've got to get back."

He turns to me. "She needs you."

Judge looks at me. "Go, baby. We'll be fine."

I look down at Clara. "I've got to go take care of my other girl, but Judge has you, okay?"

She nods her head and steps closer to him.

Tony holds his hand out and I take it and he leads me through the door, but then I stop.

"Griff," I call, and he looks up. "C'mon. She'll need you, too."

He wastes no time getting to us.

As soon as the door shuts behind us, Tony stops and turns. When I see how tortured his eyes are, my heart almost stops.

“We almost lost her, Josie,” he whispers. “She’s alive, like I said, stable but critical. It may take a while for her blood pressure to stabilize. Until then...” he shakes his head. “Sadie’s with the babies. They all need me, and I don’t—I don’t know what to do.”

I put my arms around him and pull him in close. “You do what Bree would want you to do—which is take care of the babies. While you’re taking care of them, trust us to take care of her, yeah?”

He nods, then pulls away. “Let’s go.”

Griff and I glance at each other, our faces grim, then we follow him through the maze of hallways until we reach Bree’s room.

We walk in and the room is dark, so dark it takes my eyes a minute to adjust, but then I see her, asleep, looking so small in the bed.

A nurse stands up then with a nod from Tony, quietly leaves us alone.

The first thing Griff does is walk over and place his hand on her, just like he did after she was born premature and he’d check to make sure she was breathing, then he bows his head.

I look over at Tony, and his face is grim.

“Go on, sweetie. I’ve got them both,” I whisper, my throat clogged with tears.

He nods before walking over to her bedside and running a finger down her cheek. Then he raises his shoulders, turns on his heel and walks out.

Tears pour down my face as I walk over to Griff and put my arm around him.

We stand like that for a few minutes, watching the little girl we both took under our wings all those years ago.

Finally, Griff pulls away and drags the chairs over, and we settle in for the long haul.

I look at the clock and see that it’s well after midnight.

The worst is over, and with every fiber of my being I know  
Bree and the babies will all eventually be okay.

So I close my eyes and smile.

Clara.

Twins.

My girl's going to be okay...

Christmas gifts don't get any better than this.



# MONKEY BREAD



## JUDGE

**T**uesday

For the fiftieth time, I roll over and look at the clock. Once we were sure both Bree and the babies were as stable as they were going to get, Finn brought Clara and me back to my truck at the bar, leaving Josie and Griff at the hospital. Doesn't mean I got any sleep, though.

Seeing that it's almost seven I sigh. Might as well get up and put some coffee on before Clara gets up.

Since it's Christmas morning and she saw the pile of presents waiting for her under the tree when we got home last night, she may be up early, despite how late we got in. I know I would've when I was a kid. But I'm not sure since, from what Josie says, Clara hasn't ever had a good Christmas.

Well, that's going to change. Even before we found her, I'd already grown to admire the kid, but after yesterday I'm going to do everything in my power to keep her with Josie and me.

Sure, she distrusts everyone—that's to be expected under the circumstances. But she knocked herself out to help yesterday, and after watching her with the babies, it's obvious that while life may have made her hard on the outside she's got a soft spot a mile wide on the inside.

And then last night... God. Those letters of Josie's must have really worked, because Clara latched on to her. True to her word, she never whined about how long we were there. She stayed by Josie's side and then mine, quiet as a little

mouse, watching everything. Even after Owen went out to his truck and grabbed her a tablet to keep her busy, she did more observing than playing games. Nor did she ever curl up in her chair and go to sleep. No, I figure it'll be a while before she lets her guard down around us for something like that.

But she will. I'm going to make sure that someday she'll feel safe here.

Rolling over, I sit up on the side of the bed and scrub my face with my hands before hauling my weary bones out of bed and to the bathroom.

After showering, dressing, and a quick phone call with Josie, I walk out of the bedroom. As soon as I get close to the kitchen the smell of cinnamon hits me. For as long as I can remember that's been the smell of Christmas morning at Mom's, which has me smiling despite my lack of sleep.

I walk into the kitchen heading straight for the coffee, and Mom looks up from her book. "You're up. I figured you'd sleep late. Any news?"

"Josie's on her way home. Bree's awake and finally got to go see the babies," I inform her as I get myself some coffee. "They're doing better than anyone hoped. They need oxygen, but that was expected. So far though, everything looks good with them."

"Oh, thank the Lord. Does that mean we know what they are, or even their names?" Mom asks.

I shake my head. "I asked, but Josie said it's a surprise."

"Not even if they're boys or girls?" she asks, her voice incredulous.

God, like a dog with a bone she is. "No, Mama. They've been a bit busy. Patience is a virtue, you know."

She rolls her eyes. "Well, you don't have to get snippy."

