

BADGER CREEK DUET SERIES

forget me *not*

MAX AND HARPER BOOK TWO

CLAIRE RAYE

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# FREE BOOKS

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Happy reading and thank you!

## CHAPTER 1

# HARPER

I wake up in a complete panic to a dark room with the sounds of melodic beeping filling the space, but I have no idea where I am. My heart is racing as sweat beads on my forehead. I have this vague memory of something awful happening and when I try to sit up, I'm reminded of it instantly.

Everything in my body aches and my head throbs as I turn to see a man asleep in a chair at my bedside. He's someone I don't know, someone I don't recognize at all and I suppress the scream that shoves its way up into my throat. Screaming now will only wake him, and that scares me more than anything.

I try to shift myself, moving to try and get off the bed, but I'm connected to a bunch of wires and tubes, and everything moves with me. Despite the ache that radiates through me, I reach for the call button, signaling as quietly as I can for the nurse.

Once more, I look at the man sleeping next to me, hoping with everything in me that I recognize him, but my memory falls short again. I have no recollection of how I ended up here, and I don't even know where here is. It's obviously a hospital, but where? And why isn't the man sitting here Tyler?

I hear the sound of shoes clomping down the hallway and a sliver of light fills the room as the door opens.

“Did you need something?” a nurse with close-cropped blonde hair asks, pulling my chart from the holder on the wall. She begins to look it over, not really acknowledging me, and that’s when the panic gets even worse.

“Yes, I need something,” I practically scream. The pitch in my voice startles her, and she instantly looks over at me. “Where am I? What am I doing here? What happened?” I ask, even my questions coming out in a rush with no time for her to answer.

“Let me get the doctor,” she quickly replies, my chart still in her hand, a confused look on her face. How the hell is she confused? She works here. She should know what the hell is going on since I sure the fuck don’t.

Just as she leaves, the man next to me wakes up and if I thought things were confusing before, this pushes it over the edge.

“Harper, baby,” he wails, throwing himself around me, the tears spilling from his eyes, and while it’s clear I should know who he is, I have no idea.

I’m stiff as a board in his arms, and I really want to push him away, but I’m frozen with fear and confusion. He knows my name, he knows who I am, but who the hell is he? He’s probably the only person who can help me figure out what is going on, but that’s when I’m hit with an even bigger concern than any of this.

“Sammie!” I scream out, shoving this man away. “Where is Sammie?” The tears begin to fall from my eyes, turning to sobs as I think about my poor baby with no one to take care of

her. Did social services come and take her away? I don't have any family, I'm in a strange place. It's always just been the two of us and now she's alone and probably equally as scared.

What the hell have I done to her? What the hell happened to me?

"She's okay, baby. She's okay. She's with my mom," the man says, and I don't know if he has any idea that I don't know who he is. "She's safe, don't worry," he assures me, but it does nothing to ease the anxiety that courses through me.

"I don't know you," I call out through a sob, my chest heaving with each ragged breath. "I need to go get her. She's too little to be alone."

"Harper, she isn't alone. She's with my mom. She knows my mom, you know my mom. You're my girlfriend," he tells me, but I'm struggling to believe him, to understand.

"I need to go to her," I cry, unable to understand any of this. "She needs me." I need her though, knowing she's the only person I can seem to remember out of this mess.

"You can't leave. You can't just leave here," he says, and I hear the panic now creeping into his voice. "I'll go get Sammie." He leans down and kisses my forehead and I instinctively pull away. Looking up, I can see the hurt on his face, but I don't care. This is all too much for me to fake it.

It doesn't matter to me that he's offended. He's a stranger and all I care about is seeing Sammie. She has to be terrified being left with people we don't know. How could I have done this to her? I can't even believe I'm trusting this man to go get her, but I don't have any other choice.

I feel myself apologizing as he looks down at me, the hurt still written all over his face, a face I wish I recognized but I

don't. My memory feels lost and stilted, and I've never felt anything like this, the fear and panic that grips me has my mind swirling.

"Please just go get Sammie," I whisper, not only needing him to leave so I can get some answers, but so I can see my daughter.

"I will," he responds back, walking toward the door, this time not pausing to say goodbye to me, and again, I call out an apology. For what? I'm not sure. For not recognizing him? For being cold when he clearly knows who I am?

And as he walks out the door, I'm hit with the realization that I don't even know his name. I've sent this stranger off to get my daughter, putting full trust in him that he will do that with no way to contact him. I couldn't even tell the police who he is if he never returns with Sammie.

I find myself getting so worked up that I can't even think straight, the tears spilling from my eyes in rivers. I'm sobbing so hard that when the doctor walks in, I can't even communicate.

"Ms. Neely, are you okay?" the doctor asks, and I almost laugh out loud. He can't possibly think I'm okay as I let out deep guttural sobs. "I know this situation has to be difficult for you."

"Difficult?" I echo, and again, he can't be serious. "I have no idea where I am or how I got here." All of this comes out in a rush, but also a garbled mess of tears and hard breaths.

"You were brought in two nights ago by your boyfriend after you were injured in a hit and run. We had to sedate you because of some swelling on your brain. It would be what has caused your memory loss."

I stare at the doctor, blinking through the tears as I search for any recollection of this. I remember waking up to a dark room and hearing someone say my name, but it felt like a dream.

Every word the doctor says feels like it fills in very little and through each breath, I blurt out the main question I have.

“Where am I?” I look around, not getting anything from the room. It looks like every hospital I’ve ever been in, and being here reminds me of losing my mom. She was all I had, and she gave up on me when I found out I was pregnant with Sammie, disappointed and angry that I was continuing to follow in her footsteps.

I hope Sammie isn’t worried she’s going to lose me. I don’t talk to her much about the death of her grandmother because she never had the chance to know her. And because she’s just too young to understand something like that. Nothing positive could have come from that conversation and all it could have done was set the idea in her head that she could easily lose me.

And now, here we are. She’s gone with strangers, and all I can do is trust that what is happening is right for her.

“You’re at Tahoe Medical,” the doctor tells me. “I’m Dr. Griffin, and we’ve been monitoring your brain activity, and while things look good, we know that your memory loss is not something you expected.”

I shake my head, not sure if I’m responding to his comment about the memory loss or to the name of the hospital. It’s probably a little of both.

“Tahoe? Like as in California?” I question, wondering how the hell I ended up across the country from where Sammie and I were living. Where is Tyler too?

“Yes, Lake Tahoe, California,” he replies, giving his head a curt nod.

“How did I get here?” I blurt out, not meaning the hospital, but here, in California. I know Tyler and I were having trouble, but I left? I left him? None of this feels real. It has to be some kind of crazy dream.

I ease myself up on the bed, and the doctor leans down, taking the remote, he helps me sit up by adjusting the bed.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t help you with how you got here or anything that has happened in your past. Your boyfriend has been with you since you were brought in. Do you remember him?”

I shake my head, feeling the tears start up again. I don’t remember anything about him, not a single thing.

“I don’t even know his name,” I cry out. “And I sent him to get my daughter. Please tell me I’m going to remember.”

The doctor stands there for a few seconds, letting out a hard sigh. “With memory loss cases, we can’t possibly know if you’ll regain what was lost.” His admission has my heart slamming against my chest, beating so hard that it pulses in my ears, drowning out the words as he continues to speak.

“Max Holden,” the doctor says, and I look up at him, swiping my fingers under my eyes. “Your boyfriend’s name is Max Holden. He’s a paramedic here. Anything?”

“No,” I reply, wishing like hell it had triggered something in me. “Will it come back?” I ask again, knowing the doctor avoided my question.

“I can’t answer that. It may never fully return, but we’ll work with you to attempt to build back some of what was lost.”



How? I don't know who I am. How the hell is this random doctor going to help me? I'm not even in a place where I know anyone. These people are all strangers and all I have is Sammie. She's too young to be able to help me with what I've lost. She probably doesn't even know why we moved here.

The doctor walks over to the small closet near the door. Opening it, he returns with a phone, handing it to me, he tells me to start looking through the pictures.

"I don't know the passcode," I respond, the indignation in my voice filling the room, but I still tap the screen. I'm hit with a picture of the man, Max, Sammie and me.

I stare at it, all of us smiling and happy. But Sammie isn't the Sammie in my head. She's old, at least four, maybe even older, but it's her. The dimples and the brown eyes, that perfect little smile, and my heart clenches in my chest.

I've lost several years with her. This accident took at least two years of memories of my daughter from me. I can't control the tears that spill from my eyes, overwhelmed by the idea that I've lost so much, and I may never remember it. And the doctor stands here, annoyingly calm, telling me to use this phone to help, but I want to yell out that it will do no good.

"The phone will recognize your face," the doctor prompts, motioning for me to hold it up. "Or you could try to guess the password. It might trigger something."

I type in the first thing I can think of, and the phone comes to life, all the apps right there on the screen. And while I can see the hope in the doctor's eyes, it means nothing to me.

"It was my daughter's birthday," I say, all inflection gone from my voice. It would have been Sammie's birthday no matter what.

“Why don’t you scroll through some pictures, look through the contacts? It’s all you can do at this point,” the doctor tells me. “We plan to release you tomorrow, so let’s see if we can get things moving in your brain.”

He tries to sound hopeful and positive, but I have serious doubts. I’ve never felt more lost in my life. Where do I live? How can I be released when I don’t even know if I have somewhere to go?

“You have a few things in the closet if you want to take a look,” the doctor adds, going over to adjust my IV and showing me how to take it with me when I get up. “You have some broken ribs and a lot of bruising, but somehow, nothing else was broken. You also have stitches in your forehead, so we ask that you don’t wash your hair...” he trails off when I force myself from the bed, ignoring everything he is saying.

I make my way over to the closet, sliding the door open, I find very little waiting for me. I was hoping there would at least be some clothes or something. But all I see is a purse and a few random things that look like they were brought in after my accident.

“The nurse will help you get settled now that you’re fully awake,” the doctor says. “Use the call button if you need anything.”

He’s clearly over this situation with me, getting nothing out of my confusion. He’s just here to make sure my body heals.

And as I stand here, the phone in my hand, the closet items strewn about, I punch in the only phone number I can remember.

Holding it to my ear, it rings once, twice and on the third ring, he picks up. Hearing his voice sends this strange feeling jolting through me. It's a mix of fear and worry, but more than that, it feels wrong, so fucking wrong.

“Tyler,” I mutter out, trying to keep the tears at bay, my voice trembling as the phone shakes in my hand. The fear takes over and I suddenly want to hang up, but how can I? He's the only person I remember besides Sammie.

“Harper,” he replies, and I instantly hear the anger as he says my name. “Where the fuck are you?”

## CHAPTER 2

### MAX

**T**he drive to my parents' house passes in a blur. I barely remember making the turns or how I even got here, autopilot somehow directing me. I didn't want to leave the hospital or Harper, but I had no choice. She wants to see Sammie and I know Sammie wants to see her.

Besides, it's the first time I've felt useful since any of this happened. God knows I wasn't useful at the scene of the accident, and I haven't been since, just sitting by her bed waiting for her to wake up as I tried to forget the last words she said to me before they took her away."

*Who are you?*

"Max," my mom says as I let myself in the front door.

"Hey, Mom," I reply as she pulls me into a hug. "Where's Sammie?"

"She's out back with your dad, come inside. How's Harper?"

I let out a sigh as I follow Mom down to the kitchen, where she grabs a mug and pours me a cup of coffee. "Thanks," I say as I take it from her, sitting on one of the stools at the island. "She's awake," I finally say, answering her question. "Still doesn't know who I am."

Mom makes a sympathetic sound as she moves closer, her hand resting on the top of mine. “The doctor said it could be temporary though, didn’t they?”

I nod, taking a sip of coffee. After we’d brought Harper into the ER, they’d wheeled her away from me for scans and tests and god knows what else. A nurse had asked me a bunch of questions about what had happened, I guess because I was standing there in my EMT’s uniform like I had some clue about what was going on.

Jim had ended up fielding most of the questions when it was clear I couldn’t, filling the nurse in on who I was. Eventually a doctor came to speak to me, and he explained that Harper had a head injury which is consistent with short term memory loss and although they didn’t know the full extent of it because they’d had to sedate her. They were hopeful it was only temporary, but they couldn’t say for sure.

And then this afternoon she’d woken up and she still couldn’t remember who I was.

“Yeah,” I exhale, my eyes moving to the large glass doors. I can see Sammie outside in the yard with my dad, the two of them laughing as they try to fly a kite, neither of them really looking like they know what they’re doing. “How is she?” I ask, gesturing outside.

Mom glances over her shoulder, a small smile on her face as she watches them. I know both her and Dad have really loved getting to know Sammie and it breaks my heart to think this might be taken away from them if Harper never gets her memory back.

“She’s doing as well as can be expected,” Mom says. “She has questions obviously, mostly about where you or Harper

are, but she's okay. We've been distracting her as best we can."

"Thanks, Mom," I say, taking another sip of coffee before I stand. "I really appreciate you looking after her for me."

"Of course."

"Harper wants to see her," I say, my eyes on Sammie through the glass. "She remembers Sammie and she was freaking out about where she is, so I said I'd come get her."

I feel Mom take my hand in hers and give it a gentle squeeze. "Maybe that's a good thing," she says. "It might help?"

I shrug, as I walk toward the doors, scrubbing a hand down my face. "I don't know, maybe."

"When are you going to take her to see her?"

"Now," I breathe out. "I'm going to take her now."

"Do you think that's a good idea, so soon, what if—"

"What choice do I have, Mom?" I say, pushing a hand through my hair and gripping the back of my neck. "Sammie isn't mine and Harper has no idea who I am to her. I have to take her. I have to..." I trail off.

Mom comes over and stands beside me, her hand on my shoulder. "Sammie *is* something to you, Max," she says quietly. "And in time, Harper will remember that. Just be patient with her."

I let out a long slow breath. "I'm not giving up on her," I say quietly. "I can't."

She squeezes my shoulder. "I know. Go take Sammie to see her and if you need to bring her back here afterwards, you

know you can, anytime.”

I nod once, not looking at her as I blink back the tears that have formed. I don't even want to think about what happens if I can't bring Sammie back here. If Harper tells me I can't see her again or have anything to do with her.

I slide open the door and walk out onto the deck. I watch Sammie and my dad for a few seconds, the two of them laughing as they finally get the kite flying in the wind. Eventually Dad notices me, holding up a hand in a wave that has Sammie turning.

“Max!” she shouts, running up to the deck.

“Hey, kiddo,” I say, bending down and grabbing her as she comes running toward me. I pull her into a tight hug as she wraps her little arms around my neck.

“I flew a kite!” she says, her voice filled with happiness.

“I know, I saw.”

“Wanna fly it with me?” she asks, pulling back a little.

I stare at her smiling face, at the absolute trust I know she has in me. “I do,” I say, knowing that what I'm about to say might change everything between us. “But how would you like to go see Mommy first?”

Sammie's big brown eyes light up as she lets out an excited squeal. “Mommy? Yes!”

