



Heartwood Lake
Secret Billionaires

A PLACE

Like You

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CLAUDIA BURGOA

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Cover by: Hang Le

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Also By Claudia Burgoa

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Dear Reader,

I write highly emotional romances that include thought provoking subjects. If you would like to see a list of them, please check the link below with more information.

[TW Website](#)

Happy Reading,
Claudia

For my imaginary friends from childhood: It turns out you were the best character development exercises.

You only are free when you realize you belong no place — you belong every place — no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great . . .

– Maya Angelou

Wren's Prologue



Secrets are as plentiful as pines in Heartwood Lake, Colorado.

Heartwood Lake is an enigmatic town where whispers of hidden truths fill the air, are kept concealed and unspoken, and reserved solely for a chosen few. Every cobblestone, evergreen, and old wooden structure holds secrets known by only a few. We don't have many tourists, and if we do, they pass through quickly and quietly, blending in with the surroundings like wildflowers in the grass, soon fading away into forgotten memories.

Except for them. No one can ignore the Kershaw family.

They're not your average person and can't blend with the rest of us.

It's impossible to pretend they aren't here, since they're like a bold splash of color in an otherwise green-scale palette that makes our town unique. There's something strangely captivating about them, a charisma that fractures our town's usual monotony.

At least, I know one of the reasons why they're here. The entire family is hiding their past and their sins. They're escaping their truths and hoping to live another day. Someone wants them served on a silver platter—and they hide several secrets of their own.

How do I know? I work for Crait Quantum Shield, the people who run the Endor Concealment program—a privately owned witness protection program.

Now, you might be wondering why a family doctor for a small town is working for a high-security intelligence company. The answer is simple. In my other life, I used to be a trauma surgeon. I might not know any fighting moves, but I know how to save lives when people are hanging by a thread.

And no, it wasn't like being in the middle of *Chicago Med*, *Grey's Anatomy*, or any of those medical dramas everyone loves. It was real life emergencies with no rehearsals and victims who sometimes didn't make it.

The owners of Crait Quantum Shield and I have a symbiotic relationship that works well for both parties. They need my experience, and in exchange, they protect my five-year-old son and me.

But let's focus on the Kershaws—at least, that's the last name they go by. For all we know, their last name could be Smith, Thomas, or Brown. This is the first time that so many people—eleven—have come into the program simultaneously pretending to be related.

We're not sure if they're a family, or if the program made up the relationship between them. For all we know, they could be siblings, cousins twice removed, or neighbors who witnessed a crime. Everything about them is a mystery that wraps around them like twisting ivy.

There's something about this family that makes me want to uncover their truth—but technically, I'm not allowed to.

Still, I have to know what the deal is with them. It's in my nature. And have I mentioned they don't look normal? All the men are extremely handsome, and the women are beautiful—even their mothers are attractive. They resemble models who have been hired to be a part of a reality show unfolding right in our own backyard.

My three best friends and I have front row seats, drinks and snacks in

hand, waiting to see what'll unfold in front of us, while also trying to figure out what they hide. Are they guilty of a crime or just hiding from a serial killer?

We have to know who's in our town and why. We always figure it out.

And without *the boss* or his team knowing, we'll figure things out. It's simply a matter of putting our heads together and protecting our hearts.

Drake's Prologue



I didn't ask to be born, and I certainly didn't choose my life.

And sure, that sounds too fucking dramatic, but it's just a fact in the life of Drake Cillian Thorndale—that would be me.

If I had been given a choice, I wouldn't have chosen to be the firstborn of Eric Thorndale.

Eric Thorndale, the man with a reputation larger than life and a heart smaller than a mustard seed. At twenty-three, he knocked up the family maid—that'll be my mother. A woman I never met since my grandparents paid her to disappear. I don't think I'll ever forgive them for robbing me of the

opportunity to get to know her.

She's not mentioned on my birth certificate, and there's no trace of her. I wouldn't be surprised if anyone told me the Thorndales killed her and disposed of her body.

When I was two, Dad married his first wife. At the request of his parents, he dragged me along. She was nice enough, but dear ol' Dad built a concrete wall between Donna and me and attached a "Not Your Mother" sign on it. It was his sweet way to remind me I'm his bastard and nothing more.

I resented my brothers Magnus, Callahan, and Bach who were the bona fide sons of Eric Thorndale. Magnus was groomed to become Dad's sole successor since day one even when I was his firstborn.

Unsurprisingly, four years after the happy nuptials, Donna and my father went through a bitter divorce.

When Flora, wife number two, stepped into the picture, she yanked me into her frosty embrace. She hated me, and the feeling was mutual. During that marriage, there were two new Thorndales: Gael and Genevieve. I wasn't a fan of them, but now that we're older, I get along with Gael well enough. He's pleasant with everyone. It's hard not to like him.

Leonora Marchesani, wife number three, barely made it past the honeymoon phase before she was out the door. However, she left with a small Thorndale as a souvenir—Slade. My younger brother has a chip on his shoulder. Anger runs in his veins. I can't say that I like him, but he hates us all.

Then there was Suzie. Picture-perfect, full-of-love Suzie. I didn't see her as my mom, but I loved her like an aunt—or a family friend. She made the effort to get to know me, and I learned a lot from her. Thanks to her, I even decided to go to med school. She was patient with all her stepchildren—and loved my father. Her death messed us all up, mostly her children, River and Elmira.

After that, I moved to Los Angeles and tried to start fresh, but bad luck follows me everywhere. It's been years since I've gone through the motions, keeping up appearances, trying to forget the shitstorm that's my life. That's when Dad's call came in, pulling me back into the vortex of the Thorndale family. He needed me, and because of some twisted sense of family obligation, I had to comply.

It wasn't like he was asking. It was an order. One I followed, and now here I am, in the middle of nowhere, Colorado, off the grid, cooped up with

my siblings.

Whoever thought putting the Thorndale family in the same place doesn't understand the dynamics of a dysfunctional family.

Our family reunions resemble a game of *Survivor* or *Hunger Games* complete with alliances, backstabbing, and challenges. Seven of my eight siblings, two of my former stepmothers, and I are sharing the same space. There's a rumor that Slade might join us.

Some are trying to figure out what the fuck we're doing here, others are fighting to get the hell out, and I'm just wondering who'll be the last man—or woman—standing.

Let the games begin.

Chapter One



Drake

I PUSH open the wooden door to Heartwood Brew Bar, and the aroma of freshly prepared coffee envelops me, instantly transporting me to a different place and era. The cozy little coffee shop nestled amidst the breathtaking mountains of Colorado is a charming blend of nostalgic '90s vibes and modern elegance. As I step inside, a wave of warm, earthy hues greets me, emanating from the plush couches, modern tables, and walls adorned with vintage posters.

The soft murmur of conversations fills the air, accompanied by the gentle melodies flowing from the speakers overhead, playing classical music. I find myself drawn to the sleek, state-of-the-art espresso machines standing behind the counter, their polished chrome surfaces reflecting the soft glow of the pendant lights hanging above. It's a juxtaposition that flawlessly captures the essence of this place—blending the simplicity of yesteryears with the modern days.

The line is long. They definitely need more than just one coffee shop in this small town. My attention swivels to the barista, who gives the person in turn a friendly smile. “What can I get you today?” The acoustics in this place are great since I can hear her voice all the way to where I stand.

“Why is this place swamped?” one of the women standing in front of me muses aloud impatiently.

Her complaint drifts in the air until the woman next to her softly chuckles, responding, “Because the *newbies* have been coming around since yesterday.”

Their conversation catches my attention. “They’re definitely not following instructions,” the first woman mutters, her voice taut with an underlying tension. “How hard is it to stick to the golden rule . . . blend in?”

Laughter bubbles from the other woman, warm and rich, sending a shiver of electricity skittering along my spine. I shudder, closing my eyes to steady myself. “How can they blend in when they look like they’re children from the divine? Or one of those sculptors, like Michelangelo, Donatello, or—”

“Are we now naming Ninja Turtles, Wren?” her companion interrupts, teasing her.

Wren tosses her head, a cascade of auburn curls catching the soft lighting in the room. “No. I’m just saying they’re too pretty, too polished . . . too perfect not to draw attention. Their type doesn’t blend in. They never do.”

Laughter sparks inside me. This woman is wrong if she thinks my brothers or sisters are perfect. We Thorndales are imperfect at best. A quilt of flaws stitched together by our father’s blood and a history that might get us all killed.

Of course we can’t blend in easily in this town. Everyone knows each other. If anyone asks me, we would’ve been better off in some big city. This is all Callahan’s fault. He’s the one who made the impartial decision to uproot us from our lives in the name of saving us.

He claims someone is after us—Thorndales. That whoever tried to kill him two nights ago is trying to eliminate all of us. I doubt it. He’s an FBI agent. There’s no doubt that there are a lot of criminals who’re seeking his demise.

“Are we amusing you?” Wren swivels around, her beautiful brown eyes widening as they take in my features, piecing together the unsaid. There’s a glimmer of recognition in her gaze, a silent acknowledgment that I’m one of those “*too beautiful* to exist in this town” people.

“Why not? After all, my family and I seem to be your favorite topic of conversation,” I respond.

As the other woman turns around, I instantly recognize her—Regina Banks. She’s the sheriff’s daughter and part of my new identity. According to what we were told during orientation, she’s my long-lost cousin.

My lips curve into a smirk. “Ah, here’s Cousin Gina,” I drawl, infusing my words with a rich layer of sarcasm. “How are you, cuz?”

Regina blinks, processing my words. Seizing the moment, I add a dash more discomfort. “Shouldn’t you introduce me to your charming friend?”

Regina composes herself, tightly pressing her lips together before she responds, “Of course, Wren, meet . . .”

“Drake,” I interject with a hint of amusement. “You always confuse me with Magnus. Not sure why. I’m three years older and better looking than him.”

Regina scoffs, wearing a smirk. “Maybe because both of you are arrogant as fuck?” She then gestures toward Wren. “Wren, this is one of my cousins, Drake. Drake, meet one of my best friends.”

I make an entire production of taking her hand and brushing my lips

against her skin. “*Tout le plaisir est pour moi.*”

Big mistake. Big. Mistake.

Abort.

A jolt of electricity, unexpected and powerful, rockets up my arm. Time slows down as the softness of her skin against my lips triggers a volcanic eruption of desire in the pit of my stomach.

It’s probably nothing. A bad case of altitude sickness. Yeah, it’s called acute mountain sickness, and it’s messing with my equilibrium. Perhaps my oxygen levels are dipping. I’m not used to this area. I should go to the cabin where the oxygen tank is. It’s supposed to help us, so we can acclimate to this elevation.

That’s the only explanation as to why my body is having this reaction.

The warmth spreading across my chest is inconsequential, I assure myself. This is just a side effect of the sudden relocation. But I definitely have to go. Now.

“I’ll leave you to your coffee and your theories. I have something to do,” I say before fleeing the coffee shop.

WHEN I ARRIVE at the cabin where I’m staying with Callahan, he eyes me with an inquisitive look. “Who’s chasing you?”

Obviously, I can’t tell him I’m not feeling well. After all, I’m a doctor. I should just take care of myself. So, I dismiss him with a shake of my head and change the topic. “Have they told you when we’ll be going back home?”

He scoffs. “Between now and never,” he responds.

My brows furrow in confusion. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“There’s no definitive timeline. It could be a month, could be longer,” he explains. “Crait Quantum Shield is helping us neutralize the danger, so we can go back and resume our regular lives, but it can take some time. As far as I’m concerned, we don’t know what we are up against just yet.”

When he throws the words neutralize and resume, I know he’s just bullshitting me. He doesn’t even know if we’re in danger, and yet, here we are stuck in nowhere Colorado, bored out of our skulls.

Of course, I can’t bite back the sarcastic retort or the irritation in my voice. “Can you skip the tactical drivel and give it to me straight?”

He throws his hands up in frustration. “What do you expect me to say?” His growl echoes in the cabin. “This is completely out of my control.”

I glance at my hands, then show them to him. “These babies are insured for millions of dollars. I can’t be playing Billy the Kid, shoveling shit and feeding the cows until you decide we’re done serving time.”

His face slowly morphs into a vibrant shade of red, a vein in his forehead throbbing, eerily reminiscent of the way our father’s used to pulse when he was about to lose his ever-fucking mind and yell at us. “Do you think I’m enjoying this? Lake might’ve fucked me, and I can’t even step out to track her down. Not yet at least.”

An eyebrow arches because it seems like he has a plan to escape like his little friend did. “What’s that supposed to imply? Is there a get-out-of-jail-free card? Or are you bailing out of here?” I put my hands on my waist, straightening my shoulders. “Either way, you’re taking me with you.”

He scoffs, running a hand through his hair. “Again, we’re not in prison.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” I retort, bristling at his dismissive tone. “I’m a fucking doctor—the best plastic surgeon in LA, not a farmhand.” I wave a hand as if saying it doesn’t matter and backpedal, focusing on what he said before. “When exactly will you be able to go and look for Lake?”

He shakes his head.

“Callahan?”

He heaves a sigh, his shoulders slumping. “I’m trying to land a position at Crait Quantum,” he admits. “Ansel works for them. We were a good team once. Maybe he can convince them that I’m a good asset.”

“What’s going to happen with your job at the FBI?”

“I went MIA. Even when we leave this place, I doubt my position at the bureau will still be there waiting for me. Plus, like you, I can do a lot more than scooping shit and milking cows.”

“Think they’d need a resident surgeon? I can’t continue pretending to be John Wayne or some mountain man. It’s driving me crazy,” I complain, expressing only a fraction of my frustration.

He rubs his chin in consideration. “You know what? I think we should have a conversation with Finnegan Gil, one of the owners of CQS.”

I gaze at him. “What are we going to discuss with him?”

“I’m guessing there are other jobs around the area. He can use my expertise within his company,” he suggests, shrugging. “There’s a clinic in town where you could lend your skills.”

My lips quirk into a smirk. "I knew I liked you for a reason."

He snorts, rolling his eyes at me. "Aww, my big brother is finally beginning to like me. How fucking touching."

I flip him the finger. "Fuck you, Cal."

"Lake already did a lot of damage, so no thank you. For now, let's focus on what we can do to make this situation slightly better."

Is there any hope of escaping this situation, or are we going to be living in this forsaken town permanently?

Chapter Two



Wren

“WHAT ARE YOU READING?” Milo, my inquisitive five-year-old son, asks. His eyes shimmer with an eager spark of interest.

I lift the magazine my best friend Sutton handed me earlier when we visited the library. The perks of having a best-friend librarian. She’s always saving Milo’s favorite books and a few magazines for me. “An article, bud.”

He gives me an unamused glare before he returns his focus to the tower of books he acquired at the library. His tiny brows furrow in concentration as he ponders the order in which we’ll be reading them during the week.

I consider telling him this isn’t some high-stakes game, but I opt for a loving smile, returning to the most inaccurate article I’ve read in the past few days: *Seventeen Single Mom Survival Tips*.

The advice, while well-intentioned, doesn’t help me deal with my quirky boy.

Actually, most of these tips are useless.

Tip number five: Join up with other single moms. There’s no such thing as single mothers in this place. I might as well take on unicorn spotting. There’s just *a* single father who thinks the entire town is invisible and ignores us the best he can. I can’t count on him for . . . well anything.

Tip number seven: Organize sleepover exchanges. A chuckle escapes me because, really, who wants to exchange that with me?

I’ve lived in this town for five years, and none of the other parents have ever offered more than just pleasantries. That’s until a coughing child or routine check-up turns me from a stranger to the only doctor in town.

Milo’s attention flickers back to me. “What’s so funny, Mommy?”

“Just remembered a joke a patient shared earlier today,” I lie, keeping my tone light. There’s an art to preserving his innocence and fostering the belief that there’s good within everyone—even when, at times, people seem like empty vessels, only taking without offering anything in return, not even kindness.

He nods and goes back to his pile of books.

“Remember, it’s bath time, kiddo,” I prompt him, hoping this will speed up his daunting process.

This would be a great time to follow tip number eight: Rely on family members. But the thing is that I don't have any relatives in Heartwood Lake. I should have thought about it when I decided to move here, but that wasn't even an option. I am about to bring up the bath once again when I get a text from Finnegan Gil, *the boss*.

Finnegan: *We need to talk.*

Wren: *Are you about to break up with me?*

Finnegan: *Not funny. If anyone reads that, they will really think there's something going on between us.*

Wren: *Since when do you care what the town says?*

Finnegan: *Since hearing the gossip might upset my spouses—not that they would believe it, but still.*

Of course, his significant others are the reason I have to be careful with what I say. I like them both well enough, but I'm pretty sure they're not my fans. There's never been anything between Finnegan and me, but the rumors can be tiresome.

Do I find Finn attractive? I'm not blind. He's handsome in that rugged-well-built-enigmatic-eyes kind of way. However, I'm not into him. Not at all.

Now he's happily married to not one but two people and has an adorable baby daughter.

Wren: *Fine, let's be technical. Are you planning on firing me?*

Finnegan: *No, but I have something for you.*

Wren: *Is this a hefty bonus so I do something that might jeopardize my medical license?*

Finnegan: *Can you come over to my place?*

Wren: *I have a kiddo who needs to take a bath. You should be the one coming here.*

Finnegan: *I have a six-month-old little girl who's asleep, and I'm alone.*

Wren: *Where are your spouses?*

Finnegan: *They went to Denver to pick up some family members and groceries.*

Wren: *Well, you'll have to wait until tomorrow, Finn. I can't shift the balance, or Milo won't sleep until next Saturday.*

Finnegan: *Fine, I'll bundle my jelly-bug. We'll be there soon. I might even bring the surprise with me.*

Wren: *Joy, I can't wait.*

It's such a shame that people can't read sarcasm through texts.

A KNOCK on the front door disrupts the peacefulness in the house. "This better be important," I grumble, setting down the magazine and dragging myself to answer the door.

On the other side is Finnegan Gil. He's not alone, though. His adorable baby daughter is in a sling, pressed to his chest, and covered with a pink blanket.

The sight of a rugged man, seemingly indifferent to the world and those around him, cradling a baby with a tenderness akin to the gentle breeze caressing delicate petals makes my ovaries explode. It creates a longing not only for another child, but a man who'll give up his entire life for a baby.

"Rhea is here." Milo runs, squealing excitedly.

Finn gently places his index finger upon his lips, urging my son to embrace the soothing silence with a tender "Shh," but he promptly crouches down to let Milo get a better look at a sleeping Rhea.

"Hi, baby Rhea," Milo coos softly.

"You haven't bathed yet?" Finn says with a low voice and shakes his head. "I'll be brief, so your mom can be with you soon."

"Why don't you finish choosing your books, and we'll get your bath ready as soon as I'm done with Finn?"

"Okay, Mom," he says, marching back to the dining table, leaving me alone with Finnegan, the baby, and . . .

"Sorry I'm late," a familiar voice calls out. When I look to my right, I spot Drake, one of the men who's currently part of the Endor program—the guy Regina and I bumped into at the coffee shop.

I fix my gaze on Finn, my eyes filled with a mix of curiosity and suspicion. "Why is he here?"

Carefully rising from his crouched position, Finnegan adjusts the baby sling with a tenderness that softens his usually hard edges. When he meets my gaze, there's a determined spark in his gray eyes. "I brought you a doctor."

The statement ignites a spark of indignation within me, my brows knitting tighter. "Excuse me?"

“You said you needed another physician for the clinic,” Finnegan prompts, his attention partially on the stirring baby.

Beside him, Drake grins, revealing not one but two charming dimples. Why does he have to be so incredibly attractive? Back in the coffee shop, I nearly swayed by his velvety voice and striking features, but I swiftly reminded myself that men of his caliber often harbor hidden agendas. It’s safer to steer clear of him.

Except now he’s standing at my front door, searching for something. I sneak a hesitant glance his way, not exactly thrilled about unraveling the mystery behind Finnegan’s choice to bring him here.

“I happen to be a physician,” he announces, his voice almost sounding like one of those cheesy, good-looking superheroes who arrive when someone is in distress. He even possesses dreamy blue eyes that sparkle with a hint of mischief and a head of dark, thick, wavy hair that adds to his captivating charm.

But instead of succumbing to his magnetism, I find myself unable to hold back my laughter, and I playfully point at him while glancing at Finn. “Are you seriously telling me you brought Mr. Pretty Boy here to . . . what? Play doctor?” Then my focus shifts to Drake. “Let me guess. You’re one of those doctors who spends more time on the golf course than with their patients . . . if you’re indeed a doctor.”

“I’m a surgeon,” he counters, unfazed by my skepticism. “I’m sure I can run a family practice without missing tee time.”

The fucking arrogance doesn’t go unnoticed.

My gaze snaps back to Finnegan. “I don’t want some outcast who’s paying you to save his ass tending to my patients.”

“Mommy said ‘ass,’” Milo chimes in, and even Rhea stirs, the commotion bringing her back from the brink of sleep. Drake’s laughter rings out at my son’s bafflement.

“The jelly-bug and I have to head back home. In the meantime. . .” He pauses, sparing Drake a sideways glance. “I’ve done my part. Introduced you. As for the rest . . . well, she might not invite you to play. After all, it is her sandbox.”

With that, he turns on his heel, leaving me with the cocky, wannabe doctor in the doorway.

“Take him with you,” I request as he walks away.

“I think you should reconsider,” Finnegan calls out, the smirk evident in

his voice as he glances over his shoulder. “You could use some help at the clinic. But hey, what do I know?”

“I have things to do,” I respond, directing my words at Drake. “Maybe we can discuss this at a later time. Let’s say February thirtieth. Goodbye.”

With that, I firmly shut the door, leaving behind an atmosphere of finality.

Very mature, Wren.

But seriously, what am I supposed to do? Open the doors of my practice to a guy that might be here for a few weeks, and then what? I need stability in my life, including the clinic.

Then again, choosers shouldn’t be . . . how does that phrase go?

It doesn’t matter. If I really need a doctor, I’ll contact a headhunting company, not Finnegan. He has many qualifications, but common sense isn’t one of them. Is it?

Chapter Three

Wren



Every Thursday afternoon, my best friends—Sutton, Regina, and Jez—and I meet at the Mountain Range Bar and Grill. Jezebel—Jez for short—owns the joint, so I’m not sure if it counts as her joining us for lunch when she’s darting between tables, making sure everything is running like a well-oiled engine while we eat.

The four of us have been friends for years. Jezebel’s grandma calls us the modern-day Golden Girls, only younger and less funny. We’re more of a family, bound not by blood but by shared laughter, tears, and history.

Like every week, we’re here at noon. The theme of today is: Last night’s uninvited guest. Sutton hasn’t arrived yet, but that doesn’t stop me from telling them what happened with Drake Kershaw.

“The audacity of Finnegan, to just drop a stranger in my lap and expect me to hire him,” I complain.

Okay, he didn’t tell me to hire him. More like he tried to help the guy but warned him that I might not be persuaded to do such a thing.

Regina, always the practical one, nonchalantly shrugs. “I don’t understand your hesitation. You do need a doctor,” she points out. “If you

can't afford his salary, I can help you with that."

I shrug off her suggestion. It's not about the money, but the principle. "Who knows if this guy is even a competent doctor? He comes from a big city, probably an overpriced cardiologist who charges exorbitant fees by spending all of five minutes with his patients declining surgeries and having affairs. He could be a wife beater . . ." My voice trails off, the words heavy with memories I shouldn't bring back.

"Way to project yourself," Regina interjects.

I shrug, because maybe that's my biggest problem with Drake. There's an inexplicable familiarity about him that fills me with an unsettling unease.

"What did he say during the interview?" Jez interrupts our conversation, placing our drinks on the table.

"Um, there wasn't an interview—and I won't be hiring him. As I explained, Finn brought him by last night as if he were some present that'll bring me joy. He didn't. Obviously, I dismissed them both." I reach for my glass and take a sip. The peach iced tea is probably the best around here, not that there are many places that even offer it in this area.

Just then, Sutton slides onto a barstool. "Who are we hiring?" she asks, her grin mischievous. "Did we decide to start a strip club because I'm ready for the interviews—full naked body."

"No strippers." Jez rolls her eyes.

"Apparently, a doctor," Regina replies.

Jez turns to Sutton. "The usual?"

Sutton nods and then, without missing a beat, swivels to face me, her eyebrows raised. "You're finally hiring someone to help you at the clinic?"

I shoot Regina a disapproving look. "I haven't decided anything," I clarify.

"Well, you should seriously consider it. I love babysitting Milo, but sometimes we can't help you when there's an emergency at the clinic," Regina remarks. "Having this new doctor available to cover for you when my favorite boy is sick, or when you need to attend one of his recitals would be helpful."

Curious, Sutton chimes in, "So, who is this doctor you refuse to hire?"

"It's one of the Kershaw family members," Regina pipes up, the last of her words still hanging in the air as she sips her drink.

Sutton's knowing gaze settles on me. "Wren, you should seriously consider hiring him. This could be our chance to find out more about them."

“And why am I not surprised that you’re all for it?” Sarcasm drips from every word.

“That’s one of the reasons, but honestly, I think he could help you,” Sutton says.

“We don’t even know if he’s a legitimate doctor,” I argue.

“Finnegan wouldn’t just drop him in front of your door if he wasn’t qualified,” Jez counters before she refills my glass.

“Still, I won’t hire him,” I insist. “There is no way I’m letting him treat any of my patients. Would you trust them to work for you?”

Jez pauses, contemplating my question before responding, “Well, as it happens, two of them will start working for me tonight.”

I gape at Jez, my jaw slightly dropping in disbelief. “That’s a terrible idea.”

She shrugs, her eyes sparkling with amusement. She’s unaffected by my disapproval. “Leave that negativity at the door, shall we?”

Regina chimes in with a chuckle. “And Pessimistic Patty is making her grand entrance.” She turns to Jez. “So, you hired two of the hotties. What did they say during the interview?”

Jez flicks an imaginary piece of lint off her Mountain Range Bar and Grill shirt, the corners of her mouth lift before saying, “Other than they’re your ‘cousins,’” she draws quotes and continues, “and your father sent them my way? Not a whole lot.”

Regina lets out a soft groan, rolling her eyes. “Did I mention one of the Kershaw matriarchs is my new aunt?”

Regina hates it when her father and Finnegan involve her when they bring people into town.

“Which one?” Sutton and I chime in complete unison.

“I believe her name is Fauna . . . no, maybe Flora,” Regina responds.

Sutton bursts into laughter. “So, one of the three good fairies from Sleeping Beauty?”

Regina shoots her a glare. “No. I can’t remember her name, okay? Just go with it, or Dad might lose his shit if he learns that I tell you more than I should about the Endor program.”

“We know how to be discreet,” I grumble. It’s like she doesn’t know us. We’ve never spilled her secrets—or anyone’s, for that matter.

Regina leans forward, her gaze intent. “You should seriously think about hiring that doctor, Wren.”

I let out a firm sigh, crossing my arms over my chest. “No way. He’ll probably pack up and leave in less than a month and—”

“I overheard Dad and one of the Kershaws having a deep conversation. They were talking about a long-term stay here,” Regina interrupts, her voice dropping to a whisper as she scans the bar.

Jez raises an intrigued eyebrow, leaning in closer. “Where did you pick up that juicy piece of information, Gina?”

Regina shrugs nonchalantly. “I was hanging out at the stables. The guy Dad was talking to mentioned something about looking for a job at CQS and about sticking around for a couple of years.”

“Years?” The word slips out of my mouth, and I furrow my brow in confusion. “That’s . . . unexpected.”

The Endor program isn’t known for its long-term stays. Usually, these “visitors” only remain here for a few weeks or months. The longest has been four months—yes, we usually count the days until they leave. It’s one of our hobbies. Well, that and figuring out why they’re here.

“Did they say anything else?” I ask before taking another refreshing sip of my iced tea, hoping that’ll help me swallow the news better.

Regina shakes her head. “Nope. They caught sight of me and scurried away. That’s when my dad dropped the bombshell that I have a new aunt.”

“That settles it, Wren. You should hire him,” Sutton orders while Jez scrunches her nose.

“What’s with the face?” I ask Jez, ignoring Sutton’s excitement.

Jez’s gaze meets mine, her lips curling into a grimace. “The thought of keeping those two on board for years . . . All my employees are seasonal.”

Regina gasps dramatically, her hand fluttering to her chest. “Oh no, you have to *commit* to giving these men a job for over a month. The horror.”

“Don’t you dare utter the c-word in her presence.” Sutton feigns shock, her eyes wide as she turns to Jez. “Oops, sorry, she mentioned commitment in front of you.”

I can’t help but burst into laughter. This is what I love about being with my friends—for a few moments, we can forget about life’s hardships and the future challenges ahead.

“That’s another fifty bucks in the jar,” I point at my empty glass. “No one dares speak that forbidden word in this fine establishment.”

“It’s like saying ‘Voldemort’ in front of Harry Potter,” Sutton quips, a playful smirk spreading across her face.

Jez shakes her head, a chuckle escaping her. “You’re such a nerd, Sutton.” She sighs. “But God, I love you.”

Regina raises an expectant eyebrow. “If you love us so much, where is our food? My patients will be knocking down my door soon.”

“More like barking.” Sutton grins.

Jez shakes her head in mock exasperation, shooting Regina a playfully reproachful look. “You’re too demanding,” she jokes before disappearing in the direction of the kitchen.

As the laughter dies down, Sutton turns to me, her hand reaching out to give mine a gentle squeeze. “I know change is tough for you,” she begins, her voice soft but insistent. “But give yourself and that doctor a chance. Think about what this could do for your stress levels. Not every male doctor in the world is an asshole.”

Sutton’s words hang in the air, filling the space between us with unspoken questions and possibilities. The light chatter of the bar, the clinking of glasses, and the murmur of conversation fade into the background.

Should I take a chance and hire Drake?

The mere thought of it stirs up a whirlwind of uncertainty within me.

Allowing him into my clinic and personal space would undoubtedly change many things. I can’t help but question if they would truly be for the better. It feels like I would be surrendering a part of myself, relinquishing control in the process.

Can I rely on him to care for my patients?

Doubts linger in the air, anchoring me in the midst of my wavering confidence. The weight of the decision settles deep within my bones, urging me to question myself further. “Can I truly go through with this?”

Chapter Four



Wren

AS A GENTLE GLOW of dawn filters through the curtains, my alarm pierces the silence of my cozy room. It's 6:30 AM, and another day in the captivating yet often hectic world of Heartwood Lake is about to begin.

Being a single mom and the only doctor in town means my mornings are always a flurry of activity. There's no time for leisure—I have to tackle my tasks before tending to everyone else's needs.

The first ten minutes of my day are dedicated to meditation—it's what keeps me sane throughout my entire day. That's followed by a quick shower. Once out, I apply moisturizer and foundation to look decent enough. I gather my auburn hair into a neat ponytail and slip into a pair of jeans and a cozy sweatshirt, embracing the laid-back Friday vibe. That's the beauty of being my own boss. I can take small liberties—like deciding on the dress code. Although I haven't yet instituted “pajama day,” I'm often seen in lounging pants during late-night emergency calls.

The rich aroma of coffee fills the small kitchen as I hurry to prepare a quick breakfast. I'm thankful for this automatic coffee maker that magically brews coffee when I'm ready for my caffeine fix.

When I check on Milo, he's already up, his face lighting up in excitement as he chatters nonstop about dinosaurs and their mind-boggling enormity.

“Mommy, did you know that the Argentinosaurus is the biggest dinosaur? It's even larger than our town,” he exclaims, his innocent wonder captivating me. “Do you think Grampa Charles will take me to the moose? Or maybe we can bring the fozys to us.”

“First off, it's museum, not moose, and they are fossils, not fozys,” I correct him, trying to suppress the tender amusement tugging at my lips. “We'll see what we can do about the museum, though.”

Finnegan's father is an archeologist and an amazing man who's been wonderful with Milo. He had taken my boy on weekend trips when my work at CQS became too demanding. Lately, there hasn't been any last-minute calls or big emergencies from CQS, but I'm sure that when they happen, he won't just step in to take care of him.

Now, his attention is almost exclusively on his first granddaughter, Rhea.

I doubt he'll have time to take my son to the museum or on any adventure.

The thought of finding someone else to cover for me on weekends so I can take my son out on trips flits through my mind, but I quickly dismiss it. My current life doesn't afford me the luxury of leisure trips or leisurely adventures.

"Can we have a pet dinosaur?" Milo suddenly asks, snapping me back to the present moment.

"Dinosaurs are extinct, bud," I gently explain, hoping that this doesn't become an obsession like the time he was fixated on trains and engines. Trains were easy to research, but dinosaurs are an entirely different beast—literally.

"Not in Jurassic Park," he quips with a victorious glint in his eyes.

I can't help but laugh. "That's a movie. And even if dinosaurs were still around, I think our town would be a little too small to house a gigantic *Argentinosaurus*, don't you think?"

He nods, but my response doesn't deter his enthusiasm. He immediately launches into plans to turn his room into a dinosaur wonderland and further probe into their diet. He hopes we can incorporate these prehistoric meals into our daily menu—even suggests that maybe Aunt Jez can serve some of those dishes at the bar.

"Most of them were herbivores," I offer, hoping to steer the conversation in a different direction.

His brow furrows. "Herbo what?"