"Sorry, I'm just wiped," I say, suitably chastised. I finish doctoring up my coffee, then go to her and give her a half hug.

Clara appears in the doorway, looking adorably sleepy in red plaid flannel pajamas and matching slippers. Thank

goodness Mom and I had time to pick her up some clothes while we shopped yesterday. Lisa was nice enough to wash them for us while waiting on news about Bree, then brought them here.

“Merry Christmas, Clara,” Mom singsongs.

“Morning, sweetheart,” I tell her.

Her gaze goes from me to Mom, and lingers there as she takes in Mom’s red and white reindeer patterned bathrobe with thick white fur trim over red satin pajamas, a matching Santa hat on her head.

“Hold on one second, sugar. I’ve got some hot chocolate already warmed for you. The monkey bread will be ready in about—” she looks at her watch, “ten minutes, but if you’re starving, I’ve got some more gingerbread, or even some of those cookies you helped make yesterday.”

“Monkey bread?” Clara asks, scrunching up her nose.

“Yes, ma’am. It’s a West family Christmas morning tradition,” Mom says as she pours hot chocolate into a mug from a thermos. “Don’t worry, sugar. No monkeys were harmed in the making of it. If you like cinnamon rolls, you’ll love monkey bread.”

I sit in my chair sipping my coffee while Mom prattles on and Clara slides into a chair.

Soon the oven timer goes off and Mom pulls the Bundt pan out of the oven. She sets it on the stove, then pulls out the ingredients for the frosting. “While the bread cools, you can help me make the frosting,” she tells Clara.

She grabs an apron, this one with gingerbread men dancing across it, and tosses it to Clara. “Best put that on. You don’t want to have frosting all over you in pictures later.”

Clara puts the apron on and steps up to the counter, listening intently while Mom explains the recipe. Soon they’ve got the frosting squared away, and it’s time to flip the monkey bread out of the pan, one of my favorite things to do when I was a kid.

The way Clara is eating up the attention pulls at my heartstrings, and I can't help but smile when she triumphantly pulls the Bundt pan off the monkey bread, revealing the glistening, golden mountain of cinnamon roll bites.

I hear the garage door going up and stand. "I'll be right back."

"Don't dally," Mom admonishes. "After we eat, we can get to the presents," she adds.

I'm in the garage before Josie's even out of the car and pull her straight into my arms, giving her a gentle kiss, then just holding her tight.

"You okay, Sweetness?" I ask, knowing she's got to be exhausted.

She nods into my neck. "I'm great, just tired. Tony and Bree were both sacked out in her room when we left. I checked in on the babies on our way out. God, they're beautiful, but so tiny." She leans back and looks at me, her eyes shining. "One grabbed my finger. He's a strong little thing."

I give her a smile. "One's a boy? That's awesome, baby." I throw my arm around her shoulder and start leading her into the house. "Clara's up. She and Mom are icing the monkey bread."

"Monkey bread? Yum. I haven't had that in ages. Usually, I pick up an almond Kringle for Christmas morning, but didn't have time this year. And yes, we have one of each," Josie says, excitement in her voice.

"Oh, be warned," I add before we reach the kitchen. "Mom wants to know everything about the babies, so prepare for an inquisition."

Josie smiles and we walk into the kitchen, arm in arm, to find Clara and Mom admiring their handiwork.

"Josie, you're here!" Clara says.

Josie gives her a warm but tired smile. "Of course I'm here! I couldn't miss Christmas morning with you now, could

I?” She sits down, and Mom slides a full cup of coffee over to her. “Gosh, that smells amazing and I’m starving. Let’s eat.”

Mom dishes out the bread, and we all dig in. “So... the babies?” Mom asks and Josie’s face lights up.

“They’re doing great, all considering.”

“Boys, girls, or both? And what are their names?” Mom badgers.

Josie just shrugs. “That’s for Tony and Bree to announce.”

“But you do know, right?”

Josie just grins. “I have no idea what their names are.”

I can see Mom is reaching the end of her patience so I quickly get us moving.

“Well, who’s ready to open presents?”

Mom sends a glare my way for foiling her interrogation as Clara sets her hot chocolate down and looks at Josie. “You really didn’t have to get me anything. It’s okay, I’m used to it.”

“We didn’t get you presents because we felt like we had to, sweetheart. We got them because we wanted to,” Josie tells her.

Clara looks doubtful, but clearly resigned, she nods.

I stand up and gather up our plates, then put them in the dishwasher. “Let’s go.”

The four of us head to the living room where the tree is twinkling brightly with the pile of wrapped presents underneath.

I look at Josie. “In our family, with just three of us, we take turns. Is that okay with you?”

Josie nods. “Griff and I would do the same with Bree on Christmas morning.”