I try to smile back at her, but it's fucking hard when I have no idea what version of her mommy she's going to get. I know Harper remembers her daughter, but does she remember everything about her? Does she remember the asshole who fathered her, how he tried to destroy her and how Harper ran away from him?



Maybe not.

And the thought that she doesn't remember that scares me even more than her not remembering me.

"Okay, well let's go see her then," I say, dropping a kiss to the top of her head.

"Yeay!" Sammie shouts, clearly excited.

I hate to fucking ruin her excitement and even though I need to tell her things before we go see Harper, in this moment, I can't. Sammie knows her mom was hurt and that she's in the hospital getting better, but she doesn't know how bad her injuries are. Just like she doesn't know she's forgotten things either. And honestly, I have no idea how to explain that to a four-year-old.

We walk inside, Dad following us in. He doesn't ask any questions, and I know it's because he doesn't want to in front of Sammie. Mom can fill him in when I've gone. But I do let them both say goodbye to Sammie before we leave, not knowing if she'll be back here tonight.

Or ever.

The drive to the hospital is filled with Sammie chatting non-stop about all the things she's going to tell Harper when she finally gets to see her. She's super excited but I'm only half listening, still trying to figure out a way to explain to Sammie exactly what she's going to see when I take her into Harper's room.

I mean for the most part, Harper looks the same. She's bruised and a little sore, but it's not the stuff on the outside I'm worried about.

By the time we're walking into the hospital, I'm still none the wiser about how to handle any of this. Lifting Sammie into my arms, I give a quick nod to the nurse who's seen me here pretty much non-stop for the last two days, suck in a deep breath and push open the door to Harper's room.

"Mommy!" Sammie shouts as soon as she sees her.

I watch as Harper's face lights up, even with the confusion in her eyes as she watches us walk in, Sammie still in my arms.

"Hi, baby," she says, arms out.

I give Sammie a quick kiss on the top of the head before gently placing her on the bed beside Harper. "Careful, okay, Mommy's hurt, remember?"

"I remember," Sammie says, smiling up at me even as Harper wraps her in her arms, holding her close. "Ah, Mommy, you're squishing me."

"Sorry, baby," she says, pulling back a little, but not letting her daughter go. "Are you okay? I'm sorry I haven't seen you. Mommy was hurt."

Sammie smiles up at Harper, who's brushing her daughter's hair back, her eyes scanning her face almost like she's looking for something wrong or she's trying to memorize every single part of her. "I know, Mommy, Max told me. Are you okay?"

Harper glances over at me as I stand by the bed, not sure what to do. I don't want to leave but I get the feeling Harper doesn't really want me to stay either. "I'm fine," she says, turning back to Sammie, a forced smile on her face. "I'll be out of here in no time and then we can go back home."

Sammie blinks up at her. "We are home, Mommy."

Harper leans in and kisses Sammie on the forehead. “No, baby, home is Florida, you know that.”

“No!” Sammie shouts at the same time as my heart free falls in my chest.

*Florida?*

She can't be serious right now.

“Harper,” I say, stepping closer as I run a hand gently over Sammie's hair, smiling when she looks up at me. “Tahoe is your home, you moved here. You both did.”

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “No, you're wrong. We live in Florida.”

“No, Mommy!” Sammie shouts, her smile gone and replaced now with fear and confusion. “Here, we live here!”

“Sammie,” Harper says, a smile on her face as she looks at her daughter. It's the same smile she uses when she's trying to get Sammie to do something she doesn't want to do. The smile I know Sammie can see straight through too. “We live in Florida, baby and as soon as I'm better, that's where we'll be going.”

“NO!” Sammie shouts, louder this time as she twists in Harper's arms. “Here! We live here!”

“Sammie,” Harper says, trying to calm her down.

I reach for Sammie, knowing I probably shouldn't but being unable to stop myself as I lift her up into my arms. Sammie wraps hers around me, burying her face in my neck as she lets out another loud no. “She doesn't understand this,” I say quietly, sitting on the edge of Harper's bed. “She doesn't know about your memory loss, I couldn't...I didn't know how to explain it to her.”

Harper stares at us, her eyes moving from me to her daughter and back to me again. I can see the confusion in her eyes, the completely foreign way she looks at me, like she has no clue who I am. It fucking kills me seeing her like this, being so close to her but at the same time, a million fucking miles away because she has no idea who I am or what we had together.

“Harper, babe,” I say gently. “I know you don’t remember things and I know that’s confusing. But please trust me when I say this is your home now. You don’t want to go back to Florida.”

I can hear the plea in my words, the desperation because I know if Harper goes back there, everything will get so much worse. I might not know the full story about what happened with her ex, but I know enough to know that none of it was good.

“Florida is our home,” she says, reaching for Sammie’s hand.

Sammie yanks it away and I see the hurt that crosses Harper’s face. “Tahoe is your home,” I repeat, my words soft. “Your home is with me.”

Harper shakes her head at my words. “No, I don’t even know you.”

“You do,” I say, reaching for her hand. “You do know me, and I know you. And Sammie. I love you both, very much.”

“No,” Harper says, shaking her head again. “You can’t, this...you can’t love me.”

“I do,” I whisper, lifting her hand to my mouth. I press a soft kiss to her knuckles as I feel Sammie turn in my arms.

She's resting her head against my shoulder, watching me and Harper. "I love you."

"You... No," she repeats. "You don't."

"He does!" Sammie suddenly shouts.

"Baby," Harper says, turning to her daughter, that same forced smile back in place as she reaches for her again. "Come here, please. Come on, you can stay with me now, until I'm better, and then we'll go home to Florida."

"NO!" Sammie shouts, pressing herself into me. "No, I want to stay here! I want to stay with Pam and Jeff and with Max!"

"Sammie," Harper pleads. "Please, baby."

"NO! NO. NO. NO."

I stand from the bed, Sammie still in my arms as I try to comfort her. She's crying now, her face buried in my neck, her tears on my skin. "Shhh, baby girl, you're okay," I whisper, running my hand up and down her back. Harper watches us, hurt written all over her face. "She's just confused, Harper, she doesn't mean anything by it."

I watch as Harper's eyes fill with tears now, a few escaping and falling down her cheeks. I want so desperately to go to her, to pull her in my arms and promise her that everything will be okay, that she'll remember everything, but I have no idea if that's true.

"I..." Harper starts, before stalling out. She swallows hard, brushing angrily at the tears on her cheek. "I don't...I don't even know you."

## CHAPTER 3

# HARPER

**T**he doctor stopped in to check on me, but that was about it. I was told I could leave, that everything looks good, but I can't leave because I have no idea where I'm going. I don't even know where I live. They didn't seem to care, setting me out front of the hospital with a bag of my belongings.

"Mommy, you need to call Max," Sammie tells me, and I wish with everything in me that his name would spark some tiny memory, but it doesn't.

I begged the hospital to let Sammie stay with me last night, not wanting her to go back to a stranger's house, needing to have her with me. They agreed, realizing that with my memory loss, they didn't really have any other option. I would have left at that moment had they said no.

Was I supposed to send her home with Max? He's a stranger to me, and as a mother, I couldn't in good conscience send my daughter off with him. I already had to do that once out of desperation. It was hard enough getting him to leave here when the hospital said visiting hours were over. The reluctance was written all over his face, but again, I don't even know him.

“Mommy,” Sammie says again, looking up at me, and I’m still trying to adjust to the fact that she’s not two years old anymore. It’s a devastating blow to realize that I’ve lost two years of my life with her. It’s gone. Just poof, like it was never even there.

“Sammie, I don’t know Max and I can’t ask him to pick us up,” I tell her, trying my best not to lose my patience. She has no idea how difficult this is. We’re in a strange place, and everything feels...weird.

“You do know Max,” Sammie insists, her voice riddled with fear and confusion. “Mommy, stop,” she now cries, her confusion turning to anger as she begins to wail.

I pull her to me, holding her against my chest as she cries into my shirt. I have no idea how to explain this to her, but it needs to happen. She needs to understand that things are missing, huge pieces of my memory, but talking to her about it feels like it might only make things worse.

“Okay, baby, I’ll call Max,” I assure her, rubbing her back. “He can pick us up and take us...” I trail off, not sure if I should use the word “home” since I don’t know how we ended up here.

Tyler wasn’t able to fill me in on anything when I called him. If anything, he made it all worse, screaming at me, and telling me that he was going to take Sammie from me. He carried on about me being a terrible parent and how dare I leave without telling him.

The past came flooding back, each word he said like a dagger to my heart, and a reminder of why I might have left. Things were never good between Tyler and me, but I still can’t imagine leaving, taking Sammie away from her father. It’s the one thing I told myself when I found out I was pregnant, that I



would give Sammie a family, that she wouldn't be raised by a single mother.

Not that Tyler ever took an active interest in her, but we are a family. He's her father and I'm determined to see that Sammie has the life I never did growing up.

"He can take us home, Mommy. We are going to move in with him." Sammie explains. "Remember?" She looks up at me with her big brown eyes, they're wide and hopeful, and as much as I would love to reassure her, I can't.

"I don't remember, baby. That's what's wrong. That's why they kept me at the hospital. I don't remember moving here. I don't remember a lot of things, but I remember you," I tell her, hoping that calms her fears, but I know it won't. She has to be terrified.

"Why don't you remember Max?" she asks, her eyes welling with tears again as I take my phone out, swallowing back the tears I feel building when the screen lights up with a picture of Sammie, Max and me.

"I don't know," I admit, typing out a text that feels so fucking wrong. I'm about to ask this stranger to pick us up when I asked him to leave last night.

"I want you to remember Max," Sammie whines, her little hand clutching mine now, her palm sweaty as she squeezes my hand harder. "Please remember him, Mommy."

Her words nearly shatter my heart, and I can't believe I've done this to her. I can't believe I moved her across the country, and that she has grown to like this man so quickly. Sammie doesn't like men. It's the way she's always been, and maybe that should tell me something about Max.

Fifteen minutes later Max pulls up, and again, I focus on his car, an SUV that I really hope I remember. But even with the booster seat in the back, it triggers nothing.

I watch as he exits the car, walking around to where we're waiting, and I can see he's been crying. His eyes are red-rimmed and swollen, and he swallows hard when he sees us.

Sammie runs to him, and he picks her up instantly without even a second of hesitation. The smile on his face has my heart slamming hard in my chest, begging me to remember. My eyes focus on the two of them and the way they interact as he places her in the booster seat, talking to her like nothing about this is weird.

"Look, Mommy!" Sammie calls to me, pointing at the harness for the booster seat. "Max taught me how to buckle myself in."

Max looks over his shoulder, smiling a little at me as I nod, telling Sammie that I'm proud of her. "I check it after she's done. I never let her do it entirely on her own," Max tells me, almost like he feels like I need the reassurance.

He walks over and stops in front of me, pausing, and again I watch him swallow hard, shaking his head a little. "I'll take that," Max says, reaching for my bag. It's not like I have a ton of stuff with me, but I hand it over, feeling a little hesitant. Everything just feels so off, so scary.

"Thank you."

Max puts my bag in the back seat with Sammie, and closes the door, coming over, he opens the door for me, holding out his hand.

"Careful," he says, as he helps me get into the car. Everything still hurts, even the smallest movement sends pain

radiating through every bone and muscle in my body. I have no idea how I'm going to take care of Sammie and I begin to feel incredibly overwhelmed.

I bury my face in my hands, not wanting Sammie to see me crying, but it's nearly impossible to hide. I feel a hand on my back, the weight comforting and when I look over, I see Max standing outside the car, tears spilling from his eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Harper," he whispers, shaking his head. "I wish there was a way for me to help you." His words hold so much sympathy and compassion, and I feel myself wanting to trust him.

"Mommy," I hear Sammie say, her voice cracking with the threat of tears. "Please don't cry."

I reach back, resting my hand on her leg. "It's okay. I'll be okay," I assure her, but it feels like a lie. I can't possibly know if anything is ever going to be normal again, at least her normal. We are living in two different worlds now: a world where her life is here and a life where mine still exists in Florida.

Max drives, none of us saying anything, and the silence screams so loud it feels like the car might explode. It doesn't feel right, this doesn't feel like how it's supposed to be. And even though I don't remember my life here, I have this sensation that moves through me, telling me that this isn't our normal.

I look around, taking in everything as Max drives, trying to commit to memory everything we pass, trying to help myself remember. I hate this feeling of total confusion and loss. I feel like a massive part of my life is missing, and it really is. I need to know how I ended up here and why I left Florida. I need to

figure this all out so I can get things back on track. I need to so I can give Sammie some stability.

He pulls into a parking lot that's behind a large ski resort. I see the sign, Badger Creek Ski Lodge and there's something about it that sounds familiar. I find myself mouthing the words as I read the sign, chewing on my lip, I hear the words repeat in my head.

"This is where we live?" I now ask as Max parks the car outside of a small house that is decorated with some flowerpots filled with brightly colored blooms along with a little sign that hangs on the front door.

"It is," Max replies, his voice quiet, and it feels like he has more to say than that. I remember Sammie telling me that we planned to move in with Max.

"Is this our house together?" I now ask as Max exits the car and gets Sammie out.

"No, Harper, it's not. We talked about moving in together right before your accident and you said yes." His words are said with promise, but also with hesitancy. He knows there might not ever be a time that we get there. Right now, I can only picture my life in Florida, and I plan to leave here as soon as I can.

"Okay," I respond, not sure how to answer him. I hate this awkwardness that floats between us, wanting so badly to remember.

Max opens the front door, using a key, and I hold back on asking him why he has a key. This is obviously something I gave him, something I did because how else would he have gotten a key to mine and Sammie's house. It feels very unlike me to trust someone enough to give them a key to my house.

“Welcome home!” a group of people call out, and I feel my heart begin to race. The small space is filled with about five people and again, Sammie runs right to one of them. It’s a woman with long brownish-blond hair and stunning blue eyes.

“Sammie Bammie!” she yells out, scooping Sammie up and swinging her around. “I missed your face, you little nugget.”

“I’m not a little nugget,” Sammie squeals, wrapping her arms around this woman’s neck and hugging her tightly. “I’m a princess and Max is the prince.”

Fuck my life. How is this happening to me? How is it that I remember none of these people who have clearly had a massive impact on my child’s life?

I find myself crying again, sobbing hard as I walk into the kitchen, trying to get away from the overwhelming idea of all these strangers in my house. It’s not even my house or at least I don’t think it’s my house. I don’t remember one inch of it.

“Why don’t we try this again another day,” I hear Max tell the group of people. “I don’t think she’s ready for this just yet.”

I know I should be out there thanking people for coming to see me, but I can’t bring myself to do it. I need them to leave. I need to be alone so I can process all of this, try and figure out what is going on.

“We don’t want to overwhelm her,” Max continues, and like that hasn’t already happened. “Elissa, would you be able to come by tomorrow and maybe take her around Badger Creek? See if she...” Max stops talking, and when I look over, he’s watching me through the small doorway into the kitchen.

The woman who is holding Sammie nods, her words too quiet for me to hear, but it appears she's agreed to what Max asked. But no one bothers to ask me if that's what I want. I don't want to be dragged all over this town, bombarded with the question, "do you remember this" over and over.