"Herbivores," I correct him. "They're animals that only eat plants. They don't eat other animals or meat. They have special teeth and digestive systems that help them eat and digest plants. Some herbivores, like cows, have big flat teeth that help them chew and grind grass. Others, like rabbits, have sharp teeth that help them bite and chew on leaves and vegetables."

He gives me a worried look. "But I need dino-nuggets."

"You're right, and I have good news for you." I try to sound as enthusiastic as possible. "We humans are omnivores."

His quizzical gaze finds mine again.

"An omnivore is a type of animal that eats both plants and meat. Think of having the best of both worlds—the herbivores and the carnivores. Being an omnivore means they have a more flexible diet and can eat different kinds of food.

"So, let's imagine you have a plate of food in front of you," I continue,

hoping to keep his attention and steer him away from his let's eat only dino-food (whatever that means). "If you're an omnivore, you have the option to choose from both plant-based foods and animal products. You can enjoy yummy fruits, vegetables, grains, and nuts, just like herbivores. But you can also have some meat, like chicken, beef, or fish, if you want to."

Please want to . . . he hates fish.

He scrunches his nose, clearly showing his dislike for fish. I chuckle softly, understanding his aversion. "Well, you have the freedom to decide what you want to eat," I assure him.

Distracted by Milo's culinary dino-adventures, I reach for my phone and quickly search if any dinosaurs were omnivores. A sigh of relief escapes me as I find the answer. "Oviraptors ate all kinds of food, like you," I tell him. "I don't think we need to modify our menu, after all."

"Okay," he chirps, accepting the fact as satisfactory.

"They ate fish," I toss in casually as I place a plate of fluffy waffles drizzled with maple syrup in front of Milo.

He doesn't acknowledge my comment and digs into his meal. I multitask, scanning through my emails, confirming patient appointments, and mentally organizing my day.

The frantic morning routine continues with the search for Milo's socks. He insists on finding the ones with dinosaurs on them, but they seem to have vanished. I manage to convince him to settle for the pair with puppies on them, promising to search the entire house for his favorite socks later. Deep down, I know it's a frivolous request, and I shouldn't trouble Finnegan for something so small.

As I wave goodbye to Milo at his preschool, his bright and infectious energy bathes me with a sense of love. His young voice sings out, "I love you, Mommy," and it echoes in my heart. It becomes a soft whisper that tells me, despite the time it takes to hunt down his dinosaur socks or whatever the next big thing is, it's all worth it. He is worth it.

He's my everything.

His teacher reminds me that it's his turn for show and tell next week. I add that to my to-do list, so I don't forget. The last time, we couldn't find his pet rock and had a terrible day. This time it won't happen; I promise myself. I'll be ready.

AS I STEP into the clinic, my mood takes a sudden shift when I spot Drake Kershaw casually lounging at the reception alongside Victoria, my assistant, sometimes nurse, and favorite multitasker. A lab coat drapes over his tall frame, displaying the embroidered name “Dr. Drake,” but the rest of the embroidery is unclear. If only I could make it out, maybe I could Google him and uncover why he’s part of the Endor program.

Raising an eyebrow, I ask, “What, it’s just Dr. Drake, no last name? Are you some kind of rapper?” I can’t help but add a touch of sarcasm to my voice as I question him.

Drake glances around, shaking his head. “I was asked to take off the rest for security purposes. And the rapper you’re thinking of is Dr. Dre, not Drake.”

My nose scrunches up as I retort, “No, I’m pretty sure there’s a Drake too.”

“I wouldn’t know,” he responds, cutting the conversation and reminding me that he shouldn’t be in here.

“And what do you think you’re doing here?” I inquire with a firm tone.

“He’s volunteering while visiting his family,” Victoria chimes in before Drake has a chance to answer. “He already saw Mr. Jenkins, who came in with another mysterious rash.”

I should be thankful that I didn’t have to look at Mr. Jenkin’s imaginary rash, but still, Drake shouldn’t be here.

“My office. Now,” I demand.

Seething, I beckon Drake to follow me to my office. Each footstep echoes in the silent hallway as I lead the way, the slam of the office door behind us emphasizing my brewing anger. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Volunteering,” he repeats Victoria’s words.

“We’re not a charity case, and there’s not enough work for you,” I argue.

His audacity to glance at his watch in the middle of our conversation flares up my annoyance. “If that’s all, my eight o’clock will be here soon,” he dares to say with that arrogant voice that’s infuriating and mildly attractive.

“What eight o’clock?” I fire back, the disbelief clear in my voice. “We don’t take appointments until eight-thirty.”

“Isabella Davis called. She needed an appointment. Since you were fully booked, I told her I’d see her—at eight,” he explains calmly.

The fire in my eyes intensifies at his words. “They’re my patients,” I snap, my territorial instincts kicking in.

“I’m just helping,” he says in all seriousness.

“Why?” I question, the single word hanging heavily in the air between us.

“Because being a doctor is all I know,” he responds.

I clench my jaw, narrowing my eyes at him. “Well, if you want to work here, I need your real résumé. I can’t rely solely on your word of capability,” I demand, determination fueling my voice. I swiftly pull out my phone, my fingers trembling with a mix of anger and urgency, and dial Finnegan’s number.

“Yo?” Finnegan’s voice crackles through the phone.

“I need to know who Drake Kershaw really is,” I stress into the receiver, my tone carrying a sense of urgency. “I don’t care if you swear on your life he’s the best` physician in the entire world. If I can’t find out his real name and his work experience, he can’t be here.”

“Wren, we can’t—”

“I don’t care. Can you send me a copy of his freaking résumé, so I can at least see it? I don’t need his real last name,” I interrupt him.

“You’re a pain in my ass, Wren.”

“Help me out here. I’m having trouble understanding why you’re breaking the rules for these people.” I lower my voice. “This isn’t how you usually handle the Endor program.”

“They’re different,” Finnegan insists, his tone as mysterious as Drake’s.

“How so?” I challenge, my curiosity and suspicion increasing by the second.

“Their father was connected to the mafia,” Finnegan reveals. “This situation is delicate, and the process is . . . slower.”

“So they’ll be here for more than six months?” I inquire, my mind racing with the implications.

“Probably years,” Finnegan confirms, his words echoing what Gina shared with us the day before. “Usually, I wouldn’t give a shit about them, but I have to be mindful of their mental health.”

“Send me his résumé,” I insist firmly, a note of caution underlying my words. “And remember, he can’t prescribe medications without a legitimate license.”

“But you can . . . he’d be under your supervision,” Finnegan responds, clearing his throat. “Until I fix that little detail.”

Of course, he’s going to fix it by providing Drake with some fake license to practice. Finnegan is always finding ways to bend the rules, laws, and . . .

“If I decide to do this, I need you to do me a few favors,” I say, weighing my options carefully.

“Now we’re negotiating?” Finnegan growls, his voice a low grumble over the line.

“Indeed. Milo has his heart set on seeing the biggest dinosaur in the world, and I need a pair of socks by tonight. I’ll send you the details,” I say before ending the call.

Once the conversation concludes, I redirect my attention to Drake, my eyes briefly glancing at the wristwatch adorning my wrist. “You have five minutes to provide me with details about your education and work experience.”

Chapter Five



Drake

I MEET Wren's challenging gaze, feeling the intensity of her scrutiny. The white lab coat drapes over my shoulders like a protective barrier, but it's not enough to shield me from her piercing scrutiny.

Finnegan told me that even though Wren is familiar with his company and the program, I shouldn't disclose much about my personal details. But I have no choice but to do it. This is my only chance to persuade her to hire me. I'm a capable doctor, one of the best in the country.

Granted, I haven't practiced general medicine since my medical school days, which feels like it was a lifetime ago. And yes, things might have changed in the field over the past fifteen years, but I'm confident I can adapt and learn fast. I've continued to practice medicine, even though I have invested a significant part of my career in sculpting faces rather than healing others. However, I will strive to relearn and meet the demands of this clinic to the best of my abilities.

Wren crosses her arms and stares at the clock on the wall before returning her attention to me.

Her scrutiny reminds me of one of my old professors, making me feel like a first-year resident all over again. He was a hard ass who held us students to impossible standards and gave us low grades during an oral exam because we didn't meet his irrational expectations.

I swallow hard, my throat tight with apprehension, and begin recounting my career from the beginning. "For my undergraduate degree, I attended Harvard, majoring in biology with a minor in chemistry."

Her gaze flickers, brief and inscrutable. Is it surprise that I perceive, or a hardened annoyance sparked by my alma mater? Praying it's the former, I go on, "From there, I moved to the West Coast. Stanford School of Medicine." I pause, letting the weight of my words sink in. Everyone knows it's one of the best in the country, if not the world. She has to give me a chance now that she knows I attended a prestigious school.

"I graduated at the top of my class, with a focus on plastic and *reconstructive* surgery." I emphasize the word *reconstructive* because, initially, that's what I wanted to do with my degree, help others.

There is a crucial demand for surgeons who can perform operations after a tragic accident, attend to infants, and contribute in ways beyond cosmetic procedures. However, I deviated from my principles and succumbed to what was more in demand. It's a frivolous choice, but in fact, it was a way to keep myself distant from my patients and shut down my feelings and myself from others. It was a way to survive.

"For my residency, I trained at Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles," I continue. "As you may know, it's one of the top hospitals for plastic surgery in the country. I spent years refining my skills under some of the best surgeons in the field."

I finish speaking, shifting my weight slightly as I face Wren directly. I can see the wheels turning behind her intelligent eyes, processing my words, calculating her next move. But whatever her decision will be, at least now she knows I'm qualified to hold this job. I'm not just a name on a half-embroidered lab coat.

Dr. Drake Thorndale may be renowned as one of the best and most exclusive plastic surgeons, but I can also be simply Drake, a doctor ready to set aside all the accolades and return to the essence of medicine—focused on healing.

"And where have you been working in the past few years, Dr. Drake?" Wren asks, her tone betraying a mild interest. The sparkle of curiosity in her eyes pulls a half-smile onto my lips. I call this progress.

"I actually opened my own practice seven years ago," I confess, attempting to inject a hint of modesty into my words.

She doesn't have to know about my father, trust fund, and the endless opportunities given to me because of the Thorndale last name. For all she knows, I'm just some regular Joe who was lucky enough to secure grants, scholarships, and mentorships to establish my practice.

The reality is my clinic has become one of the most sought-after in the nation. I'm proud of that fact, yet, at the same time, I can't deny the gnawing dissatisfaction that has been creeping up on me lately.

Wren raises an eyebrow, waiting for more. I sigh, recognizing that this is the moment to bare all, to reveal the truth that's been eating at me.

"But it's not all it's cracked up to be, you know? Over time, my practice . . . it morphed into something different," I say, my voice quieter now. My gaze dips to the polished surface of her desk, focusing on the random objects scattered around—pens, notepads, a coffee mug: anything but her judgmental

eyes.

“I had a mission when I began my studies . . . to heal, to restore, to help those scarred by accidents, marked by congenital disabilities, or cancer survivors, but it all changed.” I grimace, forcing myself to continue. “Now, my clientele is primarily celebrities and the wealthy individuals questing for eternal youth.”

A heavy silence fills the room. I can feel Wren’s gaze boring into me. Bracing myself, I finally meet her eyes, the confession hanging in the air between us.

“But that’s not why I’m here, Wren,” I say with conviction. “If you agree to hire me, I’m going to do what is expected of me in this clinic. I want to be more than a ‘sell-out,’ as you might say. I’m here to work in any capacity you’ll allow.”

The words hang between us, raw and honest. I lift my eyes to meet hers, hoping that she’ll give me a chance.

“I’ll . . . think about it,” Wren admits, still visibly hesitant. Her arms cross over her chest. “But honestly, Drake, I don’t think you’re suited to our small operation. We don’t need a . . . high-profile plastic surgeon.”

I respond with a nod, understanding that her concern isn’t about my experience, but my origins. For all she knows, we could be part of an organized crime, and she’s afraid we’ll hurt her and the town.

We’re not. I still don’t understand exactly why Callahan brought us here. He says someone is trying to kill us—whoever killed our father. They don’t know the motive, but it’s best if we remain hidden.

Best for who? We lost everything, including our identities.

All I have left is the hope that Wren will recognize that I can be an asset. There’s nobody else working in this clinic, and from what Victoria told me, there are days she stays late to get through all the patients. She needs to be with her son and her husband—would her spouse convince her that she needs help?

“I hope you’ll reconsider,” I say, trying to keep the desperation from creeping into my voice. I know I’m a far cry from the small-town clinic she runs, but the possibility of something more meaningful has already rooted itself in my mind.

Wren glances at the clock hanging on her office wall. “You have that eight o’clock patient, Isabella Davis. After you’re done, please leave,” she orders, and the conversation is over. I hope this is my chance to show her I

can handle her patients.

As I leave her office, I can't help but feel an odd sense of dread mixing with hope. If she decides not to hire me, if I can't practice medicine and . . . Well, I'd feel as though there was nothing left, and what would I do then?

Medicine is the only thing I know. It's the essence of my being, the one thing I have truly excelled at. It transcends being a mere job or a career. It's ingrained in me.

Medicine has been my lifeline and what saved me after I lost . . . them. I can't imagine myself without this lab coat. As I walk out of her office and toward the examination room, I take a deep breath and square my shoulders.

I have an appointment to attend to, and perhaps, if I exceed her expectations, she'll reconsider her position.

If I can show Wren the kind of doctor I truly want to be, then maybe, just maybe, she'll reconsider.

But if not, what the fuck am I going to do in this town for the next unforeseen years?

Chapter Six



Drake

IT'S KIND OF funny that the barn has become a refuge for me ever since we arrived at Heartwood Lake. The familiar scent of hay and farm animals fills the air, accompanied by the rhythmic sounds of chores being carried out. Surprisingly, this is where my mind wanders and imagines how I can improve my life once I'm out of here.

This isn't a jail sentence, but it feels like something similar to it. We're trapped here, cut off from the outside world, ready to fight tooth and nail against our inmates. In this case, our siblings.

Company aside, these past few days have taught me a valuable lesson: time is a fleeting gift, one we can never truly hold on to. It's a lesson I should have learned long ago, but back then, I shielded my heart and numbed my mind, refusing to face the harsh reality—face the loss.

But at the moment, my thoughts are consumed by the modest charm of a certain clinic and captivated by its strong-willed, fiery doctor—Wren Lynch. There's an undeniable beauty about her, a rare combination of grace and determination that exudes from every fiber of her being.

Her delicate features are complemented by a confident smile that dances across her lips, revealing a glimpse of her fierce spirit. There's a certain appeal in the way she carries herself—with an air of quiet strength and unwavering determination. It's as if she's been through storms and emerged even more resilient, even when she carries multiple scars from them.

She might be beautiful, smart, and strong, but she's also not willing to give me a chance. After I finished with a patient, she dismissed me without even a courtesy “I'll consider you for the job” to soften the blow.

To drown out my frustration, I immediately went back to the ranch, throwing myself into the task at hand. Yet, no matter how hard I toil, the nagging annoyance refuses to dissipate. Beside me, my brother, Callahan, moves with a purpose, mopping the sweat off his brow with a grim determination. We've been cleaning the stalls side by side for hours, each harboring our own thoughts. He's probably trying to accept his fate because CQS didn't hire him either—or did they, but he doesn't want to tell me?

“You've been oddly quiet,” he remarks, his gaze studying me with

concern.

“I wasn’t aware we had an ongoing conversation,” I retort, my gaze drawn to the horses grazing contentedly in the paddock. “And you’re not exactly a chatterbox yourself.”

“That’s not the point,” he insists, his brow furrowing. “You left the house early and dove straight into work without saying a word.”

“I went to the clinic,” I confess, trying to figure out if by telling him I’ll be able to just let this go and resign myself to working on this fucking ranch for the rest of my sentence—whatever that might be. “I thought maybe if I showed her my skills, proved that I’m a capable doctor, she would reconsider.”

“You went to the clinic, huh?” Callahan’s voice echoes with surprise. “I thought you would give up on that after last night’s rejection.”

“I couldn’t *just* give up,” I say, letting my gaze wander around the barn. “Seemed like the right move—show her that I’m a good fucking doctor. I don’t understand why she won’t or can’t hire me.”

“A job at the clinic?” Gael, appearing seemingly out of nowhere, raises an eyebrow. “And how do you suppose that’ll work out, given you’re now Drake Kershaw? Dr. Drake Thorndale shouldn’t be allowed to practice and using your current identity is unethical.”

“Finnegan’s working out the finer details,” I reply, caught off guard by his unexpected appearance.

“I had no idea you were here.” Callahan turns toward Gael, sounding half-joking, half-serious. “Maybe we should put a bell around your neck to warn us that you’re coming through.”

Gael chuckles, shaking his head. “And miss the chance to overhear all your secrets?” A frown creases in his face. “So, what, are you going back to the FBI? Because if that’s what’s happening, I should go back to work too.”

Callahan scrubs his face with both hands. “That’s not what is happening.”

Gael leans casually against the barn wall, crossing his arms. “Then explain because I’m not going to stay here indefinitely while you two resume your regular lives. I have several restaurants that need me, you know?”

Callahan grimaces, like he’s struggling to find the right words. “It’s not that simple. The town clinic needs a doctor. They might hire Drake under a different name, but he’s not leaving. The security company needs more agents—I’m not returning home.”

Gael’s gaze flits between us. “So I’m just left with the bar and the farm?”

“You’re working at the bar?” Callahan asks, an incredulous laugh escaping him.

Gael bristles. “What’s so funny? I can mix rum and Coke, you know?”

Cal’s head wobbles back and forth, a gentle “no” vibrating in his throat. “You and Bach behind the bar? Now there’s a picture I can’t quite bring into focus.” His eyes twinkle with suppressed mirth. “But to each their own.”

Blinking, I absorb this new information. “I understand why this one will go to the bar.” I point at Gael. “I can’t picture the professor working at the bar, though.”

He nods, his grin widening. “Yeah and get this—the coffee shop just hired Mom.”

A stunned silence fills the air as Gael and I exchange a bemused look. “What is she going to do?” we both blurt out simultaneously. The thought of Donna Thorndale working a day in her life seems utterly unimaginable.

I’m tempted to ask Gael if his mother, Flora, is working as well, but I decide not to bother. It’s no secret that his mother and I have never seen eye to eye.

“She’s got a talent for baking,” Cal answers. “They needed someone to assist the baker. Like you, I’m surprised by this new development. I adore my mother, but I can’t quite picture her working.”

A dry laugh escapes me. “So we’re all getting jobs, huh?”

Cal’s attention turns to Gael. “What about Genevieve and Elle? Any plans for them?”

Gael’s response is a noncommittal shrug, but his gaze narrows in a warning. “Don’t lump them together. Gen would hate that.”

“Fuck, this is just like any other family reunion.” I groan, running a hand over my face in exasperation.

“Except this time, we can’t simply make up a lame excuse and leave,” Callahan remarks, a touch of irony in his voice. “We’re all stuck here for years.”

Gael’s eyes go wide, his face twisting into a scowl. “Years? You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. What about the company? My restaurants? I don’t have time for this shit.”

“Finnegan—”

“I couldn’t care less about Finnegan’s plans. That’s our company.” Gael’s voice is surprisingly hard. His usually laid-back demeanor has completely disappeared.

I bite back a snicker. “Are you and Magnus still fighting to see who’s going to keep control of the company?”

In an instant, the three of us freeze, the weight of our father’s death crashing down on us. We weren’t there for his funeral, the will reading, or any discussions about what should happen to his estate. The realization hits me hard, and a pang of guilt twists in my gut. Not that it matters much to me personally, but I can’t help but think about the countless people whose livelihoods depend on the Thorndale empire.

Cal’s eyes twinkle mischievously as he pats Gael on the shoulder. “It’s a free-for-all between Magnus, Gael, Gen, or Elle, isn’t it?” His smirk says it all. He doesn’t give a fuck about the future of our father’s estate.

“This isn’t a joke. We can’t afford to let the company slip through our fingers,” Gael insists. “And we can’t just let anyone run that company.”

“I’ll touch base with Finnegan. We’ll try to figure out a way for us to retain some control,” Cal reassures him.

This isn’t how Father planned for this to happen. Then again, I doubt he ever envisioned his own death—or that he would be killed. “Have they figured out who killed our father?” I dare to ask.

Cal’s expression darkens as he shakes his head. “No, they haven’t figured out who killed him yet. But Finnegan mentioned something unsettling. According to the FBI, we, his own children, are also suspects in the investigation, especially considering we flew out around the time of his death.”

“You’re saying we’re . . . we’re considered fugitives?” I gawk at him as I struggle to comprehend the magnitude of what he just said.

His lips press together in a grim line before he nods.

Gael breaks the heavy silence with a low whistle, his shoulders slumping in defeat. “Well, this is just fucking great. Why don’t we go back home and clear our names?”

“We could try, but it’s risky.” Cal’s gaze hardens. “We probably need your help to get all the information from the company—even the things Dad hid from everyone.”

Gael’s brows arch upwards. “So, I’m suddenly a person of interest in your book too?”

“No, but we might need information. Do you think you can help us?”

Cal’s gaze locks with Gael’s, a silent challenge passing between them. I hold my breath, fearing that this could escalate into a heated argument,

leaving us even more divided.

“Ask Magnus,” Gael deflects abruptly before striding off, leaving Cal and me alone.

Alone with Cal, a chilling question escapes me. “Do you believe one of us could’ve . . . killed Dad?”

Cal looks at me, his expression serious. He takes a moment to think before answering, carefully selecting his words. “Doubtful, though if one of us did, I wouldn’t blame them. He might’ve brought it upon himself.”

His words send a shiver down my spine, and I can’t help but wonder if any of us could truly be capable of killing our own father.

Chapter Seven



Wren

IT'S AROUND five in the evening when Sutton arrives at my place, carrying Daisy in her carrier. Daisy is a pretty Russian Blue cat that Regina rescued a couple of years ago and found her forever home with Sutton.

"Hi?" I greet, my eyes fixed on the carrier.

We usually cat sit for her, but unless there's an emergency, Sutton gives me weeks, if not months' notice when she's going to bring the feline. If I had known, Milo would've chosen to stay home tonight. They get along pretty well.

"You forgot, didn't you?" Sutton rolls her eyes, giving me a "you always forget everything" look. Which might be slightly true, but I wouldn't use the word always. It's more like when I'm under stress.

I raise an eyebrow, trying to recall what I might have forgotten that is obviously related to Daisy. "Of course I didn't," I lie, reaching out to take the carrier. "I just thought you would be here later. Doesn't the library close at six?"

"We close at four on weekends, including Fridays," she reminds me, giving me a skeptical look. "Do you want to keep pretending you know what's happening, or should I fill you in?"

"Sorry, it's been a weird day," I mumble, feeling a tinge of guilt for my forgetfulness.

Sutton scans the living room as she enters the house. "Where's Milo?"

"Finn's family is in town, including Charles," I explain, leading the way to my bedroom, where Daisy usually roams freely before she starts to claim my entire home. "They invited him for a sleepover since his other grandchildren are here too."

"That sounds like fun, but you don't seem convinced." She narrows her gaze, studying me. "What's bothering you?"

I wave a dismissive hand. "Like I said, it's been a weird day."

"You think they're going to push Milo and you away," Sutton states, her tone tinged with amusement. "That's your modus operandi. You're just waiting for it to happen."

"Why would they want to keep us around?" I ask without saying that ever

since Finn got married, I've avoided Charles and him as much as possible.

"Because they welcomed you into their family. Whether you like it or not, you're a part of it," Sutton explains, her tone filled with a sense of logic that should make sense to me, but it doesn't. "I'm impressed you still believe that Jez, Gina, and I won't dump your ass."

"You guys are like my sisters."

"Charles and Finn have been there for you and Milo since day one. I highly doubt they'll stop acting like his uncle and grandfather." Sutton sighs, her frustration evident. "So, what else is bothering you?"

She's probably right. My family is the exception when it comes to how people treat one another. It's the fear of everyone else resembling them that makes me skittish, causing me to push people away and lump them into the same category: Undesired people.

Sutton, Gina, and Jez are different. We've been through so much together. We've known each other since we were children. Even when I only visited during summers and occasional Christmases, we maintained constant contact through emails and texts whenever we had access to a computer or phone.

They know every aspect of my life, just as I know everything about theirs. They are the exception to the rule that says: everyone eventually leaves or betrays you—and then leaves again. Everyone.

Sutton glances at her phone before settling on my bed. "I have ten minutes to spare before hitting the road to Evergreen. Start talking."

I scrunch my nose. "Right, your parents' anniversary is this weekend."

She grins. "I knew you forgot about it, but that doesn't matter. Tell me what's bothering you."

I start with the dinosaur obsession. And how, to no one's surprise, he unloaded all about it to Charles instead of saying hello. He mentioned wanting to visit dinosaur sites. Charles didn't say no. Instead, he suggested some sites here in Colorado that they could visit tomorrow. They'll even try to figure out if we—including me—can go to New York soon.

It's challenging to establish boundaries and distance ourselves from Finn's family when Milo doesn't realize they're not his blood relatives. Especially when they treat him so kindly, like family. Even Piper's parents have become like grandparents to him—I couldn't stop that either. How can I say, "Hey, kind stranger, don't love my son?"

Then I delve into the whole situation with Drake's visit.

“You like him,” Sutton states matter-of-factly.

“What?” I’m surprised by her bold statement.

“You’re afraid of what he makes you feel,” she adds with certainty.

I shake my head, attempting to dismiss her observation. “Were you rearranging the romance section or women’s fiction at the library?” I retort playfully. She thinks everything can become a happily ever after. She’s wrong.

I know because I lived in a Shakespearean tragedy—I’m not sure which one because I only read Romeo and Juliet during high school and chose never to read him again.

Sutton glares at me. “Neither one of them. After . . .” She trails her voice and swallows. “Have I mentioned that you need therapy to work on your issues?”

Due to my past experiences, I’m naturally cautious, but I doubt my animosity toward Drake is solely rooted in that.

“He’s part of the Endor program,” I explain, trying to shed some light on my reservations. “For all you know, he got paid to alter the appearances of the most wanted criminals. Someone stole his client list or . . . I don’t know. But because of his greed and stupidity, the entire family had to run before they got killed—hence why they’re staying for years.”

Sutton bursts into laughter, finding my theory amusing. “I’m pretty sure I read that book last year.”

I glare at her. “I’m serious. Finn mentioned something about the mafia earlier today.”

She becomes animated, her eyes widening with intrigue. “This is even more exciting than I anticipated. You have to hire Drake.”

“I’m not bringing someone dangerous to my clinic,” I state firmly.

“But you’re not attracted to him, right?” she teases.

I shake my head vigorously. She grins mischievously. “Okay, so we find Dr. Drake intriguing and want to pretend he’s a dangerous man.”

“Ugh,” I growl.

She’s so infuriating. Once Sutton gets an idea, there’s no stopping her. But she’s got it all wrong. I don’t actually find Drake attractive. Well, I mean, he’s tall, and his broad shoulders make him look like a Greek god, exuding strength and confidence. His face, with its chiseled jawline and piercing eyes, is like a masterpiece carved by one of the best sculptors in the world. Every feature seems perfectly proportioned, creating an undeniable charm.

Sure, if he wasn't involved with Endor and if I were in a different frame of mind, I might have considered a casual fling with him. But right now, all I want is to steer clear of him until he's out of town.

"No, we don't find him intriguing, attractive, or any other qualifier," I argue, hoping to dissuade her.

Sutton burst into laughter. "You can deny it all you want, but at the end of the day, I need you to consider hiring him. Not for yourself, but for Milo and the town. If there's an emergency, you can rely on Drake Kershaw."

"I'll think about it," I say without making any promises. "Don't you have to leave?"

"I wish I didn't have to go to my parents'. Little Ms. Perfect will be there, along with the prodigal son," she grumbles.

"Your brother and sister can be quite annoying," I sympathize. "But your parents are even worse for making them believe they're God's gifts to humanity. I'm sorry you have to deal with them."

"It's life. What can you do?" Sutton gives me a hug. "Call if you need me. I can't promise I'll be able to drive back, but I can hide in my old room and pretend that I'm having a library emergency."

I see her out, and before she gets in her car, she makes me promise her that I'll consider hiring Drake.

But can I really do something like that?

Chapter Eight



Wren

REGINA CALLS me to invite me over to spend the evening with her at Mountain Range Bar and Grill. Even though Milo isn't at home, this time I decline. I choose to stay at home, soaking in my bathtub, while listening to music and reading the thriller I downloaded on my e-reader. Surprisingly, she respects my decision to unwind in the solitude of my home.

However, my peaceful moment is abruptly shattered by an urgent call from the dispatcher. There's been an accident on the highway, and since my clinic happens to be the nearest with a functioning triage, the ambulances will be driving the victims to me.

I take pride in having one of the best emergency rooms in the area, not that we use it much. It's an addition that happened when Finnegan and Derek decided to set up the headquarters of Crait Quantum Shield in Heartwood Lake. They paid for the renovations and the new wing, which includes hospital rooms and an operating room. It's so they can use them when their company has an emergency.

There are times when they bring their injured agents or civilians to me. It's my job to tend to them. If we need a specialist, they usually fly them here.

We're equipped for everything, including road emergencies.

Normally, I enjoy walking to work, savoring the gentle rhythm of my steps. But today, the urgency of the situation demands otherwise. I hastily jump into my car and speed away, the sirens blaring louder as I draw nearer the clinic. The ambulance lights piercing the twilight darkness.

Upon my arrival, the scene is chaos, tempered by grim determination. First responders crisscross the area, their faces serious and focused, executing a choreography born out of countless emergencies. The air hangs heavy with the sharp scent of fear, mingling with the metallic tang of blood and the sterile aroma of antiseptic.

Each face reflects my own—ashen, tight, eyes wide with anxiety. It doesn't take long to remind myself who I was and what I could do in the emergency room. This is my domain, my duty, and I cannot afford to waver, but I also don't think I can do this alone. There are too many patients and

only one doctor.

Swallowing my pride, I pull out my phone and make the call I never thought I would be making. After the first ring, his voice responds. “Drake Thor . . .” His voice trails off, and he clears his throat. “Drake Kershaw.”

“Drake, it’s Wren. Wren Lynch,” I say, amazed at the steadiness in my voice. “We need you at the clinic. There was a terrible accident on the highway.”

“On my way,” he responds without missing a beat.

As the call ends, I take a moment to absorb my surroundings. The frenzied activity buzzes around me, punctuated by gasps for breath, the hum of medical devices, and the rhythmic beeping of heart monitors. Underneath it all, my own heartbeat thumps steadily, a resonating drumbeat of unwavering resolve.

Every person I attend to, every wound I treat, becomes my world in that moment. I’m grateful that the EMTs haven’t just dropped off the victims and departed. They stay to assist with the basics while I make critical decisions—stabilize the patient so we can airlift them to the city or provide the necessary care to discharge them soon.

Finding a sense of rhythm in my work takes me only a short time. This is what once thrilled me about my previous life—the exhilaration of saving lives on the brink of death, the rapid pace of the emergency room, and the need to make split-second choices. With each stitch, each bandage, and fast decision, I feel more at home.

“Do you have any spare scrubs?” Drake’s voice pulls me out of my concentration.

I sigh with relief, knowing that we’ll be able to get this done faster, but hoping more doctors arrive soon. This place is full and has a shortage of medical personnel.

“Yeah.” I gesture to where he can find everything he needs to start tending to the patients and add, “A couple of helicopters should be arriving soon to airlift those two patients. They’re already stabilized. If you can begin on that side, we might finish up sooner. Victoria has prepared some beds for the patients who need to stay. The ones ready to be discharged will be in the examining rooms until a family member arrives to pick them up.”

Just as the words leave my lips, the piercing sound of rotor blades slices through the chaotic scene, filling me with a wave of relief that washes over me like a powerful remedy. Doctors flown in from Denver arrive and join us

in attending to the victims.

“Why don’t you designate roles?” Drake suggests with a calm and steady voice. “I’ll assist the EMTs in transporting the patients who require immediate transfer to the nearest hospitals.”

“Thank you,” I say, not knowing how to express the immense value of his willingness to step up and help, even when I ran him off from my clinic earlier today.

The night stretches on, filled with the whispers of prayers and the steady beat of our fighting hearts. We move as one, Drake and I, bound by this shared experience that’s as harrowing as it is intimate. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt like I was part of a team, but I remind myself that this is just for the night—tomorrow, I’ll probably have to make a few decisions. Though, I have to keep my distance from him.

Chapter Nine



Drake

IT'S AROUND seven in the morning when the atmosphere of the small clinic finally begins to calm. The traces of urgency fade away, giving way to the peaceful morning ahead of us. I text Cal, asking for two large lattes and a couple of pastries.

Surprisingly, he doesn't complain, just swiftly delivers the order, a wordless exchange completed and soon forgotten as he disappears into the growing daylight.

It doesn't take me long to find Wren. She has been diligently attending to each room, checking patient vitals, and updating their charts. As she emerges from the room, I offer her one of the cups of coffee.

"Here, you should go home and rest," I suggest, noticing the weariness on her face.

Her hands wrap around the coffee cup. She takes a cautious sip before letting out a small sigh. With tired eyes, she looks at me. "Thank you for . . . this and coming last night to help me."