Mom makes herself comfortable on the couch and pats the spot next to her. “Judge and Josie, get to passing out the presents. Clara and I will supervise while we enjoy our hot chocolate, won’t we, sugar?”

I look at Josie and roll my eyes. “Mom dubs herself the Queen of Christmas every year. She serves breakfast, then we serve her.”

“That’s right. And this year Clara’s my princess, so give us all of our presents, peasant,” she drawls with a giggle.

Clara sucks her lips in, but I can see she wants to laugh as she sits down next to Mom.

Josie and I make quick work of passing out all the presents and soon the adults all have small piles, and Clara has a huge one. When we all look at Clara thinking she should open the first one, she looks so damn uncomfortable that Mom takes control.

“As the Christmas Queen, I think I should go first.” Being Mom, she grabs the biggest gift first, one from Josie, and rips all the paper off, throwing it aside with abandon. “Oh, my goodness,” she says when she finds a brand-new, seven-quart mixer.

She looks at Josie and me, shaking her head in wonder. “You shouldn’t have.”

Josie grins at her. “Yes, we should. Judge told me you missed yours that burned up. This one is even bigger, so you’ll be able to bake enough gingerbread in one go to satisfy even those biker boys.”

Mom puts her hand over her mouth and nods. We’ve been slowly trying to replace everything we lost as we rebuild our lives, but it takes time.

She shoves the mixer aside, then points to Clara. “It’s your turn, young lady. And take my advice—always start with the biggest, or the most elaborately wrapped.”

Clara looks unsure, but per Mom’s instructions, she grabs the biggest present and gently pulls off the bow, setting it aside. Then she carefully pops the tape, making sure not to rip the paper before folding the paper away to reveal a wooden box. Her eyes widen when she opens the box and finds three sketch pads, one bound in leather, both charcoal and colored

pencils, along with fancy erasers, and everything else a budding artist needs to draw.

She examines everything in it, then shuts the box and turns it all around, like she's searching for something before looking up at us, showing confusion. "There's no tags," she whispers.

Josie's mouth tightens, obviously understanding something I'm not. "Of course not. It's a gift."

Clara looks at her dubiously. "So, you're not going to return it for cash? Or sell it?"

What she's saying hits me. *Fucking hell.*

Josie shakes her head, and her eyes harden. "I don't know what happened before, but here, you keep your Christmas gifts. They don't get sold, they don't get hocked, and they don't get given away unless you do the giving." She pauses and gestures toward the pile of presents. "They're yours to do with what you want. Freely given, no strings attached."

Clara looks at her in disbelief. "But... why? You don't know me. I'm nobody to you."

Josie's face softens. "Oh, sweetie, I look at you and I see one of the strongest, bravest kids I've ever met. You've had a tough time of it, there is no doubt, but like I said before, you picked one hell of a good place to land."

Clara shakes her head. "Until when? Until the cops take me to foster care? Or a group home? Or my mom shows up? She'll have this stuff sold in no time flat, and my friend in foster care back home never got to take more than a bag with her when she moved homes."

I lean forward. "We probably should have made this clear before now, but we're your foster parents now, and no way am I letting anyone move you after what you've been through—especially your mother."

"You can't promise that," she whispers sadly and shakes her head, looking way older than her years.

"Like hell we can't," Josie says adamantly. "I know you don't like cops, but that's going to change because Griff—"

from last night—is the former county sheriff.”

Clara’s eyes widen, but Josie forges ahead. “Tony, Bree’s husband, is the current county sheriff. They run this county, and they won’t let anything else happen to you. We know judges, we know lawyers, and you have my word that if you want to stay here, this is where you’ll stay. And if you do, I swear to fucking God you will never have a Christmas present, or any other present, taken away from you and sold ever again.”

Clara sits there, stock-still, staring at her, clearly in shock, then she shoves the box off her lap and throws herself at Josie, bursting into tears.

Josie’s arms wrap around her and they rock back and forth as she cries herself out.

Mom and I quietly get up and go to the kitchen, giving them a minute.

When we get there, Mom throws herself into me. “If I ever meet her mom, I’m going to whoop her ass.”

I shake my head. “If her mom ever shows up she won’t have an ass left to whoop after Josie gets through with her.”





HURT

## JOSIE

**T**here's a power to tears—they can heal your pain and cleanse your soul—so as Clara sobs out her relief in my arms I don't try to calm her down or rush her. I just hold her tight while the tears work their magic.

But while I'm doing it, I'm fighting to keep my anger under control.

Her mother took her Christmas presents? I need a bottle and thirty seconds in a room with that bitch so I can knock some goddamned sense into her.

The only good thing about that entire conversation is that from the sounds of it, Clara thinks her mother is alive.