All I want to do is go to sleep and wake up from this nightmare. Maybe that's all it is, a nightmare. I always had thoughts of leaving Tyler and moving away, taking Sammie away from him, but I wasn't anywhere near ready. It was hard to leave. I didn't have anything. How did I get here when I had nothing?

The house clears out and Sammie parks herself on the couch, talking into the remote, telling it to turn on *Frozen* and I take it in, shocked at her independence.

"Do you want me to stay?" Max asks, finding me in the kitchen still, watching Sammie.

"I don't know," I admit. "I have no idea." I look away from him, my eyes feeling like they're coated with sand from all the crying.

"Do you want me to tell you how you got here? Are there things you want to know?" he asks, and I know he's trying to help, but I don't think I'm ready to hear it. I need some time to process this all, some time to figure out my own life before I allow people to fill my head with what they want me to hear.

"No, not now please," I respond, sounding insensitive and mean. "You don't need to stay. We'll be fine."

"Okay, if you need me, you can call me, anytime," Max says, leaning toward me like he's going to kiss me, but he stops short. "I'm sorry," he now mutters, closing his eyes.

We stand in silence for a few more moments before he walks over to Sammie, dropping a kiss on the top of her head, he whispers something in her ear. Letting out a high-pitched giggle, she then tells him she loves him.

Fuck, this is so damn hard.

I clamp my mouth shut, it takes everything in me to tell Sammie not to say that and to tell her that we aren't staying here, but I don't have it in me to listen to her cry. She's as confused as I am.

"Elissa will be by in the morning," Max tells me as he gets ready to leave. "Please spend some time with her. She's your best friend, Harper."



## CHAPTER 4

### MAX

I fucking hate leaving her, but I know I have no choice. Just like last night at the hospital, I have to respect Harper's wishes, even if everything in me is screaming at me to stay, to help her, to beg her to remember me and us and what we have together.

"You okay?"

I look up to see Alex leaning against my car, his arms crossed over his chest as he waits for me. When I look around, I see everyone else has left, including Delaney. "What are you doing?" I ask.

Alex pushes off the car and walks toward me. "Dunno, just figured I'd hang around in case," he says, shrugging.

"In case of what?" I ask, my words harsher than they should be.

Alex stops in front of me, his hand moving to my shoulder as he says, "In case you weren't okay."

I let out a hard breath, scrubbing a hand over my face. I don't know what to say to him because the truth is, I'm not okay. I'm so fucking far from okay, it's not funny. And it's not just everything that happened to Harper that night, all her injuries and the way her body still needs to heal. It's all the

things she can't remember, the way she looks at me like she doesn't know me or recognize me or remember anything about me or us or what we have together.

It's the way she flinches every time I touch her.

"Come on," Alex says, squeezing my shoulder before he turns and walks past my car and back toward the lodge.

"Where are we going?" I call out.

Alex glances back at me, a half-smile on his face. "To get a drink."

I roll my eyes, but he's already turned away and so with nothing better to do, I follow him, walking past my car and back toward the lodge and The Matterhorn. This is probably a bad idea, but it's not like I want to go home anyway. What I want to do is turn around and go back to Harper's, but I can't do that.

"Inside," Alex says with a grin as I walk up to where he's standing, holding open the door to The Matterhorn, his phone in his other hand. He pushes me inside and up to the bar, ordering us a couple of beers before we make our way over to a booth. "So," he says, settling in across from me as he puts his phone on the table between us. "Seems like the welcome home party was a bad idea."

I shake my head, taking a long pull of my beer. "Yeah," I exhale. "A fucking stupid idea."

"Was worth a shot," he says, leaning forward, his elbows resting on the table. "You never know, she might have remembered something."

"I feel like she's never gonna remember anything at this point," I say, downing half my beer. "It's like she doesn't even want to. I mean she has no fucking idea who I am."

Alex signals for another round even though we have literally just sat down before turning back to me. “Max, you know this isn’t her fault, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I groan. “Of course I do.”

“Right,” he says, taking a sip of his beer. “So stop blaming yourself for something you can’t control and stop getting mad at Harper for something she can’t either.”

“I’m not mad at her,” I snap, looking around for my fresh beer.

“You sure about that?” he asks.

“I’m not,” I say, lifting the bottle for a sip, even though it’s now empty. “I’m just fucking frustrated and scared and fuck... I don’t know,” I say, huffing out a breath, suddenly exhausted.

Alex finishes his beer, smiling up at the server who drops us off another round before he slides a bottle in my direction. “It is okay to be mad, you know?” he says, offering me a smile. “I mean, Laney and I were furious at each other after the avalanche, like we somehow blamed each other for what happened that day.” He lets out a chuckle, taking another sip of beer. “It’s ridiculous, obviously, but also totally normal.”

“It totally is, Max,” comes a voice that is familiar but completely out of place to this scenario.

I blink, staring down at the phone on the table as Alex laughs, tapping the screen quickly to wake it up and reveal that Nick is actually on speaker phone with both of us.

“What the hell?” I ask.

“Hold on,” Alex says, as he picks up his phone. “Dude, I’m switching you to FaceTime, okay, hang on.” He taps away at the screen and before I have a chance to fully process what

the fuck is going on, Nick's face appears on Alex's iPhone screen, which he then props up against the salt and pepper shaker. "I figured I'd call in reinforcements," he says, giving me a sheepish grin.

"Hey," Nick says, waving at me from the tiny screen.

"Hey, dude," I say, chuckling at this whole situation. "How are you?"

"Pfft, forget about me, how are you?" Nick asks. "Alex filled me in on what happened, and man, it sounds totally shit, are you doing okay?"

I glance over at Alex before turning to the phone. "Man, this is so fucking weird. What time is it for you anyway?" I ask him.

Nick grins. "Late morning."

"Shouldn't you be skiing?"

Nick waves a hand, shaking his head. "Like I said, forget about me. I'm more concerned with how *you* are doing?"

I let out a long slow breath. "Honestly, Nick, fucking terrified," I admit. "I'm terrified that Harper may never get her memory back, I'm terrified she's going to go back to Florida like she keeps saying, and I'm terrified I'm gonna lose her and Sammie."

My two best friends don't say anything at first, before Nick finally asks, "Why would she go back to Florida?"

I take another sip of beer, realizing I'm now halfway through this one too and if I don't slow down, I'll be drunk in a few minutes. I've barely eaten anything over the last seventy-two hours, spending most of my time sitting by Harper's bed waiting for her to wake up.

“It’s what she remembers,” I eventually say. “She doesn’t remember moving here or why she had to.”

“Had to?” Nick asks.

“Yeah,” I breathe out. “She was escaping her ex.”

“Shit, so if she...”

“Yep, pretty much,” I say, finishing off the rest of my beer.

I spend the rest of the afternoon with Alex and Nick, who stays on the phone, despite the fact that someone knocks on the door of whatever room he’s in and tells him they’re heading back out on the slopes. I’m grateful for both of them even if by the time I get back to my condo, I’m a little drunk.

“You want me to stay and hang out?” Alex says as I unlock the front door.

“Nah, I’m good, man. Thanks though.”

He gives me a smile, his hand on my shoulder as he pulls me in for a hug. “Don’t give up,” he tells me, slapping a hand on my back. “Maybe tomorrow will be different.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I say, not really believing my own words before I head inside.

I stumble into my bedroom to find my phone charger. My phone died sometime during drinks and when I plug it in and it finally turns on, my screen is flooded with messages from my parents, my sister, Nick.

Collapsing onto my bed, I flick through them all, trying to focus.

*Nick: Hey, hope you really are ok. You know you can call anytime if you need to chat.*

*Mom: How's Harper today, did she go home?*

*Mom: And Sammie?*

*Zoey: Hey, how are you?*

*Zoey: So, I guess that welcome home party wasn't a good idea, you ok? You want to come over or I can come to you?*

*Zoey: Max, are you ok? Call me.*

Exhaling, I type out a quick thanks for today to Nick in our group chat, before I call my sister.

“Hey, Max, are you alright?” she says as soon as she picks up.

“No,” I groan, exhaling hard as I close my eyes.

“You want to come over, have dinner with us?” she asks.

“Nah,” I slur. “I’m drunk and my car is still at Harper’s.”

Zoey chuckles through the phone. “Yeah, Delaney mentioned that Alex was taking you for a drink. Did it help at least?”

“Not really,” I admit. “The only thing that will help is Harper getting her memory back.”

“It’s going to happen, Max,” my sister says confidently. “We just have to keep trying to trigger something. Tomorrow is Elissa’s turn and after that, me and Del will try and obviously you will keep trying too. Plus, Sammie can help, so —”

“So what if it’s not enough,” I snap. “What if she never remembers and she leaves me, and I never see her again?”

“Max, that’s not going to happen,” she says, her voice filled with sympathy. “The doctors said it’s likely temporary and you just have to be patient.”

“Zoey, I am being patient, but fuck, if she goes back to Florida, it’s not just her leaving that’s the problem. She’ll be going back to her ex and fuck, I’m pretty sure he’s a total asshole and nothing good will come from that. I mean you saw what she was like when she first came to Tahoe.”

My sister sighs through the phone and even though I’m not meaning to take it out on her, I know she gets it too. When she first interviewed Harper, she could see straight away that she was desperate for a fresh start. It’s why she took a chance and gave her the job. Why she also threw in the accommodation for Harper, which wasn’t even part of the job package. It was just something she did because my sister is good like that.

“Yeah,” she eventually says. “I get what you’re saying, Max, and look, maybe we can make sure that someone is with her at all times so she can’t leave.”

I scoff. “What twenty-four-seven? How’s that gonna work? Short of me sleeping in my car outside her place, I don’t know how we can stop her.”

I don’t mean to be an asshole, even as I can hear that I am. I know everyone means well and they are just trying to be helpful and supportive, but right now, none of it is making any difference. Harper is still lost to me and until I get her back, I’m not sure I’m ever going to get rid of this fear.

“You sure you don’t want me to come over?” Zoey asks. “I can stay, we can hang out like old times.”

I smile. “Nah, it’s okay, Zoey, thank you though. And look I’m sorry for being a dick, I know you’re only trying to help.”

“We all are,” she says. “We all want her back.”

“I know,” I sigh. “Look, I’m gonna go to bed. I need to sleep off this alcohol and see if tomorrow doesn’t bring some new ideas.”

“Elissa is heading over in the morning,” Zoey says. “Maybe you can catch up with them when you wake up?”

“Yeah, maybe. Night, Zoey.”

“Goodnight, Max. Love you big brother.”

After we hang up, I go back to my messages, finding the thread with Harper. The last few messages I’ve sent her have all gone unanswered because obviously she has no idea who the guy sending them to her is. But I don’t stop sending them, hoping that with each one, it triggers something, however small, that helps her find her memories.

This time, I select a photo, one of the three of us out hiking. It’s the first time we went together, when we had only just started seeing each other and it’s still one of my favorites.

Attaching it to a message, I type out a quick text.

*Me: I hope you are feeling settled now you are back at home. I love you, Harper. Please remember that.*

Then I throw my phone on the nightstand, crawl under the covers and pass out, drunk, exhausted, and just over it.



## CHAPTER 5

# HARPER

I'm standing in Sammie's doorway watching her sleep, thinking about how we lost two years together, two years I might never get back, but she seems as happy and content as ever. This is not what I expected to see given my accident. I figured she'd have been distraught and scared, worried about me and what happened, and while she was, she was also calm and secure. I felt it the second she entered the hospital room, the way she trusts Max and all the people who were here when we got back.

It's interesting to see things through her eyes since I have no idea what we're doing here, but something about it feels right, especially to her. She doesn't seem to miss her dad, and not that I should be surprised by that. They rarely spent any time together, but it still breaks my heart that I took her away from him. We were supposed to be a family. That was what I wanted.

I want to crawl in bed with her and wake her up, have her tell me everything. I want to hear about her happiness and why we left and how we ended up here, but all of that feels too big for my sweet little four-year-old to handle. She's the only connection I have left to a life I can't remember. She's the only one I trust to tell me the truth.

Just as I begin to walk into her bedroom, my phone chimes out, sending this strange sense of urgency for me to check it.

After I called Tyler from the hospital, I expected him to text me or call me, but I've heard nothing from him. Our conversation didn't go well, and that feeling of inadequacy came flooding back. He was always good at making me feel like I was the one who had done something wrong, and even worse, he used my parenting against me. Sammie was always a pawn in his efforts to break me down.

But I still can't believe I left. Leaving would have proved my mother right. It would have told Tyler that I gave up. And maybe I did give up. Maybe I needed to.

I walk into the kitchen, finding my phone on the counter, I look down at the text that appears on the screen. A sigh of relief leaves my mouth when I see it isn't Tyler and that should tell me everything I need to know.

*Max: I hope you are feeling settled now you are back at home. I love you, Harper. Please remember that.*

I read it over and over, the tears pooling in my eyes at seeing his words, seeing him tell me he loves me. I wish I could remember what that feels like, what I said to him when he first said it to me. Or maybe I was the first to say it. I can't see that being the case, always being so guarded and afraid of the response.

I carry my phone to the bedroom, a place that should feel like home but holds no significance, and that causes the tears to finally spill over.

I just want to remember something, anything at this point.

I fall onto the bed, sobbing as I open the screen on my phone, seeing the picture of Sammie, Max and me, all of us smiling and happy. Then I navigate to the text Max sent, and there's another picture of the three of us, a different one than is on my home screen.

I can barely see anything through the flood of tears, but I open the photos app, scrolling through all the pictures, hoping to recognize something.

There are pictures of Sammie in a leotard and tutu, tiny pink ballet slippers on her feet. There's pictures of a beautiful lake and a house that looks straight out of a magazine with Max and me standing out on the deck. There are pictures of Sammie playing in the sand and her smiling while she's being cuddled by an older woman.

Nothing seems familiar even if I want it to. I want this life that I see in these pictures because the person looking back at me is happier than I ever remember being. Sammie looks healthy and comfortable and secure. That's all I've ever wanted for her.

I find myself scrolling till I reach the end of the pictures, all of them taking place here. There's nothing on here from my former life, the life I lived with Tyler, but it occurs to me that this isn't my phone. It's new and different than the one I used to have, and even that confuses me. I left home and I didn't take my phone, my only source of communication.

All of this means something, something I need to piece together, but right now all I feel is overwhelmed. I'm not sure I can sleep, anxious and worried about everything.

I look at the text from Max again, recalling how he immediately left to go get Sammie when I asked him, reassuring me that she was safe. I saw the smile on her face when she walked into that disaster of a welcome home party, running right to that beautiful woman who cradled Sammie in her arms. These people know us. There's something here, something I'm missing, and I hate it.

Max is the one who texted me, checking in, telling me he loves me, but there's nothing from Tyler. He has this number now, he knows where I am, but not a word. His silence should speak volumes. He never said he was coming here, he never asked to talk to Sammie, nothing other than telling me that I had made the biggest mistake of my life.