"Glad to be of assistance," I reply, my mind torn between bringing up the topic of employment now or waiting until she has rested from last night's emergency.

She should hire me, right? After all, I have proven my capability. Although other doctors were here for a few hours, they left around five in the morning. My resolve wasn't out of professional obligation or because I want a job, but the knowledge that Wren—and the patients—still needed me.

And none of this should be about me at all.

"If you want, I can take care of your patients while you go home to rest," I propose again.

She dismisses my offer with a shake of her head and a weary yawn. "Nah, I'm accustomed to this," she says.

I could believe her, but I can't help but feel a worry inside of me. "You look extremely exhausted. And don't you have to go home to your husband and son?"

Her expression hardens into a frown. "It's just Milo and me." The corners of her lips stretch. "And he's at a sleepover with his grandfather and uncle. I

can stay longer.”

I’m assuming Milo is the little boy I met a couple of nights ago when I visited her home with Finnegan. And if it’s just the two of them, then . . . “All the more reason for you to head home,” I insist. “You should take a break while you can. Dealing with a child sucks all your energy. He’ll need you once he’s back from his sleepover.”

I understand how, as doctors, we have a commitment toward our patients, but also that we all make the big mistake of putting our families at the bottom of our priority list. Somebody should caution her about the potential fallout, although that somebody won’t be me.

“You don’t have a license to practice,” she mumbles, her gaze lost somewhere. “Unfortunately, I can’t just let you—”

“What if I share my actual name with you, and you look me up online?” I ask, almost desperate. Something has to convince this woman to take me on as her employee. It’s ironic how I’m pleading for a job from someone who is much younger and inexperienced than me. I, Dr. Drake Thorndale, am hoping to land a job without any payment at a small-town clinic.

Fuck, my father really screwed me over this time, and I don’t think there’s a way out until they figure out who killed him.

She shakes her head. “You’d jeopardize your spot in the Endor program. Finnegan doesn’t like it when people break the few rules they have.”

I press on, “He wouldn’t know.”

“Oh, but he will,” she warns coldly. “The internet in this town is policed by some software he owns. That’s not really the point, though.”

It seems like my argument isn’t going to get me anywhere. After watching her last night, I’m aware that she’s a passionate woman who loves what she does, and maybe I know how to sway her.

I clear my throat. “Well, imagine for a moment that you had to uproot your life because of a man who fucked your entire existence? You’re stuck in a town where you don’t know anyone and can’t practice medicine. What would you do?” I ask, but I don’t stop there though. “You’re a doctor, so you should be able to empathize with me. The profession is part of your making, just like it is mine. I’m forty-three, and I’ve been doing this for so long that I can’t imagine being anything else. What would you do if you were in my shoes?”

She studies me, her eyes don’t give away anything, but I hope I stroke the exact chord that’ll give me access to her clinic.

“You don’t have to pay me,” I hastily add, raising my hands and gesturing them back and forth several times. “These babies are insured for millions. My knowledge and them are at your disposal for anything. I’m extremely good with my hands.” I wiggle my eyebrows. “I promise.”

A blush blooms on her cheeks, and she briefly closes her eyes, my unintentional double entendre hanging in the air.

I try to backtrack. “I didn’t mean it like that, but . . .” My voice trails off as I steal a fleeting glance at her. What the fuck am I doing? I’m trying to convince this woman that I can be professional, that she should give me a job, and I’m just blurting out innuendos.

Under different circumstances, I would definitely hit on her. She’s a very attractive woman. It wouldn’t be smart to have a fuck-buddies arrangement with her though. Blurring the lines between professional and personal lives is always a bad idea.

Bad.

Idea.

Wait, where did I go from trying to convince her to hire me to offering her my skilled hands? Okay, maybe I should take a break and clear my head.

She collects herself, her throat clearing, but she remains silent.

“So how are we going to manage this?” I circle back to the main issue. She needs to rest. “I can head home, refresh, and return by eight to stand in for you to leave until Monday.”

“You worked the same hours as I did,” she points out.

“True, but I didn’t work all day yesterday, and my body operates on a different level,” I say instead of explaining to her that for the past eight years, I haven’t slept more than a couple of hours a night. She’ll want to learn more about it, and I won’t ever disclose that part of my life to anyone, not even a therapist.

Seriously, I have no problem divulging the intricate dynamic of the Thorndale family, but my private life . . . well, that’s a different story. It’s too painful to remember and too tangled to unravel.

After what feels like forever, she finally breaks the silence. “Thank you for your offer. If you need to prescribe something, ask Victoria to do it electronically. Her number is written on a sticky note that’s attached to my screen. Please, don’t sign anything. I’ll be back around one to relieve you.”

With a playful tilt of an imaginary hat, I say, “I appreciate you doing this for me, trusting me with your clinic and patients.”

“Don’t make me regret it.” Her final words strike like a warning.

That’s a promise I can’t commit to. Sooner or later, she’ll likely join the ranks of those who’ve regretted letting me into their lives. I just know it. Is that a curse or just my fucking life? I really don’t know. Though I would very much like to not disappoint her, I undoubtedly will figure out a way to push her.

Or is that something I’m capable of changing since I’m trying to build a new life?

Chapter Ten



Wren

SINCE I'M COMPLETELY DRAINED, I decide to walk home instead of hopping into my car. Sure, there's a third option, calling the taxi service in our small town, but I'd rather avoid Mr. Jensen. He'll probably show me his new imaginary rash and pry into last night's emergency. I don't think I have the energy to handle any of that right now.

But naturally, I end up taking a detour to the local coffee shop. I desperately need another caffeine fix or one of those mouthwatering scones Drake's brother brought to the clinic. However, I honestly want to indulge in one of those pieces of heaven before I head home. It's been ages since I've eaten a pastry that good.

When I open the door of the shop, the air is thick with the rich scent of roasted beans and the tantalizing fragrance of sweet treats. The gentle hum of conversation and the delicate clinking of ceramic cups fill the air—and if there were any seats available I would sit here and enjoy my morning. I never have time for such luxury.

Normally, I'm either here to pick up something before heading to work, or I'm with Milo, and he can't stand the sensory overload from this place.

As I join the line, Regina's sharp gaze locks onto me. Her eyes convey disapproval, though I can't fathom the reason behind it. Maybe someone ruined her breakfast by peeing on it? Though that sounds like a funny joke, it has happened before. Once, a dog escaped the kennel, and the next thing she knew, he ate her breakfast. Then, there's the time when another one escaped its owner and peed on her—and her lunch box—as she was entering the vet practice.

The stories are countless, funny, and fortunately, she's into self-deprecation, so we all laugh.

Before I can tease her about it, she blurts out, "I've been sending you texts all night, and you haven't responded to me. I was concerned about you."

A flicker of annoyance tingles through my veins, but I keep my voice steady. "I was preoccupied with an emergency." I reach for her cup, intending to take a sip, but the bitter taste of the black, dark, and somber coffee makes me involuntarily spit it out. "It's Saturday. Shouldn't you be

drinking something more mellow? This is going to keep you awake until next year.”

Regina’s eyes flit around the bustling café, mirroring the weariness within her and subtly reflecting my own fatigue. Her gaze scans the crowded space, revealing lines of exhaustion etched onto her face as if both her burdens and the weight of the world bear down upon her.

“I would,” she confesses, her tone laced with a touch of longing, “if I didn’t have to work today because the technician just quit on me via text. It’s worse than a stupid breakup with a hookup.”

Sympathy courses through me, causing a twinge of pain. “Sorry,” I mumble, hoping to convey understanding and support in a single breath.

With a hint of false resignation, she sighs. “It’s a part of my crazy life,” she admits. “One day, they will stay longer than their internship.”

“Maybe you should post the position or try a headhunter, instead of waiting for some university to send you a graduate who needs hours,” I suggest.

She mumbles her response, making sure our conversation remains between us. “I’ll do that as soon as you hire the secret Dr. Hunk.” Her voice holds a playful edge.

The unexpected term for Drake catches me off guard, causing my laughter to burst forth uncontrollably. The sound reverberates through the air, filling the cozy coffee shop with a lively energy. “Secret Dr. Hunk?” I exclaim, a mixture of amusement and disbelief coloring my words. The sheer absurdity of the notion tickles my funny bone. “Have I ever mentioned that you’re absolutely ridiculous?”

Her eyes twinkle mischievously as she leans in, her voice barely above a whisper. “We—Jez and I—came up with that term last night,” she confesses. “Since we know Kershaw isn’t their real name, they’re now the secret hunks.”

A gasp escapes my lips, my hand instinctively touching my sternum, feigning shock. “You made decisions without Sutton or me?” I say, a playful hint of offense lacing my words.

Regina shrugs nonchalantly, a teasing smile playing on her lips. “It’s the best thing we could do while we were studying her *new employees*,” she explains, drawing out the last two words with a touch of intrigue.

“Harassing employees is unethical and illegal,” I respond with mock seriousness.

An impish sparkle lights up her eyes as she bats her eyelashes, feigning innocence with a flirtatious charm. “They’re not my employees, you know,” she confesses, her voice laced with a subtle undertone of amusement. “And I was just watching and making sure they wouldn’t set the bar on fire during their first day.”

A grin tugs at the corners of my lips as I playfully retort, “You’re full of shit. You know that, right?”

“Probably, but it was an experience to watch the hunks working,” she says, and though her words aren’t telling me the whole story, I let it go for now.

“I’m glad you had fun.”

She nods. “By the way, I heard you worked with Drake all night,” Gina taunts me. “You think we wouldn’t learn about it?”

“This place is . . . it’s . . .” I falter, struggling to find the right words, feeling cornered by her teasing.

She interrupts my stammering, dismissing my attempts at resistance with a wave of her hand. “Save your Scooby Doo insults and just go home to take a nap. After that, make sure to hire him,” she instructs, her tone filled with a knowing edge. “I heard you two worked *really well* under pressure.”

Her words strike a nerve, and I narrow my gaze, trying to discern whether she’s fishing for information or if someone truly spilled the beans. Not that anything happened while we worked. We were barely in the same room. He assisted with a couple of surgeries.

Who fed her some story that she’s now using to taunt me? There’s no one in the clinic that could’ve come here and told her all about my night.

Yeah, she’s just trying to make me crack. More often than not, it’s my own response that gives me away. And so, I choose my words carefully, determined to beat her at this game. “You have nothing,” I retort, my voice firm, hoping to deflect her curiosity.

She scoffs, undeterred by my attempted deflection. “But I do,” she counters, her gaze unwavering, piercing mine. “And I also know that you’re tired. Why don’t you go to your place? I’ll handle work for a couple of hours, and then I’ll pick up Milo from Finn’s place.”

“Maybe I should do it now,” I mumble, contemplating the offer.

“Can you sleep while he’s awake?” she fires the question.

A yawn escapes me, the simple act showing my current state of exhaustion. Not only that, I find myself unable to respond with a resounding

and firm yes. Regina walks me to my house. I can't even tell her about the scones or the tea latte I had been craving since I entered the coffee shop. I'm too tired to argue with her or stay on foot a second longer.

When we get to my house, she leads me all the way to my bedroom. Daisy pops out of her hiding place and shoots me a glare.

"Fuck, I forgot to give her breakfast," I mumble.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of her while you shower and get ready for bed," Regina assures me.

I nod in gratitude and do as she says. Once I'm out, she's setting a tea on my nightstand.

"You're still here?" I ask, surprised but grateful.

She nods. "Of course. If I don't look after my bestie, who will?"

"You're amazing," I mumble.

"Listen," she begins, her voice softened by understanding, "I get why you wouldn't want to have a guy like Drake in your practice but do it for Milo and yourself. Those Kershaw boys aren't that bad."

Part of me wants to argue, to defend my decisions, but the overwhelming weariness that consumes me prevents any coherent response. I nod in acknowledgment, silently conceding to her advice as she leaves me.

Chapter Eleven



Wren

IT'S AROUND two when I'm ready to pick up Milo, but of course, Regina is already by my door with my happy boy and my car.

"Jez needs some help today, but I'll catch up with you later," Gina says, giving Milo and me a hug before heading out.

Since it's so late, I do the same. Knowing that Milo has a lot to tell me, we drive. I'd rather not have him tell the entire town his adventures at the Gil-Decker household.

"Mom, Grampa Charles said he'd take me to the musum," Milo chirps from the back seat, his words infused with excitement.

"Museum," I gently correct him, glad he's getting closer to pronouncing it right.

"Yes, the one with big dinosaurs," he continues, his voice brimming with anticipation.

I make a mental note to discuss this new trip with Finn and Charles as soon as possible. Can I take time off to go to . . . where is this big dinosaur exhibit? "We'll see the calendar to set up a date." That's all I can promise for now.

"Okay." He sounds elated. I just hope it's something we can make happen.

"We need to make a quick stop at the clinic before heading back home. Is that alright with you?" I ask, gently stealing a glance at him through the rearview mirror.

Milo nods eagerly, his trusting nature shining through in every gesture. He's the epitome of an easygoing child, except when it comes to lunchtime. For some inexplicable reason, he has an aversion to having lunch or taking naps, making it quite a challenge to persuade him when he's not at school.

I'm lucky that today I don't have to deal with that part of his day. Charles, Piper, or her parents found a way to convince him that eating was a perfectly normal thing to do. I'll text them later to check if he took a nap today.

When we arrive at the clinic, I spot Drake shaking the hand of Mr. Romano, the cable guy who lives in the next town over. Once the clinic is

empty, my little boy takes a step forward, his curiosity getting the better of him. “Who are you?” Milo asks with a hint of suspicion in his eyes.

Drake squats down to his level, extending his hand in greeting. “My name is Drake. And you are?” His tone is surprisingly warm and inviting.

“Milo,” my son responds, shaking his hand, trying to sound like the old soul he is.

“Nice shake. If you were applying for a job, I’d hire you on the spot,” Drake remarks, his voice tinged with playful admiration.

“That’d be silly,” Milo laughs. “I’m not a doctor.”

“You’re right.” Drake laughs along.

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Drake confirms with a reassuring smile. “I discharged the last two patients. You know what would be more convenient?”

I stare at him, my brow furrowing in confusion. Maybe I’m still tired, I reason. And to prove my point, an involuntary yawn escapes my lips—again.

“Did you manage to get any sleep?” Drake asks.

“A few hours,” I admit, the weariness seeping into my voice.

“Have you had lunch already?”

Milo crosses his arms defiantly, his gaze fixed on Drake, as if ready to challenge his words.

“Is that a yes or a no?” Drake asks, confused and probably a little afraid of Milo’s reaction.

I can’t help but smile while saying, “Well, Milo doesn’t eat lunch unless he’s at school.”

“As a doctor, I can tell you that skipping meals isn’t good for your body,” Drake explains professionally.

Milo crosses his arms, his eyes locked in a silent battle of wills with Drake. “Dinosaurs didn’t eat lunch.”

Drake shakes his head, a playful smile playing on his lips. “Who are your sources, buddy? You can’t just drop facts without full research.” He clears his throat and then begins to count on his fingers. “Dinosaurs ate five times a day—I know because I’m a doctor.”

“Five times?” Milo pinches his lips, not liking where this is going.

“Breakfast”—Drake begins, holding up one finger—“snack, lunch, snack, and dinner. It’s the only way they got to be so strong.”

Milo looks at me, seeking confirmation, and I nod in agreement. While I’m no paleontologist, it’s common knowledge that dinosaurs needed to eat to

sustain themselves. We simply won't delve into the intricacies of their meal schedule or dietary preferences—again. One time was enough, but what if Drake convinces him that fish is good for him?

And with newfound conviction, Milo glances at me. "I need lunch, please," he says, interrupting my plans on how to get him to eat a different variety of food. Ham and cheese squares for lunch are beginning to get too tedious.

"Did you eat at Finn's place?"

He nods. "Yes, but I want to grow strong."

"Let me get you a snack from my office and check on a couple of patients before we go home and figure out your meals," I suggest, already planning the next steps in my mind.

"As I mentioned, all the patients were discharged earlier today," Drake states.

"All of them?"

He nods and then briefs me on everything that transpired in my absence, and a sense of gratitude washes over me. It's a surreal feeling to realize that my clinic remained in capable hands while I was away. Moreover, he's even managed to convince my child that lunch isn't bad, after all.

"Why don't you head back home? I'll make sure everything is locked down. If you want, I can come in on Monday and open up for you," he volunteers.

The words linger on the tip of my tongue, ready to reject his assistance, to assert my independence and self-sufficiency. However, wisdom prevails, and I realize that there's no harm in accepting help when it's offered genuinely. Besides, working with Drake wasn't as daunting as I initially believed. In fact, it's brought an unexpected sense of peace.

"I'll be here at seven-thirty on Monday. See you then," I mumble, my words laced with reluctant gratitude.

A beaming smile dances across his face, casting a radiant spell on his features. A magnetic pull envelops us, transcending the boundaries of the medical emergency. It's in that poignant moment that I grasp the profound truth: Drake's presence, against all my reservations, has brought a wave of peace that I didn't know I needed.

"Thank you," he says, his voice filled with genuine appreciation. "See you around, Milo."

Milo waves cheerfully, a radiant smile adorning his face. "Bye, Drake."

“Your friend is nice, Mom,” he murmurs as we make our way toward the car.

A chill runs down my spine because nice people with big secrets don’t usually hide in a small town under the protection of a high-security company. And maybe it’s imperative that I figure out what Drake and his family are doing here before the entire town gets too involved with them.

Chapter Twelve



Drake

“RISE AND SHINE, DOC,” Callahan’s voice echoes through the door of my bedroom, cutting through the thick haze of sleep that engulfs me.

I groan, my body aching with exhaustion. I cover my eyes with my arm, attempting to shield myself from the intrusive light. It feels like ages since I last pulled an all-nighter during my final year of residency, and the weariness clings to me like an unwelcome burden.

Cal’s persistence is unyielding as he pounds on the door once more, his urgency seeping into his words. “Come on, we have to go now.”

Where are we going? This situation triggers a sense of déjà vu from the time when that guy from Crait Quantum Shield dragged me out of bed in the middle of the night, claiming he was there to save my life.

That seems like years and not just days ago. Will I ever return to my normal life? Or get rid of these assholes who claim to be my family when all we share is a last name?

Do I even want to return to that life though?

There’s another round of knocks. I feel my annoyance surge, a muttered growl escaping my lips as I turn onto my stomach, burying my face in the comforting embrace of the pillow. “Fuck off,” I mutter, my voice muffled by the soft fabric.

But Cal refuses to back down. He persists, his tone taking on a touch of seriousness. “This is important. We’re having dinner at my mother’s,” he declares, as if that alone should be enough to motivate me. Yet, he couldn’t be more wrong.

A chuckle escapes me involuntarily, finding his futile attempt at persuasion rather amusing. “You actually think I’m going to join you for dinner?” I scoff. “And at your mother’s. Ha. That’s a nope.”

“It’s more like a family meeting,” he explains, and his response only fuels my resistance. Nothing will convince me to leave the comfort of my bed. If anything, it only serves as a reminder of the strained dynamics that exist between us—the people who despise me, and the ones I can’t help but reciprocate those feelings toward. “You have to be there.”

“So, is this the part of the show where you shoot one of us?” The sarcasm

drips from my words, laden with a heavy dose of cynicism.

To my surprise, Cal's laughter rings through the door, a sound that cuts through the tension. "Nope. If I wanted you dead, I would've left you in Los Angeles."

"I'm pretty sure I'd be safer there," I retort, my voice laced with skepticism.

"Actually, Finn told us that your house caught fire two days ago—it's crispy, both inside and outside," Cal announces, attempting to inject humor into his words, but failing miserably.

My body freezes, shock rippling through me. I push myself out of bed, the urgency propelling me to open the door, my heart pounding with apprehension. When I come face-to-face with Callahan, I implore, "Please tell me you're kidding?"

Cal's expression softens, the weight of the situation evident in his eyes. "Sorry, but it's been happening with most of our properties," he says, swallowing hard. "They're probably trying to send us some kind of message, a warning. It's a way to let us know that we're next."

"But who's they?" I swallow hard. "Who's targeting us?" I blurt out, the question hanging in the air, echoing the fear that grips my heart.

"Change. We'll discuss it when we arrive at my mother's place," Cal responds with a certain finality that tells me he won't continue this discussion, leaving me with more questions than answers.

A flicker of resistance sparks within me, a desire to find a more neutral ground for this discussion. "Can we be in a different location? What about that quaint bar and grill?" I propose, my voice filled with a mix of apprehension and caution.

"You know we can't discuss our current situation just anywhere." Cal's response is measured, his gaze steady as he speaks. "This isn't just some business we have to settle. It's our future, and we have to be careful as to who we share any information with."

I sigh, a mix of resignation and anticipation intertwining within me. "Fine," I comply, my voice tinged with a hint of weariness.

Once we're on our way to where his mother is currently staying, I say, "By the way, I'm positive that I got the job at the clinic." This might have nothing to do with what we'll be discussing later, but I'm seeking a semblance of normalcy. The thought of my house and everything that was inside it gone is constricting my lungs.

What's going to happen to me after this? I don't have a place to be anymore.

Cal glances at me and nods. "That's great news, doc. After you busted your ass last night, I think you deserve it," Cal adds, and I think I hear a tone of admiration in his words, but maybe I'm wrong.

Sure, we're getting along just fine, but years of animosity can't be erased that easily, can they? Suddenly, I feel the need to clarify, to ensure he understands my motivations. "Last night wasn't about scoring a job. I did it for the patients and her, Wren," I establish.

Cal rolls his eyes, a playful smirk dancing on his lips. "May the record show he's still a Boy Scout," he teases, flipping me the finger before picking up his pace.

AS WE ENTER the living room, the entire Thorndale family is gathered there. This is perhaps the first time we find ourselves in one place without our father's imposing figure overshadowing the room. Today isn't his birthday, a holiday, or some mandatory board meeting he's forcing us to attend to maintain the illusion of our involvement in his conglomerate. But we're here because of him, nonetheless.

"This better be good," Magnus grumbles, his impatience palpable as Cal and I search for a seat or a place to stand in the small area.

Cal's gaze sweeps over the assembled family and asks, "Where are Gael and Bach?"

My eyes scan the room, and I realize that he's right. Two of us are evidently absent. Well, Slade isn't here either, but he hasn't arrived at Heartwood Lake just yet.

Although he matters as well, I find myself more intrigued by Gael and Bach deliberately skipping this meeting. I should learn and pull the same stunt next time.

"Their boss wouldn't let them skip work just because we have a family dinner," Genevieve retorts, her sharpness cutting through the air. "Maybe I should get a job too, so I don't have to deal with you people," she mutters under her breath, her words a mix of defiance and frustration.

"Gen, please behave," Flora gently reprimands, her voice carrying a note

of maternal authority. “It’s not ladylike to speak in such a manner.”

Genevieve glares at her, her defiance unwavering. “I’m not a child, Mother,” she retorts, her words dripping with anger and frustration. “And I couldn’t care less about what people think of my behavior and how I speak. If I want to say fuck, I will—and that’s just the way I am. It’s Gen-like behavior.”

A stifled cough escapes me as I struggle to contain my laughter at my sister’s rant. Cal slaps my back as if trying to help before he begins the meeting, but I’m pretty sure he’s also trying to hide the smirk. I never thought she would set up boundaries for her controlling mother. I guess this town is doing more than just sheltering us. It might be giving some of us a backbone.

“Well, I guess I’ll update Gael and Bach later,” Callahan says, taking a long sip of air. “This is too important to keep waiting for everyone to be in the same room.”

Tension fills the room, and the unspoken questions hang heavy in the air. River crosses his arms defiantly, breaking the silence. “So, are you finally going to tell us why we’re stuck in this town indefinitely?” he challenges, his words laced with accusation. “Or is this just some kind of power trip to show us that you can be Daddy’s little successor?”

Genevieve, never one to back down, stakes her claim. “I should be the CEO of the company.” She scans the room, daring anyone to challenge her.

“That’s my position, princess,” Magnus retorts, his words carrying a hint of possessiveness.

Everyone starts to mumble. They’re probably taking sides. I hear Flora claiming that her children had more rights than the rest of us. I should remind her that I’m the oldest and probably the one who deserves more because I took more shit from my father. I don’t though. They can keep the company and everything that belonged to the bastard.

He taught me at an early age not to need him and to make it on my own. At this point, I don’t need his name or his money.

“Enough.” Callahan steps in, his voice steady and authoritative, seeking to bring order to the chaos. “As it stands no one can have the company, but we can manage it from here—using the interim CEO who’s currently covering for us,” he explains, providing a glimpse into the practicalities of the situation.

Unsurprisingly, Magnus isn’t pleased with this arrangement. He wants to

know who the guy is and questions why such a decision was made without his authorization. Cal manages to calm him down, redirecting the conversation to more pressing matters—our father’s demise, how the authorities don’t have any leads on who could’ve done it, but they suspect everyone, including us.

We, his own children, find ourselves on the FBI’s list of suspects. I didn’t like my father, but assassination wouldn’t have been my chosen form of retribution. I would have preferred him to suffer for all his misdeeds, rather than a mere—“How was he killed?” I suddenly interject.

“No one provided me with the details,” Callahan responds, his voice tinged with frustration as he avoids my gaze, a subtle action that implies he may be holding back information. “Dad seemed to have some undesirable business associates.”

I can see Cal trying to paint a prettier picture for his mother and Flora, downplaying the darker aspects of our father’s undesirable business partners. However, I can’t help but feel the weight of the truth pressing against my chest.

Callahan’s not saying out loud that those ties were to some mafia or another dangerous organization. Our father had ties to the underworld of organized crime, and though Cal is not saying it, for reasons unknown, they took Dad’s life and now they’re targeting us as well.

The questions swirl inside my head, hovering on the edge of my thoughts. How do we escape this situation? And more importantly, do I even want to go back home? My house now lies in ruins. After what transpired last night, I question whether I want to return to a world where appearances are everything, where people hide their brokenness beneath a façade of beauty.

I’m lost, adrift in a sea of uncertainty. I don’t know what lies ahead or if I’m capable of making the necessary changes within myself to start a new life. All I know is that, for now, I’m content to stay in this town, to give myself the space and time to figure out what I truly want, including a new career within the medical field. There’s a small clinic that might give me that chance.

I can be someone different. These past ten years have been a blur of mediocrity, and it’s time for me to find my purpose, and to embark on a journey of self-discovery.

Cal discusses the logistics of what’s to come: we have to remain here for at least a few years—three, maybe more.

“Part of our agreement is working on the ranch, but you can explore different venues,” Cal suggests.

“You can do something new with your life, Mom.” Genevieve gives a jab to Flora. “Explore something beyond shopping and having breakfast with your fake friends.”

Before they begin to fight, I ask, “Is Slade joining us?” The question sounds a lot better than, “Have they killed our younger brother?”

Cal shakes his head. “CQS is trying to bring him without raising any suspicions, yet they’re protecting him while he’s away.”

“What about Leonora?” Donna asks. “Is she safe?”

“CQS is looking into it too,” he states, and I have the feeling that he’s hiding something, but I choose not to ask in front of everyone. We can discuss that later, can’t we?

“Well, if that’s all, we should eat,” Donna proposes. “I hope you don’t mind helping me with the table. It’s the first time I’m doing this on my own.”

I’m not sure if she’s referring to not using maids or having to deal with all of us without Dad’s control. Either way, I’m all for helping her with what she needs. At least while we live here, we can pretend to be a family.

Chapter Thirteen



Drake

THIS PSEUDO-FAMILY REUNION has been moved into a different dimension, far from our usual encounters with our father.

Typically, when he summoned us, we'd convene in one of his mansions or the conference room of TC corporations. If we happened to be in the comfort of his lavish residence, the multitude of maids and butlers would orchestrate the entire affair. From appetizers all the way to the evening coffee and drinks.

Our role was to attend, waiting for a chance to escape, unless Dad commanded an overnight stay. Engaging in civil conversation or lifting a finger was never required.

Tonight, Donna cooked the meal, and we had to set up the table and even assigned chores to help clean up the place when we were done eating. Surprisingly, there were no squabbles, and while some departed earlier, nobody concocted a ridiculous excuse to vanish immediately after dessert.

Callahan, Magnus, and I remain in the kitchen, likely because we're assigned to washing dishes and tidying the kitchen. The clatter of cutlery and the swish of water punctuate the silence between us.

"We should suggest some changes to CQS, like investing in a dishwasher," Magnus grumbles, his dissatisfaction evident as he carefully places the silverware I've just dried in the drawer next to the stove.

"You planning to foot the bill?" Callahan retorts.

A crease forms on Magnus's forehead. "Aren't we already paying them enough to ensure our safety?" he questions, his brows furrowing in deep contemplation. "Actually, are we paying them at all?"

Cal nods. "Indeed, but I don't believe those resources are allocated toward renovating the cabins for your comfort."

Magnus glares at him. "Do you have any idea what it's like to take a shower in this place?" The frustration in his voice is palpable as if the simple act of basic hygiene in this small town is a daily struggle.

I gasp, feigning shock. "Oh, how dreadful. They don't have a bathroom plated in gold, exclusively designed for your highness. Such nerve." The words drip with mockery, intended to stoke the fire of Magnus's anger.

He shoots me a seething glare, his fingers clenching into tight fists. “Fuck you,” he seethes, the words forced through clenched teeth.

Cal shakes his head, stepping forward in an attempt to defuse the escalating tension. “Don’t fucking start, okay? We have to learn to coexist. We can’t simply vanish from each other’s lives for a year like we used to. Get this through your thick skulls: we’re stuck in this place for years. Years.”

As Magnus’s piercing gaze fixates on Callahan, a storm brews within him. The subtle twitch at the corner of his clenched jaw hints at the inner turbulence beneath his stoic exterior. It’s a silent struggle for control, a display of restrained emotions. If given the opportunity, he might consider tearing me apart, but I won’t go down without a fight. I’ll take him with me if necessary.

“I never understood why your father fostered such animosity between the two of you,” Donna interjects, her voice breaking the tension as she enters the kitchen.

“Probably for the same reason he made sure to tell me I wasn’t part of your family,” I reply, methodically drying my hands and placing the towel on top of the counter. “Thank you for dinner, but let’s not do this again.”

I stride out of the house, my emotions still swirling within me, refusing to let go. I’m not fortunate enough to be done with this issue. Donna follows me. “Sometimes I regret allowing your father to boss me around,” she confesses.

When I glance over my shoulder, her eyes hold a complex expression that I struggle to comprehend. Is it pity? Understanding?

“We don’t have to rehash the past. I promise to maintain civility,” I assure her.

“I thought I knew what I was signing up for when I married him,” she confesses. Her voice trembles as she opens up. “He had a polite, shy, little three-year-old son, who I hoped would become like a son to me. I was ready to be your mom, not just a stepmother by name.”

Her revelation strikes me like a bolt of lightning, leaving me momentarily stunned. I pivot, fully facing her, my gaze locked onto hers, a silent plea for further elucidation. The air thickens with anticipation, pregnant with unspoken revelations.

“My marriage to your father was a disaster from the beginning,” she continues, her voice laced with a mix of pain and resignation. “I had no idea it was merely a marriage of convenience. He sought my father’s power, and

my dad needed Eric's money. I was a twenty-year-old, blindsided by a handsome and charming man. I was raised to obey my father at all costs and continued doing the same once I married."

Confusion swirls within me as I try to comprehend the significance of her confession. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"I wanted to say that I'm sorry," she replies, her expression softening, offering a poignant smile tinged with sadness. "Your father prevented me from getting close to you. He claimed you had nannies to take care of you. I allowed him to manipulate and control all my relationships, including the one I could never have with you."

"It was fine," I offer a dismissive response, trying to downplay the impact of their actions. At some point during my childhood, I learned to live with my father's apathy and the way other adults treated me.

I was just a convenient pawn. Father was a single father, but the outsider didn't know that we barely interacted and he never gave two fucks about me.

"But it wasn't fine. You deserved love, and instead of giving it to you, I allowed him to perpetuate his cruel decisions," she asserts, her voice carrying the weight of regret. Her hand reaches out, gently squeezing my arm in a gesture of empathy for the boy she couldn't love. "I'm sorry for not being the person you needed."

"Believe me, it was okay," I say dismissively. "You weren't my mother."

"No, it wasn't okay," she counters. "As an adult, I shouldn't have let him be so cruel to you." In the depths of her eyes, I catch a fleeting glimpse of remorse, a silent acknowledgment of missed opportunities and unfulfilled roles.

A mixture of gratitude and resignation floods through me as I pat her hand and step away from her grasp. "Thank you," I offer, my voice filled with a bittersweet appreciation.

"Can we try?" she asks.

I furrow my brow, attempting to comprehend her request. "Try what?"

Her gaze meets mine, her eyes filled with earnestness. "You're my sons' brother. We're going to be living here for several years. I'd like to get to know you, to become a family this time," she suggests.

Any other day, I would have responded with defiance, uttering a simple "Fuck you" and walking away. But this time, something shifts within me. Skepticism momentarily yields to a glimmer of possibility. Maybe, just maybe, I could lower my defenses and allow her, along with my newfound

siblings, into my life. After all, our father's absence opens the door to something he never permitted us to be—a true family.

“That would be nice,” I simply say and add, “and thank you again for dinner.”