Judge comes back in and sets a box of tissues next to me before patting me on the shoulder and disappearing again. I know he'll win her over sooner than later but until then, if she needs to cling to me, I'm good with it.

After a while she calms down and pulls back. I reach over and grab the tissues, giving her an encouraging smile as I hand one to her.

I hold my breath, knowing it's possible she'll be so embarrassed over her breakdown that she'll pull back again. I shouldn't have worried, because instead of pulling back she gives me a shy, yet hopeful smile.

Thank God. “Are you up for me calling Judge and Adeline back in so we can open the rest of the presents?”

“Yeah,” she whispers.

I give her a little squeeze. “Okay, sweetie. Let me go get them, I’ll be right back.” I gently set her aside and go into the kitchen, finding Judge and Adeline at the table drinking coffee and looking worried.

“She okay?” Judge asks as soon as he sees me.

“Yeah. I think that was cathartic for her. I figure we can open presents, then maybe you and I can try to get her to talk. Owen is going to want answers sooner than later.”

Judge nods. “I already called him to let him know she thinks her mom is alive. He still wants to come talk to her at some point today. He’s willing to come here or to the hospital.”

I nod hoping this doesn’t set Clara back but we’ll deal, whatever happens.

“That’s a problem for later. Let’s go open presents and try to enjoy the rest of our morning,” Adeline says as she stands.

So that’s what we do. Clara *oohs* and *aahs* over all her presents. She loved all of the art supplies but seemed to get most excited about the homemade gift certificate for a pair of cowboy boots from Judge.

“I would’ve bought you a pair, but choosing boots is a personal thing so we’ll go later this week and let you pick out your own boots and hat... and maybe a few other things.”

She’s not much for showing her excitement, but the thought of picking out cowboy boots has her almost vibrating. Seems we’ve got a budding little cowgirl on our hands.

Judge laughs when he opens up his own gift certificate to the Boot Barn in Appleton. He’s always played down what he lost when the cartel burned down their homes, but Mercy told me about his beloved hat and boot collection so I figure I’ll help him work on replacing that every chance I can.

For Adeline, nothing topped the new mixer. She keeps going on about how it’s bigger and better than her old one. And prettier. But she loves the new pillows for her couch, the

perfume Judge picked up for her, and the thick, fluffy, hand-crocheted throw I made in her favorite colors.

Judge got me an absolutely stunning bracelet he had made specially for me. I'm still reeling over the stocking he filled with all sorts of goodies—including matching earrings. No one has filled a stocking for me in, well... ever. Better yet, when he handed me the package with my bracelet in it, he whispered in my ear that he had another present that he'd give me when we're alone. The way he said it has chills of anticipation running through me every time I think of it.

After we clean the mess up, Judge grabs my hand and turns to Clara. "Want to go say hello to the horses?" Judge asks, and her whole face lights up.

So we bundle up and head out to the barn.

Judge pulls Sunshine out and shows Clara how to tether her securely. Then he shows her a curry comb, and directs her on how to properly groom a horse.

I grab Royal and start working on him. While we work, we talk, first about horses, then inconsequential things, and finally I bring the conversation to what we really need to discuss.

I trade in the curry comb for a brush and start working on Royal's tail, with Clara watching me closely. "Owen called this morning. We need to talk about your mother and Roy Crews."

She stiffens beside me. I look up from Royal's tail, catching her gaze. "Sweetie, if we're going to keep you safe you need to tell us what happened."

Her shoulders droop. "Mom is so stupid. I tried to tell her he was no good, but she wouldn't listen."

She looks down and kicks the floor. "I didn't want to move, but she made us. And then when we did, he got really mean. They fought, like, all the time, and he'd hit her, a lot."

"Did he hit you?" Judge growls.

She shakes her head but looks down. "Not until the day I ran away."

She looks back up at us. “When Mom was at work, his cousin would come around and he’d bring these bags for Roy to keep.” She lowers her voice to a whisper. “I think there was drugs in them.”

“This cousin, is he a cop?” Judge asks.

She nods. “Yeah. Then other guys would show up, and Roy would trade them the bags for cash. Roy would keep some of the money, then stash the rest until his cousin came back with more and to pick up the money.”

Oh, shit. That does not sound good at all.

“Mom came home late one night and they got in a big fight. He hurt her, bad,” she continues, her voice low. “When he left, I showed her where Roy stashed the money he kept for his cousin and begged her to get us out of there. I was scared he was going to kill us both.”

She takes a deep breath then looks back up, her eyes glittering with angry tears. “She wouldn’t do it. Told me not to worry about it, and then locked me in my room.” She takes in a deep, ragged breath. “The next morning, Roy showed up and Mom was gone—and so was his cousin’s money. He was so mad. He—” She folds her arms up against her stomach. “He —”

“He hurt you,” I say, working like hell to keep the pure fury out of my voice, and she nods.