I can't stop looking at Max's text and the feeling of security it brings me. It's strange because I don't even know him, but there's something there, something that I need to remember.

*Me: Thank you. I'm sorry for my response today. I wish I could say that I love you back, but I'm not there yet.*

I hit send, sobbing harder than I ever have in my life. I hate how out of control I feel, how lost and alone and hopeless. It's the worst feeling in the world to not know your own life, but I know I need to get back there. Not just for me, but for Sammie too.

The morning comes quickly, and I wake to find Sammie curled up in bed next to me. I'm still dressed in what I wore home from the hospital, my head throbbing with the tears that were shed last night. Sleep has done nothing for me, and I struggle to wake up without feeling angry over it all.

"Mommy," Sammie whispers, her sweet little voice is like music to my ears though, "tell me what you remember."

I roll over, nose to nose with her and she giggles when I flick my eyelashes against her cheek. Butterfly kisses, she's always loved them, and I focus on the things I do remember, the things that make me happy.

"I remember you and everything about you," I tell her, even though I know that isn't true. We lost time together, but I will do everything I can to make up for that. "I remember that you love listening to books and that you love the beach. I remember that I named you Sammie because I wanted you to have a unique name, a name that most girls don't have."

I kiss the tip of her nose, her smile wide and her dimpled cheeks looking far too adorable. I'm so lucky to have her here with me, not ever being able to picture my life without her.

"And I love the movie *Frozen*," she tells me, like she's reminding me, and this is a piece I'm missing. She doesn't say it like she's angry or disappointed, but more as a push to get me to add it to my memory. "And we drink chocolate milk before bed and even though you think I don't know, you mix mine with white milk."

She lets out a silly giggle, covering her face with her hands. I pull them away, holding her hands in mine, memorizing her face, and how she looks exactly like I did when I was her age.

“I’m going to learn to ski, Mommy, so we can’t leave,” she now says, her words said with hesitation and a tinge of fear that nearly breaks my heart. “We are happy here. You love Max.”

I watch as her bottom lip starts to tremble, the tears forming in her eyes. She’s breaking my heart, and I swipe my fingers under her eyes, wiping away the tears. I sit up, pulling her into my lap, we both cry, letting it all out.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” I sob, smoothing back her hair, I kiss the top of her head. “I don’t know if we can stay.” I know this is going to upset her even more, but I can’t see us being able to stay here. I have to find out why I left Florida.

“Mommy, we can stay. Don’t say that. You have a job and I go to school here,” she pleads, the desperation now taking over. “Elissa will show you.”

I let out a hard sigh, closing my eyes as I try to process all of this, trying to figure out how we ended up here, wishing like hell it would just come back to me.

“Sammie, how did we get here?” I ask her, not wanting to put my four-year-old in this situation, but she’s all I have.

“We took a train and the bus and you woke me up and said we were home.” It’s all said with a casualness that I wish I could have right now. She shrugs, brushing away the last of her tears, seeming to calm down.

“What about your dad?”

“He’s in Florida. He didn’t care that we left. I don’t miss him, Mommy, I promise.”

I’m not sure that’s entirely true. He certainly sounded like he cared when I talked to him on the phone, but it also felt like I was confusing him caring for him being unable to control

what happened. Even if we don't go back to Tyler, we need to go back to Florida. That's where our life was. I was finishing my second year in college.

But that's when I'm hit with a memory that feels fuzzy but real. Tyler made me quit school. I never finished my sophomore year.

"Sammie, did I go to school too?" I now ask her, needing to fill in these gaps.

"You stopped going when I was a baby," Sammie replies. "You said you needed to stay home to take care of me."

"I told you that?" I question, wondering if this is just something she created in her own mind or if I told her all of this.

"You told me. You told me all about it when we were on the train coming here," she says, confidently. "You told me that you would take me to class with you when I was a baby and you would feed me and take notes and other people in class would hold me. I don't remember being a baby."

I laugh a little at her last comment. It sounds like something she would say, and I once again pull her into my arms, hugging her tightly.

"I'm sure you don't," I tell her, again laughing. Nothing like my daughter to help make me feel better. "Thank you for helping me. I love you."

"I love you too, Mommy," she replies, without even thinking about it. "Elissa is coming over today," she now says, almost like she's reminding me.

"I know she is. She's going to help me see if I can remember anything about us living here," I reply, trying to

think positively. I owe it to Sammie to try and this feels like a good place to start.

Sammie needs me to be strong, and we can't keep having the argument about us leaving. She needs stability, and even though I'm terrified, she can't know that. I need to give her the space she needs to feel comfortable and assure her that I will make the decision that is right for both of us.

"Can we have pancakes?" she now asks, jumping on the bed. "Chocolate chip ones? Watch this, Mommy. I learned this at ballet." She shifts gears faster than a race car driver, and even though my head is spinning with all this trauma, she's the reason I need to keep going.

An hour later there's a knock on the front door and I walk over, looking through the peephole. It's the girl from yesterday with the long brown hair and the sparkling blue eyes, the one Sammie gravitated too, and I can see why. There's something so comforting about her, so calming.

"Hi," I say, opening the door, but still not sure how I should greet her. Max told me that we're best friends, but like everything else about my life here, I don't remember her.

"Hey, Harper. How are you doing today?" she asks, stopping in the small entryway to the house. "Anything?" she now asks, sounding hopeful.

"No, nothing, but I'm hoping that changes today," I reply, trying to sound equally as hopeful. Although, it's hard for me to feel anything but indifferent about trying to regain a life that I don't remember.



“I thought we’d start with some of the places you spend a lot of time at and see if that triggers anything,” Elissa suggests, and all I can do is nod.

I don’t even know where I spend a lot of time.

## CHAPTER 6

### MAX

**W**hen I wake up, my eyes feel gritty like I haven't even been asleep, my mouth is dry and foul, and my head is fucking pounding.

"Jesus christ," I mutter, rolling over as I reach for my phone on the nightstand. Not only is it nearly ten o'clock in the morning, but I also have a new text message.

From Harper.

I bolt upright, which only makes my head spin in addition to the pounding, as my fingers tap awkwardly at the screen, trying to open the message she must have sent after I passed out last night. My heart is now also pounding, wondering what her response is, whether she's miraculously remembered me and us somehow and is texting to tell me. To ask me to come home to her.

But when I finally get the message app to open, all my hope comes crashing down.

*Harper: Thank you. I'm sorry for my response today. I wish I could say that I love you back, but I'm not there yet.*

“Fuck,” I groan, shoving a rough hand through my hair. I’m still dressed in my clothes, because evidently in addition to getting drunk yesterday, passing out fully clothed was another dumbass move on my part.

I quickly text Elissa to see if she’s managed to convince Harper to go out with her, hoping that this somehow helps to trigger some memories for her.

*Elissa: Yes, we are out now. Spending the day around the resort. I’ll let you know if anything changes.*

Exhaling, I throw my phone onto the bed and drag my sorry ass into the shower, scrubbing away my hangover and disappointment. I have no idea what to do today. I’m not working at the moment, because Jim has given me a couple of weeks off.

Between me showing up to the accident scene and being unable to remember a single bit of my training and then discovering Harper has lost her memory, I’m fairly certain he thinks I’m useless at this point. And honestly, he wouldn’t be far off.

Maybe I’m not cut out to be an EMT after all and should just stick to being a medic on the slopes and dealing with idiotic tourists who think they can ski black runs when in reality they belong on the beginner slopes.

Fuck, maybe this is the universe telling me I should just be working at Holden, where the worst thing I can do is sell someone the wrong size jacket or some shit.

When I eventually drag myself out of the shower, I pull on jeans and a t-shirt before wandering into the kitchen to make some coffee, my mind drifting to what Harper and Elissa are doing. Is Sammie with them? I'm guessing she is seeing as Harper now thinks she knows nobody in this town so isn't going to leave Sammie anywhere.

I hope Sammie is somehow triggering some memories with her no filter approach to saying whatever's on her mind.

By the time I finish my coffee and get my shit together, it's now almost noon and I'm bored out of my brain and desperate to see Harper, to know if any of this is working. I haven't heard anymore from Elissa, so I decide to fuck it and wander over to the resort in the hopes of running into them.

When I get there, I head into the coffee shop at the lodge to grab another coffee, knowing I need it and probably another couple hours of sleep at this point.

"Max, hey, how are you doing?"

I turn to find Ethan waiting at the end of the counter, presumably for his coffee. After I place my order, I move to where he stands.

"I don't know," I admit with a shrug. "Not great to be honest."

I wait for the usual *be patient* or *give it time*, platitudes most people seem to dish out, but that's not what Ethan says, instead surprising me with, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

I blow out a breath, shaking my head as I reply, "Not unless you've somehow invented time travel?"

Ethan chuckles. "Unfortunately not. But have you thought about getting a second opinion, maybe sending her to a

specialist or something. Tracy's dad is a surgeon, he might know some people if you want me to reach out?"

"Yeah, I've thought about it," I say. "But I'm not sure if Harper would go for it. She barely accepts my help with the easy stuff, so I can't see her accepting it with something like this. Thanks though," I add, grateful.

"I'm sure she wants to remember," he says, just as his order is called. "Can't hurt to offer."

"I know, I mean the doctors here said to give it time and try things that might trigger her in some way. I guess if that doesn't help, maybe I'll ask if we can try a specialist."

"Well, let me know," he says, offering me a smile. "It's no problem for me to reach out."

"Thanks, Ethan, I really appreciate it," I say. "Where's your other half?" I now ask, glancing around the coffee shop. "It's not often I see you without my sister attached to some part of you?"

He laughs, reaching for the coffees. "She's tied up on a call, so I'm grabbing her coffee."

I roll my eyes, but I'm only giving him shit when I tease, "Such a sap."

"You know it," he says. "Talk to you later?"

"Yeah, see you."

After he leaves, I wait for my coffee, grabbing it and heading outside and down toward the lake, to the spot I took Harper when we first met for lunch weeks or months ago now. It's busy, filled with tourists and people making the most of the warm summer that has well and truly arrived.

I take a seat on one of the benches as I drink my coffee, watching, waiting to see if Harper shows up. I'm not sure if she ever came down here with anyone else though, so maybe Elissa wouldn't think to bring her here.

If I was taking Harper out today, there's a whole list of places I'd take her, that start with here and end with my condo, with a whole lot in between.

After I finish my coffee, I stand and wander back to the resort, heading into the main lobby with no clue as to where I'm going or what I'm doing.

“Max!”

I turn just in time to see Sammie running toward me, a huge smile on her face and her arms already out. With a grin, I bend down, scooping her up into my arms the second she's within reach. “Hey, squirt,” I say, blowing a raspberry on her cheek.

She lets out a loud giggle, throwing her head back even as she wraps her little arms around my neck. “I'm not a squirt.”

“You sure about that?” I tease, blowing one on the other cheek this time.

“Yes!”

“Sure?” I ask again, tickling her this time.

“Yes!”

With a chuckle, I pull back, brushing her hair back from her face. “How are you, how's Mommy doing?”

Sammie shrugs, her smile dimming a little as she says, “She still doesn't remember.”

“No?” I ask, trying to hide the disappointment. None of this is Sammie’s fault and the last thing I want is for her to think it’s her responsibility to try and get her mom to remember things. “I’m sure she’s trying really hard though,” I say, just as I see Elissa and Harper watching us.

Harper stands beside Elissa, watching me and Sammie, an unreadable expression on her face. I give her a smile, hoisting Sammie onto my hip as I tickle her again.

“What have you been doing so far?” I ask.

“Ummm, we got cookies, and we went to the ski lodge, which was a huge mess and then I jumped on a bed in one of the rooms,” Sammie says.

I laugh, glancing over again at Harper, who’s still just watching us. “Jumped on the bed, huh?”

“Yep,” Sammie says nodding, a huge smile on her face.

“Sounds like you’re having fun.”

She sighs now, her smile falling. “Yep, except Mommy doesn’t remember anything,” she says, just as Harper and Elissa walk over to join us.

“Hey,” I say, smiling at Harper. “How are you?” My words and question sound weirdly formal and not at all how I’d speak to Harper. Hell, just standing here and not touching her is weird.

“I’m okay, thanks,” she says with a small shrug.

“Anything?” I ask, despite Sammie telling me Harper hasn’t got her memories back.

She glances at Elissa who gives her a small smile before she turns back to me. “No, nothing yet.”

“But you will remember,” Sammie says, clearly understanding our conversation and exactly what’s going on here. I can’t imagine what it’s like for her, to remember everything about why they are here in Tahoe, but her mom has no idea. It must be so confusing for her.

“I’ve taken her to a few places from work,” Elissa says, all of us ignoring Sammie’s comment. “Just to see if it jogs any memories.”

She gives me a small smile and I’m truly grateful for everything Elissa is doing to help Harper. I know the two of them have grown close over the last few months and I can’t imagine this is easy for Elissa either.

“Where are you off too next?” I ask.

Elissa glances at Harper, giving her a warm smile. “I thought we might get a late lunch. You have any suggestions for where we should go?”

“You could try Tony’s—” I start, my suggestion cut off by Sammie yelling, “Tacos!”

I laugh, squeezing her a little because I know she loves that place almost as much as I do. It was also one of the first places I took the two of them when they first moved to town. “You want to get some queso?” I ask Sammie.

“And gauco...gauca...” She narrows her brow as she attempts to say guacamole and I can’t help but laugh.

“Guacamole?”

“Yes!” she now shouts. “Come with us, Max?”

“Oh no, I don’t think...” Harper starts to say, before Elissa stops her.



“Maybe it might help,” she suggests, giving me a quick smile. “Max is the one who took you there first.”

“You were?” Harper asks, turning to me.

I meet her gaze, her gorgeous brown eyes still pulling me in even though they look at me like they don’t recognize me. “I was,” I say with a nod. “It was one of our first dates. You, me and Sammie.”

“Oh,” she says.

“Come on, Mommy,” Sammie now whines. “Let’s all go for tacos, we can—”

Whatever Sammie is about to say next never comes out and instead, I watch as the excitement on her face morphs into something that looks like confusion or maybe fear.

As I follow her gaze to the doors of the hotel, I see a guy standing by the concierge, asking one of the staff a question, even as his gaze moves around the lobby as though he isn’t even listening to their answer. Before I can even ask Sammie what it is that’s freaking her out, his eyes land on us, widening a little before his brows narrow and he stalks toward us.

“Um, Harper, I think—”

“No,” Sammie shouts, turning her face away and burying it against my neck.

“Harper? Babe?” this guy says as he comes to a stop beside her, immediately throwing his arm around her shoulders in this weirdly possessive way.

I wait for her to freak out, to tell him to piss off, but she doesn’t. Instead, she turns to him, a small smile tugging at her mouth as she says, “Tyler, I...I wasn’t expecting you to come here?”

He smiles back at her, but there's something sinister and off about it. "Oh come on? Did you really expect me to leave my girls here all alone after what happened?" he says, his voice smooth but slimy.

"Your girls?" I blurt out, confused, even though my brain is screaming at me to get this guy away from Harper and Sammie because I know *exactly* who he is.