Her smile, like a gentle embrace, holds a warmth that resonates within me, thawing the iciness that had encased my heart for so long. Its genuine radiance cuts through the darkness, illuminating the path toward a newfound connection. “Please come more often. I always make enough food for everyone.”

I nod, a silent acknowledgment of her invitation, but as I step away, my mind becomes a whirlwind of questions. Thoughts tumble and collide, stirring a storm of uncertainty within me. I'm left wondering about her relationship with my father and hers with other men.

Has she always been trapped under the thumb of controlling, misogynistic men who denied her the chance to live her own life? Did my sisters grow up in the same oppressive environment?

My father was a terrible man, that much is clear, but with each passing day, I'm beginning to believe that he may have been the devil incarnate. Perhaps his legacy will continue to haunt us, and those criminals who took his life lie in wait, patient as vultures, biding their time until they find us, seeking retribution for his heinous deeds.

What if, by hiding in this seemingly peaceful town, we are merely prolonging the inevitable?

Chapter Fourteen



Drake

WHEN I REACH the cabin where I'm staying, Magnus and Callahan are already there. How did they get here so fast? The question should probably be, why are they here?

I left Donna's place to get away from them. I shoot them a withering glare, the intensity of my irritation seeping into my words as they escape my lips. "What the fuck do you want?" The words burst out of me, laced with a sharp edge of irritation. I point at Magnus. "Head to your place and stay away."

Sensing the crackling tension, Callahan takes a step forward, his movements deliberate and measured. "Magnus, *our brother*, is here just to hang out with me, since this is also my place. We plan on drinking the scotch we found in the cabinets earlier today. You want to join us by the fire pit?" His invitation is casual, carrying a touch of nonchalance that cuts through the charged atmosphere. It's a deliberate attempt to defuse the escalating conflict between Magnus and me.

I shake my head, my refusal clear. The last thing I want is to spend more time with him or any other Thorndale. With a hint of finality, I say, "Enjoy your night," and begin walking toward my room.

"We could build a cage and have you two fight until you work out your differences," Callahan teases us with an absurd notion. His voice carries a hint of playfulness, daring us to consider his unconventional and absurd approach to fixing our differences.

I come to a complete stop and shoot him a withering glare, ready to tell him, "Fuck you." But before I can utter a word, he presses on, with a suggestion that catches us off guard, "But maybe, just maybe, you two can put your differences aside like grown-ups and start getting along. He's not that bad."

Both Magnus and I turn to face Callahan, our brows furrowing in confusion, mirroring the shared sentiment of bewilderment. "What the fuck does that mean?" Our synchronized voices fill the space, blending into a chorus of disbelief.

"You both are annoying as fuck and have too many issues," Callahan

offers an unfiltered glimpse into his thoughts. “But at the end of the day, I believe you’re not so different from one another.”

Magnus scoffs. “He doesn’t give two fucks about the company, and I don’t care to learn how to make people pretty,” he declares, his words dripping with contempt and disdain. “If I sell Dad’s empire, he wouldn’t care at all.”

I raise an eyebrow, my arms crossing over my chest in a defensive stance. Magnus’s decision catches me off guard, and I can’t help but confront him. “Are you really selling it?” I question, my tone tinged with surprise. Dad may have groomed him to take his place, but we all have a stake in the company.

Magnus’s expression contorts, revealing his inner turmoil. “Obviously not. I can’t even see what’s happening right now,” he admits, his voice heavy with uncertainty.

Callahan interjects, his voice steady and determined. “As I mentioned earlier, we all need to have a meeting with Finn to figure out what’s happening with the company,” he reminds us. “We can arrange that soon. Why don’t we go out and have a drink by the firepit?”

I nod, considering his suggestion, recognizing the potential for a change of environment to alleviate the strain that lingers between us. Together, we make our way toward the fire pit where an unexpected sight awaits.

Magnus surprises me by taking charge, skillfully gathering wood and kindling the fire. At that moment, it becomes apparent that we are all beginning to shed the remnants of our past lives. At least I hope we’re all doing something to blend into this town.

As the fire crackles, I can’t help but voice the questions burning in my mind. “So, what’s the deal with Slade?” I ask, trying not to sound suspicious or skeptical, but I fail. “You seem to be withholding information from us.”

“Yeah, and why isn’t Leonora coming either?” Magnus adds, his eyes searching for answers.

Callahan’s lips press together, a sigh escaping him as he braces himself to share the truth. “Leonora is currently in an assisted facility,” he reveals, his voice tinged with sadness.

“Why?” I ask with concern and a genuine desire to comprehend her situation.

“Early dementia,” Callahan mumbles, his tone heavy with the weight of the situation.

“Alzheimer’s disease?” Magnus asks.

“No,” Callahan replies, shaking his head. “Apparently, there’s a distinction between the two. I didn’t receive a detailed explanation, though.”

Magnus turns to me, seeking clarity. “You’re a doctor. Do you know the difference?” he asks, his gaze fixed on me.

I take a moment to gather my thoughts, searching for the right words. “Early dementia is a broad term,” I explain, my voice carrying a mix of knowledge and empathy. “Alzheimer’s is a specific type of dementia. Leonora could possibly have vascular dementia, which is caused by reduced blood flow to the brain, or she might have Lewy body dementia or even frontotemporal dementia. There are other possibilities, but without knowing her exact diagnosis, it’s difficult to give you an exact explanation as to what caused it and the protocol that they could follow to help her.”

Magnus nods, seemingly absorbing the information I provide. It’s clear that he’s grasping for any understanding he can find. “What’s going to happen with her? Is she at risk of getting killed by . . .?” He trails off, his voice filled with unease, leaving the unsaid words hanging in the air.

Callahan’s expression tightens. “The security company has moved her to a different facility under a pseudonym to ensure her safety,” he discloses. “I’d rather not reveal any further details until Slade is here.”

Concern for Slade and his mother weighs heavy on my mind, prompting me to seek clarification. “Is Slade aware of what’s happening?” I inquire, my voice filled with genuine worry. This can’t be easy for him. Like me, he wasn’t welcomed into the family the same way that the others were.

He at least got to be with his mother. I still can’t understand my place in this family.

“He is indeed,” Callahan confirms with a nod. “Finn assured us that they’ll find a way to bring him to Heartwood Lake. We just have to trust in their expertise.”

“Cal, if you end up working for CQS, what does that mean for us?” Magnus wonders aloud, his voice tinged with a mix of apprehension and intrigue. His body language mirrors his uncertainty, his fingers drumming lightly on the armrest of his chair.

Callahan leans back, his eyes scanning the crackling fire, lost in thought. “For you? I would say not much. It’s hard to say for sure how things will work. There’ll be protocols, limitations on my location, and who knows what else. At least I’ll be doing something I like and helping others and not getting lost in this town. During college, I carved my own destiny, fighting the

shadow of our father, and now . . . now, I'm hiding because of him and losing everything I built. I hope working for CQS gives me something back."

"But will you be okay by remaining in town?" I ask.

"One day," Callahan muses, his voice filled with possibility, "they might trust me enough to let me go on missions. If not, when this is over, I'll do something different within the organization or . . . who the fuck knows?"

The sound of approaching footsteps breaks our conversation, drawing our attention to the figures emerging from the shadows. Gael and Bach materialize before us. "So you're actually getting the fuck out of here while we're stuck in this forsaken town?" Gael taunts.

"I swear, his hearing is better than—"

"A bat," I conclude. My voice picks up where Magnus leaves off, finishing his sentence with easy familiarity.

"I was debating between owls and African elephants," Magnus quips. His attention then shifts to Gael and Bach. "How was the bar? It seems like a fun place to hang out. Can we even do that?"

Bach steps forward, his expression calm and composed. "Chef Ramsey here took over the kitchen," he reports matter-of-factly, not responding to the other question Magnus asked.

Gael rolls his eyes, his annoyance palpable. "I'm not Ramsey, and I had to step in. Jezebel doesn't know how to run a kitchen—or cook," he grumbles with a hint of exasperation.

My brow furrows in confusion. "Who the fuck is Jezebel?" I inquire, trying to make sense of the conversation.

"The owner of the bar," Gael clarifies.

"Thankfully, River was there. He helped us with the tables," Bach says.

My gaze scans the surroundings, searching for any sign of River's presence. "Where is he?"

Bach nods toward the cabins. "He walked Gen and Elle to their place," he explains. "Even though everyone claims nothing happens in this town, we can't take any chances."

"On our way here, we spotted people still hanging out in their backyards. Including the hot doctor," Gael adds with a mischievous smirk.

I wonder if they're talking about Wren. Probably, as far as I know, she's the only doctor in town. "She was alone at the mercy of everyone?"

"Uh-huh. I offered to keep her company, but she didn't seem very receptive," Gael grins.

“Stay the fuck away from her.” A surge of protectiveness courses through me as I issue a stern warning.

Without uttering another word, I rise from my seat and make my way through the backwoods, the familiar path leading me toward the heart of the town. In the moonlit glow, I spot Wren, a captivating aura surrounding her. My gaze fixates on her, unable to resist the magnetic pull she exudes.

“Enjoying your night?” The question holds an unspoken longing, a desire for a deeper connection.

Wren looks up from her book, her eyes meeting mine. A soft smile graces her lips. Her walls are completely down. This isn't the doctor who has to set boundaries and put up a wall so others will respect her.

This is just a beautiful woman with soulful eyes, fiery hair, and a vulnerability that tugs at my heartstrings, beckoning me closer like a moth drawn to a flame. In her gaze, I see a glimpse of her true self, unguarded and unmasked, as if the weight of the world has momentarily lifted from her shoulders.

As I approach, my heart beats like the rhythmic echo of distant drums, as if it senses that something profound and life-changing might be on the horizon. The air crackles with an unspoken chemistry, and I find myself drawn to her presence, yearning for more.

The stillness of the night seems to amplify the intensity of the moment, as if time itself has slowed down to savor this fleeting connection.

Can I stretch this moment long enough to taste her lips?

Chapter Fifteen



Wren

WHEN I DECIDED to read my book in front of the fire pit, I thought the most exciting thing that could happen was among the pages of my e-reader. I was completely wrong. First, I saw the Kershaw family walk by with two women. I didn't see them well and didn't recognize the women who went home with them. They were a bit too far from where I was sitting.

Though one of them broke away from the group and approached me. He introduced himself as Gael, the new bartender and chef, and his voice oozed a smooth and captivating charm. With a polite smile, I introduced myself and waved at him.

I'm not sure how this new chef thing is going to work. Jez might fire him for butting into her kitchen. She's pretty territorial when it comes to . . . well, everything.

Only a few minutes later, Drake appears, and I can see that he's not here just because he was walking through the back trail. My first instinct is to bid him farewell, considering the lateness of the hour, but I find myself transfixed, rendered speechless by his mesmerizing presence.

He's handsome, bordering on sexy and irresistible. I've done my best to ignore the attraction, but it's getting too hard. And also, he's here, at my house. He stands before me, clad in nothing but a snug shirt that showcases his chiseled torso and sinewy arms. The flickering fire casts a soft glow, accentuating the sprinkling of silver amid his dark hair and playing with shadows across his striking features.

His mere presence sends my heart into a frenzy, reminding me that it's been long since a man has paid any attention to me outside the clinic—for something other than a routine checkup or illness.

I want to breathe him in so deep, I can remember every detail about him. Not only that, I'd like to etch the way he sees me by memory so when he goes back to his life, I can remember that someone made me feel pretty and desirable just by a single gaze.

In his eyes, I catch a glimpse of the possibilities that lie beyond my imagination, the potential for connection and intimacy that I've been craving for a long time. It's as if he sees past my reserved façade and into the

dormant depths of my soul, where my true desires lie. I find myself torn between the safety of solitude and the appeal of what could be if I were to take a chance on him.

I shift in my seat, feeling the weight of his gaze like a gentle caress on my skin. It stirs a warmth within me, a flicker of hope that maybe, just maybe, I could allow myself to be vulnerable with him—let him in for at least a night. But then I remember it's not possible. He's my employee, and then . . .

Well, there are other reasons why I've carefully built these walls around my heart. The defenses I've constructed to shield myself from pain and disappointment.

Drake's enticing presence, his easy charm, stirs a yearning within me, a carnal hunger for affection and sex. My heart longs for love. My skin aches to be touched. I want to taste his mouth, feel his hands . . .

He's not close, but I can imagine the firmness of his lips, his taste—feel the warmth of his touch against my skin. But I know that indulging in such fantasies is dangerous. The appeal to satiate my needs clashes with the reasons to resist—the knowledge that he'll leave, the secrets I carry, the potential for heartbreak.

So, I make an effort to resist him. Behind a small, subtle smile, I hide my emotions, a mask to shield myself from vulnerability.

Remember, he's your employee.

Next week, he'll be working for me, but I don't trust men like him—men who seem too captivating, but they're too temporary. Not with my heart.

But can I resist him?

With every breath, I am reminded of how much I long to be seen, to be cherished by someone who understands the depths of my soul. Not that Drake is capable of such, but I wish I could have someone like that in my life.

He could at least fulfill my fantasies. Drake's magnetism is undeniable, his appearance tantalizing. And as he stands before me, my heart wrestles with the vulnerability of admitting what I yearn for.

"Enjoying your night?" he asks, his voice carrying a hint of intrigue. The way his gaze lingers on me sends a jolt of anticipation through my veins. It's been so long since I've had someone like him in my life—someone attractive, someone who stirs something inside me that I can't quite put into words.

I let out a soft chuckle, trying to maintain a sense of composure. "Sure."

"Where's Milo?" he inquires.

I show him the baby monitor, a silent reassurance that my son is sound

asleep. “Sound asleep since eight,” I respond, a mixture of exhaustion and relief washing over me. Being a single mother has its challenges, but moments like these make it all worthwhile.

Drake’s eyes flicker with interest. “Shouldn’t you be doing the same? Resting, I mean.”

A wistful smile tugs at my lips. “I’m not tired. Usually, I would be hanging out with my friends. Saturday night is like our girls’ night out, but Sutton is in Evergreen, Regina had a family thing to attend, and Jez is closing the bar,” I share, inadvertently revealing more about myself than I intended.

He bobs his head a couple of times, as if understanding why after midnight I’m still wide awake. “So it’s just you tonight? Do you want some company?”

I gesture toward the empty chair beside the table where the wine sits, its ruby hues reflecting the flickering fire. “Do you want some wine?” I point toward the second glass of wine I bought in case Sutton escaped her parents’ house a day earlier or Gina decided to come by.

“I might be alone, but I’m still having wine, relaxing with the company of a good book. It was a stressful week.” I share a knowing smile with him.

Drake’s gaze lingers on me, his eyes conveying a warmth that sends a tingle down my spine. A magnetic pull urges me to lean closer, to kiss him, but I steel myself against the temptation.

I must resist.

Must resist.

Must.

Resist.

But how long will I be able to resist him?

Chapter Sixteen



Wren

“WHY ARE YOU STILL UP?” I inquire, steering the conversation toward him, attempting to distract myself from an impossible fantasy.

Drake, me, and any surface in my house.

No, focus on him. Maybe I can find out why he doesn't sleep much. I recall him saying that he operated on a different schedule. It could be code for I take naps all day, or I have trouble falling asleep. Insomnia is more common than people want to admit.

“I was hanging with two of my brothers when Gael joined us and mentioned you were still outside.” He scans the area. “At the mercy of people.”

I release a chuckle. “This isn't LA. If I were you, I'd be more concerned about bears and mountain lions than a thief trying to steal my lawn chairs.”

He shrugs. “You can't blame me. I've always lived in big cities.”

“So, where are you from? Boston, New York . . . Atlanta maybe?” I mention some of the major cities I can recall, trying to uncover more about his past. But before he responds, I add yet another question, “So all those guys are your real brothers?”

His raised eyebrow reveals a momentary surprise at my unexpected question. “Why would I lie about it?”

I chuckle, amused by his response. Is he for real?

“It's hard to believe any of what you say when we know your name isn't even Drake Kershaw. How do I know that you're actually related to them?” I say, holding up a finger to emphasize my point. “So, you're seriously telling me you have that many brothers.”

I begin to count as I recall all the Kershaws I've seen around town, including the ones who walked by earlier tonight. “That's like five of you running around town?”

A hint of mischief dances in his eyes as he corrects me. “Six. I have six brothers. You've only seen five because one of them isn't with us just yet.” He offers a glimpse into what I believe is a complex family dynamic. “Plus, we also have two sisters, Elle and Genevieve.”

Skepticism creeps back into my expression as I process the information.

“And two mothers?”

Drake meets my gaze with unwavering honesty. “My father was married four times, and he also had several mistresses and lovers,” he admits, his words tinged with a mixture of resignation and acceptance. “Donna and Flora are wives one and two. We’re your average American family.”

I scoff, a mixture of surprise and amusement bubbling within me. “Of course you are,” I respond, unable to hide the hint of sarcasm in my tone. “So, wow, nine children. Should I assume your mom is number one? You look like the oldest.”

He shakes his head, a mixture of resignation and sadness crossing his features, as he opens up about his mother, Donna, Flora, Leonora, and Suzie.

Listening to him speak, I can’t help but empathize with the boy who never had the chance to meet his mother or be fully embraced by the families his father created over the years. He gets along with Gael, because he’s a people person, but can’t tolerate Magnus due to the rivalry his father set up between them since they were children.

“My sisters are okay, I guess. All we have in common is our father’s microscopic attention,” he says, and I understand exactly how he feels.

Our experiences may not be the same, but the scars of childhood neglect run just as deep within our souls.

My mother never gave us the attention we needed, even less after she divorced our father. Her career was more important. Not that our dad was any different. He didn’t give two fucks about us either. The only thing that separates them was that our father got custody of us, and our mother never acknowledged us after she signed the dotted line that gave her the freedom she wanted.

“Does your family live here?” he suddenly asks, and I turn to look at him in surprise.

No one ever broaches the subject of my family or life. Everyone just focuses on the little boy who owns my heart and my attention.

“Well, yes, you’ve seen my son,” I say, smiling at him as if it’s evident that I have my family with me.

He frowns, a hint of horror in his eyes. “What brought you here?” he asks, and I’m relieved he doesn’t pry further into my family history.

“There was an opportunity to work at the clinic,” I state. “At the beginning, it was only for a couple of days a week and weekends. Then, I just took over.”

It sounds simple and easy, right? I'm aware there are parts of my life I'll never be able to share with him or anyone. Like my family, the reason why I own the clinic, or . . . well anything about my personal life. Only my best friends know about it, and that's how it has to stay.

"You don't have to be stuck in this town," he states. "Why not get a job in Denver?"

I chuckle, because this is in fact cluing me to something, and I can divert the attention away from me too. "Ah, so we know the root of your problem, and you're trying to protect yourself."

Confusion flashes across his face, his brow furrowing slightly as my words catch him off guard. "What problem?" he asks, seeking clarification.

"You're stuck in this town, and you're wondering how someone like me is living here willingly," I tease him.

The slight furrowing of his brow and the tightening of his jaw betray his apprehension. The burden of having to spend all that time not only in this small town, but with his estranged family is evident.

"Families," I mumble with a hint of resignation. "You can't choose them, but you can choose to stay away from them."

"Usually that's how it goes, but currently I can't escape them," he reminds me. "After living alone for years, I have to live close by them and share my cabin with one of my brothers, Callahan."

I seize the opportunity to probe for more information, aiming to learn more about Drake's personal life and his family. "So, I take it neither one of you have a girlfriend or a wife." I venture to nudge him to share a bit more, but I'm not as subtle as a detective. I probably sound like Jez's grandma trying to get the latest gossip from the neighbor.

He stares at me, blinking a couple of times. So, I expand a little further. "Well, at least it seems like you didn't bring a significant other along."

Caught off guard, he rubs his chin thoughtfully. "Huh. I didn't think about that."

"What?" I ask, puzzled by his response. Did he forget about his wife or significant other while he was escaping? Who does that?

"If any of my siblings have significant others, they should've brought them with us, right?" he muses, his mouth twisting in deep thought, as if pondering the implications.

I study him curiously, intrigued by this revelation. "Are you telling me that you don't know if your brothers and sisters are married or in serious

relationships?”

“We just discussed my relationship with them. We don’t get along *at all*.” His response carries a hint of exasperation, a sigh escaping him as if I hadn’t been paying attention to our conversation.

My expression reflects shock, my eyebrows raising and my eyes widening in surprise, as if struck by the reality of their distant relationships. “I mean, yes, but I didn’t think it was *that* bad.”

Drake glances my way, a raspy, humor-filled voice softening his words. “I could almost bet that it is worse than you think.”

My jaw slackens, taken aback not only by his humor but also by the realization of how disconnected his family truly is. My mind drifts to my own sister, Brighton, and how despite living states apart, we always knew each other’s life updates, always staying connected. Well, at least until . . . *he* entered her life.

His gaze, laden with questions of its own, roams over my face, seeking answers. “Where’s Milo’s dad?” he asks, his words hanging in the air, heavy with the weight of my secrets.

I hold my breath for a couple of seconds because no one ever asks about him. I’m not ready to respond on command.

“He’s not a part of his life,” I say, my voice steady, concealing the emotions tied to the truth. I guard the secret carefully, unwilling to let my voice waver, not giving away the depths of my feelings and the reasons behind his absence.

“I’m sorry,” he says, his voice filled with empathy. “We don’t have to talk about it if it’s so painful.”

He doesn’t know exactly why speaking of Milo’s dad hurts, and like everyone else, he’ll never figure it out. So, I offer a nonchalant shrug, pretending we’re discussing something less personal. “It’s for the best.”

His gaze meets mine, searching for something more, an unspoken longing hovering beneath the surface. “If you ever want to share about him, I’m here.” The gentleness of his voice makes me want to trust him.

A smile tugs at my lips. “Thank you. I will share as soon as you tell me why you’re here,” I reply, my voice filled with a hint of mischief, masking the pain.

His fingers graze the back of his neck, a nervous gesture betraying his uncertainty and reluctance. “So that’s a hard no,” he admits with a blend of reluctance and hesitation.

“Exactly,” I reply, a sense of mutual understanding passing between us.

Checking the time on my phone, I realize it’s getting late. “It’s time for me to head to bed but thank you for the company.”

As he stands up, I notice him staring at me for a moment, his gaze lingering on my lips before he turns around and waves goodbye. Confusion creeps in, wondering if I said something wrong to make him almost rush out of here.

Or maybe he wanted the same as me, a kiss, company, and probably more.

A place to belong and someone to love.

Just the impossible.

Chapter Seventeen



Wren

EVERY SUNDAY, Milo and I escape the mundane, swapping the comfort of our kitchen for the bustling charm of the coffee shop. Our outing is one of the most exciting things for Milo. He loves to order his own drink and sit at the shop drawing in his coloring book while we plan the day.

There's nothing too exciting, but the promise of this treat is as enticing as the sugary lure of a cinnamon roll, propelling us into the day's chores right after we're done with our breakfast.

As we push open the door, a golden glow envelops the cozy coffee shop, casting a warm ambiance that embraces us in its charm. The air carries the irresistible aroma of freshly brewed coffee fused with the delicate fragrance of vanilla. The gentle chatter and the clinking of cups fills the space, infusing it with an inviting atmosphere.

Approaching the counter, we meet a new face. The barista stands gracefully behind the register, her hair graced by strands of silver woven into an elegantly understated bun. The gentle lines etched at the corners of her eyes speak of a life filled with stories, and her smile, wide and welcoming, carries the warmth of freshly baked bread.

"Good morning, what would you like?" she greets us, her voice reminiscent of a grandmother ready to spoil her grandchildren.

"We haven't met you before," Milo chimes in, his eyes wide with curiosity as he looks at the woman before us.

"Well, we should rectify that, shouldn't we?" she suggests, her words carrying a gentle invitation. "My name is Donna. Donna Kershaw, and may I ask who you are?"

Donna. I recall the name from last night's conversation with Drake. She was his first stepmother. I don't want to like her, but there's a comforting aura about her. My second thought is Regina, who warned us that one of the Kershaw women is now supposed to be her aunt. Ugh, I need to have a chat with her soon and compare notes before I make a mess.

Milo swivels his gaze toward me, his eyes wide pools of anticipation seeking my approval. I nod, giving him the go-ahead to continue.

"I'm Milo," he responds cautiously.

Donna's smile broadens, her eyes alight with a spark. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Milo," she replies warmly.

"Welcome to Heartwood Lake, Donna," I chime in, the words slipping off my tongue. This is an unfamiliar sentiment that rarely graces my lips when newcomers from the Endor program arrive.

But this time feels completely different. These people are staying for the long haul, and I hope they'll try to blend in and embrace our town. They'll be living among us for a substantial period of time, and I wish they'd come to love it as much as we do.

Heartwood Lake may be small, but there's something special about this place that makes you feel at home—even when sometimes we wish we could hide from the gossip.

"So, what can I get for you today?" she inquires, glancing at the register.

"Cocoa, please," Milo says, and I finish ordering by adding a latte and a couple of pastries.

"Will that be for here or to go?" Donna asks, her eyes focused on the screen.

"Mom?" Milo turns to me, expectation in his gaze.

"Of course we're staying," I confirm, ruffling his hair. I tap my card on the reader before refocusing on him. "After all, this is our special breakfast day."

"Enjoy," Donna says as she passes us a small wooden block, the number five etched deeply into it.

"We're five, like me," Milo announces, a glint of excitement in his eyes as he reverently holds the block.

"That we are," I respond, steering him toward our preferred corner table, a cozy nook bathed in morning light.

As we settle in, I rummage through my purse, retrieving a pack of wipes. It's not that I distrust the cleanliness of the café, but Milo has an uncanny knack for finding his fingers—or worse, his tongue—on the most random surfaces. I've found him licking the table more than once. So, as a precaution, I wipe down our area before we claim it.

While waiting for our order, Milo shares his desire for a dad, a sister like Rhea, and maybe even more grandparents. It's a discussion we've circled around for the past couple of years. His thirst for connections beyond our close-knit circle is both heartbreaking and endearing. I wish I could wave a magic wand and fulfill these desires for him, but the reality is far more

complicated.

Before I can come up with an appropriate response, our drinks and pastries appear before us. When I look up, I find Drake smiling warmly at Milo and then at me. “Good morning.”

“Hi, Drake,” Milo greets him, his face lighting up.

“Morning,” I echo, quirking an eyebrow. “Do you work here too?”

“Nah,” he replies, the corners of his mouth twitching in amusement. “I just came in for some coffee, and Donna asked me to bring this over to you.”

Casting a glance back to the counter, I catch Donna’s eye and see her waving in our direction. I return the wave with a silent *thank you* forming on my lips.

“Join us,” Milo invites him with a hopeful gleam in his eyes.

As much as I feel the need to teach him about boundaries and social interactions with semi-strangers, I find myself pointing to one of the empty chairs. “If you’re not in a rush, please join us,” I add, trying to shut down the undeniable flutter in my chest from the previous night. The memory of Drake’s gaze and . . . well, the thing we’ll never be able to do.

Drake throws a glance toward the entrance, his expression twisting slightly. “I’d love to stay, but the ranch doesn’t run itself.”

“You work at the ranch?” Milo’s voice spikes with enthusiasm, his love for animals an undeniable part of him. He’s spent countless afternoons pleading with Aunt Regina to take him to visit the horses.

Drake’s response comes in the form of a nod. “Me and my brothers do.”

“Brothers?” Milo’s eyes flicker to mine, his mouth stretching into a grin. It’s the look he gets when he’s hatching a plan or has stumbled upon something promising.

I know what he’s thinking, he could add more members to our family. Though they’ll be around for a while, I should probably keep Milo away from the Kershaws.

“We won’t keep you,” I cut in, not too subtly veering the conversation away from Drake’s family and Milo’s scheming.

“What are you two doing for lunch?” Drake inquires, catching me off guard.

“Cleaning the house,” I answer without missing a beat. We can’t indulge in this friendship, in this proximity. Milo could misunderstand, and I . . . well, I’ve drawn an invisible line between us as I build a wall.

“Then I’ll swing by with some food around noon,” Drake proposes, his

voice bearing an air of casual confidence.

“Dino food?” Milo pipes up, hopeful.

“No,” Drake chuckles, “but I’ll bring something equally delicious—for human consumption.”

“Okay,” Milo says, satisfied.

With a final “Enjoy your breakfast,” Drake heads to the counter. A stack of paper cups and bags wait there, along with one of his brothers. He embraces Donna, a familiar warmth in their interaction. Drake, in contrast, offers only a wave. I surmise he’s one of Donna’s children.

I shouldn’t care, but this is becoming more interesting than we hoped. Maybe tonight, the girls and I can start piecing together the puzzle that’s the Kershaw family.

Chapter Eighteen



Drake

“SHE’S CUTE,” Callahan says casually as we leave the coffee shop. “I might even say hot.”

The weight of the coffee tray almost slips from my grip as I glance toward the door, startled by Callahan’s comment. Why is he looking at her? Of course, I refuse to discuss Wren with him, so I respond, “What are you talking about?” pretending to be confused by his observation.

I sound stupid, but it’s for the best. I could tell him that Wren isn’t just cute. She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve encountered in a long time. I’ve been denying this attraction ever since our paths crossed in this exact coffee shop, but it’s becoming increasingly difficult to resist her.

Her image lingers in my mind, making it hard to focus on anything else. Wren Lynch seems like a complicated woman who is surprisingly easy to talk to—and understand. There’s something about her that leaves me strangely undone every time I’m around her.

When I entered the café and caught sight of her, an overwhelming desire to walk up to her and kiss her good morning consumed me. For some reason I can’t explain, I yearn to spend every moment of the day with her.

Since last night, I’ve been aching to taste her, and the urge to touch her grows stronger with each passing moment. I wonder if it’s possible to purge her from my system without giving in to these needs—the lust I never thought I would be able to feel for a woman.

It’s been long, so long, since I turned off my emotions and my body went dormant.

It’s absurd. I’m forty-three, and I shouldn’t be lusting after someone so young and full of life, but here I am, wanting a lot more than I should.

“The gorgeous doctor,” Cal clarifies, amused by my attempt to feign ignorance, unaware of the turmoil she’s stirred within me.

“Yeah, I guess so,” I reply nonchalantly, attempting to hide the attraction I have toward Wren Lynch.

We spent last night just talking, but it felt like so much more. Her presence made me forget my problems but left me yearning for things I shouldn’t want—her lips, her body, and even the simple pleasure of falling

asleep beside her.

I crave to know the rhythm of her heartbeat, synchronized with mine.

But this is where things get complicated. This is the first time in my life when I can't control my emotions and reactions toward a woman. Wren wouldn't be the first woman in my life. There have been several others, and of course, I can't forget Noelle.

My relationship with Noelle was a gradual progression from dating to living together. We made sense in a hectic world where no one had time to stop and find love.

Wren, on the other hand, she's different. She evokes feelings in me that are both frightening and exhilarating. Yet, I can't ignore the reality of our circumstances. She has a son, I'm leaving . . . there are several more that I can't come up with but that'll show me we don't fit together.

Callahan scoffs, snapping me back to the present. "So, you have a thing for her, and she's married?"

"There's nothing between us," I reply defensively, pushing aside the pull I feel toward her. "And she's single."

"So, single mom, huh?" he mumbles, but there's something beneath his tone I don't understand.

"Why do you say it like that?" I inquire.

"Mom," he answers. "It's complicated to date when there's a kid involved."

I nod, playing along, even though I'm clueless about the complications. Pretending to grasp the depth of his insight, when in reality, I have no fucking idea what he's talking about. I was the son of a single father, and he had no trouble dating. Dad made it look pretty easy.

"According to my mother, it's an art to date a single parent," he answers, apparently filling the void of my unspoken question.

Clearly, I'm not familiar with that concept. In my experience, it was straightforward—you tell your child, "This is my new wife," and you keep your distance. That's what my father did with me.

"How so?" I ask, not because I have any intention of dating Wren, but because I'm genuinely curious.

"You have to be aware that she's a package deal—a mom and a son. It's not just her," he explains, his words painting a picture of a family dynamic I can barely comprehend. "He's going to be a permanent presence and become part of your family. From the moment you ask her out, you acknowledge that

he's your potential stepson and not just some random person who might be around."

I can't help but chuckle at the irony.

"What's so funny?" Cal asks, puzzled by my unexpected reaction.

"Every woman who married or dated our father treated me like I was some stranger invading their space as if I didn't belong," I say with a bitter undertone that I can't suppress. I can't deny the emotional scars I have from being excluded from his life.

"That's fucked up," he mumbles, his steps faltering.

It truly was. My father never took me along on vacation, never considered me part of the family, not then, not in the subsequent ones either. I've always been the one left behind, an afterthought in his life.

"I wasn't part of his first family, the next, or . . . you get the idea," I continue, my emotions bubbling to the surface, like a dormant volcano waiting to erupt.

Cal shakes his head in disbelief, struggling to comprehend the extent of my isolation. "And to think that we envied you."

"Me?" I laugh incredulously, continuing our walk toward the ranch. "Why would you?"

"No matter what happened, you were always with him," Cal says, his voice tinged with envy. "Magnus, Bach, and I wanted to be you. Unlike us, you were a permanent fixture in his life. We stopped being his children once he divorced our mother and only saw him a few times a year."