“She left me there,” she says, and I pick up her hand and squeeze it. “She knew he’d be mad, and she left me there.”

“I’m so sorry, sweetie,” I murmur.

“When I couldn’t tell him where she was, he took off to look for her.” She squares her shoulders before continuing, “But I only showed Mom where he kept his cousin’s money. I knew where he kept his share, so I took it and ran.”

She looks up at me, tears streaming down her face. “She told me all the time how having me ruined her life,” she whispers, “but I never thought...” She trails off and shakes her head. “She left me with him. Please don’t make me go back.”

I look up at Judge, and he nods at me.

I cup her face in my hands and level my gaze on hers. “Never. You’ll never have to worry about her again. You’re with us now, and you’re not going anywhere.” I wipe her tears with my thumbs. “Understand?”

She searches my face, then finally nods.

I pull her to me and hold her tight, catching Judge’s gaze in mine and knowing the fury I see in his eyes mirrors my own.

Twenty minutes later while Clara takes her shower, I phone Griff and tell him what I found out.

“Find her, Griff. Find that fucking bitch and make sure she can never get her hands on Clara again.”

“Consider it done,” he growls. “Are you keeping her, then?”

“You bet your ass I am.”

# EPILOGUE

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## SHARE SOME OF THAT GOODNESS

**J**osie

*Christmas Afternoon*

I walk into the NICU, Clara by my side, and her eyes widen as she takes everything in.

“They’re so tiny,” she says, a hint of awe in her voice when we make it to the babies’ incubators. Clara looks like a kid dressed up for Halloween with the hospital smock over her clothes.

Her breath catches when the little boy opens his eyes and turns his head, staring right at her. “Oh my gosh, he’s looking at me.”

“Would you like to touch him?” the nurse asks, and Clara’s mouth drops open.

Then she shakes her head. “No, I don’t want to hurt him.”

“It’ll be okay. I’ll show you how.” The nurse reaches in and gently places her hand under his. “See, like this.”

She extracts her hand, and Clara reaches in, placing her hand under the baby’s, a look of pure wonder on her face. “Look at how small his hands are,” she murmurs as she falls head over heels for the little guy.

“You’re so cute,” she coos. “I can’t wait to hold you. You need to get bigger fast so you can get out of there.” She looks at me and giggles. “He’s kind of furry.”

“That’s because he’s a preemie,” I explain. “If he’d gone full term, he wouldn’t have that. For now, though, it helps him regulate his temperature.”

She looks from me to him. “He’s a little teddy bear, all fuzzy and cute, but with a fierce grip. Do you think they’ll let me babysit after they get home?”

“Maybe down the road, but I imagine it will be a long time before they’re ready to leave them after all this,” I tell her. “But I bet we can go visit them whenever we want to—once they get to go home.”

Griff and Mercy walk in, Tony behind them, pushing Bree in her wheelchair.

I look over at the nurses, sure we’re about to get kicked out, but the nurse gives Tony a smile and steps away.

Clara gently pulls her hand from the baby’s and steps back, and Griff immediately takes her place. He reaches in with both hands, expertly cradling the baby’s head with one, his feet with the other, reminding us he’s been through this before with Bree when she was born.

“He’s bigger than you were,” he says, looking at Bree, then back down at the baby. “This little guy’s gonna do just fine.”

“Are you ready to know their names?” Bree asks.

We all look at them expectantly.

“Meet Griffin Daniel Kane,” Tony says, indicating the boy.

Griff looks at Bree, shock on his face, then he looks down at the baby he’s so carefully cradling in those powerful hands of his, and closes his eyes.

“I’m honored,” he says, his voice rough.

Tony wheels Bree over to the baby girl.

Bree smiles at me. “And this is Josephine Lee Kane.”

My heart skips a beat, then the tears flood my eyes. They’re naming their daughter after me.

“I... I don’t know what to say,” I whisper, and bend down to hug Bree.

She wraps her arms around me and whispers, “Thank you for loving me. You are the best mom I could ever have hoped for.”

“Oh, baby, I love you so much. Thank you.”

I pull back, then look in wonder at my namesake. God, she’s so precious.

A small hand takes mine. “Wow. They really named her after you?” Clara asks.

“Yeah,” I say, then I reach in, cradling her with my free hand just like Griff did her baby brother. Her little head turns in my hand like she’s snuggling in.

“I think she likes you,” Clara says.

“Of course she does. I’m awesome.”

I pull my hand from the baby’s feet, and run it down her little tummy. “I’m going to teach you so many things, little girl—especially how to be a badass.”