He turns to me, a small sneer on his face. "That's right, *my girls*," he says, looking right at me. "Come on, Sammie, come to daddy," he adds, his words firm as he reaches for his daughter in my arms.

## CHAPTER 7

# HARPER

“No!” Sammie wails, high-pitched and loud. Her words fill the lobby, and every eye is now on us as Tyler continues to reach for her. “No!” she screams again, clinging to Max, her arms wrapped around his neck so tightly that I worry she’s hurting him.

“Sammie,” I whisper, my mouth close to her ear, but she lets out a shrill shriek, hitting me with a nasty glare when I try to take her from Max. She clearly isn’t going to go to Tyler, not that I’m surprised by that, but maybe this will be the catalyst he needs to be a better parent.

“It’s okay, Sammie,” Max murmurs to her, his voice sweet and soothing. “Go to Mommy.” He runs his hand over her back, pressing a soft kiss to her temple before she takes in a ragged breath and reaches for me.

I take her from Max’s arms, my ribs aching as I try to position her onto my hip, telling him thank you and when I turn to look at Tyler, his face is filled with absolute rage. I can feel the fear moving up my spine, reminding me for a split second why I must have left. My memory is filled with flashbacks to my life in Florida, before and after Sammie and none of them are good.

“Maybe we should try this another day,” I tell Max and Elissa. “Sammie seems like she might need a nap.” I try to get the words out without crying, feeling that lump form in my throat, but I swallow it back down. I’m still so damn confused, and I can’t be here with all these people right now.

“I don’t need a nap!” Sammie screams, her voice once again echoing in the vast expanse of the lobby. She suddenly turns to face Tyler and it’s in that instant I know what she’s going to say, but I can’t stop her. Her eyes are like daggers, her words said with venom. “I hate you!”

“This has been a lot for her,” I quickly defend, but I know it won’t help. Tyler is already pissed off, and now I’m going to have to do damage control.

“What the hell did you do to her?” he hisses, his words almost a whisper as he moves closer to me. I’m not sure if Elissa or Max heard him, but even if they didn’t, it’s obvious that things are not going well. This isn’t a happy reunion.

I quickly shake my head, unable to hold back the tears now, they begin to spill from my eyes and down my cheeks.

“I’m going to take Sammie home. Thank you, Elissa. Maybe we can try tomorrow,” I quickly say, sounding like a broken record, but it’s all I can bring myself to do. I swipe at my cheeks as I hoist Sammie higher onto my hip. She’s stopped screaming but that doesn’t mean the tantrum is over. She’s struggling with all of this just as much as I am, and I can’t imagine what is going through her little brain right now.

“I’m coming with you,” Tyler says, his tone suddenly changing to this sickeningly sweet drawl, and again I’m hit with what it used to be like to live with him. I’m starting to hate myself for calling him, but I could be remembering it all wrong. Nothing feels right anymore.

I see Max step toward us, his mouth opening as if he wants to say something, but he stops himself. His eyes cast down, shaking his head a little. I can tell he's hurt, and I try to process what he could be so upset over. Could it be that Tyler is here? That I don't remember who he is or that we were in a relationship? Maybe it's the way Sammie responded? All of it feels like too much to handle, and I can't keep thinking about other people. I need to do what's right for Sammie and me, and being with Sammie's dad is what makes us a family.

"Okay," I reply softly, and as soon as I do, Sammie begins to screech again, and I seriously can't take it. Walking as quickly as I can, I leave the hotel lobby, embarrassed and hurt and confused. "Sammie, what has gotten into you?" I ask when we've exited the building, Tyler following behind us, and when I look over my shoulder, I see Elissa and Max watching us.

"No, Mommy!" Sammie screams, not really articulating what is wrong, but that's the life of a four-year-old. "You didn't let me say goodbye to Max," she now says, her words coming out ragged and desperate.

"Okay, hold on," I tell her, starting to carry her back over to where Max is standing, but Tyler stops directly in front of us.

"You aren't going to let her tell you what to do," he spits out, and I swallow hard, his words startling me. "We're leaving. She's behaving like a complete asshole."

I blink several times, making sure I heard him right. He can't be serious. She's four years old and her life has just completely changed. Her mom is unable to remember anything about the last two years, yet he wants Sammie and me to behave as if nothing is wrong.

“Tyler, she’s having a hard time. Please be patient with her,” I plead. “And don’t call her names. She can hear you and that kind of thing affects her.”

He lets out a scoff, but eventually concedes, letting me walk Sammie back over to say goodbye to Max. But I know this isn’t going to be easy. Sammie has clearly developed a very strong bond with him and taking her from him is going to suck. I’m probably going to have to peel her off of him kicking and screaming.

“She wants to say goodbye,” I tell Max, Tyler standing several feet away, watching us with far too much suspicion.

“Bye, Sammie. Don’t worry. I’ll see you later,” Max says, appeasing her, but I don’t think it works because Sammie is once again crying.

“I don’t want to see you later,” Sammie wails, reaching out for Max. “I want to see you now.”

Max looks at me for help and all I can do is shrug, knowing that nothing either of us says is going to matter to Sammie. She feels like her whole world is changing and it feels out of control to her. I know the feeling well.

“We will see Max later. I promise,” I now say, knowing I need to keep that promise. Just because she’s a kid doesn’t mean I don’t have to keep promises to her.

“Do you promise, Mommy?” Sammie asks, her voice breaking a little with the idea that I might be lying to her.

“We promise,” Max interjects, resting a hand on Sammie’s back. “We can go for ice cream or tacos. Whatever you want.”

“Okay,” Sammie snuffles, calming down. “Bye, Max. I love you.”

“Bye, Sammie,” Max replies, pausing a second, he looks at me, almost like he’s waiting for me to say it’s okay for him to say it back to her.

I don’t want to be the one to take that away from either of them. There’s something between them, something Sammie has never had with her dad.

“Love you, Sammie,” he quickly says, smiling at both of us, but behind that smile is complete and utter sadness. I can feel it passing between us. “Harper,” Max now calls as I begin to walk away. Turning around, I look at him, catching a memory of his face flashing in my mind. “I’ll win you back. I promise.”

“See, Mommy, he promises,” Sammie croons, rubbing at her red-rimmed eyes. “Max loves you too.” She lets out a hard sigh, resting her head on my shoulder, her arms wrapped around my neck.

“Bye, Max,” I say, my brain buzzing with the weird sense of déjà vu I just had when I saw Max’s face. There was something about the face he made, something about the way he looked at me that had my memory flooded with a vision of him standing in a grocery store, a basket in his hand.

Before I can walk away, the memory so vivid in my mind that I can’t let it go, I turn back to Max asking, “Did we see you in the grocery store?” It’s an odd question, something that would normally make a person take a pause, processing it, but not Max.

“You did. It was the day you arrived here, after you got your job,” Max immediately answers, his smile growing, practically beaming with a sudden happiness.

“Swedish Fish,” I say, to no one in particular. I have no idea why it comes out of my mouth, and Sammie throws her head back laughing.

“Mommy, you remember,” she cheers, squeezing me in a tight hug. “Do you remember Max now?” I wish I could tell her yes, but it was just a fleeting memory, something small and insignificant, but it still gives me hope.

“Not yet, but I will.”

Sammie, Tyler and I walk back through the parking lot toward the small little house that is now beginning to feel more familiar. It’s easier to navigate my way there after walking for a bit today, and hopefully that memory of Max means things will begin to return.

Tyler hasn’t said anything to me since taking Sammie back to say goodbye to Max, and I can tell he’s angry. The strange thing is, I kind of don’t give a shit, and maybe that’s good.

“This is where you live?” Tyler asks, his eyes scanning the little bungalow in front of us. “This is what you left me for? You know we had a place on the beach, right?”

“Yes, I remember. I don’t know why I left,” I tell him, and he lets out a hard sigh. “Do you?” I ask it, wondering if he will even tell me the truth. I’d be better off asking Sammie. It feels like she’s the only one I can trust, but she’s just a kid and shouldn’t be burdened with this any more than she already is.

“I’m not sure this is something we should talk about now,” Tyler says, tilting his head toward Sammie, and I’m caught off guard at his sudden concern for her.



“You can talk about it in front of Sammie,” I tell him. If we’re going to talk about why I left, we should do it as a family.

“Fine,” Tyler says, as I push open the door to the bungalow, a smell wafts through the open door, a slight breeze blowing toward me. It smells of pine trees and fresh cut wood mixed with leather and instantly Max’s face appears in my mind.

I stop in the doorway, all the air leaving my lungs, and then Sammie says, “It smells like Max in here.” It’s an innocent comment, something she doesn’t even realize, but it makes my memory all the more real.

“You okay?” Tyler now asks, as I set Sammie down and she heads over to the couch, sitting down and turning on the TV.

I’ve stopped walking, trying to recover from the memory again, a memory that feels so real and so vivid in my mind. Standing here in the entryway, almost frozen with the hopefulness that I will continue to remember more and more.

The doctor did tell me that things would slowly come back to me, but there might always be things I’m missing. That parts of my memory may never return, and while at that time, I only cared about remembering Sammie, I’m starting to think that I need to remember Max too.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I reply, not wanting to give too much away, I follow Tyler into the kitchen.

He opens the fridge, scanning it and then turns to me and says, “No beer? Seems about right.” He lets out a scoff and a laugh as he takes the water pitcher from the fridge.

“Do you want to tell me why I left?” I now ask, needing to hear what he has to say.

“You had a psychotic breakdown. I begged you to stay but you packed up Sammie and left. You were mentally unwell and refused to let me help you,” Tyler says, talking faster than I expect and nothing he’s saying makes any sense. “I should have had you hospitalized, but you left before I could.”

I take in everything he says, thinking that none of that could be true. I was fine before I left Florida, but then I realize I’m thinking about two years before I left. That’s where my memory picks up.

“What happened?” I ask softly, not wanting Sammie to hear. Even though I said Tyler could talk about it in front of her, I’m now regretting that. She doesn’t need to know that I wasn’t doing well and that I left because I wasn’t in the right headspace. “I was medicated?”

“You refused. That’s why I was going to have you hospitalized. I was worried you were going to hurt yourself or...” Tyler trails off, and he doesn’t have to fill in the missing words. He was going to say that he was worried that I would hurt Sammie.

That would never happen.

Never.

## CHAPTER 8

### MAX

“Fuck,” I yell into my empty living room. “Fucking, shit, fuck.”

I cannot believe he is here. That this guy, this fucking asshole who did so much bad shit to Harper, is here. And there’s only one way it could’ve happened too, because Harper made sure when she ran, that she didn’t leave any clues as to where she was going. Even she didn’t know the destination, just buying random tickets to the next available place.

Which means he’s here because she told him.

Because *he’s* what she remembers. Not me, but him. The asshole who doesn’t love her and didn’t want her or their daughter.

“Fuck!” I yell again, beyond frustrated now. I’d thought when Harper lost her memory, that this would be the worst thing that could happen to us. And yeah, it sucks how she doesn’t remember me or us, but I’m not giving up. I meant what I said about winning her back and even today, there was something she remembered. A moment in the grocery store.

But with him now here, this is definitely the worst-case scenario. I never could’ve predicted she would fall back on this memory. And fuck me, if her gut isn’t telling her how

wrong that decision is, then surely Sammie's reaction to seeing him should.

Sammie has always been honest about everything, something I both love and find hilarious, and this afternoon clearly said that not only does she dislike her dad, but she wants nothing to do with him either.

Jesus, fuck I hope they are both alright.

It's been hours since I last saw them, and I've done nothing but pace my living room and freak out. When I left the hotel, I was pissed off and I'm pretty sure Elissa was too. It's clear this guy, Tyler, is an asshole and neither of us got a good vibe from him.

And fuck, if he's with them now, what the hell is he doing to them?

Just thinking about it has my blood boiling, pounding through my veins and I can't stay here any longer. I have to go and check on them. I don't give a shit if that's not what she wants, I can't just sit here.

Grabbing my keys, I head back outside, making my way toward the hotel and over to where the staff bungalows are. Just as I round the back of the ski lodge, I see a figure up ahead, heading my way. An aching familiar figure.

"Harper?"

She looks up, surprise registering on her face when she sees me. She doesn't stop though, and I wait as she walks toward me. "Hi."

"Are you okay?" I immediately ask. "Where's Sammie? You didn't leave her with him, did you?" I have no right to ask these questions, especially considering the dickhead is

Sammie's father, but I can't stop worrying about Sammie being alone with him. Harper either.

"No," she says, offering me a small smile. "Elissa is with her. I asked her to come over."

I exhale in relief, glad that Sammie is safe. With someone safe. "Where is he?"

She looks away, her eyes taking in the lodge and the surrounding area. "I don't know, getting a drink, I think. He left."

"Fuck," I breathe out. "And are you okay? Why are you out here?"

She turns back to me now, nodding a little as she says. "I needed some fresh air, a moment to think."

I step closer to her, my hand moving to her arm, hovering for a second before I gently rest it on her shoulder. "He hasn't hurt you, has he?"

"No, no, he wouldn't..." she starts to say, before trailing off. "No, nothing's happened."

I squeeze once before reluctantly letting go, tilting my head toward the lake, I ask, "Wanna walk for a bit?"

Harper stares at me, an unreadable expression on her face, before she eventually offers me a small smile. "Sure."

We walk down toward the lake in silence, slowly making our way toward the very spot I was at earlier today. The place where she and I had lunch together once. When we reach the picnic tables, I gesture to one of them, silently asking if she wants to sit. We do, both of us sitting on the same bench, facing out toward the lake.

"You had a memory before," I say, not looking at her.

“Yeah,” she replies, her words quiet. “The grocery store.”

“It happened, you know,” I say, needing her to know it’s real, the memory.

Harper turns toward me, a smile on her face. “I know it is,” she says. “I can feel it.”

I turn so I am facing her, resting an elbow on the table, my fingers gently brushing against the bare skin of her arm. “Harper, I need you to know that I’m not going to lie to you. That if the memory isn’t right, I’m not going to pretend it is. I wouldn’t do that to you.”

She stares at me now, her eyes searching my face before she says, “Yeah, I think I know that too.”

I lift my hand, brushing some loose strands of hair back from her face, gently tucking them behind her ear. Harper shivers at my touch, but she doesn’t pull away, not even when I run my fingers down her arm to her fingers, threading them with mine.

“Is this place familiar?” I ask.

She looks away, her gaze taking in the picnic area, the lake, the mountains behind it all. “I don’t know,” she replies.

“We had lunch here,” I continue. “Just you and me. I wanted to kiss you so bad that day.”

“Did you?” she asks, turning back to me. “Kiss me, I mean?”

I smile. “No, I didn’t. I said something that...well, I guess it triggered a bad memory for you and actually, you kissed me and then left, walked away and went back to work.”

“What did you say?” she asks, her gaze locked with mine, her brown eyes nearly pools of blackness in the moonlight.

I suck in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “I said something about wanting to wait, until you wanted to kiss me so bad you couldn’t stop yourself.” Harper immediately flinches at my words, and I tighten my grip on her hand. “Do you remember that?”