I can tell him that at least he had Donna, his mother, but I stay silent. There's no point in telling him that he had it a million times better than I did.

"He was stuck with me. I was a punishment for knocking up *the help*," I tell him, unaware of how much he knows about my origins, but wanting to give him the real picture. "Our grandparents made him drag me around. It wasn't because he loved me more than the rest of you."

"Where's your mother?" he asks, not asking more questions about our father and our fucked-up relationship.

"Who knows? Someone probably paid her off so she'd disappear," I reply, trying to sound casual while masking the anger that still simmers within me.

"We could try to dig around so we can figure it out," he offers, genuinely wanting to help solve the mystery of my past. But what's there to fix?

"I already tried and didn't find anything," I answer, almost disappointed.

Not because I long for a mother, but because she holds the answers I've sought for years.

"So, you weren't his favorite, huh?" Cal probes, trying to make sense of my relationship with our father.

"I was nobody to Eric," I admit, bitterness seeping into my words as I recall the indifference he showed me throughout my life. I was an invisible presence in his world, always there but never truly seen.

"Well, then I'm sure that if you decide to pursue something with the doctor, you'll know how important it is to include her son," Cal says, his words pulling me back from the memories of my father's neglect. And I'm thankful that he doesn't circle back to Eric's fucked-up behavior.

"I wouldn't date her," I establish, trying to convince myself more than anyone else. The truth is, I'm torn between the desire to be with Wren and the realization that it wouldn't be fair to anyone.

My future lies back in Los Angeles, where I'll have to decide on a new career path. I'll probably open a new practice and build a life there. They'll stay in this little town, living their best life. Despite everything, I can't help but feel for Milo, whose father chose to stay away, missing out on the best part of himself—his own son.

You were no different, I remind myself. I chose work, and that's why I lost it all.

"Can you have CQS go through the remains of my house and see if they can find anything that's useful?" I ask, because losing the remnants of my past is too fucking painful.

Cal glances at me, narrowing his gaze. "Like what? Electronics, clothes, your favorite scalpel? They're probably lost."

"Frames, portraits . . . pictures," I respond instead of telling him that I don't have medical equipment lingering around my house.

He nods, but then a frown creases his brow. "Like from our family? I could print you some of the stuff I have on my drive once CQS gives me access to it."

I shake my head. "No, I'm talking about pictures of my family."

"What family?" he asks, his expression horrified. "Dude, do we have to go and look for a wife, a girlfriend? Why didn't you tell me? They might find them first and—"

"They already died," I interject as the grief I had buried deep within me begins to seep through my pores. "It was years ago."

“Who are you talking about?” he asks, taken aback by the revelation.

“My girlfriend and son.” The words escape my lips with a mixture of pain and regret.

As we approach the ranch, Cal steals a glance at me, his expression filled with regret. “Sorry, I had no idea.”

“As I said, it was too many years ago. I only had a few memories left, and maybe . . . I lost everything,” I say, my voice catching in my throat, making it impossible to remain calm this time.

In truth, there was never much to lose—it was all an illusion that slipped through my fingers too quickly due to my own negligence. The weight of all my regrets settles in my chest, like an elephant stepping on top of me, squeezing the life out of me.

I realize now that I’m not so different from my father. Perhaps I’m even worse. I wasn’t cruel, but I failed them in the worst possible way.

That’s why it was effortless to promise lunch to Milo. He deserves more than a life with just his mother and the absence of an asshole and irresponsible father.

What stories is Wren telling him when he asks for his dad? White lies, perhaps, to protect him from the harsh truth that his father never wanted him. Can a simple lunch make up for years of absence and neglect?

I don’t know, but at least I can try. And as we continue our walk, I can’t help but hope that maybe I can make a difference. Be a distant uncle, or just a friend who can alleviate the burden his mother carries as a single parent.

This isn’t a penance, but . . . why do I want to do this for them?

Chapter Nineteen



Drake

AS GAEL HANDLES THE STOVE, a faint grumble escapes his lips. “You know, people pay a lot of money for my services.”

“What kind of services are you offering?” Callahan asks as he enters the kitchen, then glances at me. “And what the fuck is he doing here?”

I give Callahan a warning glance. He better not kick Gael out of here, at least not until he finishes helping me.

“Personal chef,” Gael states with a mix of frustration. “I’m here because your eldest brother needed my assistance.”

“Intriguing,” Cal mumbles as he reaches out for one of the cookies on the cooling tray. “Have you ever been one? I thought you only did guest appearances at your restaurants—when Daddy allowed it.”

Gael glares at him but only answers, “I’ve done it several times.”

Teasingly, Cal asks, “We’re talking about doing it for your dates? Because if they pay you for—”

“Stop right there,” Gael interjects, his tone a clear warning. He doesn’t want to be belittled or teased about his profession. “We’re talking about celebrities. Important people who call me because they want the best but can’t just bring their dates or family to a restaurant.”

Although I want to know more, I refrain from asking more questions. Of course, I can’t say the same about Callahan, who has a knack for digging for information. “Who are these families?” Cal persists, not letting this go as easily as I did.

Gael turns around, a pan in hand, his expression becoming more serious. “Leave it alone,” he cautions, clearly not willing to divulge any names or specifics. But the conversation takes a slight turn as Gael brings up an unexpected topic. “The real question here is, why am I making dinosaur-shaped nuggets and sandwiches for a child who isn’t yours?”

Cal raises an eyebrow, crossing his arms in an inquisitive manner, and stares at me. “Is it for the doctor’s son?”

I shrug. “Milo is into dinosaurs but hates the concept of lunch,” I begin, but then elaborate further. “Maybe if I bring him something innovating, he might eat without fussing.”

“Be careful with them,” Cal warns me.

Gael frowns. “The hot doctor has a child?” Gael asks.

I bob my head a couple of times, hoping he doesn’t ask for more. I didn’t want to disclose much about my motives.

“I’m with Cal. You have to be careful. As a child, having so many men coming in and out of your mother’s life fucks you up pretty bad.” Gael’s face contorts with bitterness as he speaks. The pain, anger, and frustration are etched across his features.

Cal and I stare at Gael for a few moments. I break the silence, trying to understand his warning. “What are you talking about?”

“My mother has trouble being alone,” he admits with a shrug. “She was . . . is a serial dater. While growing up, Gen and I would get used to one guy, and a few months later, he’d disappear. It was like my parents’ divorce all over again.”

As Gael shares his painful experience, I realize that our parents have left lasting scars on each of us in different ways. None of us had it better than the other. We were all broken in different ways by the adults who were supposed to care for us. It dawns on me that we haven’t taken the time to admit that we need help—and, well, get help.

And now, I’m faced with a difficult decision: should I cancel lunch with Wren and stay away to avoid any potential harm to her son, or should I continue with my plan and hope that my presence doesn’t have a negative impact on the young boy?

AFTER GAEL IS DONE HELPING me with lunch, I make my way to Wren’s house, my heart racing with a mix of excitement and nerves.

When she opens the door, I can’t help but blurt out, “I had no idea what to cook him. My brother helped me, but this might be a disaster.”

Wren’s lips curve into a pouty smile as she teases, “You should run away.” The mischievous glint in her eyes ignites a desire within me to pull her close, to hold her and never let go.

I’m tempted to lean closer and kiss her, to show her how much I’ve missed her, but I know I need to tread carefully, especially with Milo around.

Milo suddenly appears, and I quickly refocus my attention on him. He’s a

bundle of energy, running toward me with his T-rex toy and a palm tree in his tiny hands. His enthusiasm is infectious, and I can't help but feel a rush of affection for the little boy.

"You made it! Meet Tyler," he exclaims, introducing me to his toy.

"Of course I came, Milo," I answer, trying to hide the excitement that's bubbling inside me. I glance at the toy he holds, a T-rex named Tyler. "Nice to meet you, Tyler."

Before I can respond further, Wren suggests, "Why don't we let Drake come inside, so he can set the box with food on the counter? Then he can meet your toys."

As she opens the door wider and I step inside, I take the opportunity to scan the surroundings. Last time I was here, my attention was solely on her, my focus on getting a job at the clinic. Now . . . my goal is to fight my desire and not kiss her in front of her son.

Don't touch her, that's a big fucking no, Thorndale.

So, I take a moment to survey the small living room, the cozy table, and the kitchen. I absorb every detail, not wanting to miss a thing. The place has a warm and inviting atmosphere. It reminds me of the doll house my grandparents had in the Hamptons. It was designed by some famous architect and decorated by a renowned designer. Though it was meant to be a present for my sisters, the house was off-limits—not even Gen and Elle could play with it.

"Would you like something to drink?" Wren asks. "We have water, lemonade, and apple juice."

"I want juice," Milo quickly chimes in.

Wren glances at me. "Same for me, please," I pause, scan the kitchen as I set the box on the counter, and add, "How long have you been living here?"

"Five years," she answers, and I'm not sure if she's referring to the house or the town.

Something tells me that she's spent more time in a big hospital working in an emergency room than in this small town. I saw how easily she just jumped into working with the victims of last night's accident. Her ability to lead and care for others is evident, but I also sense that she keeps her past guarded, perhaps to protect herself from opening old wounds.

"What are we eating?" Milo asks with a grin plastered on his face.

I take out the smaller boxes, showing the variety of food Gael and I prepared—nuggets, fries, and veggie sticks, among other things. It's a

generous amount of food. Milo's eyes light up with excitement when Wren points out that they're going to have plenty of leftovers for the rest of the week.

Milo and I set up the table together while Wren plates the food. As we begin to eat, Milo proposes going to the park. However, Wren reminds him that he has to take a nap after he finishes his food.

His eyes widen, and a hint of moisture fills them as he negotiates, "What if we do it after my nap?"

Realizing I might have overstepped some boundaries, I quickly try to backtrack. "Sorry, I didn't mean to—"

Wren nods a couple of times as if understanding that my intentions were genuinely innocent. "It's fine. The thing is that I still have a lot to do. Like folding laundry, cleaning the bathroom, and tidying up the kitchen," she states.

"Why don't I help you so we can go once he's up from his nap," I offer.

"Please, Mom," Milo insists.

Wren looks at me with amusement. "You can still run, but if you help us with the chores, we might be able to finish soon and go to the park."

The sight of Milo's bright smile warms my heart, and for a moment, I feel reassured that I might have done a good thing by coming here. But beneath that warmth, a flicker of uncertainty lingers. I hope that my presence doesn't unintentionally mess things up for them. I genuinely want to help Wren and Milo, but what if he expects more from me? What if I disappoint them in some way?

Chapter Twenty



Drake

AFTER WREN TAKES Milo to his room, I set about clearing the table and carefully putting away the leftovers inside the refrigerator.

I hear Wren's footsteps approaching, and as she enters the room, her voice breaks the silence. "Thank you for the food."

I turn to face her, a small smile playing on my lips as I reply, "I'm just glad he liked everything I brought."

The temptation to ask Gael to cook for Milo regularly tugs at me, but I quickly crush the thought. This should be a one-time thing, a simple gesture. Getting involved in their lives further might complicate everything, and I need to be careful not to overstep boundaries.

"He loved everything," she says, cleaning the table and heading to the sink. Her movements are graceful, and I can't help but admire her. She's breathtakingly beautiful.

"You can still save yourself and go back home," she suggests, her eyes glancing at me with concern. "You must be tired after working at the ranch all morning."

I wave her concern away with a dismissive gesture. "Pfft, I'm fine," I assure her, trying to sound nonchalant. The truth is, being here with her and Milo feels more like home than anywhere else. There's a sense of comfort and belonging in their presence, something I never thought I'd find.

"Let's get to work. Do you have a dishwasher?"

As we begin to tackle the dishes together, I notice the absence of a dishwasher in her kitchen. It's a small space, but it feels cozy and intimate. "This kitchen, like the house, is too small and too old to have certain things," she explains. "We don't use that many dishes. It's only the two of us."

"Donna's kitchen has the same issue, and she plans on feeding us often," I state, ready to find an excuse not to drop by Donna's place when she invites us to avoid the chores that come with having to share a meal with the entire family.

We start working together, washing the dishes. I do my best to focus on the chores, but the close proximity makes my heart race. Her presence is both comforting and electrifying.

As we work side by side, Wren asks a question that shifts the conversation drastically, “Did you find out if any of you left a significant other behind?”

“Seems like we’re all single,” I answer, my mind drifting to our discussion while milking the cows. We had to check with everyone to make sure nobody had a significant other waiting for them, potentially putting them at risk.

Except for Lake, Cal’s best friend and the love of his life. She joined the program but disappeared, leaving Cal desperate to find her. He believes she might be a double agent, working for the very criminal organization that’s hunting us down.

CQS, our security team, claims they are handling her situation, but Cal is filled with both anger and worry, unsure if he’ll ever see her again. During our conversation, I could sense his pain even if he didn’t openly admit it. He’s torn between anger and concern, unable to fully let go of the connection they once shared.

Wren’s gaze locks with mine, and I can see the concern in her eyes. “I’m glad no one else is in danger from . . . what is it that you did to get on the wrong side of the mafia?”

I let out a small chuckle at her assumption. “What makes you think it was me?”

“You’re a plastic surgeon. You alter people’s appearances for a living. My guess is that they hired you to do such,” she states matter-of-factly, causing me to freeze in my tracks.

She’s wrong, but . . . she might be onto something. It takes a moment for me to find my words.

“No, that’s not it,” I say, my voice lowering as I try to process her theory. “But my father tried to pressure me into doing that for some of his associates.”

The realization hits me, connecting the dots between Wren’s theory and my father’s request. “I didn’t think much of it, but now I wonder if that demand has anything to do with what happened to him.”

I hesitate to say more. It’s a dangerous situation, and I don’t want to put Wren or anyone else at risk. “It’s complicated,” I mumble, stopping myself from saying anything further.

“Where is your dad?” she asks.

“Are you ready to exchange information, Wren?” I ask, wondering if it’s

wise to tell her anything at all.

Her eyes search mine as if trying to gauge whether we should share more about each other. Then she smiles and shakes her head.

“I thought so,” I say, pulling out my phone and firing a text to Callahan.

DRAKE: *Did I mention Dad summoned me to DC so I could perform cosmetic surgery on a few of his associates?*

Callahan: *What kind of surgery?*

Drake: *He wanted me to alter their appearances.*

Callahan: *Why didn't you tell me this before?*

Drake: *It didn't seem important at the time.*

Callahan: *Do you have any names?*

Drake: *No. I told him to fuck himself.*

Drake: *Do you think they killed him because I refused to perform the surgeries?*

Drake: *Fuck, I got our father killed.*

Callahan: *You didn't, but it'd be important to find out who was trying to get a facelift and disappear.*

Drake: *What if it was for him, and he's not dead?*

Callahan: *Though a great theory, I know he's no longer among the living. Thank you for letting me know about his plans. If you remember any names, message me.*

Drake: *I will.*

RIGHT AFTER MY exchange with Cal, I go back to stand next to Wren and begin helping her with the dishes. The clinking of plates and silverware fills the air, creating a rhythm that matches my heart's beat. Her laughter echoes around the room as we exchange playful banter, our eyes meeting in brief, stolen glances that send a tingle down my spine.

I catch her studying me for a moment, her eyes seemingly searching for something. Maybe she's just trying to figure me out, and I'm the only one wishing for more. Her gaze lingers on mine, and there's an unspoken

question in her eyes as if she's daring me to make a move.

The temptation is big. I want to put my hands on her and pull her toward me, to bridge the gap between us. But I rely on the little self-control I have left, holding back my desires beneath the façade of our casual conversation.

As I reach for the plate she just rinsed so I can dry it, our fingers brush momentarily, and a jolt of electricity shoots through me. It's a fleeting touch, yet it lingers on my skin, leaving me yearning for more. I quickly withdraw my hand, my body tensing with both excitement and trepidation. I'm afraid of where it might lead, fearful of losing myself in this magnetic pull that draws me to her.

Wren's lips curve into a playful smile, and her eyes dance with mischief as she hands me another plate. There's a glint in her gaze, a spark of understanding that stirs something deep within me. The moment passes but leaves me breathless and craving more.

I try to focus on the towel and the dishes in front of me, attempting to regain my composure. But my heart refuses to calm, pounding relentlessly in my chest like a wild drumbeat. Every fiber of my being is drawn to her, and it's becoming increasingly challenging to concentrate when her presence exerts such a powerful magnetic force that I can't ignore.

We move in perfect sync, our bodies unconsciously mirroring each other's movements. It's as if we share an unspoken language. There's an understanding between us that words can't express. So similar to the one we shared while attending to the victims last Friday night.

What is it about her that makes me feel so at ease and drawn to her in ways I can't explain? There's something deeper than attraction, something that pulls me toward her on an emotional level. I'm mesmerized by her, captivated by her essence.

With every passing second, the tension in the room thickens, the air charged with unspoken desires. It's a delicate dance between restraint and surrender as if we're both afraid of acknowledging the feelings that simmer beneath the surface. I'm torn between closing the distance between us and the fear of crossing a line that might change everything and destroy the connection we're slowly building.

But something tells me that even if I'm able to resist her today, tomorrow, things between us will continue to change. She has become a constant presence in my mind. My breathing shifts, and my pulse quickens whenever she's near. And I know, deep down, the emotions I feel for her are only

growing stronger.

As we finish cleaning the last dish, our eyes meet once more, and I can see the fire in her gaze, but there's also vulnerability.

Without thinking, I step closer, closing the gap between us. Her breath hitches, and I can feel the heat radiating from her body. I gently brush a strand of hair away from her face, and my fingers linger on her cheek, savoring the softness of her skin.

For a moment, the world around us fades away, and it's just the two of us, suspended in time. The room is filled with the faint sounds of our breaths mingling, the beating of two hearts in sync. I can hear the soft sound of her breathing, feel the racing of her heart, and in that moment, I know that she feels it too.

"We shouldn't do this, but I don't want to regret not kissing you," I whisper, my voice barely audible, afraid of breaking the spell between us.

Her eyes hold a mix of uncertainty and longing, like a stormy sea, both inviting and dangerous. She swallows and takes a step back. "Believe me, you're not missing much," she says, turning around. "I'll bring the laundry basket unless you need to go."

Her response is laced with humor, running away from our attraction and what could've been a good fucking kiss. She's probably smarter than I am. She's protecting herself from not only this moment but the fall down of an impulsive moment.

If I were using my brain, I would listen to her and leave. The next time, not even her common sense will stop me. The next time, I'll probably persuade her and won't stop until I'm satisfied. The pull between us is undeniable, like two magnets drawn together, unable to resist the attraction.

As she walks away, I'm left standing there, torn between my desire and the rational voice in my head. The taste of regret lingers on my tongue, tempting and bittersweet.

Chapter Twenty-One



Drake

AND AGAINST ALL LOGIC, I decide to stay for more.

After the kitchen is spotless, we transition to folding laundry. Wren sets the basket with freshly washed clothes on the couch, and we settle on the living room floor together. The scent of laundry detergent fills the air, mingling with the faint aroma of the lemon-scented candles she's placed around the room.

As we start the task, I can't help but feel like a fish out of water, just like I did the first time I worked at the ranch. "What is that gadget?" I point at a plastic square she's using to fold t-shirts.

"This shirt folding board?" She arches an eyebrow as if waiting for me to catch up.

I roll my eyes. "Okay, I've never seen one like that before."

"Well, it's used for . . . folding clothes," she answers with amusement, then clears her throat. "Have you ever folded clothes in your life?"

"Have I ever folded clothes?" I burst into genuine laughter, the sound echoing through the room.

"I'll take that as a no." A playful glint sparkles in her eyes as if she's enjoying my ineptitude.

"I knew it. You're just a pretty boy who grew up in a rich household, weren't you?" she teases, her grin tugging at the corners of her lips.

She's not wrong, but I don't like the implications. "Why would you say that?" I try not to sound offended but fail.

She leans in, her expression teasingly mischievous. "All of you Kershaws look too . . . pretty and well-groomed. Five-hundred-dollar haircuts, well-manicured nails, and a little clueless about mundane things."

"Mundane things?" I repeat, wondering if everyone in town sees us like her. Just a bunch of "fish out of water" billionaires, who, if left unattended, might die before the end of the day.

If that's what she thinks, she's probably right. Usually, we pay to get things done, but in our current situation, we don't have money for anything. We're poor billionaires who can't fend for themselves—we're fucked.

"Yeah, everyday chores people like you delegate to others," she explains.

“Let me show you how this contraption works.”

“You’re assuming too much,” I reply, my voice holding a hint of laughter and a touch of seriousness, as I watch her demonstrate the art of folding with ease. “But I would appreciate it if you repeated that because you went too fast.”

Instead of teasing me for being a pretty boy, she takes a different approach, explaining patiently how to fold the different clothing items with slow and deliberate movements. Her fingers glide gracefully over the fabric, making me wonder what it’d be like if she did the same with me.

Focus on the clothes, asshole. Even folding clothes is making your dick twitch. What the fuck is wrong with you?

Once I get a hold of the task, I begin to do it on my own. My movements aren’t as delicate as hers, but I try my best. This is almost like stitching with precision, but there’s no danger of losing a person if I do it wrong.

The scent of laundry detergent fills the air, mixing with the faint aroma of the lemon-scented candles she has scattered around the room. The air crackles with electricity, charged by the shared energy between us, like the electricity in the moments before a storm.

“So, are you ready for your first day at the clinic?” Wren asks, breaking the comfortable silence between us. Her voice is soft, and her eyes hold genuine interest as she looks at me.

I nod. “You know, I never thought I’d end up in a small town like this,” I confess, my gaze fixed on the clothes in my hands as if searching for the right words. A couple of days ago, I would’ve said something like: I never thought I would end up in a forsaken place like this. Today, I don’t feel that way anymore. Yet, I’m not sure what I feel about this place.

“Is it crazy to say that it feels more like home than my old house?” I ask.

Wren nods. “That’s the magic of Heartwood Lake.”

Magic? I don’t know if there’s anything like that here, but it’s definitely different. I’ve lived in three different places, and none of them have felt like home—not even LA.

“Is that how you felt the first time you arrived five years ago?” I ask, wondering why she stayed.

“Oh, no. I . . . I’ve known and loved Heartwood Lake for almost my entire life. Dad used to have a cabin up here. Every summer we’d spend eight weeks with the nanny in turn,” she shares, her tone conveying bitterness and nostalgia.

“You had a nanny?” I ask, surprised.

“Only during summers and long holidays. It was cheaper than sending us to camps every week,” she explains, her body language relaxed, like a friend reminiscing about cherished memories. “That’s how I met my friends.”

She sounds casual, but I feel the loneliness underneath those words. My heart reaches out to her in silent empathy because I know what it is like to be left behind. Was her father like mine? What about her mother?

Though I have so many questions, I settle for the safest. “So, I take it you’re from Denver?”

“Yep, born and raised,” she confirms, her gaze focused on the clothing she folds. “I moved to Arizona for undergrad. Since I had AP classes and was able to take some courses during the summer, I graduated early. Then I went to Perelman School of Medicine. I did my residency at Denver Health Medical Center. It was closer to home and my friends,” she says, the words flowing like a winding river.

No one would notice that she offered those trivial details to avoid discussing her parents.

“How did you end up here?” I ask, genuinely curious about the path that led her to this small town.

“The doctor needed help. I came a few times a month until he convinced me to change my specialty from trauma surgeon to family medicine,” she explains, her tone thoughtful.

“That’s a big change,” I state, my mind trying to grasp the significance of such a shift. “How do you go from a fast-paced emergency room to a family practice?”

“It was a big change, but as Jez’s grandma says, ‘Everything happens for a reason,’” she says, not acknowledging my question.

“But is this what you really want?”

I’ve been a plastic surgeon for more than a decade. I’m no longer passionate about it. Switching specialties makes sense, but I saw her working on patients, and I don’t understand why she doesn’t pack her things and leave to pursue her passion.

“Sure. And as a bonus, I live in a wonderful place. It’s a tight-knit community, and people genuinely care about each other,” she replies, her expression softening, revealing her love for this town.

“Yeah, I can see that,” I say, my fingers fumbling with the fabric as I gather my thoughts. “It’s different from the city, but probably in a good

way.”

She chuckles softly, and the sound is like music to my ears. “Definitely different,” she agrees playfully. “But it grows on you.”

Not sure if I’ll ever fully adjust to the town, but with each passing moment, I’m growing fonder of her. I can’t help but steal another glance at her, my heart pounding like a wild drumbeat in my chest. The tension between us grows like an invisible thread drawing us closer.

I want to reach out and take her hand in mine, press my mouth to hers, create a real connection. But I hold on to that thread of self-control and remind myself that Milo is in the other room.

A voice in the back of my head whispers, *It’ll be just one kiss, just one stolen moment.*

As I’m about to listen to that tempting voice, a faint noise comes from the monitor. It’s probably Milo, stirring in his sleep, and it’s enough to pull us back to reality. Wren’s gaze shifts toward her son’s room, her expression softening.

“He’s waking up,” she whispers.

“Yeah,” I reply, unsure if I should be relieved or upset.

It’s probably for the best I say to myself, but another part of me longs for that stolen moment, that chance to taste her lips, to touch her curves, and to explore what could be between us.

Wren gets up, leaving the laundry almost done. I gather everything that’s been folded and place them carefully back into the basket. Everything else stays on the couch.

“Hi, you didn’t leave.” Milo comes out running.

“Hey, buddy.” I wave at him, offering a warm smile. “Did you have a good nap?”

“Yeah, I’m ready for the park.” Milo stretches and nods eagerly.

Wren suggests that we finish the laundry before we leave. Milo and I nod in agreement. He’s a pro at matching socks and folding them together, his small hands work diligently. It doesn’t take us long to finish everything before we leave for the park.

And though this moment feels domestic, it also makes me feel guilty. The guilt of not having experienced moments like this with Noelle and our son, Sinclair. He was too young when we lost him, but still, I can’t help but feel regretful for the time we didn’t get to share.

The grief buried deep within me seeps through the cracks in my armor, a

slow and steady leak beyond my control. It gathers momentum, turning into a torrent of emotions, threatening to overwhelm like a river breaking its banks. It catches me off guard in its relentless grip, overwhelming and raw, a storm raging within, tearing at my heart.

My chest tightens, and I struggle to catch my breath as memories of Sinclair flood my mind. The laughter we never got to share, the memories we never got to create, all echo through my heart with a painful ache, like an unfulfilled promise that hangs heavy in the air.

All of these reminders weigh heavily on my shoulders, reminding me why I've been numb for so long, why I've chosen to shield myself from feeling anything too deeply. It's as if the universe is telling me to turn around and leave, to retreat back into the cocoon of safety I've created.

Wren's eyes meet mine, and at that moment, it's as if she sees through me, seeing the pain that I've kept hidden from the world. She reaches for my hand, her touch warm and gentle, offering comfort and understanding.

The gesture mends some of the cracks in my soul.

It's a glimmer of hope.

It's the possibility of a new day.

It's . . . something that I don't think I deserve.

Chapter Twenty-Two



Wren

SINCE WE SKIPPED our Saturday night reunion, Gina, Sutton, and Jez arrive at my house after eight. Once Milo is fast asleep and Jez has left the bar in good hands—I don't know exactly what that means.

"Where's Daisy?" Sutton asks when she enters the house holding a tray of cookies.

"Sleeping in Milo's room. Do you think you can pick her up tomorrow?" I give her my best puppy pout, imitating my son's trick when he wants something.

"Sure, but just one more night," she warns, chuckling. "I'll get her while he's still in school to avoid the 'One more week, Aunt Sutton' plea. That boy knows how to work his charm."

"Thank you," I answer, surprised that she already has a plan to avoid his puppy pout and all but yet, I'm thankful she's willing to accommodate Milo's attachment to her cat.

Once Jez finishes preparing the margarita pitcher, we head outside with the food Gina and Sutton brought. The evening breeze carries the aroma of lemon and chocolate.

"How was your parents' anniversary?" I ask, settling in my favorite chair.

"I need to drink half of that pitcher before we discuss my family," Sutton replies, reaching for a glass.

Before I can insist on getting the scoop, Jez asks, "Tell us, Wren, how was working with the new doctor in town?"

"Like any other shift at an emergency room," I respond, sounding casual. "He knows what he's doing, and that's a good skill to have as a doctor."

"Huh, she was doing great and even sounded uninterested until she added her not-so-breezy, 'that's a good skill . . .'" Regina bursts into laughter, and the other two join in.

I shoot her a playful glare. "Sometimes, I don't like you."

Gina grins. "You love me."

"And lunch?" Jez probes, ignoring our nonsense. "I heard he made something *very* special for Milo."

"Excuse me?" I ask, genuinely confused. How does she know about that?

“You can’t deny it.” Jez smirks. “Gael helped him with the meal.”

Right, the chef who’s quite comfortable invading her personal space. Yet so far, Jez hasn’t uttered a complaint about him. I find that fascinating and use it to deflect attention from myself.

I turn my gaze to Sutton and Regina before shifting it back to Jez, one eyebrow raised. “Maybe you can enlighten us about how things are progressing with Gael, your new chef.” I lean forward conspiratorially. “I heard he’s been thoroughly exploring all your, shall we say, secret nooks and crevices—in the kitchen, of course.”

Jez shoots me a piercing glare while the other two women stare at her, curiosity piqued.

Sutton fills her glass with margarita, an intrigued smile playing on her lips. “Do tell. I bet they’re doing it on top of the bar.”

“Ugh, I’ll never look at that counter the same way again,” Regina complains dramatically.

Jez’s scowl deepens, a faint flush on her cheeks. “He’s no one,” she insists coolly.

I roll my eyes in exaggerated disbelief. “Oh please, it’s obvious you have a thing for him.”

“Oh sure,” Jez says, her voice dripping sarcasm. “I’m just head over heels for the overbearing control freak. That must be why I’ve fired his infuriating ass three times, yet he still keeps showing up.”

“Why would he do that?” I ask almost innocently and add, “Maybe he likes you so much, he doesn’t care how much you push him away.”

Jez’s eyes narrow. “Actually, it’s because apparently, ‘I don’t know how to cook for shit’. His words. So he’ll just keep showing up, despite the fact I can’t afford him. He’s doing it for the good of the town, not me or my shitty business.”

“His food is good,” I admit.

Jez shoots me an irritated glare, clearly not appreciating me taking his side.

“She’s right,” Regina chimes in with a shrug, her expression showing amusement. “Sorry, Jez, but I’m just pointing out the obvious. You’re good at prepping meals, but that man knows how to cook.”

Jez leans back in her chair, a challenging smile curving her lips. “You know what? You’re fired too.” She points at Regina before turning her gaze to me. “And so are you.”

I gasp dramatically, pressing a hand to my chest. “I hope you realize neither of us actually works for you. You can’t just pink-slip us.”

She waves a hand casually. “Don’t care. You’re no longer my best friends. We’re through.”

Regina and I burst into laughter at her over-the-top response. “So dramatic,” Regina admonishes through her grin.

“So, the doctor brought you food?” Sutton redirects the conversation back to me. “I’m gone for a few days, and everyone is hooking up with the new guys.”

“Not me,” Regina defends herself.

“There’s no hooking up going on. Drake Kershaw is my new employee and nothing else,” I clarify, and I take a long sip of my drink, hoping to change the subject.

“But he brought you lunch,” Sutton persists, her eyes lighting up with keen interest as she circles back yet again.

I let out an exasperated sigh, trying to divert her attention. “Sutton, can we please talk about something else? How was your parents’ anniversary party?”

She grabs the margarita pitcher, topping up her glass. “I haven’t had nearly enough alcohol for that conversation.”

“I bet it’s like every family reunion,” Gina mumbles, giving us a rueful half-smile. “Everyone in the family is pushing Dad to retire, nagging me to get married . . . It’s just the usual crap for everyone.”

“The usual,” Sutton echoes mockingly, taking a generous sip of her drink.

“Families can be infuriating at times,” Gina concludes.

Sutton nods vehemently. “At least your family doesn’t compare you with your perfect sister who now has a picture-perfect boyfriend, career, life . . .” She trails off, frown lines forming between her brows.

Jez leans forward, eyeing the nearly empty pitcher meaningfully. “You might want to eat something if you’re going to keep pounding those margaritas.”

Sutton grabs a cracker, chewing it aggressively. “I’m single, stuck in this crappy small town, working for nothing,” she rants dramatically. She pretends to dab at tears, blinking her long lashes. “When will they understand I love my imperfect little life?”

“Never,” Gina states matter-of-factly. “What makes them happy isn’t the same as what makes you happy. So they just can’t see it.”

I nod along, even as an old sadness wells up in me. At least they have loving families who care. I can't even remember the last time my father invited me to visit or when we spoke at all. Probably when he declared I was ruining my life over nothing.

He lectured me relentlessly about my life choices—how children are just financial burdens that destroy your career and freedom. I'll never forget his words when I had to decide about keeping Milo: "You don't need *that* child. Get rid of him."

I wish I could blame his cruelty on grief, but deep down, I fear that's how he truly felt about us kids after my mother left him.

"Ooh, someone has company," Jez murmurs, jolting me from my bitter reverie. She grins wickedly. "I wonder if she's going to kick us out so they can make out."

"What is she talking about?" I ask when Regina chimes in, "I forgot he's *really* hot."