“Maybe save the bottle throwing lessons until she’s old enough to drink,” Tony advises, a smile in his voice.

“Nah. I think she should learn that before she starts dating,” Bree declares.

“Until she’s thirty then,” Griff says, and we all chuckle.

The nurse clears her throat, indicating she can’t let us all stay any longer, so with one last touch on her little cheek I pull back.

I step to Griffin’s incubator and give him one last look. “We’ll be back, little bit,” I promise.

“C’mon, sweetie,” I say to Clara. “We need to head out before we wear out our welcome with the nurses.”

Clara nods, then looks shyly at Tony and Bree. “Your babies are so cute.”

Bree gives her a radiant smile. “Thank you, and Merry Christmas. I’m so glad you found your way home. We’ll visit as soon as I get out of here.”

I give hugs all around, and then Judge ushers us out. Clara is asleep before we hit the highway home. It’s been a long two days, and we’re all exhausted.

While she snoozes soundly in the back seat, Judge reaches over and grabs my hand. He glances in the rearview mirror, then at me, a satisfied smile on his face.

The sky is dark as snow starts falling gently when we turn off the highway toward home. The only sound is Elvis singing “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” quietly in the background.

I swallow hard when we pull up to the gate. The past few weeks have been so damn hard, but right now, everything is absolutely perfect.

“You okay, Sweetness?” Judge asks, and I look up and smile.

“I love you,” I whisper.

His lips quirk up. “Good thing since I’m head over boots for you, darlin’.”

Head over boots... God, he’s such a cowboy.

Clara stirs in the back seat. “Are we home?”

“Almost,” Judge replies as he inches forward as the gate opens.

We pull around the bend to see all three houses lit up like beacons. God, it feels good to be home. When we get inside, a spicy smell permeates the house.

“Is that tamales?” Judge asks as soon as we walk in the kitchen.

“Sure is,” Adeline confirms. “Finn helped me mail order a passel of them as a surprise!”

“Tamales?” Clara asks, sounding curious.

“Yes, ma’am.” Adeline gushes. “It’s a Texas tradition to have tamales for Christmas, so we’ve got tamales with your choice of white or red sauce, some of my famous queso, guacamole, beans, Spanish rice, and Mexican corn.”

“I’m in heaven,” Judge declares as he goes to Adeline and twirls her around before kissing her on the cheek. “Thank you, Mama. This is perfect.”

She laughs and swats him with a towel. “Y’all go wash up, then you can help me get everything ready. I invited Regina, Bart, and Lisa, and told Finn to tell any of his biker boys who are around to come join us.”

Within an hour the house is full of people snarfing down tamales, which are delicious. I notice the Aces gently trying to get Clara out of her shell, which is working to a degree. The poor girl is a bit tongue-tied around them, but she’ll get past that someday.

When Bree was growing up I’d go over to Griff’s and spend Christmas morning with them, but in the afternoons I always found myself alone. Last year, I dropped gifts off at Bree’s but spent the rest of the day on my own. I’ve never had a Christmas filled with people, and I have to say I like it.

Soon the guitars come out, and Judge and I play while we all sing Christmas carols around the tree. It took Clara a bit to finally start singing, but when she did she wowed us all with her high, clear voice—a definite sign she’s going to fit right in.

Later that night when both Clara and Adeline are tucked snug in their beds, King and Country’s “Into the Silent Night” plays low while Judge and I cuddle on the couch with only the Christmas tree lights on, while sipping the absolutely delicious boozy hot chocolates he made for us.

“It started kind of rough, but I think for our first Christmas it ended up pretty good,” he murmurs in my ear.

I chuckle. “Kind of rough? It started out as a total shitshow.”

“Yeah, but now you’ve got two grandbabies and we both know we’re keeping Clara, so you also have another girl to

raise. Sweetness, I'd say you cleaned up this Christmas."

I snuggle back into him, then raise my head and kiss his jaw. "You're right, I did do pretty damn good this year."

He leans over and snags something off the table, then settles back in before grabbing my hand and placing a ring on my finger. "I'm kind of jealous of those grandbabies," he murmurs. "So, I think you need to share some of that goodness. When you adopt Clara, I want her to have my name, so marry me, Sweetness, so I can be a dad and a grandpa."

I stare at the ring he just put on my finger—a thin band supporting a solitaire with two smaller diamonds on each side. It's simple perfection, a beautiful design I'd have picked for myself.

I turn my head and look up into his beautiful green eyes, sparkling with humor and full of love.

"You want to marry me so you can have my kids?" I whisper.

"That, and because I love you so much it's hard to breathe sometimes."

Jesus, I'm tearing up again. I'm turning into such a wimp.

"What do you say, Sweetness? You want to become an ol' cowboy's wife and ride off into the sunset with me?"