“No, no,” she breathes out, shaking her head. “It’s just that...”

“What?” I ask as her head falls back and she looks up at the sky, an almost anguished look on her face. I fucking hate that this is happening to her. That not only has she lost all of the good memories about us, but that she’s lost the bad memories about him too. “Harper?” I prompt, squeezing her hand in mine.

She lowers her gaze back to mine, her bottom lip pulled between her teeth. “I remember being forced to beg,” she whispers, her words barely audible.

“What, by who, by—”

“By him,” she says.

My jaw clenches, my teeth grinding together so tightly I swear I’m going to chip one of them off. “He made you beg?” I force out, trying to stay calm even though all I want to do is find this fucker and punch him right in the fucking face.

Harper nods. “I think so.”

“Harper, baby,” I say, sliding closer to her as I let go of her hand and put my arm around her shoulders. “You need to stay away from him, please. There’s a reason you’re here in Tahoe. A reason you left Florida, left him.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t think he will hurt us.”

I scoff, as I pull her closer, resting my chin on the top of her head. “Tell me something,” I say, staring out at the lake. “Why did you leave Sammie with Elissa tonight and not him?” Harper doesn’t answer my question and that alone should tell me everything, but I press on anyway. “You didn’t trust him with her, did you?”

She shakes her head and when I pull back, I can see her eyes have filled with tears. Brushing a thumb across her cheek, I lean in and drop a soft kiss on her forehead.

“I don’t know everything that happened to you,” I whisper, my lips resting against her skin. “You didn’t tell me everything, but I know that it wasn’t good. And I know it was enough to make you terrified of him, enough to make you run far away, taking your daughter from the only home you’d ever known. You have to believe there was a reason for that.”

“I know,” she whispers. “I just can’t remember what that reason was.”

I press another kiss to her forehead, lingering this time as I close my eyes and inhale her scent. I miss her, miss everything about her, so badly. “What’s the last thing you do remember?” I eventually ask. “About Florida?”

I pull back as she blows out a breath, but don’t move, holding her close. “I remember visiting my mom’s grave,” she starts, sniffing as she swipes at a tear on her cheek. “I remember wishing that Tyler’s mom would help more with Sammie.”

“How old was Sammie when this happened?”

Harper shrugs. “I don’t know, two.”

“Jesus,” I murmur, wondering just how far back her memory loss has gone. I always assumed it was just me and



her time in Tahoe that she forgot, but it sounds like it's more than that. Fuck, I can't even begin to imagine how confusing this all is for her. "I remember you telling me that Tyler's family never welcomed you or Sammie. That they didn't believe she was even his until you did the paternity test."

She gasps at this, looking up at me in confused surprise. "Really? I told you that?"

I offer her a soft smile. "Yeah, you did," I say. "I told you I wouldn't lie to you, Harper and I'm not."

She blinks up at me, her hands clasped in her lap as she sits here with my arm around her shoulder. "You seem too good to be true."

My heart hammers out a hard beat at her words as a smile slowly tugs at my mouth. "You used to say that to me all the time," I tell her.

"I did?"

"Yep," I reply with a nod. "You couldn't believe I was real," I say, chuckling a little as I take her hand in mine again, lifting them and pressing them to my chest, right above my pounding heart. "And I made a promise to you, that I would spend every day of the rest of my life proving to you that I was real, that what I felt for you, was real." I lift our joined hands to my mouth now, pressing a kiss to the back of hers. "I'm not breaking that promise, Harper."

"Max," she whispers, her eyes locked with mine.

"I know you're confused," I continue, needing to get all of this out. "And I know he's probably here because you called him, and I get it, baby," I add, even if I don't like it. "He's the last thing you remember, the only thing that's familiar, but I promise, you're going to remember me and us and what we

had together and when you do, I'll be right here waiting for you."

"Max," she says again, lifting our joined hands to her cheek. "I want so badly to remember this, remember you."

"I know you do."

"But I—"

"Don't," I say, cutting her off. "Don't give up, okay. Not on this. It's too important, Harper. We are too important."

"But what if I never remember?" she asks, her words a desperate plea as her tears start to fall.

"You will," I say, giving her a smile. "But even if you don't, I'll just convince you to fall in love with me all over again." Harper lets out a combination laugh, sob, her head falling as our joined hands drop to her lap. "Can I ask you something?" I say, my heart pounding in my chest again, but for different reasons now.

"Yes," she says, looking up at me.

"Is he...is he staying with you?" I ask, swallowing hard as I force the question out.

Harper's eyes widen as she bites her bottom lip again, slowly shaking her head at me. "No, I told him it would be better if he...well, no, he's not."

I exhale in relief, even though I know he knows where she lives so could find her if he wanted to. "Okay, that's good," I say, licking my lips. "And you know, you have a key to my place if you ever need to go somewhere safe," I say. "I'll give you my address again, so if you ever need..." Now it's me trailing off, unable to finish my thought.

"Thank you," Harper says, offering me a small smile.

I stare down at her, unable to look away, desperate to have her remember this thing between us. It was there from the start, from the second I first met her, even with all her walls up.

“Harper,” I whisper.

“Yes?”

“Can I ask something else?” I ask, knowing it’s a risk but unable to stop myself from asking it anyway.

“What?”

I take a deep breath, my heart pounding in my chest as I stare into her eyes. “Can I kiss you?”

## CHAPTER 9

# HARPER

I look down at where our hands are joined, my heart beating wildly and without thinking about his question anymore, I lean in and kiss him. I kiss with the hope of remembering, and his lips are soft and comforting, and patient. A feeling buzzes between us and I can't tell if it's the night air or if it's the idea that we had something, maybe we still have something between us.

When he begins to pull away, leaving our kiss as something sweet and simple, I pull him to me, tangling my hands in his hair, needing him closer. Deepening the kiss, my lips part, letting out a soft moan as I feel Max's tongue caress mine.

I can't get close enough to him, suddenly wanting to feel his hands all over me, but he's gentle and kind, his fingers brushing my cheek, his warm tears sting my skin.

"I want you to remember me," Max whispers against my lips. "I want you to remember us. Harper, what we had..." He trails off, running a thumb under my eye where the tears have begun to fall. We're both crying, crying for what we've lost, for what is happening between us and for the idea that we may never get those memories back.

“I feel it, Max,” I tell him, my body sparking with desire and the feeling that there’s something between us. It’s here, but the memories are not. “But I don’t remember.” I feel the tears now flood from my eyes, wanting so badly to not only remember Max, but to remember everything I’ve lost. Max’s heart is breaking, shattering with every word, with every memory I don’t have, and it hurts, it literally hurts my heart.

Why did I leave Florida? Why would Tyler have said I should have been hospitalized? I never struggled with my mental health before. What triggered it?

The fact that I left Sammie with essentially a complete stranger tonight over her father should tell me something, and it does. It’s not a surprise though. I never left her with Tyler when we lived in Florida because he was never around. And even when he was, I feared for Sammie’s safety, not knowing if he would even be able to take care of her.

“You’ll get there. Trust yourself. Trust Sammie,” Max says, and it’s the last part that gets me. Sammie is all I have here and at four years old, I should not have to rely on her for my memory, but I am.

I’ve watched her response to Tyler and her response to Elissa and Max, and they couldn’t have been more different. This should tell me everything I need to know, and while it does, I’m still struggling to understand what’s real, what happened.

“He’s not listed on her birth certificate,” I admit, Max’s hand now cupping the back of my neck, his thumb tracing a soft line down my cheek. My eyes are closed when I tell him this, remembering that day like it was yesterday. The memory is so clear, but everything else in the last two years is still a foggy mess.

“Sammie’s dad?” Max questions.

“Yes, he wasn’t there when she was born. We weren’t even together. I called him, but he never came. I gave her my last name, delivered her on my own with no one there, just the doctor and the nurses.”

It all plays out in my head like a movie. The anger over it all still palpable and raw. I wanted having Sammie to change him the way it changed me, but if anything, it made things worse. I held onto this romanticized ideal of the perfect family that I never had growing up.

“I left the hospital in a bus, a fucking public transportation bus with a newborn baby, but I had nowhere to go. My mom let us live with her for a week, and then she told us we had to leave. I went back to Tyler then.”

I have no idea why I’m unloading all of this on Max, but it feels good to let it out and remember all the pain I felt for those weeks after I had Sammie. The feeling that no one wanted us sticks hard, but it also has me thinking about all the people here who want us.

“That’s awful, Harper and I’m so sorry you went through that. I’m always here if you need anything,” Max says, and I believe every word of it. He’s done nothing to make me feel otherwise, and if anything, he’s made me see that Sammie trusts him wholeheartedly. That should mean the most of all.

“Can I ask you something?” I say, my head resting on his shoulder, if nothing more for comfort from all of this.

“Of course, anything.”

“Was I…” I start up, but stop quickly, trying to find the right words to use. “Was I mentally okay when you met me? I mean, did you ever think that I needed to be hospitalized or

that I would hurt myself or Sammie?” Everything in me aches, deep and painful as the words leave my lips. I swallow hard, fighting back the tears that threaten at the idea that I would ever hurt Sammie.

“What?” Max instantly says, the shock in his tone loud and clear. “No, never, if anything, it felt like you would do whatever it took to protect her. Why are you asking?” he now says but shakes his head. “You don’t have to answer that.”

“Tyler said before I left that I was mentally unstable and that’s why I ran off with Sammie. He planned to have me hospitalized.”

Max’s jaw goes tight, his hand tightens in mine, and when he lets out a hard sigh, I can tell he’s holding back from saying something that’s on his mind.

“He’s full of shit, Harper,” Max blurts out. “He’s gaslighting you. You would never hurt Sammie and if anything, he made you feel like you were going crazy. He’s fucking...” The anger in his words radiates from him, sending a shiver up my spine. “Ugh, I’m not saying anything more, but please, please know that you would never hurt Sammie. Don’t ever let that thought in your head.”

I want to believe Max, and while a part of me does, there’s also a part of me that needs to know the truth on my own. It’s all lost in this hazy mess from the accident, and I beg myself to remember.

“I need to go,” I tell Max, needing to get back to Sammie and needing some time alone to process everything. While I hoped this conversation with Max would make things clearer, all it’s done is muddy the waters of what I remember and what I don’t.

I have Tyler telling me one thing, and as someone who I've known for the last seven years, I want to believe him, but then I have Max, whose words hold so much weight.

"Here's my address," Max now says, pulling his phone from his pocket, he sends me a text. "You have keys to my place, and you can come anytime, even in the middle of the night. Do you need help getting back to your place?"

"I'm okay, thank you," I tell him, standing up, I lean down and press a soft kiss to his lips. The feeling of complete and utter calm washing over me when I do. Even if I can't remember him, I feel a connection to him, a strange and instant connection.

Tyler felt like normalcy. Max feels like forever.

"Good night, Harper," Max calls as I walk away and the way he says my name has my mind swirling with thoughts of hearing him say it. Him in the grocery store. Him on a beach. Him outside of an old motel. Him at a street fair. But like before, it feels foggy and pieces are missing, like a puzzle I'm waiting to finish.

I walk into the house, finding Elissa on the couch with Sammie asleep in her lap. Elissa's fingers are brushing softly at Sammie's wispy hair as she sleeps soundly.

"She heard you leave and thought you left her with her dad," Elissa whispers, looking up at me with a sadness in her eyes. "Once she saw it was me, she curled up next to me and fell back to sleep. I didn't have the heart to move her."

"Thank you," I say, my heart breaking at the idea of Sammie panicking about being left with her dad. "She likes



you.”

“She thinks I look like Rapunzel. That’s the first thing she said to me when we met. She loves Disney Princesses,” Elissa shares, and I don’t want to cry again, but the tears come anyway. “Oh, Harper, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Elissa shifts so Sammie is resting on the couch rather than on her. Standing up, she pulls me into a hug, letting me cry on her shoulder.

“I didn’t even know she loves Disney Princesses,” I whisper-cry. “She didn’t even watch TV...” I can’t finish my thought, not wanting to remind myself of the years I lost with her.

“It’s okay. That’s why I’m here. To help you with whatever you need and if you need me to remind you of all the things Sammie loves, then I’m happy to help.”

“Thank you. Let me get her in bed,” I say, pulling back, and wondering how I ended up with such amazing friends. I lived in Florida all my life and slowly lost the small number of friends I did have, but none of them were like this.

“Do you want me to stay the night?” Elissa asks. “I can take you over to the childcare center tomorrow. We can drop Sammie off there and I can show you where you work.”

I immediately begin to reply with a no but remind myself that it’s okay to ask for help, and staying here alone does feel a little scary. While it is my home, it still feels like a strange place. Not so much unsafe, just strange.

“Yes, that would be wonderful,” I tell Elissa, feeling a weight lift off my shoulders. I know that waking up in the morning to Elissa being here will give Sammie some comfort too.

“I’ll get some blankets and sleep on the couch,” she replies, but I shake my head.

“You can have my bed. I’m going to sleep in bed with Sammie tonight,” I say, hoping that the closeness to Sammie brings me some peace and some memories. “I’m going to go to bed now. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Night, Harper,” Elissa says as I carefully lift Sammie off the couch, cringing as my ribs throb with pain. I carry her into her bedroom, setting her down on the bed, I pull the covers over her. She snuggles into them and tells me she loves me. Kicking off my shoes, I join her in the bed, and as soon as I do, she wraps her little arms around me, burying her face in my hair.

It’s something she’s done since she was a baby, a reminder of our past, and how much time we spent together. She found comfort in being close to me, in my smell and the security I gave her. She still feels it and I feel it too.

I wake suddenly, the startled gasp falling from my mouth as I shoot up in bed, my heart pounding, my body covered in sweat. I look over, finding Sammie still asleep next to me, the room dark, and the sound of my labored breathing fills the stillness.

I can picture it as if it just happened, and I scan the room, even in the darkness I know it’s not the same place from my dream. But it wasn’t a dream. More of a memory of the past, a reminder of what I left and why.

*“You took the bathroom door off?” I hear myself ask him, my words coming out as a weak question. I don’t have the strength to argue, not after the day I’ve had.*

*“How am I supposed to know what you’re doing in there if the door is closed?” Nothing about his question sounds logical, but I listen with a seriousness that I shouldn’t.*

*“I’m taking a bath,” I tell him, knowing it’s the only place where I have a moment of peace. “What else would I be doing in there?”*

*“I don’t know and that’s why you can’t have a door on the bathroom. I don’t know what you’re doing in there. Cheating on me. Texting with guys.”*

*“I’m not doing any of those things.”*

*“You’re a liar, Harper,” he hisses, his words spit out like his tongue is dripping with poison. “It’s why you close the door. There’s no reason for privacy.”*

*I don’t dare say it out loud, but his privacy is the only one that matters. I just blindly agree because what else am I supposed to do? I don’t have a job or any money. I have no place to go. This is my life.*

*I spent my day at the free clinic, finding out I have an STI. All of this with our one-year-old daughter in tow. Embarrassed, I could barely answer the questions the nurse asked.*

*“How many sexual partners have you had in the last year?”*

*“One.”*

*The answer was one. Only one.*

*She looked at me as if I were lying, while I bounced a fussy baby on my knee. A teen mom with an STI must mean I’m out sleeping around.*

*It’s not me who’s sleeping around.*

I quickly get out of bed, moving slowly toward the door, and into the hallway, finding the bathroom with the door still intact. I don't know why I feel the need to check, but something about seeing it in place brings me to the realization that things were not right.