Right on cue, Drake appears before us with an easy smile. "So your friends made it today, after all?"

"He's pretty. You should do him." Sutton, clearly tipsy, slurs her words.

"I think I should take her home," Jez mumbles. "She had one too many margaritas."

"No kidding, she killed that first pitcher single-handedly," Regina remarks wryly.

Sutton slurs her words almost unintelligibly. "A you gonna innerduce us to the sexy doitor guy?"

I resist an eye roll. "Drake, meet my former friends Sutton, Jez, and Regina. Ladies, this is Drake Kershaw, the eldest of his family."

Drake dips his head politely. "A pleasure to meet you all."

"Are you a package?" Sutton erupts into wild laughter before adding more nonsense, "You doctor, cook—"

"She's so fucking drunk." Regina bursts into laughter, finding the situation highly amusing.

"Gael, my brother is the one who cooks," Drake responds like the gentleman he is.

Jez hooks her arm around Sutton's waist, hoisting her up. "Speaking of, tell your brother he's fired. Again." She tugs Sutton toward the door. "Let's go."

Drake's brow furrows slightly. "Isn't he closing the bar tonight?"

“Well yeah, but after today he should consider himself fired,” Jez insists.

“If I were you, I would keep him for another year or two,” Drake suggests.

“Oh, and why’s that?” Jez asks, leaning forward with amusement and curiosity evident in her eyes.

“He’s a great cook and expensive,” he replies, but somehow I have the feeling that there is a lot more than that. I wouldn’t doubt that he can’t tell us because it’s against some stupid policy.

One day, I’ll learn all their secrets.

Jez crosses her arms. “Really? Where did he learn these impressive skills?”

Drake glances at me, his posture stiffening as he crosses his arms over his chest.

“It’s time for you three to go home,” I say, hoping they take a hint.

“But I can stay,” Gina claims, wanting to linger around.

“No, you’re going too,” I firmly respond, determined to put an end to this awkward encounter before things get out of hand.

Regina huffs. “Fine, I’ll leave, but you owe me details.”

I nod absently, eager for them to leave.

Once alone, Drake grins. “Good, it’s now just the two of us.”

It’s not until he says the last three words that I realize my mistake because now it’s only the two of us sharing the same space, alone, at night. My eyes dart to his lips. I have two options, walk inside my house or . . .

Chapter Twenty-Three



Drake

WREN'S TEETH catch on her bottom lip. Her skin takes on a slightly darker shade, and I find myself captivated by how fucking adorable she looks when she's nervous or flustered. It hasn't taken me long to learn her subtle tells. Her emotions are written all over her face, and it's a refreshing change from what I've experienced in my life so far.

"You okay?" I ask gently, forcing my gaze away from her tempting lips.

She nods, blowing a heavy breath out as she does. "I love my friends dearly, but sometimes they can be too much to handle."

I suppress the laughter because the three of them were pretty funny. One was attempting to fire Gael, another seemed curious about me, and Sutton was, well, I have no idea what Sutton was trying to accomplish with her slurred words in her drunken state.

"They seem like fun," I comment, trying to keep the conversation going and hoping she'll invite me to stay.

Wren huffs out a laugh. "Fun wouldn't be the word I'd use to describe either one of them."

"Tell me more," I suggest, silently hoping she'll allow me to linger a little longer.

She glances around at the trays of unfinished food, the empty margarita glasses, and the pitcher. "Umm, maybe another day. I have to tidy up before heading to bed."

Disappointment pricks me, though I know not to push. I gather dishes instead. "Or I could help tidy up while you explain why Jez is so set on firing Gael," I counter, heading inside.

"Aren't you tired after today?" she questions, trailing after me. "I mean, you were swinging Milo for hours."

"It wasn't hours, and I still have some energy left," I say, flashing her a grin before entering the house and setting everything on the counter. "Besides, I'd rather spend time with you than my brothers."

"You should be bonding with them," Wren suggests, her brow furrowing with concern. Her eyes linger on me for a moment, as if trying to gauge my emotions.

“I’ll try that another day. How’s Milo?” I ask.

“Fell asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow,” she says, her tone conspiratorial. “Thank you for today. I really appreciate everything, the food, the park . . .”

“It was nothing. I’m just glad it worked out for Milo,” I say, trying to sound casual.

But in truth, it was more than just a visit to the park. Today, I did things I never imagined I would enjoy—activities I should’ve done with my girlfriend and my son. These two strangers filled my well with an energy I never knew existed or that I needed.

After our time together, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about them. Yet, my mind also drifts to all the moments I’ll never have with Noelle and Sinclair.

The guilt gnaws at me, and I don’t know how to handle it, other than seeking the peace Wren gives me with her mere presence. I don’t want to leave, but I can’t tell her the real reason for my restlessness.

“You don’t have to help me,” Wren says, her eyes following my movements as I push up the sleeves of my sweater and turn on the water.

Instead of arguing with her, I divert the conversation to Jez’s comment. “So, why is your friend firing my brother—again?” I inquire, hoping to learn more about the dynamics of this town.

“She’s very protective of her kitchen,” she states.

“So, the people in this town are territorial with their businesses?” My rhetorical question delivers the necessary sarcasm to hit the nail, but in case I’m not being obvious, I add, “Even when you need doctors, bartenders, and chefs?”

Her head snaps in my direction, eyes flaring with a mix of surprise and annoyance. “Seriously, Drake? You’re talking shit about me after I hired you?”

“I’m just stating the obvious, but let’s not forget that it took a lot to convince you,” I remind her, trying to ease the tension my comment may have caused.

When I peek over, she’s smiling, which surprises me. “Do you hire just any doctor for your practice?”

I lean back slightly, stunned by her unexpected question. “What does that have to do with this?”

She grabs a drying towel and extends her hand, gesturing for me to pass

her the first margarita glass. “It’s a yes or a no answer.”

“No. I did a . . .” My voice trails off as I realize that until now, I hadn’t fully put myself in her shoes. “Okay, so I understand your point. This stranger, who might or might not be a criminal, asks for a job with little to no information, and he gets offended by your rejection.”

“Bingo,” she says.

“And yet, you invited me to spend the day with you.” I clear my throat. “*The criminal.*”

Her eyes stare at me, one brow arching a little higher than the other. “Umm, no offense, but you kind of included yourself by offering lunch.”

“And I appreciate that you let me tag along,” I respond, grateful for the opportunity to spend time with her and her son.

“You could indeed be a criminal, but I doubt CQS would let you frolic around the town if that were the case,” she points out, making a valid argument. “Still, giving you a job without knowing your qualifications is a big risk.”

“Why are you taking it?”

“You worked well under pressure, and I do need help,” she explains, her brows slightly furrowing in thought. “Turning people down because there’s only one me weighs on me. But most importantly, I can spend more time with Milo. He’s growing too fast, and I don’t want to miss these years because I’m working all the time. Hiring you helps me find a balance between my son and my career.”

I nod in understanding, though a part of me wishes I had done something similar before it was too late with Noelle and Sinclair.

“Glad I can help,” I say, my fingers twitching to reach out and caress her cheek, to lean in and capture her mouth. I’m dying to kiss her. But I resist the temptation, reminding myself to keep my hands to myself. I can’t risk complicating things between us.

Shaking my head to clear my thoughts, I order myself to calm the fuck down before I do something foolish. I clear my throat, focusing on the dishes in front of me. “You own my time, so just schedule me whenever you feel like it, okay?”

I hurry to wash and tidy up the kitchen, keeping myself busy to distract from the strong attraction I feel toward Wren. It’s not that I don’t want to spend time with her. On the contrary, I find myself drawn to her. But I can’t fuck this up for either of us.

We need each other and not in the way my dick thinks.

When I finish, I dry my hands and walk swiftly toward the door, eager to put some distance between us.

“Thank you again for today,” she says with a playful glint in her eyes, her lips curling up into a subtle, flirtatious smile.

I linger for a moment, my eyes involuntarily tracing the outline of her lips, before offering a salute. “Anytime. See you tomorrow, boss.”

As I turn to leave, I catch a flicker of something in her gaze. Is it disappointment? Perhaps, but it’s better to step back now than to complicate things further. She doesn’t need the added aggravation, and I can’t afford to let my desires cloud my judgment.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Drake: Morning, got the coffee. Did River drop breakfast at your place?

Wren: You're spoiling Milo.

Drake: I want to think that we're just helping.

Wren: I appreciate it, but I can prepare breakfast.

Drake: Sure, but do you have time to prepare dino-muffins with fruit?

Wren: Well, no. I don't own molds or have a chef in the family. How did you make this happen (the molds)?

Drake: We have our ways.

Wren: Something tells me that you guys are using a lot of CQS assets to

live more comfortably.

Drake: Surprisingly no. We're not allowed to do much unless we use the magic words.

Wren: Which are?

Drake: THIS IS FOR MILO. :wink: emoji

Wren: You're using my son?

Drake: Not at all. Gael is just asking for dinosaur molds, cooking gadgets, and more to create new food. They only say yes because they're for Milo. We can't get anything else, so no, we're not using him.

Wren: I appreciate everything you are doing for him.

Drake: It's fun to see him gush about dinosaurs and learn that he's no longer fighting lunchtime.

Wren: Did I tell you that this weekend we're going to dig dinosaurs?

Drake: I heard.

Wren: If I could, I would invite you.

Drake: Thank you, but we have to follow the rules. Just make sure to take enough pictures and videos.

Wren: You got it. We're heading to the school. See you in thirty minutes.

Drake: Probably more, Mr. Jensen is here for a rash. Wish me luck.

Wren: :shamrock: emoji

Chapter Twenty-Five



Wren

WHAT AM I doing with my life? Ever since Drake started working for me, he's been having dinner with us every evening. Sometimes I cook, other times he brings something prepared by his brother.

After we eat and clean up the kitchen, he sticks around to hang out with us. The fact that he looks adorable, either playing ball with Milo or reading books, makes me melt. I know I should be more guarded, but he's so amazing with my boy that it's impossible to draw a line.

I just hope Milo doesn't get the wrong idea.

This evening, like many others, I lean in the doorway, unable to stop smiling as I watch them. Drake sits cross-legged on the floor, his large frame hunched over the coffee table as he dramatically reads Milo's favorite book collection. The ones with dinosaurs. His sound effects and roars send Milo into delighted giggles.

At work, Drake is serious, but here he's so playful and patient. He seems to like spending time with us more than anything. I know I shouldn't read too much into it, that I need to keep my distance. But this just feels so right.

"Bronto munched on leaves, watching glumly as the others played with a ball," Drake narrates. He turns the page and pitches his voice higher. "What's wrong, Bronto? Why aren't you playing?" asked Polly."

Milo's laughter rings out while I watch from the doorway, resisting the urge to join in. Drake really does have a knack for voices—even I can't quite match his vocal range and dramatic flair.

When they finish, Drake glances up, catching my eye with a warm grin. "Instead of spying over there, you should help me with the voices."

My cheeks warm with embarrassment at being caught, but I can't help the smile that tugs at my lips. "Maybe next time."

Milo's head whips toward me, eyes bright. "You could try. Drake does voices waaay better than you, Mom."

His enthusiasm is infectious, and I can't help but come over and ruffle his hair affectionately. "I heard. His dinosaur roar is pretty impressive."

"Can you read another book?" Milo pleads, bouncing in place. Drake chuckles warmly, obliging with another dramatic reading, this time of Milo's

beloved book: Triceratops Try Tacos.

Drake looks so natural with Milo, as if they've known each other for ages. His eyes sparkle with genuine joy, and his lips curve into a tender smile as he listens to Milo's animated questions about tacos, triceratops, and if Gael could make Tricer-tacos for dinner.

Throughout their playful interaction, I notice Drake stealing glances at me now and then, his eyes soft and tender. The sight sends a flutter of anticipation through me, wondering what thoughts or feelings might be swirling behind those eyes. But just as quickly, I halt my hopeful fantasies and start second-guessing myself.

I focus my attention on Milo's infectious laughter and the adorable way he imitates Drake's roars. Yet, beneath the surface, a mix of excitement and nervousness churns whenever our eyes meet. My emotions are a whirlwind, but I can't afford to let them run wild. Just then, my phone chimes with a text.

Grateful for the distraction, I glance away from Drake's handsome face and find a message from Sutton.

Sutton: *So, he's at your house again, huh?*

Wren: *What are you talking about?*

Sutton: *Dr. Hottie Drake.*

Wren: *What about him?*

Sutton: *I know the good doctor had dinner with you and hasn't left your place yet.*

Wren: *Are you spying on me?*

Sutton: *No, we just want the scoop.*

Wren: *There's no scoop. He brings food made by his amazing brother, and I can't just push him away. It's called politeness.*

Sutton: *You have a crush on the doctor.*

Wren: *He's my colleague.*

Sutton: *Have you at least ridden the doctor?*

Wren: *Stop right there.*

Sutton: *You're no fun.*

Wren: *Your concept of fun is different from mine.*

As I'm typing my response to Sutton's last text, I catch sight of the time on my phone. Instead of continuing our conversation, I turn my attention to Milo. "Okay, Milo, it's time for bed," I announce, hoping he'll understand and won't throw a sudden tantrum.

His lower lip juts out in an exaggerated pout. “But I want Drake to read more books.”

I walk closer to him, smoothing his messy hair and giving him a knowing look. “The books won’t go anywhere, but it’s bedtime.”

Drake smiles warmly at Milo. “Your mom’s right, buddy. But I can come back, and we’ll read the rest, okay?”

Milo’s pout dissolves, replaced by a grin. “Okay, see you tomorrow,” he agrees brightly.

Taking Milo’s hand, I lead him toward his bedtime routine. “Let’s get pajamas on and brush those teeth,” I gently coax. He drags his feet a little as we head to the bathroom.

As we go through our regular bedtime ritual—showering, putting on pajamas, and brushing his teeth with his favorite blueberry-flavored toothpaste—I hear Drake tidying up the living room. The domesticity of it all warms my chest, and I can’t help but feel a sense of contentment settling over me.

After our bedtime prayers and some sweet snuggles, I finally get my sleepy, dinosaur-obsessed little boy settled into bed. I turn out the lights and leave his door slightly ajar, just how he likes it.

When I return to the living room, Drake is waiting with a tender smile that mirrors my own overflowing emotions. This evening has felt like a glimpse into a future that suddenly seems possible, but I shouldn’t want.

My heart is tired of the whiplash, but I don’t know how to do this any other way. I suck at relationships, and I always seem to choose the wrong person. That’s why I should resist picking him. But my body . . . Well, it’s not concerned with logic. It only craves Drake, here and now.

“Shall we chat outside for a bit?” Drake asks, and although I know I should send him home to respect my boundaries, I find myself agreeing to spend more time with him.

The cool night air provides a welcome relief after a long day. I settle onto the porch steps beside Drake, handing him a freshly poured glass of merlot.

“To surviving another crazy week at the clinic,” I say, clinking my glass against his with a grin.

Drake chuckles. “It was a trial by fire, that’s for sure.”

I take a sip, savoring the rich wine. “You’re so great with all the patients, though. They love you. I don’t know how I managed without you before.”

“I’m just glad that I can lighten your workload a little.” He swirls the

deep red liquid pensively.

“Have I mentioned how thankful I am that you’re here?” I bump my shoulder against him playfully. “No, seriously. It’s made a huge difference at home and the clinic.”

Drake meets my gaze, his eyes glinting with warmth. “I should be thanking you for taking a chance on me. Turns out I love being a small-town doctor.” His gravelly voice sends a shiver through me.

Inwardly, I wrestle with the urge to lean over and kiss him senseless. Instead, I take a breath and steer the conversation to lighter topics—amusing patient anecdotes, plans for Jez’s birthday, whether Gael should make us gluten-free cupcakes. Anything to distract me from the magnetic pull between us.

Too soon, Drake glances at his watch and then gives me an apologetic look. “I should probably get going. I have an early day tomorrow at the ranch.”

I try not to let my disappointment show as we gather the wine glasses and bottle to rinse in the kitchen. The merlot has left me feeling warm, relaxed, and dangerously comfortable in his presence. His closeness makes my pulse skitter erratically. I hold on to the last thread of self-control I have in my body.

Once everything is tidy, we linger by the front door. We’re close, too close. The warmth of his body radiating, inviting me to burn with him.

“I had a really nice time tonight,” Drake rumbles, his voice gravelly.

“Me too,” I breathe, locking eyes with him, the intoxicating proximity rendering me breathless. I can see the sexy stubble on his jaw, smell his cedar and musk scent. It would take nothing to close the distance. The pull is undeniable, and I’m teetering on the edge of something I can’t afford to fall into.

“Well, good night,” I say hastily, taking a step back, breaking the magnetic connection that threatens to overwhelm me. This is for the best. I can’t complicate things for either one of us.

“Yeah . . . good night,” he mumbles. With a terse nod, he turns and walks away.

I remain frozen on the threshold, watching until he disappears from view. With a sigh, I head inside, replaying the almost-kiss in my mind. If I hadn’t pulled away, would that have been just an innocent kiss?

I spend the night tangled in restless dreams where Drake’s fictional lips

finally meet mine. And I know dreams are the only place we'll find that dangerous pleasure. I can't let things go further, no matter how tempting he is.

Chapter Twenty-Six



Drake: *Morning. I'm on my way to the office. Anything I need to know before I arrive?*

Wren: *Good morning. I should be there by eight. I'm pretty confused by your question. Care to clarify?*

Drake: *When I arrived yesterday, my office had two cats, remember?*

Wren: *:laughing: emoji*

Drake: *It wasn't funny.*

Wren: *I found it hilarious, but don't worry about it. There're no cats or other animals in your office—or the practice.*

Drake: I still can't understand why they were at my office.

Wren: Gina just needed a safe space for the night. We can't just let them loose in the clinic. It's not very sanitary. She totally forgot that the office was now yours.

Drake: I've been there for a month, and it took me hours to sanitize the clinic.

Wren: Again, she forgot. And you had the new nurse do your dirty job. Stop complaining, Dr. Drake.

Drake: One day, I'll have an animal waiting in your office, and we'll see if you find that funny.

Wren: You're fired.

Drake: You and your friend have to stop firing us.

Wren: This is the first time I want to pink-slip you. Is Jez still threatening Gael?

Drake: Of course, he dared to buy a new stove and freezer for the bar.

Wren: You Kershaws have to stop . . . I don't even know what you're doing. We don't need your assistance. Remember the saying? Don't fix what's not broken.

Drake: Nope, it's: If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Wren: That's what I said.

Drake: It's not, but Jez should let the asshole help. Even when it's for his own gain.

Wren: What is he getting in exchange?

Wren: I know it's not sex.

Drake: He gets to be in the kitchen and cook anything he wants.

Wren: Seriously, he's spending crazy amounts of money so he can cook?

Drake: Yep, he's weird that way.

Wren: So Callahan needs to be in the security company. Gael in the kitchen. I need to start watching the rest to figure out what they used to do before they came here. River is always delivering things. Did he own a shipping company in his past life?

Drake: lol

Wren: It's a valid conclusion.

Drake: He was just a pretty boy :wink: emoji.

Wren: So you're not going to tell me what he used to do?

Drake: No, I think you've got too much information from me. If CQS finds out, they're going to kick us out. Bye-bye, Kershaw brothers (forever).

Wren: *Keep the dramatics for someone who'll believe you.*

Wren: *Milo is up. Time to start my morning routine.*

Drake: *Say hi to your boy. See you soon.*

Wren sent an image

Drake: *I like that picture of him and his new stuffy.*

Wren: *Thank you for Paco the pterodactyl.*

Drake: *Don't thank me. Finn got it for him.*

Wren: *Because you asked him. Don't you think I know?*

Drake: *It was nothing. Talk soon.*

Drake

As I step out of the cabin, River's intense glare locks onto me instantly. "You still have to help at the ranch," he says sharply.

I raise an eyebrow. "Are you the new hallway monitor?" I joke.

He doesn't crack a smile. "No, but you can't just bail on your duties because you got a job," he insists, his jaw tensing. "You're no different from Callahan. For the past month, neither one of you has done shit at the ranch. We're supposed to be working there, remember?"

"We work during the weekends," I point out, irritation flickering across my face.

"It's not enough," he grumbles.

"How's that arm healing up? The one you badly burnt three weeks ago," I ask, unable to resist a smug tone. "Oh wait, it's nearly healed because I treated it at the clinic."

River's scowl deepens. "That's not the point."

"It is, actually," I state, my patience wearing thin. "If I wasn't at the clinic, no one would have been able to treat your injury as quickly. And Cal is working with CQS to resolve our case faster so we can get out of here." I meet his glare steadily. "Sorry if you can't see the bigger picture. But there are more pressing concerns than cows and chickens right now."

"You forgot the horses," he adds, his tone a mix of sarcasm and seriousness.

I roll my eyes. "Sorry, tell Sir Prancelot next time I go to the stables, I'll bring carrots for him and apologize for not visiting him often. Happy?"

He squints, clearly unamused. "You're not as funny as you think."

"Neither are you," I respond sharply, my annoyance showing through. "Now, what do you want from me?"

"We just want this to be fair with the ranch work," he states.

"It's not like I'm lounging around while you guys work," I remind him, trying to keep my voice down because if we fight, we won't be able to avoid each other for months or years, the way we used to do it.

"I work nights, but you don't see me complaining," he argues defensively, jaw ticking.

I raise an eyebrow. “Speaking of, how did you get hired at the bar when they didn’t need staff?”

He smirks. “What can I say? I’m very persuasive.”

“Is that why you’re here? Your brothers sent you to convince me to . . . What exactly is that you want from me?” I ask warily.

“We have a proposition,” he pauses, clearing his throat. “You work mornings with us, then go to the clinic at eleven,” he states.

“Wren needs me to cover mornings so she can have time to be with Milo,” I remind him.

His jaw clenches. “Can she get a babysitter or a nanny?”

I scoff. “We’re not in the Thorndale world anymore. In this town, people care for their children, and they don’t just delegate the responsibility to some stranger,” I retort, emphasizing the difference between normal people and our fucked-up family.

“That’s a foreign concept.” He taps his temple. “It doesn’t compute.”

“Understandable. Look deep inside your hardened heart and stop harassing me about the ranch. There’re plenty of hands to help,” I suggest, trying to end the discussion.

River scratches his chin contemplatively. “Fine, I’ll leave you be for now.” His lips quirk up. “But you owe me one.”

I frown warily. “Owe you what exactly?”

“Not sure yet, but I’ll cash in when I need it.” He smirks as he walks off, leaving me uneasy.

I just made a deal with the devil, it seems.

Is it worth it?

But it is worth it, I remind myself. Wren and Milo’s lives are better with me around. I’ll deal with River when the time comes. How much can he really ask while we’re all stuck in this small town?

He’s harmless . . . right?

Chapter Twenty-Seven



WREN: *Thank you for the flowers?*

Drake: *What's with the question mark? You do know how to use your punctuation, right? ← See, this is a question.*

Wren: *Ha, ha!*

Drake: *My text was intended to educate you, not to humor you. You should talk to the professor. He might give you a lesson or two on when to use a question mark.*

Wren: *:raised eyebrow: emoji . . . Who is the professor?*

Drake: *So about those flowers, are you thanking me for them or just*

letting me know you received them?

Wren: Oh no, you don't get to change the subject. I need to know which one of your brothers is the professor.

Drake: No, you don't.

Wren: (inserts puppy pout)

Drake: As cute as you might look with that pouty face, I won't be telling you anything else.

Wren: It's Slade, the guy who hasn't arrived yet.

Drake: Wren, stop.

Wren: Magnus, the broody one?

Drake: Stop.

Wren: It's one of your sisters. Did you know Elle now works with Mrs. Lawrence in the tailor shop?

Drake: We can only hope that Gen will get a job soon.

Wren: She's working at the ranch, right?

Drake: Sure, but everyone is trying to get a job outside the ranch to avoid chores.

Wren: Good luck with that.

Drake: Why do you say that?

Wren: You still have to do your part at the ranch, or the people who run the Endor program won't be happy.

Drake: CQS?

Wren: They're not the only ones involved.

Drake: Who else is involved?

Wren: You tell me your secrets, and I'll tell you mine.

Drake: Ha, like I'm going to fall for that.

Wren: So, about the flowers. They're pretty, but why did you send them?

Drake: It's been two months since we started working together. I wanted to commemorate this.

Wren: Thank you, I appreciate everything you do in the clinic and my life.

Drake: It's a pleasure.

Wren: Are you coming back to the clinic this afternoon?

Drake: Nope. Remember that there's this meeting I have to attend at CQS, which will take almost all day. I could talk to Cal and see if they can give me the SparkNotes later.

Wren: No, don't worry. We'll be fine.

Drake: *Who's going to watch Milo after school?*

Wren: *Sutton.*

Drake: *I'm sorry for this.*

Wren: *Hey, it's totally fine.*

Drake: *Debatable. Can I see you tonight? That means don't hide in your room instead of enjoying your backyard.*

Wren: *I don't hide.*

Drake: *Though I want to believe you, Sutton says you've been doing that since the Sunday she got hammered—two months ago.*

Wren: *Sutton has taken first place on my shit list.*

Drake: *See you tonight :wink: emoji.*

Wren

When the doorbell rings, my pulse skyrockets, threatening to escape my chest. Part of me wants to ignore the person behind the door, but curiosity wins, and I make my way to it, swinging it open.

Drake is right in front of me, armed with that handsome grin and dreamy eyes. “Hey,” he greets me.

“Hi,” I manage, trying to steady my frantic heartbeat. I’m sure he can hear it hammering. The only thing I can do is move aside to let him in.

This is a bad idea, Wren. You should just kick him out and maybe set up a schedule in the clinic so our paths don’t cross until he’s out of the program. And maybe this is why he’s here—to say he’s leaving town for good.

Bye-bye, hot surgeon. Hello, my old peaceful life.

Okay, it wouldn’t be that peaceful, and he’d be missed terribly . . . But it’s for the best. He needs to return to his old life, and I have to repair the walls he’s been slowly breaking down since he entered my life.

“Are you okay?” Drake asks, brow furrowing.

I nod. “Yeah, what do you need tonight?”

His mouth quirks. “You’re cute when you’re nervous. You know that?”

I scowl at his teasing. “Am I amusing you, Kershaw?”

“Why are you grumpy, Dr. Lynch?” he rumbles, sending shivers through me. “Do you need me to check you out, make sure you’re healthy?”

I cross my arms, irritated. “Don’t flirt with me.”

His grin widens. “So fucking adorable.”

I huff impatiently. “Is this some kind of last-day wish?”

He frowns, confused. “What does that mean?”

“You guys are leaving tomorrow, so you think it’d be a good time to fuck the doctor before you leave?” The words slip out before I can stop myself, and I immediately cover my mouth, regret washing over me.

Hurt flashes across his face. “You must think very little of me. The last thing I would do is use you.”

I bite my lip, chagrined. “But you’re leaving, aren’t you?” My voice wavers slightly despite my efforts to remain composed.

He steps closer, and I instinctively shy back, trying to keep space between

us. But he doesn't give up and takes another step forward. We dance like that, a silent push and pull, until he says, "Stop, you're about to hit yourself with the wall."

"What's gotten into you, Drake Kershaw?" I ask shakily, my pulse racing from his sudden proximity. I'm not scared—rather, unsure if I can trust myself this close to him.

I can feel the heat radiating off his muscular frame as he edges nearer still, his eyes searching mine intently. My heart pounds, and tension thrums in the scant air between us.

Slowly, he raises a hand to the wall just above my shoulder, leaning in. Drake's eyes bore into mine, exploring every nook and cranny of my soul. They seem to be begging for an answer to some silent question he hasn't yet articulated. His hand slowly rises and leans on the wall right above me.

Time stops as he takes yet another step closer.

He continues to dip his head, eyes smoldering.

He's close.

Closer.

Closer . . .

Until finally, his mouth captures mine.

My heart leaps as our lips melt together, unleashing weeks of repressed longing. We'd avoided this for so long, fearing the fallout, but now our reservations evaporate.

His kiss is electric, jolting through me. His lips are soft yet assured, stoking my desires higher. When his hand finds my waist, pulling our bodies flush, I can't help winding my arms around his neck, surrendering fully to his embrace. Excitement wars with apprehension. I never want this exquisite moment to end.

Our kiss seems to last for an eternity, and when we finally pull apart, I feel like I am in a dream. But Drake is still here, his intense gaze fixed on me. In his eyes, I feel suddenly like the only person in the world. He's baring his soul in this moment.

We stare at each other, speechless, our eyes swimming with unspoken emotions. My mind is a whirlwind of thoughts and questions, but all I can manage to say is, "Why?"

This is unfair. I'm trying desperately not to fall for this man, to protect myself from the potential heartbreak, and what does he do? He kisses the fuck out of me.

Who gives this man the right to kiss me senseless and leave me like . . . ?

I have never felt anything like this before in my life, and I want this to last forever.

How can I make it so this moment never ends?

“Because you’re beautiful . . . No, you’re fucking adorable. I just can’t resist you anymore,” he states, as if it’s obvious and I should just deal with it.

“You’re leaving,” I remind him.

“We don’t know what the future will bring. So far, they’re saying it could be years before we can go back. I can’t just stop living until they decide it’s safe,” he adds, his eyes searching mine for understanding. “I’ve been doing that for years. Years. I did it once, and thank fuck, you and Milo helped me recover and understand a thing or two about life.”

I suck on my bottom lip as I stare at him, his words sinking in and stirring up a mix of emotions. “But you’re leaving.”

He shrugs, trying to appear nonchalant despite the gravity of the situation. “Who knows what I’m doing? For all I know, I could die tomorrow, and I’d miss the chance to kiss you.”

I frown, confused by his morbidity. “Why would you die?”

“It’s . . . you’re seriously freaking out, aren’t you?” And I’m impressed by how easy it is for him to read me.

“Can you blame me?” I retort, feeling torn between wanting to embrace him and fearing the pain of separation.

“No, but . . .” He lets out a loud breath, struggling to find the right words. “Have I told you about Slade?”

“The brother who hasn’t arrived yet?”

Drake nods. “He should be here in a couple of weeks.”

“That’s good, right?”

“Nope. He suffered multiple injuries. I don’t know much, but Finn said he’ll update you once they’re ready to transfer him. He almost died, just like Callahan, before we moved to Heartwood Lake.” He runs a hand through his hair. “While we were listening to CQS and they were interviewing us to see if we could figure out more about our case, all I could think about was you. What if I don’t get to kiss you? What if I don’t get to . . .” He trails off with a heavy sigh. “I don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow, but I already fucked up my life once.”

“And you think we’re like a do-over, that you can fall in love twice?” I inquire, my heart aching with both hope and trepidation.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



Drake

I STARE AT WREN, and her words play on repeat. “And you think we’re like a do-over, that you can fall in love twice?”

“That’s the thing, I’ve never been in love,” I confess, my hands shaking slightly. “Noelle and I . . .” My voice trails off as I struggle to find the right words without sounding cold and heartless.

I hold my head with both hands as I walk around the living room, trying to put all my thoughts together before I speak. The memories flood my mind, and I can feel the weight of my past mistakes pressing down on me, threatening to damage what could be my present.

“We met during our residency,” I start the story, my eyes distant as I recall the past. “One thing led to another, and we became friends with benefits. It just made sense. We weren’t together because we were madly in love with each other, but because it was just a natural progression. Sinclair happened, and we moved in together.”

She frowns. I can see the wheels turning in her mind as she processes my words. “But you didn’t do it because you loved her and your son?”

I scoff. “That’s my biggest regret,” I confess. “I can’t say that I miss the love of my life, only that I lost my family. The guilt sometimes is suffocating, especially when I miss you so fucking much—and we’ve only been apart for hours or maybe a day.”

“What happened to them?” she asks gently, her eyes filled with empathy.

“She got a job offer in another state,” I answer, staring at the wall while I recall those days. “We fought about it because my practice was thriving. It was new, but I was making a name for myself without the help of my father—no one knew him in Los Angeles.”

I clench my fists, feeling the anger building up inside me as I recall the argument. “‘You can’t just uproot our lives like this,’ I had pleaded, my voice tinged with desperation. ‘What about us? What about Sinclair?’ I made promises to change, to be present—to love her.”

Glancing at Wren, I continue, “But she was determined to pursue the offer since I was unable to offer her more. The more we argued, the more apparent it became that we were at an impasse. One day I came home, and

she had left, taking everything with her.”

I let out a loud breath, exhaustion evident in every line of my face as I rub my eyes, trying to push away the painful memories that still haunt me. The ache in my chest feels all too real, as if the wounds from the past have been freshly reopened. The news of the accident had shattered my world. I might not have loved Noelle, but Sinclair? I adored my boy.

“Noelle didn’t have to drive the moving truck,” I admit, my voice tinged with frustration and regret. “We could have afforded any service, but she insisted on doing it herself.

“They never made it to their destination,” I add, the words heavy with sorrow and disbelief.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” she mumbles and then adds, “That’s why you pull away from Milo sometimes, don’t you? You feel guilty about spending time with him.” Her words cut through my self-blame like a knife, and I can’t help but feel the sting of truth in her words.

I nod, ashamed of myself. “I want him to have everything because his father left him,” I admit, my voice cracking. “Who chooses to leave their kid willingly? But then, I don’t feel like I deserve his love, or that it’s fair to Sinclair.”