I reach up and pull him down until his lips are against mine. "Hell yes, I'll be your wife."

His lips smile against mine, his tongue soon sweeping in as he gives me the sweetest kiss I've ever had.

"I love you," I whisper.

"I love you more," he whispers back. "Merry Christmas, baby." He gently sets me aside, stands up, and pulls me into his arms, before leading me to our room to finish our celebration, and by the time he's done, I'm finally bursting with holiday cheer.

**OT READY**

**N** **Finn Beck**

*Chicago*

*Four Days Later*

This place is such a dump it makes my skin crawl just sitting here, so it's good I only have to wait around ten minutes before Jill Butler lets herself in. When she flips on the light she doesn't notice me at first.

Long blond hair, clear blue eyes like her daughter—she'd be a looker if she didn't have such a mean look to her. But one glance at her face and you know there's not a kind bone in this woman's body.

Finally, after throwing her purse down on the bed she looks up and her eyes widen as she takes a step back.

“Who—who the fuck are you?” she asks, her voice shaky.

I say nothing. I just tilt my head and look her over.

“Well, what do you want?” she demands, her voice a little stronger but not by much.

I uncross my legs and lean forward. “I've been sitting here trying to figure out what kind of woman would steal from an abusive asshole, then leave her little girl to pay the consequences. But now that I look at you, I find I just don't give a shit what your reasons were, I just want you to pay for it.”

She takes another step back, her eyes darting around wildly.

“I didn't think he'd hurt her,” she says.

“Bullshit. You didn't give a flying fuck.”

She turns to run back out the door, but Ghost steps out of the shadows and blocks her way. With a squeak, she sidesteps and turns so she can keep both of us in her sight.

I put my elbows to my knees and clasp my hands together, cocking my head as I study her. “If I had my way, I'd solve my little problem by putting your ass six feet under.”

“Oh, God,” she whispers, then swallows. “Your problem?”

“Yeah. *You’re* the problem. I have to make sure you never set eyes on Clara again.”

She puts her hands up and gives me a shaky smile. “I promise you, if you let me go, she’s all yours. You can keep her. Do whatever you want to with her, I don’t care. Just let me walk out that door and you’ll never see me again.”

“You are not helping your case at fucking all,” Ghost mutters from behind her, and she blanches.

“Unfortunately, if you walk out of here alive I’ll have to watch you.” I curl my lip up in disgust. “And bitch, just looking at you turns my stomach.”

Sighing wearily, I straighten up. “Like I said, if I had my way, I’d solve the problem of you permanently, but today is your lucky day. You get to live... if you sign these papers.” I gesture toward the papers that Griff had Ted Wilson draw up.

Her gaze jerks toward the papers, and she looks back at me, visibly confused. “Papers? For what?”

“To permanently relinquish all your parental rights to Clara,” I inform her.

Her shoulders sag in relief, but then she gets a calculating look in her eyes.

I shake my head. “Don’t even think about it. I don’t care if you’re a woman, you abuse children, you deserve to die. I think you’re getting off too easy here for what that little girl suffered because of you. In fact, once this is done I think you need to leave and put at least a thousand miles between yourself and the Wisconsin state line. And if you ever get a wild hair and decide to check up on Clara or even call her, know the minute you dial her number or cross that state line, you’re dead.”

Less than five minutes later Ghost and I walk out, signed papers in hand.

“Jesus, she’s a piece of work,” Ghost spits out angrily. “How’d that sweet little girl come out of that piece of shit?”



“Fucking miracle,” I mutter.

A little over four hours later, I take the back way onto the farm. Once I’ve parked, we slip into the barn, finding Griff and Judge there.

“Is it done?” Griff asks.

“It’s done.” I pull the papers out and hand them to him. “We’ll keep an eye on the bitch, but we scared the shit out of her. She won’t be back.”

“I still think she got off easy,” Ghost mutters.

“I agree,” Judge says, “but if Clara ever found out we offed her mother, it could hurt her. Kid’s been through enough without adding that shit on her.”

“Whatever,” I grumble, but I know he’s right.

He claps me on the shoulder. “Thank you for taking care of that. It means the world to Josie and me.”

I shrug and grin. “It’s no problem. The little wild child is growing on us all. She’s going to make a great Ace someday.”

Judge rolls his eyes, then looks at Griff. “You’re going to get them to the judge to be signed and filed?”

He nods. “Yeah. I’ll take care of everything.”

I cock my head and look at Griff. “What about Crews’ cousin?”

Griff’s grin is feral. “He’s being arrested as we speak. The DEA agents weren’t even watching him twenty-four hours before they got video of him shaking down not one but two drug dealers for drugs and a pimp for cash. Asshole’s going down. They’re also looking at Crews’ brother, but so far, he looks clean.”