I left for more reasons than a bathroom door.

## CHAPTER 10

### MAX

I push open the front door, stifling a yawn as I walk through the large entryway and down toward the empty kitchen. Through the glass doors, I can see my dad sitting out on the back deck, a cup of coffee beside him as he types away on his laptop. I head over to the pot, pouring myself a much-needed cup. I hadn't gotten much sleep last night, not after that kiss or that conversation with Harper.

It had felt like a giant step forward when she leaned in and kissed me, only to be pushed several huge steps back with all the bullshit she told me about Tyler. I mean fuck, the fact that he is actually here feels like I've been kicked in the gut.

Exhaling, I grab my cup and head outside.

"Max," Dad says, looking up from whatever he's working on as he greets me with a smile.

"Hey, Dad," I say, taking a seat. "Am I interrupting you?" I ask, gesturing toward the laptop.

He immediately closes it. "Not at all," he says with a smile. "How are you doing?"

I shrug, taking a large sip of my coffee. "I don't know," I say, exhaling. "I saw Harper yesterday."

"Oh," he says, his eyes widening. "Any change?"

“Her ex is in town,” I spit out, not answering his question. “She remembers him, of course. He’s who she called.” My words are laced with anger and frustration even though I know none of this is her fault.

Dad lets out a slow breath, watching me as he says, “I’m sure this is all very confusing for Harper and that the only reason she’s called him is because he’s what’s familiar to her.”

“Yeah, I know,” I say, huffing out a breath. “But he’s a fucking asshole, Dad. He’s totally manipulating her, even now.”

“What do you mean?”

I shove a hand through my hair, my mind flashing back to yesterday in the hotel when he’d first shown up. Even then, it was obvious he was putting on an act, pretending to be all concerned about Harper and Sammie, when I could tell it was total bullshit.

But then with what Harper said to me last night, all that crap about her mental state and him wanting to have her hospitalized, I fucking knew he was playing her.

“He made up some shit about Harper being unstable.”

“What?” Dad says, clearly shocked.

“Yeah, not true obviously. I mean you’ve seen her, do you think she’s unstable?”

“Well, I mean I’m not an expert,” he says, clearly playing devil’s advocate. “But no, I certainly never got that impression.”

“He told her she’d harm Sammie, that she’d—”

“No, I definitely don’t believe that,” Dad says, cutting me off. “Harper is an amazing mother.”

“I know she is. He’s just...he’s gaslighting her,” I continue. “I’m pretty sure he did it to her the whole time they were together. He questioned whether Sammie was even his when she was pregnant, wasn’t even there for her birth and kicked Harper out afterwards.”

“Wow,” Dad breathes out. “I mean, you are sure he is Sammie’s father?” he then asks, almost as an afterthought.

“Dad, seriously?” I ask. “She took a fucking paternity test, at his insistence. And no before you ask, I haven’t seen the results of that, but I trust her okay, Jesus, I thought you guys liked her.”

Dad holds up a hand to placate me. “Max, we do like her and yes, I know you trust her. I do too, for the record. But I’m just trying to consider everything here okay. I know you’re frustrated, and I know you’re hurting with all of this.”

“I love her, Dad.”

“Yes, I know you do,” he says, smiling. “That and the fact that Harper also loves you is obvious. How did Sammie react to seeing her father?”

I groan, scrubbing a hand down my face. “She was scared, wouldn’t go to him, didn’t want anything to do with him. Wanted to stay with me actually.”

Dad raises a brow as he gives me a knowing look. “That says a lot and you know Harper will see that too.”

“Yeah,” I breathe out. “She notices it. I saw her after and she...well she says she feels this, this, thing with us, she just doesn’t remember it,” I say, still frustrated, because at times it feels like her memories are just there, right within reach, but then just as quickly, they seem to disappear.

“Give her time, Max,” Dad says. “It hasn’t been that long and I’m sure it’s not all going to come flooding back at once.”

“She remembered us meeting in a grocery store,” I say, the memory of that question sparking the first real bit of hope in me.

“See,” he says, smiling. “You just have to be patient. Be there for her and let her memories slowly return.”

“I know,” I say. “But what the fuck do I do about him? I mean Harper was already talking about moving back to Florida and now that he’s here, I’m scared he’s gonna convince her. Scared he’s going to take her and Sammie away from me.”

Dad sighs. “You know there’s nothing you can do to stop her leaving, don’t you?” he says, offering me a sympathetic smile. “And if she does go, you have to trust that when her memories come back, so does she.”

“Fuck, god I hate this,” I groan in frustration, dropping my head into my hands.

A warm hand lands on my shoulder, squeezing gently. “I know you do and I’m sorry you have to go through all of this, especially with how you feel about her.”

“Dad,” I say, lifting my head. “I am so far gone with her, it’s not funny. I asked her and Sammie to move in with me,” I blurt out. He gives me a strange look and I chuckle, realizing how that came across. “Before the accident,” I clarify. “That day, actually, I asked them to move in with me.”

“What did she say?” he asks.

“She said she wants stability for Sammie, which I get. But that yeah, she would move in with me.”



He squeezes my shoulder again. “Trust that she will remember that too,” he says, giving me a smile.

“Yeah,” I breathe out.

We sit in silence for a few moments, both of us drinking our coffee. Dad makes no attempt to open his laptop and start working again, instead just sitting here with me. It’s something I remember, even as a kid, how he and Mom were never too busy to be present for me and Zoey. No matter what was going on with Holden or whatever, if me or Zoey needed them or we had a game or something on at school or whatever, they would always be there for us.

It’s exactly how I want to be with Sammie. With any more kids we might have in the future.

“I’ve been thinking about quitting my EMT job,” I suddenly blurt out.

“What, why?” Dad asks, clearly surprised. I lift the cup for another sip of coffee only to find it empty. “You want something stronger?” Dad jokes, clearly sensing that I haven’t finished unloading on him.

I glance at my phone, noting that it’s only two in the afternoon. “No, well yeah, but I won’t, thanks.”

“So you want to tell me why you’re thinking about quitting?”

I blow out a breath. “I mean the hours for one,” I say, hating that when I started seeing Harper, I had to spend multiple nights away from her on shift. That when my shift was over, I was then exhausted for the next twenty-four hours.

“Okay,” he says. “And that’s all it is? Because if memory serves, when you first applied for college, being a medic was all you wanted to be.”

“I know, I know,” I say nodding. “And I thought it was, but...”

“But?”

“But I fucked up,” I say. “The night of the accident, I froze, Dad. Had no idea what to do, couldn’t remember anything from my training or how I could help Harper. Jesus, I’m lucky Jim didn’t just fire me on the spot.”

Dad frowns. “Max, I think given the circumstances, your reaction was perfectly understandable.”

“Yeah, that’s what Jim said,” I say, waving a hand in dismissal.

“Well, there you go,” Dad replies. “Seeing someone you love hurt and then not being able to respond is not a reason to quit.”

“I guess,” I say. “But maybe working for Holden would be a better option.”

“What?” Dad says, letting out a surprised laugh. “I thought working for Holden was the last thing you or Zoey wanted to do?”

I roll my eyes, but I’m smiling. “Dad, you know that’s not true. We both just want to make our own way in the world first.”

Dad grins. “I know, just giving you shit.”

“Of course you were,” I mutter. “But maybe it’s time I consider it, you know. Work a job that’s a bit more stable, has better hours and stuff.”

“And give up doing what you love?”

I shrug. “Maybe.”

“Nope,” Dad now says, shaking his head. “There’s no job for you at Holden.”

“What? Why not?” I blurt.

He smiles at me, sitting back in his chair, hands resting on his stomach. “Because I refuse to let my son take the easy way out, especially when he fought so hard to find a job he loves.”

“Dad, seriously?” I say, sounding like a petulant teenager. “I thought you’d want this?”

“I mean sure, handing the company over to family is exactly what your mother and I want, but not like this,” he says. “But,” he adds, holding up a hand to silence my protest, “I’ll make a deal with you.”

“What?” I huff out.

He grins. “If you still feel this way when Harper gets her memories back, then we’ll talk, okay?”

“Seriously?” I ask.

“Deadly serious,” he says, laughing. “You’re not in the right headspace to be making these decisions right now, Max. So when everything is back to how it was, if you still feel this way, then I will be here welcoming you with open arms.”

I shake my head, both annoyed and grateful that I have such an awesome dad. “Anyone ever tell you, you’re a bit of a pain in the ass?” I ask, smiling.

Dad chuckles. “Yeah, your mother. On a fairly regular basis actually.”

His comment makes me laugh. “To be fair, you probably deserve it.”

“Pfft,” he scoffs. “Now, what do you say you and I go for a hike or something? Get some fresh air into that head of yours.”

“Don’t you have to work?” I ask, gesturing toward his laptop.

Dad pushes it to the side before standing. “Nope,” he says, giving me a smile. “One perk of being the boss is making your own hours,” he adds, giving me a wink.

Chuckling, I stand. “Alright old man, if you think you can keep up with me.”

“Please,” he says, throwing an arm around my shoulders. “I’ll have you know I still run five miles every morning.”

“Yeah, on a treadmill,” I tease as we make our way inside.

Dad lets out a laugh, gently pushing me toward the wing that houses mine and Zoey’s old bedrooms. “You, go and change. I’ll pack us some snacks and we’ll go in ten.”

The hike with my dad is exactly what I need. Well, that and the conversation we had on the deck. We don’t talk any more about Harper or my future job prospects as we hike, instead just filling the space with light conversation about things at Badger Creek, Zoey and Ethan’s wedding next summer, and how Nick’s been doing.

By the time we get back home, I feel a hell of a lot better than I had when I first arrived.

“You wanna stay and have dinner?” Dad asks. “I’ve got a nice ribeye for the grill.”

“Very tempting,” I say, just as my phone pings with a text in my pocket. Pulling it out, I’m surprised to see Harper’s

name on the screen.

Opening up the message, my surprise turns to something that resembles excitement and hope.

*Harper: Hi, I was wondering if you would like to have dinner with me and Sammie tonight? Maybe we could do the taco place Sammie keeps talking about?*

“Shit,” I breathe out.

“What is it?” Dad asks, concern in his voice as he comes over to me.

“I think I might need to take a raincheck on dinner,” I say, grinning as I turn the screen to him.

## CHAPTER 11

# HARPER

It's been a long day, but I still want to see Max. It's this strange pull to him that I've felt ever since I remember seeing his face in the grocery store. After I unloaded all that stuff on him, and now realizing he's here to help me, I've found myself wanting to be near him even more. He feels safe, and with Tyler being here, I've come to the realization that he's not healthy for me or for Sammie.

I hate that in that moment of panic and fear I called him, scared to be alone. But with him, I'm even more alone than I was when I first woke up in the hospital. He hasn't come to check on Sammie or me since I asked him to stay somewhere else. He was angry and all it did was cause a fight, making it about him rather than me.

I'm standing in the shower letting the warm water wash over me when I hear Sammie's voice call my name.

"Mommy," she says, and I hear her little feet padding on the floor and into the bathroom. "Remember when you were in the shower with Max, and he told me you were getting dirty?" She lets out a series of giggles and I pull back the curtain, peeking out at her. It's an instant remembrance when I see her standing there, my mouth falling open as soon as my brain fills in the missing pieces.

I have to keep myself from saying it out loud, a laugh falling from my mouth at the idea of what we were doing. Max and I were definitely together, not that I doubted his word or Elissa's, but now it feels so real, so true.

"I do remember, baby," I tell her, the excitement in my tone contagious and Sammie begins jumping around, doing a little dance in the bathroom.

"Yay!" she yells, giggling while she leaves the bathroom, not asking me anything else. I'm sure she's just happy that I have a real memory, one that she remembers too.

The smile that is on my face stays the entire time I'm in the shower, searching for more memories, trying to remember other things that happened while Max and I were together. The other thing I find myself doing is recalling things that happened with Tyler when Sammie and I were living in Florida.

My dream from last night is still very vivid in my mind, and as I think about why I left, I'm hit with so many reasons. And again, I hate that he's here. He's not going to leave willingly, and he certainly will not let go of me. It's a control thing with him, and I won't be the one to end it. He's not going to allow that to happen.

I step out of the shower, excited to see Max and tell him that I have a memory of him, trying to push the negative thoughts aside, not wanting to deal with Tyler and all his bullshit. It's going to have to happen, but it's not today.

Sammie and I walk to Tony's Tacos, meeting Max there rather than have him pick us up. At the time that I asked if he wanted to have dinner with us, I had no idea I would have such a

strong and vivid memory of him. It makes meeting up with him even more important, needing to tell him that I could practically feel his presence in the shower.

Sammie is playing an imaginary game of hopscotch on the sidewalk out front of the restaurant when Max walks up. She instantly starts squealing and runs to him.

“Max!” she screams, and he scoops her up in his arms. “Mommy remembers!” she adds, her hands resting on either side of his cheeks, holding his face so he’s looking at her.

“Not everything,” I clarify, but by the smile I can feel on my face, Max sees that things are improving. “I remembered our shower when Sammie busted us.”

“Seriously?” Max asks, the shock present in his words, but he’s beaming, letting out a laugh. “Glad that’s the first real memory of me. Was I good?” he jokes.

“You were. Definitely memorable.” I wink at him, and he walks over, pausing in front of me, and I can tell he’s uneasy. He’s unsure if he should kiss me or not, so I do it. Leaning in, I press my lips to his and Sammie lets out a high-pitch giggle, clapping her hands.

“Mommy, do you love him again?” she asks, slinging an arm around my neck, pulling me closer to her. She waits for my response and I’m not sure how to answer. I’m not there yet, but it feels like it will get there. It’s only been twenty-four hours since all of this began, and the memory in the shower is only one small missing piece, but I find myself trusting how I feel when I’m with Max. My life feels happy, and different, and normal, despite everything.

“Don’t worry, baby. It will happen,” I tell her, and I swear the smile on Max’s face nearly brings me to my knees. I’ve



never seen someone look so happy, so relieved. It washes over his face instantly, and while I'm not making sure he's okay with all of this because my top priority is my own feelings, it feels good to see him so happy.

I spent so much of my life trying to please Tyler that if I'm starting over, I'm not here for that shit again. This is about me, about making myself happy, about making a life for Sammie and me that I can be proud of, that she can be proud of.

"No rush, of course," Max adds, his fingers entwining with mine, excited about the small victory. I love that he's celebrating the small stuff and not pushing me to be something I'm not ready for.

We head into the restaurant, Max carrying Sammie, our hands linked together, happiness radiating from all of us. It's a small win, but one that we'll all take.