Wren’s eyes narrow in fierce protectiveness. “You can’t use my child to clear your conscience,” she declares, sounding like a mama bear defending her cub. “We’re not a replacement for something you lost or a charity case.”

“Fuck,” I growl in frustration. “I’m saying everything wrong, aren’t I?”

Wren stares at me, and I’m pretty sure she’s about to kick me out of her house and her life. “I suck at this,” I confess, feeling vulnerable and exposed. “I come from a long line of heartless assholes who don’t know how to speak feelings.”

Her lips twitch in a small smile, and I take it as a sign to continue. “So maybe the first couple of times I was trying to give him something I thought he was missing,” I try to explain, my emotions a jumbled mess. “But, in fact, I didn’t bring anything to the table. It was the two of you who filled all the cracks in my soul: his laughter, your sassiness and kindness. But of course, I was trying to avoid him because the guilt was gnawing at me. I wasn’t like that with them—ever. I didn’t fall in love with Noelle, but I adore you.”

Her eyes open wide in surprise, and for a moment, I fear I’ve said too much. But I can’t hold back any longer, the words spilling out in a torrent of emotion and vulnerability.

“I’m not expecting you to say much, only to let me into your life,” I continue, my voice pleading. “Though I’m broken, I want to make you fall in love with me.”

With a shaky breath, I point at the flowers I sent earlier. “These are just to tell you that I’m thinking of you, not to celebrate two months of working together.”

“You can’t just burst into my house and tell me that you love me when we barely know each other.” Her response is guarded.

I point at my ear, emphasizing my words. “I didn’t say that, but I’m falling madly and irrevocably in love with you.”

Her eyebrows knit together in confusion, and I can see the turmoil in her eyes. “And what am I supposed to do with that information when I know you’re leaving?”

“Am I?” I counter, my heart sinking at the realization that she believes I’ll be just another temporary presence in her life.

“No one stays after they leave the Endor program.”

“Cal promised me they’re going to fix everything so we can go back to our normal lives,” I say, my hopefulness tinged with uncertainty. “I can’t promise much, but hopefully, my normal life will be here with you and Milo.”

“You’re a stranger,” she reminds me, her voice soft yet firm.

“I step closer, closing the distance between us. “Thorndale. My name is Drake Thorndale,” I introduce myself, hoping she’ll see that I’m sincere in my intentions. “Please, Wren, just give me a chance.”

Her gasp echoes through the room, and she gawks at me, unable to find the right words to respond.

“You’re not supposed to tell me anything. What if they kick you out of the program?” she asks.

My heart pounds in my chest. “I trust that you won’t tell anyone my secret. I’m trusting you with our lives, Wren. Can you trust me with your heart?”

“Drake,” she whispers my name, and for a moment, there’s a glimmer of hope in her eyes.

But then reality crashes down on me, and I feel like I’ve just failed my family and fucked up my life all over again. Of course, she can’t trust me. I’m just some asshole who might leave the way Milo’s dad did. I told her that I’m not different from him, and now she’s faced with the very real possibility

of history repeating itself.

The urge to pull her close and give her one last kiss before I leave is almost overwhelming, but I know it's not the right thing to do. So instead, I salute her, my heart heavy with regret and longing. "I understand. If you think we can't continue working together, let me know," I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

She nods, and I can see the pain in her eyes as she tries to hold back her emotions. I turn around, forcing myself to walk away even though it feels like I'm leaving a piece of my heart and my hope behind.

As I walk out of her house, I can't help but wonder if I've made a huge mistake. Maybe I should have kept my feelings to myself, played it safe, and not risked everything for a chance at love.

But then again, if I never took a chance, I would have never known what could have been. And as much as it hurts now, I know that I would have regretted it even more if I hadn't tried.

I glance back, and I mumble, "Please don't let me go." But it's an empty plea because deep down, I can't escape the nagging feeling that maybe we Thorndales are destined never to love, that our family is cursed when it comes to matters of the heart.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Wren

I STARE at the closed door, my mind spinning with a whirlwind of emotions. My heart continues beating erratically, unable to calm down after Drake's unexpected confession. He told me his name and . . . he's falling in love with me.

Gazing at the flowers he sent me, I close my eyes, trying to remind myself what happens with men like him. Men don't give two shits about the women they claim to love. Men who think we're objects to use. Men who . . .

Brighton used to call them Daddy issues, warning me that some men didn't care about the women they claimed to love, using them as objects for their own pleasure. On her deathbed, she urged me to be safe, especially for the sake of Milo. For the past eight weeks, I've been trying to move on from the pain of the past and protecting myself from getting hurt again.

But Drake's vulnerability and the pain in his eyes make me question if he's different. Could he be the exception to the rule? Is it possible that not every man is like the ones I've encountered before?

Unable to shake these thoughts, I pick up my phone and call Finn, hoping to get some clarity.

"Yeah?" he asks on the other side of the line.

"What's going to happen with the Kershaw family once they're out of the Endor program?" I inquire. "They have to leave, right?"

He scoffs. "So, the doctor talked to you tonight, huh?"

"You knew?" I let out a gasp, unable to contain my surprise.

"Yeah, but it's obvious that he's in love with you," he states matter-of-factly. "He's doing everything he can for Milo and you. Who do you think paid for your trip to New York so Milo could go to The American Museum of Natural History?"

"I . . . why would he do that?" My confusion deepens, and I wonder if maybe, just maybe, Drake's feelings are genuine.

"Because believe it or not, he loves the two of you and wants to see you happy," he states.

"He had another family and is trying—"

“Fuck, don’t do that, Wren. No one is replacing anything or anyone,” Finn’s voice cuts in, his irritation palpable even through the phone. “Listen, I know you’ve had a shitty life, but not every man you meet is an asshole. Plus, this guy is really trying to become who you need—and the person you can fall in love with. It’s not my place to tell you this, but the guy has been attending therapy for weeks.”

“Why is he doing that?”

“I told him to fix his shit before he tried to make a move.”

“And when he’s out of the Endor program?” I circle back to my original question.

“You two will have to decide what to do with your future. The question isn’t what happens tomorrow, but what are you going to do today?”

“I can’t trust him.”

Finn sighs heavily on the other side of the phone. “You don’t want to trust him. If you’d like, I have an extensive directory of therapists who’ll help you with your underlying issues.”

My mind races as Finn’s words sink in. Underlying issues? Maybe he’s right. I’ve never taken the time to work on myself. When my sister died, I focused on everything and everyone but my own mental state.

“He’s not Cain,” Finn breaks through my thoughts and brings up my ex.

I had been more concerned about Vincent, but I refrain from saying so. Instead, I inquire, “How do you know he’s not?”

“It’s my job to know that. I wouldn’t keep the family among civilians if I knew any of them were sociopaths.”

“I can’t just let him into my life and see if this works out,” I mumble, unsure if I’m talking to Finn or simply thinking aloud.

“That’s up to you, but just remember, life is short. Call your friends, so they can babysit Milo and go talk to him.”

“Since you’re so invested, you could come help,” I tease, attempting to lighten the heavy conversation.

“Though I’d love to help, we’re in Seattle for the unforeseeable future.”

“You’re not taking care of your sociopaths?” I joke, hoping to elicit a smile.

He chuckles. “They’re normal, broken people who need a reality check, but they’re harmless. Also, we have plenty of personnel at HQ to watch over them. But if you need anything, holler, okay?”

“I probably will,” I admit, grateful for his unwavering support.

I SENT a text to the group chat. Regina is the first to arrive at my house shortly after I text my friends. She doesn't ask any questions, simply urges me to hurry up before my carriage turns into a pumpkin. As I approach the cabins where the Kershaws are staying, I spot a man by the firepit. It doesn't take me long to recognize him. It's Drake. He turns around as I come closer, and a sad smile tugs at his lips.

"Hey," I greet him.

He slightly tilts his head, silently urging me to continue.

"My sister used to say that our biggest problem was that we were starved for love," I begin, my voice trembling with vulnerability. "We just want people to love us, to feel cherished."

Drake remains still, his eyes fixed on me as if waiting for more.

I swallow hard, gathering the courage to continue. "All my relationships have been a disaster."

"Including Milo's dad," he states with a hint of understanding.

I shake my head because that's an entirely different subject that I might have to tackle today too.

"I was doing my residency in Baltimore, John Hopkins." My gaze drops to the ground momentarily before meeting his eyes again. "I thought I met someone there, but things took a turn for the worse."

He furrows his brows, puzzled. "I thought you said Denver?"

I bite my lip, a mixture of shame and regret flooding through me. "Yes, I did. I moved to Denver after everything that happened in Baltimore with Cain."

I press my lips together, taking a deep, cleansing breath. "So, as I was saying, I met this guy who came to my ER. He was handsome, older, and successful. He said the right words, and I fell for him."

He was an older man, about thirty, handsome, with an air of confidence and authority. He had a presence that I was drawn to, like he had power and knowledge that I wanted. So, even though I was scared and uncertain, I kept seeing him. We would go out, just the two of us, and he would buy me dinner, drinks, and gifts. I thought he loved me, and I felt special, like something was happening between us.

Fidgeting with the sleeve of my sweater, I muster the courage to continue. "He gave me what I was missing—love. It's something I always craved, you

know. Even after enduring broken relationships, I couldn't see that I was falling for the wrong man.

"Cain had a temper. He was jealous, possessive, and . . . I missed the signs because I had what I craved—love and attention," I mumble, my voice barely audible. "It all started with verbal abuse and ended with me in the hospital, facing the risk of losing an eye and suffering several broken bones."

His jaw twitches, but he remains quiet, allowing me to continue.

"You and your brothers reminded me of him. It's not fair to compare you, but after all the toads that have hurt me, I decided to close myself up to relationships."

Drake's eyes narrow, showing his concern and curiosity. "Where does Milo's dad fall into this story?"

He doesn't, but if I'm going to give us a chance, he has to know.

"In theory, he's my nephew," I mumble. "My sister died soon after he was born. She was involved with the wrong people. When I brought her here, I also dragged in undesirable company. Finn took care of the trash, but I couldn't save her."

I close my eyes briefly, still feeling the weight of the loss. My sister's memory lingers, and I miss her dearly.

"All the attention that you give me scares me. A part of me is waiting for the switch to flick and for you to . . ." I shrug, unable to articulate my fear completely.

He scrubs his face, and I see a ghostly smile illuminating it.

"What's funny?"

"I mean, nothing of what you say is funny. It's tragic and painful, and I want to beat the shit out of every man who hurt you," he states with a mixture of protectiveness and anger. "I just thought that maybe I'm too defective to have a real relationship."

"I mean, you're not perfect, Drake Kershaw. You're arrogant and bossy, but also kind and gentlemanly, and I don't think I have all night to tell you how amazing you are even when sometimes you drive me crazy."

"So you like me?" he probes, his arrogance surfacing.

"See, there's the arrogance right there," I quip, trying to lighten the mood.

He grins in response, extending his hand. I walk toward him willingly, drawn to his presence. He takes me into his arms, and our mouths meet once again. This time, I allow it to happen.

His embrace is secure, holding me close. His scent, a mix of sandalwood,

musk, and spices, envelops me, and I feel the warmth radiating from his skin.

Electricity courses between us as our lips move together, exploring every inch of one another. There's no fear, no hesitation. All that exists is our mutual desire, which grows as we explore each other.

He holds me as if I'm the most precious thing in the world, and I respond in kind, wrapping my arms around his neck, my fingers playing in his hair. My body trembles with pleasure, the warmth spreading through me almost too much to bear.

The kiss deepens, and I feel his tongue caressing mine. I respond with equal fervor, our tongues intertwining as one. Our breathing becomes labored, and our hearts beat faster and faster.

Finally, he pulls away, his eyes mirroring the wonder I felt when we first met. He smiles at me, his eyes twinkling, and I smile back.

I find myself looking into his eyes, realizing how much I love him. I smile, feeling a warm glow spreading through me.

"I mean it," I whisper. "You're amazing, Drake, but you also scare me."

He grins, pressing his forehead against mine. "You're pretty amazing yourself," he murmurs, kissing the tip of my nose. "Frightening, and you make me feel all kinds of emotions that are foreign to me. However, I want to take the leap. Jump with me."

Can I take a leap with him?

We stand there, gazing into each other's eyes, both of us lost in this perfect moment.

But the question remains there. Am I brave enough?

Chapter Thirty



Drake

WREN'S GAZE darts away as she fidgets, rubbing her bottom lip between her thumb and forefinger. I resist the urge to stop her nervous gesture with a kiss, instead I ask gently, "So, where do we go from here?"

She gives a half-hearted shrug. "I'm not sure. I want this to work out for the three of us, but . . ." She drags her teeth over her swollen lip, brow furrowing. "There's just so much uncertainty."

Reaching out, I lift her chin until our eyes meet. "When this is over, I don't care about reclaiming my old life. I just want to keep being with you and Milo, however and wherever that is."

Wren sighs heavily, eyelids fluttering closed. My chest squeezes with apprehension. "What's wrong, baby?"

"What if you leave?" she mumbles.

Before I can say anything, Wren opens her eyes but immediately glances away. "Before I left the house, Regina told me . . ." She pauses, fiddling with the hem of her sweater. "That I need to work on my abandonment issues. I'm so scared of people leaving that I push them away first."

I understand it, but instead of pushing people away, I just never let anyone into my life. We're no different from each other until she came into my life. From the beginning, I not only let the door open for her but fought my way into her inner circle. What she needs from me is to know that I won't let her do to me what she's been doing to everyone else.

I'm here to stay for as long as she lets me love her.

Gently, I brush a kiss on her lips. "Just so you know, no matter how hard you push, I'll keep coming back."

The corner of her mouth quirks up. "Even if I fire you?"

I laugh, the worry in my chest loosening. "I might open a new practice and become your competition."

She gasps, eyes flying wide with exaggerated dismay. "You wouldn't dare."

Grinning, I take her hands in mine. "Of course not. But I do want to know how you envision our relationship. We'll move at your pace—no pressure."

"Slowly," she murmurs, gaze falling. "I need to work on myself, and we

have to be so careful with Milo.”

“Does he know that he’s . . .” I trail off uncertainly.

“Adopted?” Wren lifts her eyes to meet mine again and nods. “Yeah, I’ve always been open with him about it. He’s my special boy.”

Her lips curve into a soft smile. “My sister gave him to me as a gift before she left for heaven. That’s also why he’s always trying to expand his family.”

My head tips in puzzlement. “What do you mean by expanding his family?”

“He understands family isn’t just blood,” she explains. “He has aunts, uncles, and grandparents who adore him even though they aren’t related by blood.”

I tap my chin. “Is that why he asked River if he’ll be his uncle?”

“Probably.” Wren nods. “He just wants to bring more people into his family, the more the merrier.”

“He’s never asked me to be anything,” I say, unsure if I have to be worried or hurt. I love that kid.

At that, her gaze darts away again.

I gently tilt her chin back to me. “What is it? What aren’t you telling me?”

“A few days ago . . .” She hesitates. “He asked if you and I were going to bring him a little sister.”

I can’t help but burst into surprised laughter. The thought of becoming a part of their lives, of embracing a future with Wren and Milo, and potentially having more kids, fills me with anticipation.

It also gives me hope that one day, Milo will accept me as his father.

My therapist’s words come to mind, about learning to love without betraying the memories of the past. Embracing a new chapter in my life with Wren and Milo doesn’t mean forgetting my son, but rather finding a way to remember him without the burden of guilt that has haunted me for so long.

Loving Wren and Milo doesn’t replace the family I couldn’t embrace before, but it’s a way for me to heal and grow. It’s an opportunity to allow love back into my life, to open my heart to the possibility of a future where I can be happy maybe for the first time in my entire life.

Wren cracks a sheepish half-smile, her cheeks flushing pink. “He has such a great imagination.” Her expression grows serious. “But for this to work between us, you have to be committed to him too. He’s my whole world.”

Reaching out, I squeeze her hand reassuringly. “I don’t know what the future holds, but I promise I’ll not only love you, but I’ll do everything I can to be what you both need.”

I meet her earnest gaze. “Can I guarantee a little sister someday?” I chuckle and shake my head. “We’ll just have to see where this journey takes us.”

The tension in her shoulders seems to ease. “That sounds like a good compromise for now.”

I grin. “Why don’t we go inside the cabin? Cal is gone. We can have some coffee and finish this conversation, unless you have to go home.”

She takes my hand, and together, we walk toward the cabin. “Thank you for listening to me,” I murmur, my lips brushing the inside of her wrist, a gentle gesture that conveys the depth of my gratitude. With a soft exhale, I open the door, ushering us inside.

“Thank you for being so understanding,” she responds, her voice barely above a whisper as she steps into the cabin and scans the surroundings. Her presence fills the space, and a pang of desire stirs within me.

“Where is everyone?” she asks, and I sense a hint of relief in her words.

I shrug. “Cal is probably training at CQS. He’s trying to show them he’s trustworthy and a quick learner by working late hours. The rest shouldn’t be here. They have their own cabins.”

And this is when I realize we’re alone.

I’m alone with Wren Lynch in my cabin. She’s looking not just beautiful, but edible. If I could just get one lick, one bite . . . anything more than the kiss we shared in her house.

I want to love her, gently, roughly, and with all my soul.

“What’s with that look, Dr. Kershaw?” she teases, her words pushing me further toward the edge of reason. “You seem to be thinking about doing something, aren’t you?”

Should I tell her?

I can’t just tell her that I want her in my bed.

I want to devour her . . .

Fuck her.

Fuck her the way I haven’t been able to do, but I’ve wanted for so long.

I want to show her with my body how much she means to me, making sure that she loves every second that I’m inside her.

Clearing my throat, I ask, “What do you mean?” My voice comes out

normal. I'm trying to sound innocent, but my heart pounds loudly in my chest, betraying my façade.

She cups my face with her hands, bringing our mouths tantalizingly close. Her warm breath brushes against my skin, and I'm intoxicated by her proximity. "I'm pretty sure you know," she breathes, her voice a whisper of temptation.

"Is that an invitation, Wren?" I ask, my voice low, mirroring her sultriness.

She nods slowly, and I can't resist the urge to trail my fingers along the side of her face, down to her neck. Her eyes flutter closed, and I inch closer, my lips hovering over hers, savoring the anticipation of this long-awaited moment.

Before I do anything else, I draw away from her hold, locking the door to ensure our privacy, and then lead her to my room.

"I can't wait to unwrap you, like a present," I murmur, my heart pounding with anticipation as I lead her closer to the bed. With a gentle tug of her hair tie, I release her auburn waves, and they cascade freely around her, framing her face like a halo.

"And worship every inch of your body," I add, my fingers trembling with the intensity of my emotions as I begin to undress her with tender reverence.

"You're so beautiful." I kiss the base of her neck. "So fucking beautiful."

Her sweater is off, and I can't help but grin at the sight of her only wearing a tank top with nothing underneath. Her nipples are already hard with arousal. The sight of her as she lets me undress her is so fucking hot—intoxicating.

I slide the straps of her top off her shoulders. First one, then the other, until it gathers at her waist. I inch my hands downward, my fingertips tracing the gentle curves of her body. She bobs her head slowly, her breath hitches, and her skin flushes a deep red.

I pause, savoring every moment as each inch of her soft skin is unveiled before me. My heart races, pounding against my rib cage, and I take a deep breath to steady myself. Her bare breasts move with her breathing, captivating me, and it's impossible to tear my eyes away.

I want to touch her, but I'm not sure where to start. I raise my hand, gently caressing the side of her face with the back of my fingers, then trailing down to her neck. She closes her eyes, her vulnerability evident, and I lower my mouth to meet hers in a light, tender kiss. I want to remember everything

about this moment—the way her lips feel against mine, the taste of her, the electricity in the air.

With a mix of restraint and desire, I pull away and proceed to take off the rest of her clothes, standing back to admire her beauty. My heart melts as I take her in, wanting to embrace her and hold her close forever. Her presence electrifies me, and a deep sense of satisfaction washes over me as I revel in the sight of her.

Gently, I grasp the back of her neck and kiss her desperately, trying to convey the overwhelming emotions running through my veins. I breathe her in, letting her fill my entire existence with hers, while I surrender my heart to her.

However, the ache inside me for more pulls me away from the kiss—I need to be inside her, to connect with her on a deeper level. To become one with her.

“Sit on the bed,” I order, my voice husky with desire.

She gives me a mischievous grin. “Who said you’re in charge?”

I reach out and take her hand, stroking it tenderly. “No one is in charge. I’m just here to worship you.” I wink at her, taking a seat.

She inhales sharply as I pull her to me, her pupils dilating. Never breaking eye contact, she sits next to me, her lips parting invitingly. Slowly, I lean in, meeting her mouth with mine. Our kiss is unhurried, allowing me to focus on the subtle reactions she emits, letting her set the pace.

I slide my hands up the curves of her body, exploring her with my mouth too. I take my time savoring every moment. My hands travel to her hips and slowly start to slide her panties down.

Her breathing becomes heavier, and I feel her body trembling with anticipation. I gently kiss the inside of her thighs as I inch her underwear down her legs.

Once her panties hit the floor, I spread her legs wider. Her vulnerability and beauty captivate me, and I take a moment to admire her.

“Such a pretty pussy,” I whisper, my voice thick with desire.

Everything about Wren is so perfect and inviting. I run my finger over her clit before trailing my lips from her knee all the way up to her core. My tongue darts, circling her clit slowly, exploring her with pleasure as I thrust two fingers deep inside her.

She shudders as I begin to fuck her with my mouth. Her moans are like music to my ears, and I can feel her body quivering beneath me. I continue to

caress her with my tongue, faster and faster until her moans become louder and more intense, fueling my own desire.

Wren wraps her legs around me, pushing my head closer as she starts to climax. I keep my tongue and fingers fucking her pussy as wave after wave of pleasure crashes over her. She shakes and moans in pleasure, gripping onto me as her orgasm takes over her body.

Finally, when her breathing is even, I remove my own clothes, and I stand before her naked. My heart beats fast with anticipation and trepidation. Her eyes are on me as she sinks into the soft mattress and her wild hair covers my pillow. I reach for the condoms on the nightstand.

I carefully open the foil and roll the condom down my length, the anticipation and nerves tightening my grip. Kneeling in front of her, I pump my cock, trying to steady my trembling hands before gently setting it at her entrance. Slowly, I push myself inside her tight, warm core. Inch-by-inch, I mold myself, not only inside her warmth, but her soul.

There's a mix of fear and excitement swirling within me as I continue. Questions popping up every second. Am I enough for her? Can I surrender myself completely? Yet, I push those thoughts away, immersing myself in this moment with her, determined to savor every minute.

I'm determined to figure out how I found myself in the place I thought I had lost everything. I came here with the idea that my life had stopped, and suddenly, this woman showed me the truth. The truth is that I've been lost until now.

I was lost until her.

She's the person who found me.

She's the place where I belong.

Once I'm fully inside her, I know she's home.

When that sinks in, I move my hips deliberately, seeking a rhythm that matches the tenderness of our connection. I lean forward, capturing her lips with mine, wanting to taste her as we move together. My senses are heightened, and I drink in every moan, every flick of her tongue, cherishing the moment as she gives in to pleasure beneath me.

Our movements grow more intense, an exquisite dance of bodies molded perfectly together, as if she was made for me. She matches my hunger, kissing me with the same intensity, her body quivering and bucking with pleasure. As we move faster and harder, I can barely catch my breath, and an explosion of ecstasy rips through me.

I feel like I'm reaching for something beyond my grasp, and with one final thrust, we're soaring to the heavens, transcending the ordinary and touching the corners of the universe where the most brilliant stars shine.

We both tremble in pleasure, our bodies still entwined, our hearts racing in perfect harmony. Lying there, basking in the aftermath of our passion, I feel as if nothing else in the world could ever compare to this moment.

As if nothing else could be better than surrendering myself to Wren.

Chapter Thirty-One



Drake

WREN FALLS asleep in my arms. I don't have the heart to disturb her sleep, and I don't want her to leave me this soon. If we could have a few more minutes—at least until midnight. All I want to do is hold her, be next to her. Lost in thought, I'm interrupted by noises outside my room. Grabbing a pair of shorts and a shirt, I slip out, trying not to wake her.

“So, you and the doctor are finally a thing, huh?” Callahan asks as I enter the living room where he and our brothers are gathered.

Fuck, I can't have a moment of peace. What would it take to get permission from CQS to let me live outside the cabins and the ranch? Is that even possible?

Though I spoke to Finn about this, my relationship with Wren and my future, I never asked him about my accommodations. It's not like I plan on moving out right now, but as I look at my obnoxious brothers, I wonder if I can do it soon.

“Are we having a slumber party?” I quip, though my stomach twists with anxiety. Why the fuck are they here?

“We could.” River grins. “Tell us about the horror story you unleashed. The one where you most likely will end in a tragic monogamy.”

“Enough. This isn't why we're here,” Magnus snaps, his stern gaze boring into River and me.

I study the tense faces of my brothers gathered in the living room. “What are you doing here?” I whisper, hoping they won't wake Wren.

“You asked CQS to liquidate all your assets so you can move here permanently,” Callahan says, his eyes narrowed. “We want to know what the fuck you were thinking?”

“He's not thinking,” Magnus interjects with a bark.

I wish they would mind their own fucking business, but as we discussed it earlier, everything we do affects the other. I rake a hand through my hair with a frustrated sigh. “It's not like they let me do it,” I remind them, still seething from my conversation with Finnegan and Derek.

And even though they didn't let me just disregard my old life so I can become Drake Kershaw, I took a leap and told Wren how I feel about her.

With another sigh of frustration, I confess, “Waiting until this gets solved feels like a lifetime.”

Gael shakes his head disapprovingly, his brow deeply furrowed. “But did you have to go and declare your undying love to the doctor?”

How the fuck do they know? I’ve come to realize that this town is not just small but also remarkably gossip-prone. It never ceases to amaze me how quickly everyone becomes aware of anyone’s actions, yet no one seems to question who we are or why we’re here.

“Drake?” Magnus pulls me back into the conversation. All eyes are fixed on me.

“It’s simple. I want to live now,” I assert firmly, meeting each brother’s gaze. “Slade’s life is hanging by a thread, and his mother is dying alone. We’ve already lost our father. These past few months have taught me that life is too short,” I say, avoiding the admission that I’ve already lost one family, naïvely believing I had all the time to make it up to them.

I won’t make that mistake again.

Not again.

Magnus glowers, then he turns on Callahan. “Can you just get us the fuck out of this place?”

“Easy there.” Callahan holds up a placating hand. “Like I said, this won’t happen overnight. I’m doing everything I can to speed it up, but realistically, it’ll take years.”

“Years,” I echo, though I don’t sound resigned like Cal. I’m in fact happy that I’m here finding myself and the person I belong to—Wren.

Cal tilts his head toward me. “Maybe the doc is onto something. We all need to start living life now instead of waiting for this to end.”

River stands and squeezes my shoulder reassuringly. “So, the plan is we follow big bro’s example, falling in love and all that mushy stuff.” He waggles his eyebrows playfully. “Who knows, maybe Bach will hook up with the sexy librarian next.”

“Fuck you,” Bach growls, his fists clenching at his sides.

I frown, puzzled by River’s statement. “Why?” Honestly, I don’t see the professor hooking up with Sutton.

“You know, they like words and shit,” River responds and laughs. “The studious professor and the bookish librarian—they just make sense.”

Bach’s jaw tightens, but he stays quiet.

I want to defend Bach but decide to let it go for now. “Well, if that’s

everything, you should leave.”

As I turn to head to my room, Callahan asks, “What are we doing with Slade?”

I stop short, my shoulders tensing as I glance back at him, perplexed. “What do you mean?”

“You’re the doctor. What are we doing for his recovery and rehab?” he prods, eyes narrowing.

During today’s meeting, Finn told us that Slade was MIA up until last week. Thankfully, CQS found him, rescued him, and he’s now in the hospital in critical condition. They don’t know if he’ll make it. Once he’s stable enough, they’re bringing him to Heartwood Lake. They’ll keep his MIA status until it’s safe for him to leave.

“We’ll figure out his accommodations when he’s well enough to travel,” I reply carefully, realizing I need to tread lightly here. Anything I say might make me responsible for Slade. I don’t plan on abandoning him, but we all have to help him, as a family. “He’ll probably stay in the clinic or . . . We can’t decide until we get an update from the hospital where he’s currently at.”

I don’t add how I don’t know if Slade will accept our help or what will happen to his frail mother. “We’ll work it out when the time comes,” I add as an afterthought.

Callahan studies me for a couple seconds, and eventually he nods as if accepting what I just said.

Of course, in that moment, Wren steps forward, her eyes flashing with anger. “It’s my clinic. I should be the one who decides who stays or doesn’t.”

I groan inwardly because this is something Finn wanted to discuss with her directly—when the time is right.

Arms crossed, Wren glares at me, her beautiful eyes like daggers. “Were you ever going to tell me about it?”

“Nope,” I say, trying to sound neutral, but obviously failing because the last thing I want is for her to be pissed at me.

She stares at me accusingly, tapping her foot as she clearly waits for an explanation.

I glance at Callahan pleadingly. “You’re the one who works for CQS. Maybe you’d like to take over this conversation.”

Cal grins. “Sure, I’ll save your ass.” He stands from the couch and turns toward Wren. “During today’s meeting, we got an update about our situation. Plus, we learned Slade was injured during a mission. CQS rescued him, but

we don't know much beyond his current status and that he'll probably come to Heartwood Lake when he's stable."

"Is he Special Forces?" Wren asks.

We all nod.

"Were you Special Forces?" she asks Cal, her eyes like two slates.

"No, I'm a former FBI agent," he answers matter-of-factly. Though it's not confirmed that he's no longer with the bureau, he's operating with the understanding that they'll never give him his job back. "But that's not important. What matters is that our brother is in critical condition. If he pulls through, Finn plans to discuss the next steps with you."

"But you're already deciding that he'll go to my clinic." She glares at me, her arms crossed.

I shrug, avoiding her piercing, accusing stare. "It'd be the most logical thing to do, and why I gave them that answer. It's not easy to keep these assholes calm."

"More so when we were trying to grill him about your relationship." Gael grins wickedly, waggling his eyebrows suggestively. "We wanted to know how far you've gone . . . we got our answer though."

River begins to make squeaking noises.

"Stop or I'll rearrange your face with my fist," I warn him.

Wren scans the room, her lips pressed in a thin line, and shakes her head in exasperation. "If I ever hear any of you complain about the town's gossip, I'll remind you that you're no different from the rest."

She begins to walk toward the door, chin held high.

"You're not staying?" I ask, my heart sinking as she stalks away.

"I'm not ready for sleepovers. We have to tread this carefully," she states.

I gently take her arm desperately, wanting to smooth things over. "Let me put on something to walk you to your place."

"I can go by myself," she says, reaching for the door handle.

"I know, but I'd rather go with you, if you'll allow it." I stare at her, hoping she's not upset and doesn't kick me out of her life before we even get started.

Will this become some kind of fight between us that will drag on until I buy her some expensive present?

"Okay, just hurry. I really need to be home." She smiles softly, the anger in her eyes dissipating.

My shoulders relax, and I have to remind myself that Wren isn't a woman

who plays games. She speaks her mind and will tell me when she's upset and would rather not have me around. The corner of my lip lifts as I'm beginning to understand that things don't have to be complicated. Not everyone is out to stab me in the back, and I can let myself be vulnerable with the woman I love.

Realization dawns on me. This new life isn't a punishment from my father, but an opportunity to reinvent myself, and I'm ready to embrace it.

"SORRY for not disclosing Slade's condition earlier," I say as we walk toward Wren's house, the gravel crunching under our feet.

She shakes her head with a weary sigh, her shoulders slumping. "This is the story of my life. I'm always the last person to learn who's landing at my clinic. Though I hate it, I understand it."

I furrow my brow in confusion, struggling to comprehend her calm reaction. "How can you say that so easily?"

"CQS has been my employer for years. Finnegan Gil doesn't like to explain himself or disclose much. If he tells me your brother is coming, but then something changes that, Finn has to deliver the news to me twice." She doesn't stop walking, but glances at me, giving me an exaggerated eye roll. "It's not practical from his viewpoint. Though, you and your brothers knowing before me irritates me."

Since I don't want to have any secrets between us, I tell her more about Slade, his mom, and their current situation. I add my conversation with Finnegan.

"So, you were planning on uprooting your life and just moving here?" she asks. "What if things between us don't work out and I run you out of Heartwood Lake?"

"I told you before, and I'll repeat it as many times as you need to hear it, I won't let you push me away." I stop and gently grasp her shoulders, gazing into her eyes intently. "Unless you stop caring about me. Then, I'll leave."

Wren bites her lip and hugs herself, glancing up at the starry sky. "I want to believe you. Let me work it out in my head, okay?"

"Thank you for not getting upset with me," I add sincerely, relief flooding through me.

“As I said, it irritated me, but I understand that’s not your fault.” When we arrive at her house, she pushes herself on her tiptoes and kisses my jaw tenderly, sending tingles through my skin. “I’m not here to play mind games with you. If I’m upset with you, you’ll know. Sometimes, I’ll confront you right then, and other times, I might ask you to give me time to calm down.”