Judge nods. “That’s a relief. I didn’t want to have to worry about blowback from his family. I’m heading to the bar to tell Josie about Clara before Kenny kills her. She’s been hell on wheels waiting for you guys to get back.”

We watch him take off, then I turn to Griff.

“How’s Bear?” The little guy may be named after Griff but everyone’s been calling him Bear, much to Clara’s delight. He had a few more breathing problems than his sister, JoJo. I know Bree was worried.

Griff smiles. “He’s doing much better. He’s a little fighter—they both are. But the doctors are saying they should both be completely fine once they catch up.” Then he loses his smile. “Sadie’s struggling. She still feels like she let Bree down by not insisting she deliver earlier.”

“I’ll check on her,” I say.

“Son, you need to do more than that. Quit pussyfooting around with this shit. She needs you.”

I shake my head. “She’s not ready yet.”

His eyes harden on mine. “She’s not ready, or you’re not ready?”

I narrow my eyes on him, pissed he’d even ask that shit. “I’ve been ready for fucking *years*. You know this.”

“She’s drowning. You need to pull her up,” Griff argues.

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t,” I growl, then I soften my tone. “I’ll make sure she’s okay, but before Sadie and I can make a go of it she’s got to be able to trust me *and* the Aces. You and I both know she’s not ready to do that. After the wringer McCord and her uncle put her through, she only has one person she fully trusts—and it ain’t me.” I straighten up and look him in the eye before continuing, “But you can be damn fucking sure that the second she’s ready, she’s mine.”

The End

*Stay Tuned for Finn and Sadie in early 2024.*

To stay up to date on my preorders, releases, and book news, sign up for my newsletter at [TarynRivers.com](https://TarynRivers.com) and get Whiskey Sweet, Whiskey Falls book 2.5 , for free.

*Reviews on the platform of your choice are always appreciated.*

## FIND TARA AT:

Taryn Rivers lives in central Arkansas with her extremely patient husband. When she's not writing, she's either kicking back with her husband at the lake, eating her weight in fried cheese curds while visiting family in Wisconsin, or she's guilt-tripping her children into coming to see her. She loves reading, coffee, wine, and her family, but not necessarily in that order.

**Website:** <https://tarynrivers.com>

**FB Reader Group:** Taryn's Tavern where the books are spicy, the drinks are strong, and the music is rocking all night long. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/TarynsTavern/>

Want to get the novella *Whiskey Sweet*, Book 2.5 in the *Whiskey Falls* series free? Sign up for my newsletter on my website at [tarynrivers.com](https://tarynrivers.com) for that and more.



## THOUGHTS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

You can all thank Katy Nielsen, my editor, for Whiskey Gifts. When I finished *Savage Cove* I had every intention of starting on Finn's book next, but I quickly figured out that I had a timeline issue. The epilogue of *Savage Cove* fast forwards to the next year, and Finn and Sadie weren't together yet.

I don't know what I was thinking when I did that. I had every intention of bringing you guys along for the wild ride of Bree's pregnancy. So when I realized I'd robbed myself and you guys of that, I was pretty disappointed. That's when I came up with the idea of a Christmas novella based around Bree giving birth. I thought I'd do a couple of chapters for each couple, that kind of thing. When I pitched the idea to Katy, she nixed it. "Josie deserves for her story to be told," she insisted.

I argued, but knew in my heart she was right. It's just, Josie was inspired by my favorite ex-stepmom of all. She's my real mom in every way but blood—she's crazy, and fun, and loud, and obnoxious, and you never know what's going to come out of her mouth, and there's just so much to love about her. I mean, how could I not have a character inspired by her?

Anyway, mother figures and steamy scenes don't mix... so I had to keep reminding myself that Josie is not Lee, she's inspired by her. Still, I have to admit that I cussed Katy quite a bit while I wrote *those* scenes. Sorry Katy—actually, no I'm not. I'll probably be traumatized for life after this book.

But in the end, I owe Katy my thanks for steering, well, *forcing* me, to write this story. I do love Josie, and Judge is amazing. Their story was a fun, albeit emotional ride.

I also need to thank Suzanne and Penny for listening to me whine for three months straight without unfriending me, and also for being great alpha readers.

Beth and Karen, thanks for proofreading under the gun since I took this book down to the wire, deadline wise.

To the gang in Taryn's Tavern and the rest of my readers, thank you for reading, loving, and sharing my books. I read every comment and review, and your enthusiasm for my stories means the world to me.

And last, RH—thanks for being the most supportive husband in the world. Our thirtieth anniversary came and went during the writing of this book. It's been an amazing ride, babe, and I can't wait to see where we go next.

Now on to Finn and Sadie... this will be so much fun.

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