I wrap her in my arms, pulling her body close against me, inhaling her sweet scent. “I meant what I said. I want to be with you, no matter where you want to live.” I bend and kiss her deeply, never wanting to let go, hoping this is one of the last times I have to reluctantly leave her warm embrace for the night.

Chapter Thirty-Two



Drake: Morning, beautiful.

Wren: I'm beautiful?

Drake: Of course you are.

Wren: Morning, handsome.

Drake: Are you ready to start the day?

Wren: Yep, I just got out of the shower.

Drake: Feel free to send a picture. :wink: emoji

Wren sent an image

Drake: A picture of you freshly showered, not of your shower. :rolling-

eyes: emoji

Wren: Oh, I don't think we're in that stage of our relationship where I'll share selfies with you.

Drake: What stage are we in?

Wren: I'm not sure yet, but I'll keep you updated.

Drake: I'm heading to the clinic. Donna prepared the muffins today.

Wren: Not Gael?

Drake: It seems like my brothers decided to get drunk last night and started their chores too late.

Wren: You're not drunk like them?

Drake: Nope. When I came back to the cabin, they were gone. Let's just say that you saved me from a killer hangover.

Wren: You're welcome. Do you want me to bring the coffee?

Drake: Nope, I got that too. Don't worry about it.

Wren: See you then. :kissing-heart: emoji

Wren

The entire morning has been a whirlwind of patients and paperwork. It's around noon when I finally push open the door to my office, looking forward to a quick break. I'm surprised to find Drake already there, with two large paper bags in his hands and a smile lighting up his face.

"You brought me food?" I ask, immediately kicking off my shoes with a relieved sigh and shrugging off my crisp white lab coat.

"We're undressing already, Dr. Lynch?" He wiggles his eyebrows playfully, his blue eyes dancing with mirth.

I let out a little laugh as I hang my coat on the back of my desk chair. "That's not what I'm doing," I say, going over to Drake and peering at the bags curiously. The savory smell of takeout food makes my stomach rumble. "What's in there?"

He smiles warmly, eyes crinkling at the corners. "Sandwiches, fruit, nothing too fancy. I thought we'd take a little break and have a picnic lunch in your office. I know how hard you've been working, racing around the clinic all morning, so I figured you deserved it."

I'm touched by his thoughtfulness. My small office is cluttered with medical books and notes, but he has already cleared a spot on my desk and laid out napkins.

"You've been working just as hard, seeing patients all day, and I didn't bring you anything," I say ruefully. "Is there something I can do for you?"

In response, Drake steps closer, his strong, muscular arms enveloping me and pulling me tight against his firm body. His mouth meets mine with an eager hunger that steals my breath away.

His warm, inviting lips ignite a raging fire within me, and I respond with the same intensity. My longing and desire mirroring his passion.

Our kiss deepens rapidly, our tongues intertwining in a passionate dance. His large, skillful hands venture beneath my blouse, exploring every inch of my sensitive skin with tender, teasing strokes that send delightful shivers through my entire body. I can't help but moan softly against his mouth as his clever fingers graze my breasts, and my body quivers, desperately craving more.

My hands run across the hard planes of his back, clutching him tighter in an effort to eliminate any remaining distance between us. His thick cock presses against my belly, making me want him more.

The scruff of his jaw rasps deliciously against my cheek as he trails searing kisses down my neck. My pulse races wildly, my heart pounding with arousal. Every nerve in my body is humming, alive, and attuned to him. I have never wanted someone so much and with such intensity.

But I could make this more interesting. A sudden surge of courage and excitement rushes through me as I kneel before him.

“Wren,” he says my name with such reverence it feels like he’s the one kneeling in front of me, about to worship me.

My heart pounds in my chest as I reach for his slacks, undoing them with trembling fingers. I sense his intense gaze upon me, and a newfound desire to please him fills me.

His cock springs out, eager and swollen. I lick my lips as I marvel at it for a moment, my fingers gently tracing its length, making him gasp. When I look up, his eyes are dark and intense, a strange mix of joy and desire.

Drake Kershaw is at my mercy, and I’m ready to make him scream for more.

I lean forward, wrapping my lips around his veiny dick and begin to swallow him.

“Babe, I’m going to come undone fast,” he warns me, moaning in pleasure.

His fingers entwine in my hair, and his hips move in perfect rhythm with my hands and mouth. The intense heat radiating from him engulfs me, and I’m swept away by a passion I’ve never experienced.

With each passing second, my mouth grows wetter, and my tongue explores every inch of him with a hunger that matches his desire. The overwhelming sensations flood my senses, and my breaths become faster, caught in the whirlwind of ecstasy we share.

His moans grow louder and louder, and soon I can feel his orgasm building. I revel in the knowledge that I hold him in my grasp, and the moment fills me with a sense of empowerment I can’t deny.

I own this man.

This beautiful broken man who’s giving me everything. His trust, his heart, even his soul.

Last night, when he wrapped me in his arms, I realized I had fallen in

love with him even when I tried my best to shield my heart. And somehow, I'm not scared anymore. I'm ready to open up and let him inside. To give him everything I have and need.

I wrap my hands around him, pulling his hips forward into me as his back stiffens.

"Wren, Wren," he groans just as he fills my mouth with his essence. The satisfaction of knowing I've brought him to this point fills me with a deep warmth.

I can't help but smile, feeling a deep connection with him that words can't describe. At this moment, I know that there is no turning back. I am his, and he is mine. Everything else will work out on its own time.

Chapter Thirty-Three



Drake: *Morning, beautiful.*

Wren: *You woke up a little late today.*

Drake: *Nope. I had to help at the ranch. They dragged me out of bed at four in the fucking morning.*

Wren: *Anything I can do for you?*

Drake: *You can help me with a little math before your first patient.*

Wren: *Math?*

Drake: *You + your couch + me*

Wren: *Ha!*

Drake: I'm not kidding.

Wren: My couch needs a break from your antics, Dr. Kershaw.

Drake: Fine, let me buy a couch for my office, and we can alternate
:wink: emoji

Wren: You're not funny.

Drake: No, I'm horny and tired. You take care of the first one, and I'll deal with the second.

Wren: Though I'd love to help you, I think you're forgetting that today I'm not going to the office. In fact, I'll be gone for the entire weekend.

Drake: Fuck, I totally forgot you're leaving for Seattle. Is Milo excited about the trip?

Wren: He is ready to go to his first football game and meet all the players.

Drake: Send me pictures.

Wren: Maybe next time you can come with us?

Drake: I don't want to push my luck. It'll put you, Milo, and my family in danger.

Wren: One day you'll be able to get out of here—at least for vacation and to explore the world with Milo and me.

Drake: It'll happen. I have faith in Cal and CQS.

Wren: Have you realized that you and your brothers are starting to become more of a family?

Drake: It's a work in progress. My sisters and I are still not there, but you know what they say, New York wasn't built in one day.

Wren: It's Rome.

Drake: I just wanted to make sure that you're paying attention. :wink:
emoji

Wren: :rolling-eyes: emoji

Drake: Don't pretend you didn't laugh. In fact, I'm pretty sure you want me to kiss you—maybe even fuck you for making your day lighter.

Wren: Umm, nope. And I have to hurry up. I didn't pack last night.

Drake: May I remind you that you kicked me out of your bed so you could get ready?

Wren: Yeah, but then Sutton called me, and I didn't do much afterward.

Drake: Fine, go pack but keep me updated.

Drake: Love you.

Wren: Love you more.

Drake: *You know what we could do while you're away?*

Wren: *:eyes: emoji*

Drake: *Sex-calling.*

Wren: *That's not a thing. Also, may I remind you that you're not allowed to use your camera—not even for video-calls.*

Drake: *He's not going to notice.*

Wren: *You underestimate CQS and Finnegan Gil.*

Drake: *Do they always watch everyone like hawks?*

Wren: *Yep. Though, no one has ever stayed for so long.*

Drake: *It's only been four months. You haven't had people who stick for that long?*

Wren: *The record is four months, and they didn't have the same accommodations as you. I'm guessing that since you'll be staying for a long time, they're making a few exceptions. Like having a phone or getting jobs.*

Drake: *Maybe I can convince them to let me buy a property so we can build a house.*

Wren: *Whoa, you're moving a little too fast.*

Drake: *I'm thinking a year from now. That should be plenty of time to sweep you out of your lab coat and convince you to be mine forever.*

Wren: *No one can say you're not a romantic, Dr. Drake.*

Drake: *Underneath all the bitter exterior, there's a small heart beating just for you.*

Wren: *I love you.*

Drake: *Love you more.*

Wren: *So . . . Milo is exchanging his triceratops for a football.*

Drake: *We'll make sure to re-decorate his room with football memorabilia. Though, we'll be ready for the next stage—whatever that is.*

Wren: *I think I like you.*

Drake: *Same here, so how about sexting? Can we do that?*

Wren: *We could, but right now, I'm heading to a turtle sanctuary so . . .*

Drake: *It's almost six. Shouldn't you go to dinner?*

Wren: *I'm in a different time zone.*

Drake: *Have fun then.*

WREN: Dinosaurs are still out, but instead of football, we moved to sea creatures.

Drake: Thank fuck.

Wren: You seem worried.

Drake: I was. I don't know shit about football or how to toss a fucking ball.

Wren: Didn't you play that with your dad while growing up?

Drake: Did you pay attention while I told you about my childhood?

Wren: You didn't say much about it.

Drake: Oh, long story short, I was raised by nannies. They never tossed me anything.

Wren: Didn't you have to practice sports at school?

Drake: Yeah, but football wasn't a part of it. I know baseball, lacrosse, hockey . . . not football. That's for savages.

Wren: Because in hockey you do finger painting and sing songs?

Drake: Fine, they also beat the shit out of each other. Though, the difference is that they do it while skating. See? No grass stains on our uniforms.

Wren: You're kidding, right?

Drake: Of course, I am. Though I confess that I sucked at sports. I'm more of a science guy—hence, why I'm a doctor. How about you?

Wren: I won a championship or two.

Drake: Were you a mathlete?

Wren: Softball, I don't think athletics is a thing. There's a mathematic Olympiad, but I'm not that good at math—only average.

Wren sent an image

Drake: So now he's carrying a turtle around, huh?

Wren: Yep. But do you know what's bad about all this newfound love for sea creatures, including fish?

Drake: Let me guess, he'll never eat a fish in his life.

Wren: Yep. I never stood a chance.

Drake: Sorry, but remember, he likes Donna's crab cakes. Maybe we can introduce him to tuna-cakes, shrimp-cake . . . You get the idea.

Wren: Anyone eats fried food.

Drake: Then take advantage of that.

Wren: *Hey, we're going to have dinner. I'll talk to you soon, and if not, I'll see you tomorrow night.*

Drake: *Text before you go to bed. Love you.*

Wren: *Love you too.*

Chapter Thirty-Four



Wren

THE PRIVATE JET slows to a stop on the tarmac, and I take Milo's small hand in mine as we prepare to disembark.

The late afternoon sun is blindingly bright as we descend the metal stairs. I shade my eyes with one hand and scan the area anxiously, my breath catching when I spot him.

Drake stands off to the side, tall and powerfully built as always, emanating a subtle strength. The instant Milo sees him, he lets go of my hand and takes off, running full-tilt across the tarmac toward Drake, his little sneakers pounding the pavement.

"Drake. Drake," Milo shouts excitedly, his backpack bouncing wildly as he barrels forward at top speed. Drake's handsome face lights up, and he swoops a laughing Milo up into his strong arms, tossing him playfully in the air as Milo giggles with pure delight.

I approach slowly, butterflies swirling in my stomach, still hardly believing this is real or how much I missed him while we were gone. It was just three days, but it felt like a lifetime. Drake sets Milo down but keeps an arm wrapped around his little shoulders. His eyes meet mine, crinkling at the corners as he smiles softly.

"Hi," he says, his voice low and full of warmth.

"Hi, yourself," I reply, feeling suddenly shy as a flush creeps across my cheeks.

I wish I could throw my arms around his neck and kiss him or at least hug his solid, sturdy frame. But we have yet to talk to Milo about our relationship. That pivotal step would make this more official and permanent between us. And maybe I'm overthinking everything. Drake isn't going anywhere, and Milo clearly adores him.

So what is stopping me from crossing that threshold? Is it my own fear?

But I'm no longer afraid of losing him. I know in my heart that we belong together.

Drake reaches for my hand, his own strong, callused fingers curling around mine with thrilling familiarity, and raises it tenderly to his lips for a featherlight kiss that makes my skin tingle. He leans closer, his woodsy,

masculine scent enveloping me, and murmurs intimately, “I’ve missed you.”

Milo tugs impatiently on Drake’s muscular arm, practically bouncing on his toes. “You should’ve come with us to Seattle. They had a turtle sanctuary,” he says eagerly, brown eyes wide with excitement. “Mom, I desperately need new books about turtles.”

Drake chuckles, ruffling Milo’s hair affectionately. “Don’t worry, we can find some great turtle books at the library and order more online.”

“Okay.” Milo sighs, his small shoulders slumping with relief.

“Why don’t we head home?” I suggest.

Drake, Milo, and I pile into the SUV and drive from the imposing CQS headquarters toward my cozy house on the outskirts of town. Milo chatters excitedly the whole way, practically bouncing in his booster seat as he fills Drake in on every detail of our trip.

“We got to see dozens of sea turtles! Some were gigantic, as big as this!” Milo exclaims, stretching his arms wide. “And some were ancient, like 100 years old. Their skin looked all wrinkly.” Then he whispers in awe, “Older than my new great grandpa.”

I doubt anyone we’ve met is older than eighty, but I’m not going to correct him. Also, I’m not sure how to tell him that Rhea’s great-grandfathers are not related to him.

Drake smiles down at him. “Wow, 100 years old? That’s pretty amazing.”

“Yeah, and the keepers let us feed them lettuce and kale. They gobbled it up.” Milo mimes a turtle snapping its jaws. “I even got to pet one. Their shells felt smooth and bumpy.”

I grin as Milo hops and waddles in his seat, imitating a turtle. He’s been talking nonstop about them since we left the sanctuary, even saying he might become a veterinarian someday like Aunt Regina.

“We had to be super gentle, though,” Milo adds seriously. “The lady said we must always respect the animals.”

“It sounds like you learned a lot and made some new turtle friends,” Drake replies.

Milo nods rapidly, hair bouncing. “Yeah. Oh, and guess what?” His eyes go wide. “We went to the aquarium where they had an otter exhibit and a seal show.”

As Milo continues to chatter enthusiastically, Drake listens attentively, asking questions and showing genuine interest in every detail. My heart swells as I watch their sweet bond continue to grow.

I can't keep the smile off my face watching them, my two favorite boys in the world.

When we finally arrive at my house, I stop short in astonishment. There on the dining table sits an elaborate home-cooked meal—juicy roasted chicken, golden potatoes, rolls—and even a brightly colored “Welcome Home” sign hangs on the wall. A vibrant bouquet of wildflowers in a crystal vase scents the room with their sweet fragrance.

“You did all this?” I ask Drake, turning to him with surprised delight.

He gives me a sheepish grin and rubs the back of his neck. “I wanted to make your first night back special.”

“This is so thoughtful and amazing,” I breathe, taking it all in with misty eyes. No one has ever gone to such lengths for me before.

Meanwhile, Milo makes a beeline for the table. “Can Uncle Gael make me turtle-shaped nuggets?” he asks eagerly, clambering onto a chair.

Chuckling, Drake catches him around the waist and swings him back down. “Hold your horses, kiddo. Wash those hands first.”

“But I'm starving,” Milo protests dramatically, even as he obediently scampers off toward the bathroom.

Still stunned by Drake's incredible thoughtfulness, I wrap my arms around his solid waist and rise up on tiptoes to kiss him deeply, hoping he can feel all my gratitude and emotion. “Thank you,” I whisper, a lump forming in my throat. “This means the world to me.”

Drake's blue piercing eyes are tender as he gazes down at me and gently brushes a loose strand of hair from my flushed face. “Anything for you,” he murmurs, his voice low and sincere. And I know with complete certainty that he means every word.

He leans down, his warm breath tickling my skin, and kisses me deeply. I melt into his embrace, surrendering myself fully to the exhilarating moment. This incredible man has slowly become such an integral part of me. I love how he spins each ordinary moment we share into something extraordinary.

I'm completely lost in Drake's passionate kiss when suddenly I hear Milo's curious little voice pipe up behind me. “Eww, are you guys kissing?”

I spring back from Drake in alarm, my cheeks flaming red as I whirl around to see Milo watching us intently, his little nose scrunched up but his big brown eyes dancing with curiosity and even happiness.

“I . . . well . . .” I stammer anxiously, my heart pounding as I scramble for words.

We haven't told Milo about the change in our relationship yet because I wanted to wait for the perfect moment. But I guess that's not going to happen, right?

Drake smiles easily and saunters over to affectionately ruffle Milo's messy curls. "Yeah, buddy, I really care about your mom. Is it okay if I kiss her sometimes?"

Milo considers this with the seriousness only a five-year-old can muster. "Hmm . . . okay," he says finally. "But no yucky grown-up stuff."

Drake nods, his lips twitching. "We can do that. I'll keep it PG."

Milo taps his chin thoughtfully. "And maybe you can bring me a baby sister. Rhea was born after Uncle Finn married Aunt Piper and Uncle Derek." He glances at me. "You can marry Drake too."

I let out a nervous laugh, my stomach flipping. "There's nothing better than getting the seal of approval from your son."

"We'll take this slowly," Drake states. "I'm sure we can discuss marriage and a bigger family later."

"Like next Friday?" Milo asks innocently, eyes wide.

I bite my lip, willing my blush to fade. "Maybe a lot later than that, sweetie. How about after your seventh birthday?"

Milo's face falls into a disappointed frown, his lower lip poking out. "But that's too long to wait. I just want Drake to be my dad right now," he states matter-of-factly, as if it's a simple decision we can just make on the spot.

My eyes widen in panic, my heart racing anxiously. I see Drake's shoulders tense slightly, hesitation flickering across his face.

"Oh, uh, we haven't really talked about all that yet . . ." I trail off with uncertainty, wondering how to delicately explain this.

Drake crouches down in front of Milo so they are at eye level, his expression tender. "I would absolutely love to be your dad someday, buddy. But why don't you get to know me a little better first before we make any big decisions? What if you end up not liking me as much after all?" he suggests gently.

Milo scrunches his nose, considering this turn of events. Then he sighs heavily, his excitement visibly dimming. "I guess you're right. I already love you so much, though. But if you need more time to think about it, I'm okay with waiting," he says bravely, though his eyes glisten with disappointment.

My heart cracks, hating to see him sad. I had no idea how strongly he felt about Drake already, how deeply he yearns for a father figure.

Drake meets my anxious gaze, then looks back at Milo, his expression tender. “I love you and your mom more than anything. You two are my entire world. I’d be honored beyond words to officially be your dad someday. But these big life changes take a lot of time and thought,” he explains.

Unable to help himself, Milo surges forward to hug Drake’s neck tightly. “I’ve always dreamed of having a dad, but I want you to be my dad more than anyone,” he confesses emotionally.

“You make me the happiest man in the world. Thank you for understanding, Milo. Thank you so much.”

Chapter Thirty-Five



DRAKE: *Good morning, beautiful!*

Wren: *Hey there, I didn't see when you left.*

Drake: *I didn't want Milo to get the wrong idea.*

Wren: *Sorry about last night.*

Drake: *Please don't be sorry. As I told you last night, I wish we had been ready for his reaction. I do want to be his dad. I just need to discuss my future with CQS and my brothers. What if they don't let me live outside the ranch?*

Wren: *That's a valid concern.*

Drake: *I heard that Slade is finally coming this Friday.*

Wren: *And yet, Finnegan hasn't updated me yet. There should be a groan emoji somewhere.*

Drake: *:weary: emoji*

Wren: *I guess that works.*

Drake: *You don't think Finn will update you until Friday?*

Wren: *I'm guessing Thursday at the earliest, when I have to scramble to figure out what we're going to need. I'll message him later today. Hopefully, that won't get you in trouble.*

Drake: *What can he do? Kick me out of the program for being proactive?*

Wren: *No, he wouldn't do that.*

Wren: *Hey, Milo wants to know if you plan on coming to dinner.*

Drake: *Of course I am. Gael said he'll work on the ocean theme and that no fish will be harmed in the creation of said dinner.*

Wren: *Hey, I need to get ready for work. See you at the clinic.*

Drake: *See you then.*

Drake

Being with Wren is everything. Every moment we spend together is a treasure, and things have changed between us now that Milo knows we're a couple. We haven't felt pressured by him, but we can sense his desire for us to be a family.

While I wait for Finnegan's green light, figuring out the logistics once I leave the ranch, I cherish every day and night spent with Wren.

"You know what my favorite thing about us is?" I murmur, my hands gently roaming over her body. My touch is like a delicate dance, tracing her curves with featherlight caresses. Her skin feels as soft as silk, warm and inviting as I explore every inch of her, memorizing the hills and valleys of her flesh.

"When we have sleepovers?" she asks playfully, moaning softly as I nibble on her neck.

I take my time, savoring each part of her. From her neck to her shoulders and down her back, I revel in her pleasure, my hands following the path of her sighs.

The sensation of her body against my fingertips is intoxicating, and I feel the heat radiating from between them. I close my eyes and savor the moment, letting my touch linger over every part of her. I want to take my time with her, to explore every inch of her with my caresses.

I move my hands up her body, my touch worshiping each curve before trailing across her stomach. As I feel her arch into me, inviting my touch, I let my fingertips linger over her hips, reveling in the softness of her skin.

The heat radiating from between her legs is undeniable, and I close my eyes, savoring the moment. I want to take my time, to explore every inch of her with my caresses.

My hands continue their journey, moving with a purpose and devotion that mirrors the love in my heart. As I explore her, I'm overcome with the desire to protect and cherish her.

With longing coursing through my veins, I feel the slickness between her legs as I slide my cock inside her, losing myself in the depths of her womb. It's an intimate connection, a dance of passion and love that leaves us both

breathless.

“I love you,” she moans, her words reverberating through my entire being, touching a place deep within me that I never knew existed.

“I love you more,” I confess, my voice a raw admission of the intense emotions swirling inside me. “You’re my favorite place, you know.”

“I’m a place?” She chuckles.

“You’re my home,” I tell her, my voice sincere and heartfelt. “There’s no other place like you in the entire world, and I’m so damn happy that after being lost for so long, I finally arrived at you.”

As we move together, our bodies perfectly in sync, I thrust deeper, reaching a level of intimacy we’ve never experienced before. It’s as if our souls are dancing in harmony, guided by a love that transcends time and space. The sensations overwhelm us, and I lose myself in the moment.

Her pussy tightens around me, adding to the intensity, and I thrust once more before she begins to shake, her body quivering in the throes of pleasure. She’s falling apart in my arms, and I can feel her vulnerability, her trust in me to hold her through every emotion.

As she surrenders to her release, I follow suit, succumbing to the overwhelming pleasure that washes over me. I hold her tight, finding solace in the knowledge that we’re in this together, bound by a love that’s both tender and fierce.

I’m filled with a sense of belonging as if I’ve finally found my place in the world—with her. It’s an overwhelming feeling I never want to let go of. I capture her lips in a tender kiss, pouring all my love into that simple gesture. Our souls connect, and I know that I’ve found my home in her.

I found love.

It’s a love that’s both passionate and gentle, fierce and tender, and I cherish every second of it. And as we lie together, wrapped in each other’s arms, I feel complete.

Epilogue



Drake

MY HANDS TREMBLE uncontrollably as I pat the small velvet box in my pocket for what feels like the hundredth time. After six incredible months with Wren, I'm finally going to gather my courage and ask her to be my wife. Finn's allowing me to move out of the cabin and will be building a home in the outskirts of town.

Tonight, I've planned a romantic sunset picnic on the property I bought for us. It's overlooking the shimmering lake—Wren's favorite peaceful spot. As Wren happily arranges the food with Milo's help, I take a deep, steadying breath, trying to slow my racing heart.

Slowly dropping to one knee, I gently take Wren's delicate hand in mine. Her bright eyes instantly fly wide open in shock when she sees the ring box in my palm.

"From the very first moment I met you, I knew deep in my soul that you were the missing piece of my heart," I say softly, my voice filled with emotion as I gaze into her eyes. "You and Milo are my entire world. I want to spend the rest of my life trying to make you as happy as you've made me. Will you marry me?"

Her hands fly to her mouth as she gasps loudly, tears of joy filling her shimmering eyes. "Yes!" she cries ecstatically. "Of course, I'll marry you!"

My heart soars higher than I ever thought possible in this perfect, magical moment. I tenderly slip the glittering diamond ring onto her slender finger, sealing our love with a symbol of forever. She throws her arms around my neck, pulling me into a fierce, passionate kiss that steals my breath away. In this moment, I feel like the happiest, luckiest man on earth.

"Does this mean you're going to officially be my dad now?" Milo asks eagerly, bouncing up and down on his toes with unrestrained excitement.

I ruffle his curly dark hair affectionately, my own eyes misting over with emotion. "Yeah, buddy, it does. Is that okay with you?"

"Yes." He leaps excitedly into my open arms, and my heart swells with love for this incredible boy who has already become such an important part of my life.

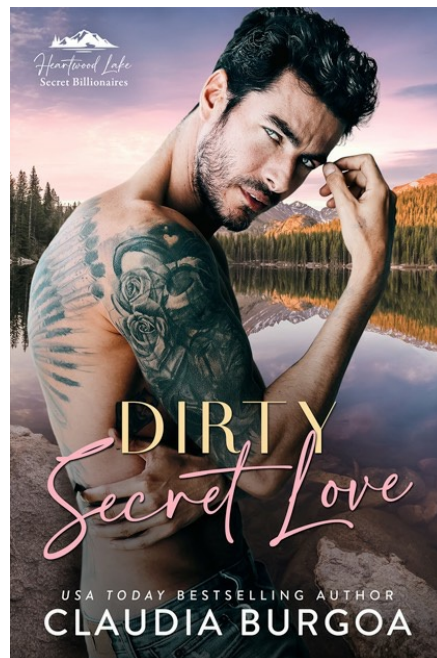
Holding my new family tightly to me under the painted sky, I silently

thank the benevolent forces of the universe that inexplicably brought these two amazing people into my life. With Wren and Milo forever by my side, the future stretches out brighter and more hopeful than I ever could have imagined.

Together, we'll face whatever comes our way, knowing that love is our guiding light and that, in each other's arms, we have found our sanctuary—the place where we truly belong.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Dirty Secret Love



From *USA Today* bestselling author Claudia Burgoa comes an angsty, fake-fiance, opposites attract, secret billionaire romance.

WHAT DO you do when you're tired of being the loser?

You make up the perfect fiancé, of course.

I KNOW IT SOUNDS DESPERATE, but hear me out.

IN MY FAMILY, everyone is someone.

But me? I'm just a small-town librarian with no prospects and no future.
At every family reunion, my older sister reminds me of that fact.

SO WHEN SHE announced her own upcoming nuptials, I knew I had to act fast.
I needed a fake fiancé to bring to the wedding and prove that I was happy and successful too.

ENTER RIVER KERSHAW, the town playboy.

My bestie Wren suggested him, and I was hesitant at first.
He's the complete opposite of me: a charming extrovert.

BUT I CAN'T DENY that he's tall, strong, and hot.

I KNOW IT'S A RISK, but I'm determined to show my family that I'm just as happy and in love as they are. Even if that means pretending to be with someone who's totally not my type.

I'M ready to give the performance of a lifetime.

DIRTY SECRET LOVE is the second book in the Heartwood Lake Secret Billionaire Series—an emotional rollercoaster of a journey that combines the intense drama of *Succession* and the hilarity of *Schitt's Creek*. A must-read.

>>> <https://claudiayburgoa.com/wp/dirty-secret-love/>



Thank you so much for reading *A PLACE LIKE YOU*.

If you're just discovering my work, I sincerely hope this is not the last story we share between us.

Writing is one of my favorite things to do and I'm grateful that I get to do it often and most of it is because of your support. Thank you so much for all you do.

I'm super excited about Heartwood Lake and the Thorndale family. I've been plotting this for a couple of years and when I finally began to write it I was excited to find more secrets. The next book for this series is *Dirty Secret Love* which will be releasing in a couple of months.

That's a fake relationship between River and Sutton . . . I know, River was trying to ship the professor but that's not how this will work. I really hope that you're ready for this series and you fall in love with these characters like I did.

If you love this book as much as I did writing, I would appreciate if you leave a review on your favorite retailer and bookbub, it really helps me spread the word. Also, tell your bookiefriends about it.

Sending all my love,
Claudia xoxo

Acknowledgments

This is one of the most difficult parts for me to write. I have a terrible memory, and I am afraid of forgetting anyone. Please forgive me if I do. Before I continue, let me tell you that I'm grateful for all of you and for being part of the world that I've created.

So where do I start?

First and foremost, I'd like to thank God for all the blessings in my life.

To my family, for your support and patience. Luis, the best husband a woman can have. He's my biggest supporter, my inspiration and the love of my life. My kids, they give me all the energy and material to keep going. The things I learned from Paulina about Tinder. Dating these days aint easy people.

Thank you to Grahame for reading the early version of Maybe Later. Your notes and support help me through this book.

My alpha readers, Michelle, Patricia, Yolanda, Deb, and Kim. Thank you isn't enough, but I am grateful, ladies.

Michelle, what can I say that I haven't said yet? You keep me sane and some days that's all I have, my sanity.

My hooker! Thank you for your daily calls and your friendship.

To Hang Le—you complete my books, always. I can't thank you enough for everything you do for me and my stories. Love you my friend.

Ellie, thank you so much for working on this manuscript!

Kristi, thank you for always listening and understanding me. Not sure where I'd be without you.

To the Book Lovin' Chicas group, thank you so much for your continuous support. For your daily cheers, and the words of encouragement. I'm grateful for you.

Thank you to all the bloggers who help spread the word about my books. I guess thank you doesn't cut it, your energy and support are what makes every release a success.

To my readers, I am grateful to you. Thank you for reading my words,

and for supporting my books. Thank you so much for those emails and notes, they mean so much to me.

All my love,
Claudia

About the Author



Claudia is an award-winning, *USA Today* bestselling author. She writes alluring, thrilling stories about complicated women and the men who take their breath away. She lives in Denver, Colorado with her husband and her youngest two children. She has a sweet Bichon, Macey, who thinks she's the ruler of the house. She's only partially right. When Claudia is not writing, you can find her reading, knitting, or just hanging out with her family. At night, she likes to binge-watch shows with her equally geeky husband.

To find more about Claudia:

[website](#)

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A PLACE LIKE YOU is also available in [Audio](#)

The Baker's Creek Billionaire Brothers Series

[Loved You Once](#)

[A Moment Like You](#)

[Defying Our Forever](#)

[Call You Mine](#)

[As We Are](#)

[Yours to Keep](#)

[Collide with Me](#)

Paradise Bay Billionaire Brothers

[My Favorite Night](#)

[Faking The Game](#)

[Can't Help Love](#)

[Along Came You](#)

[My Favorite Mistake](#)

[The Way of Us](#)

[Meant For Me](#)

[Finally Found You](#)

[Where We Belong](#)

Heartwood Lake Secret Billionaires

[A Place Like You](#)

[Dirty Secret Love](#)

[Love Unlike Ours](#)

[Through It All](#)

[Better than Revenge](#)

[Fade into us](#)

[An Unlikely Story](#)

[Hard to love](#)

Against All Odds Series

[Wrong Text, Right Love](#)

[Didn't Expect You](#)

[Love Like Her](#)

[Until Next Time, Love](#)

[Something Like Love](#)

[Accidentally in Love](#)

Decker Family Novels

Unexpected Everlasting:

[Suddenly Broken](#)

[Suddenly Us](#)

Somehow Everlasting:

[Almost Strangers](#)

[Strangers in Love](#)

Perfect Everlasting:

[Who We Are](#)

[Who We Love](#)

[Us After You](#)

Covert Affair Duet:

[After The Vows](#)

[Love After Us](#)

The Downfall of Us:
[The End of Me](#)
[When Forever Finds Us](#)

Requiem for Love:
[Reminders of Her](#)
[The Symphony of Us](#)

Impossibly Possible:
[The Lies About Forever](#)
[The Truth About Love](#)

Second Chance Sinners :
[Pieces of Us](#)
[Somehow Finding Us](#)

The Spearman Brothers

[Maybe Later](#)
[Then He Happened](#)
[Once Upon a Holiday](#)
[Almost Perfect](#)

Luna Harbor

[Finally You](#)
[Perfectly You](#)
[Always You](#)
[Truly You](#)

My One
[My One Regret](#)
[My One Desire](#)

The Everhart Brothers

[Fall for Me](#)

[Fight for Me](#)
[Perfect for Me](#)
[Forever with Me](#)

Standalones

[Chasing Fireflies](#)
[Until I Fall](#)
[Finding My Reason](#)
[Something Like Hate](#)
[Someday, Somehow](#)

Chaotic Love Duet

[Begin with You](#)
[Back to You](#)

Co-writing

[Holiday with You](#)
[Home with You](#)
[Here with You](#)

All my books are interconnected standalone, except for the duets, but if you want a reading order, I have it here → [Reading Order](#)