"How was your day?" Max asks as Sammie is digging into the guacamole, alternating with queso, guacamole and her cheese quesadilla.

"It was good," Sammie answers, making Max and I laugh. "I went to daycare, and we had cheesy rice and broccoli for lunch. It's my favorite."

"Cheesy rice, huh? What's that like?" Max asks her, and she giggles. "What? I've never had cheesy rice. Can you fill me in on what makes it so good?"

"Well, it has cheese in it and it has rice," she replies, shrugging, returning to her shoveling of more of her favorite things to eat.

“And your day?” he asks, directing his question to me now, even though I know he initially meant it for me the first time.

“I spent it with Elissa. Dropped Sammie off at daycare so she could walk me through what my day looks like at Badger Creek,” I tell him.

“How’d it go?”

“Not bad. Good news is that my job isn’t all that difficult, so I was able to pick it up pretty quickly. It’s crazy that I’m in charge of other people,” I joke, but it really is. The last job I remember having was waiting tables at a local bar and I was forced to quit that when I had Sammie.

I couldn’t afford to pay for daycare back then and Tyler refused to watch her. It wasn’t worth it to me to struggle to find someone to care for her so I could make a few hundred bucks.

“You’re really good at your job. You actually moved up quickly because one of the old supervisors had a baby and left unexpectedly. You jumped in to help Zoey and she promoted you shortly after,” Max tells me, even though I do know this already. Elissa filled me in, and I was surprised then too.

“We met up with Zoey too,” I say, it being the first time I really met her since the accident. She was at the house when I came home, but I was so overwhelmed that day, I couldn’t think straight. “She’s so nice and I’m excited to get back to work.”

“Awesome,” Max replies. “I’m glad you’re going back to work.” He’s smiling and I know that with me saying I’m going back to work, it says that I’m planning to stay.

“Me too.”

“Me too,” Sammie echoes, her mouth full of chips.

“Why?” Max asks her. “So you can have cheesy rice?” The teasing is what gets me. He’s so damn perfect with her, loving spending time with her and making her laugh.

“Yes,” she answers casually, continuing to eat like her only concern is whether cheesy rice is being served for lunch at daycare. Honestly, it should be her only concern. She’s four years old and that’s the kind of worries I want her to have.

I don’t want her to worry about whether her dad loves her or not. I don’t want her to worry about having to go back to Florida. We have an amazing life here, a life I created in only a few short months, and am only beginning to remember.

“Looks like we’re going to be here a while,” I say, watching as Max’s face lights up. “And it also sounds like I need to learn to make cheesy rice.”

“Mommy, it won’t be the same,” Sammie says, shaking her head. “It’s better at daycare. Miss Joyce just knows how to make it.”

“Okay then, I guess we’ll leave that as a daycare thing,” I reply, chuckling a little. She’s just so comfortable here. “How was your day?” I now ask Max, realizing it’s been all about me lately.

“It was fine. I went to see my dad and spent the day talking with him,” Max answers, but Sammie injects almost immediately.

“Can we go see Pam and Jeff?” she asks, sounding incredibly excited. “I haven’t seen them, and I miss them.”

“You want to do some swimming tomorrow?” Max suggests, and Sammie nods immediately. “We can all go by there and have dinner.”

“Okay, that sounds really nice. I told Zoey I would be back at work tomorrow, but after that will work. When are you working?” As soon as I ask the question, I see Max’s face change, his smile fading away.

“I’m on leave for a little bit,” he replies, his words soft, his body sagging with his admission. “I took leave after your accident.”

“Why?”

“Things didn’t go well when I arrived on the scene of your accident and I’m just not sure I’m cut out to be a paramedic,” Max admits, and it breaks my heart. I never want to be the reason someone stops doing something.

“It’s probably because you were scared,” I tell him. “I would have felt the same way.”

“Yeah, but it’s my job, my career. I’m not supposed to get spooked when I see something like that. It was just so…” He trails off, not wanting to relive what happened. I don’t want to relive what happened either. Not being able to remember isn’t such a bad thing when it comes to my accident.

“I don’t think you should give up so quickly. It was a one-time thing, and it involved your girlfriend,” I say, realizing I just referred to myself as Max’s girlfriend.

“If you want, I’d love it if you’d still be my girlfriend again,” Max says, a hopefulness to his tone. “But again, no rush.” He winks at me, my heart leaping in my chest at his simple gesture and the simpleness to his suggestion.

“I think we could make that work,” I reply, feeling my cheeks grow hot, blushing a little at the idea of having Max as my boyfriend. It feels good to let him in, to have him in our lives. Even if this has all happened before.

“Glad you remembered that day in the shower,” Max teases. “Feels like I lived up to my potential.”

“You certainly did.”

We end dinner with Sammie and I walking back home on our own. I told Max he didn't need to walk us home, feeling like I needed a little time to myself to take everything in.

Sammie and I walk hand in hand, taking in all the sights around us, seeing if it triggers anything. It's starting to feel like home though, comforting and safe with all the quiet stillness of the area, the people moving about. It has all happened far faster than I thought it would, but also slower somehow, and I still find myself wishing like hell I could just remember everything. Even without my memories though, I feel different than I ever remember feeling, happier and freer.

“Are you happy, Mommy?” Sammie suddenly asks me, her little hand squeezing mine a little tighter as if she can will me to say yes.

“I am. Are you happy?” I now ask her.

“Yes, and I want to stay here,” she says, a small bit of sadness creeping through, and I know she's still worried that we'll go back to Florida. She has nothing to worry about now, but as much as I want to assure her, I can't really tell her why we'll be staying here.

It's too much for her little brain to handle. She just needs to know that this is her home. She doesn't need the details of the abuse I endured by her father. Just because I don't have the bruises to show for it, he fucked me up mentally and I will not go back there again.

“Where the hell have you two been?” I hear, the words clipped and loud in the silence of the night. I recognize the voice immediately and Sammie’s hand grips mine with a hold that screams she’s nervous.

“We went to dinner,” I reply, and I swallow hard, knowing now is as good of a time as any to handle this. “I think it’s probably time for you to go back to Florida, Tyler.”

I try to sound convincing, but it isn’t going to work. If anything, I’m sure I’ve just pissed him off.

“Come on, Harper. You don’t mean that,” Tyler answers back, and I can now see him sitting in the chair on the porch of mine and Sammie’s house. “You called me. I came when you needed me. That means something.”

“That’s not how I remember it,” I reply back, opening the front door, I shoo Sammie into the house, not needing her to hear this. She stops though, looking up at me, she begins digging through my purse, taking my phone with her.

“And you’re going to trust your memory?” he quips, letting out a condescending laugh. “You have some issues, Harper, we both know that. I hate to use this word, but you were pretty solidly crazy when you left. You think I’m going to trust you to take care of our kid when you’re mentally not well.”

I let out a hard sigh, hating that he’s using Sammie to get to me. He has had no interest in her since she was born, but he knows I love her with everything I have. It’s his way to get back at me.

“I called you and it took you nearly three days to get here. You didn’t fucking drive here, Tyler. You could have gotten on a plane and been here overnight, but you didn’t. Then you

didn't even come to the hospital where I told you I was. You went to a fucking hotel."

Everything comes out in a rush, loud and booming in the quiet of the night. Each word is said with conviction, but it's going to fail. He's not listening to a word I've said, only planning his comeback.

"And don't you dare talk about my parenting, ever," I hiss. "You've never been in her life."

"Fine, have it your way. You can bet your ass I'm taking her from you. No court would give you custody when I tell them all the shit you've done. You're fucking crazy, Harper!" he shouts, and it's in this instant that I see Sammie watching us out the window.

## CHAPTER 12

### MAX

I feel like I fucking float home from Tony's. And while I wish I wasn't going home alone, or I was going home to Harper's with her and Sammie, I'm still smiling like an idiot because she remembered.

She remembered that afternoon in the shower. A memory that is undeniable when it comes to us being together. She remembered and it made her smile and kiss me and say she was staying in town and that she was my girlfriend again.

And fuck me if all of this doesn't have me smiling like a lunatic.

I just hope that these new memories over the past day or so mean everything starts to come back and come back quickly. I mean, I meant what I said about not rushing and no pressure, but fuck it's been hard having been all in with her and then getting kicked right back to the starting line.

But, no matter what, I will stick with her, because she is worth it, even if it means I have to win her back all over again.

I pull my phone from my pocket as I walk into my condo, wanting to text Harper to let her know how good it was to see her again and check she got home okay. As I pull it out, I'm surprised to see I have a message from her already.



But when I open it, nothing about her message makes sense to me.

*Harper: M*

M? What the fuck does M mean? I start to type out a reply when my phone suddenly starts ringing, Harper's name flashing on the screen.

"Hey, Harper, are you okay? I just saw your text?" I blurt out, not bothering with a hello.

There's silence on the end of the line, just the faint sound of someone breathing and a rustling noise as though the phone is rubbing against something. A spike of fear pierces through me as I pull the phone from my ear, glancing at the screen like that's going to give me some clue as to what's going on here.

"Harper?" I repeat. "Are you okay, what's going on?"

"Max?" A tiny voice says.

I blink in confusion before my brain catches up. "Sammie?"

"Max," she says again, a note of fear in her voice now.

"Sammie, what's up, why are you calling me on Mommy's phone? Is she okay?" I ask, my heart pounding in my chest as I frantically search for my keys.

"Max, please come here," Sammie now says. "Daddy is here."

"WHAT?" I shout into the phone, muttering a fuck as I try to remember where I put my keys just now. "What's

happening, Sammie? Tell me what's going on."

There's more rustling through the phone before she speaks again. "He's yelling at Mommy."

"Where are they?" I ask as I finally find my keys, still in the fucking front door.

"Outside."

"And where are you?" I ask, slamming the front door closed as I run to my car.

"Inside."

I blow out a breath, climbing into my car, waiting for the phone to switch over to Bluetooth. "Okay, Sammie, I want you to stay inside. Stay on the phone with me, can you do that?"

"Yes."

"Good girl," I reply, trying to stay calm, even as my heart pounds in my chest, fear washing over me. "Is Mommy okay, is she still talking with him?"

"Yes. But he's yelling at her."

"Fuck," I breathe out, putting my foot down as I head over to Badger Creek. "Okay, keep talking to me Sammie, tell me what's happening."

I hear the sound of her breathing, more rustling against the phone, before she whispers, "I'm scared, Max."

"I know, baby girl, I'm coming okay. I'll be there really soon, just stay inside for me."

"Okay."

I turn into the parking lot, my tires screeching as I race down toward the staff bungalows. My heart is pounding, my

blood racing and I swear if this fucking guy lays a finger on Harper or Sammie, he is fucking dead.

I park my car, switching off the ignition as I get out, running down the short path toward Harper's place, my phone at my ear. "Okay, Sammie, I'm here now. It's going to be alright."

I reach them, just as Tyler steps toward Harper, putting his face right up against hers. His whole face is red, his hands curled into tight fists at his side as he yells at Harper. Just as I'm about to yank him away from her, the front door to her bungalow opens and Sammie comes racing down the path toward me, Harper's phone still in her tiny hand.

"Max," she cries, tears streaming down her cheeks as she throws herself at me.

I wrap my arms around her, picking her up and pulling her close. "It's okay, I've got you," I whisper, brushing her hair back as I swipe my thumbs across her cheeks. "You're okay."

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Tyler says, turning to me.

I glance at Harper, who is as white as a ghost. "Are you alright?" I ask her, ignoring Tyler's question.

She nods. "Yeah," she croaks out.

I step closer, reaching for her hand and giving it a squeeze. "Go inside and pack a bag. Take Sammie with you."

"No! I want to stay with you," Sammie cries, her arms tightening around my neck.

Tyler scoffs, turning to Harper. "You've turned her against me, haven't you? You're a crazy bitch, Harper and you're not keeping my daughter."

“HEY!” I yell, stepping toward him. As much as I wish Sammie would go inside, he’s probably lucky she hasn’t, or he’d be on the ground right now for saying shit like that to Harper. “Don’t you dare fucking speak to her like that,” I say, shifting Sammie on my hip so she’s facing away from him.

Tyler smirks, his eyes flicking to Harper before returning to me. “Yeah, what the hell are you going to do about it?” he says, clearly trying to provoke me.

As much as I’d love to punch the guy, I’m not going to, especially not in front of Sammie. So instead, I take a step back so I’m standing between him and Harper as I say, “Get the hell out of here.” Tyler doesn’t move, his smirk widening as his gaze moves back to Harper again. Swallowing hard, I force myself to stand still as I say, “Get out of here now before I call the police.”

Tyler lets out a laugh, lifting an arm as he points a finger at Harper. “This isn’t over,” he says, staring at her for a second or two before he turns and walks away.

The moment he’s gone, I turn around, closing the gap between me and Harper as I wrap my free arm around her shoulders and pull her into me, Sammie still in my other arm. “Are you alright?” I whisper, my mouth at her ear. I can feel her body trembling against mine as she nods. “I want you to pack a bag,” I say, pressing my lips to her cheek. “You’re not staying here tonight.”

“Okay,” she whispers before she turns and goes back into the house.

I put Sammie down, dropping a kiss to the top of her head. “Can you go help Mommy?” I ask. Sammie nods up at me and I offer her a quick smile, before gently urging her inside.

As soon as she's gone, I pull out my phone and call my dad. As much as I would love to take Harper and Sammie to my place, it's too close to the resort and not secure enough. I need the security my parents' place offers, even if I'm not sure Harper even remembers them.

"Max, hey, how did your dinner go?" Dad says as soon as he answers.

I blow out a breath before quickly explaining everything that's happened tonight to him. He actually suggests I bring them there before I even have a chance to ask, and I feel a small weight lift off my shoulders. "We're leaving now," I say to him as Harper and Sammie walk out the door, a large bag in Harper's hand. "I'll see you soon."

I hang up before taking the bag from Harper's hand and leading them both to my car. I'm constantly scanning the area, half expecting Tyler to reappear, but thankfully he doesn't. Harper sits in the back of the car with Sammie as we make the drive over to my parents, neither of us saying anything about what happened.

As the gates close behind us and I park the car, I see both Mom and Dad are waiting for us on the front porch.

"Pam, Jeff!" Sammie cries, unbuckling her belt as she scrambles to get out of the car before I have a chance to even open her door. Harper helps her out, watching as her daughter runs toward my parents, my mom laughing as she swoops Sammie up in her arms.

"We've been here," Harper whispers, still sitting in the back seat as I stand beside the open door.

"You have," I say, holding out a hand to her. "It's safe, you're safe here."

She turns to me, a soft smile on her face. “I know,” she replies, sliding her hand into mine as she climbs out of the car.

We follow my parents inside, Sammie talking a mile a minute, the events of this evening apparently forgotten as she fills them in on what she ate for dinner at Tony’s. As we walk into the kitchen, I see Mom has already set up a bowl of ice cream for her.

“Is this okay?” she asks, looking at Harper.

“Yes, thank you,” Harper replies with a nod as she walks over to them. I watch them, hoping to god that what happened tonight doesn’t set things back with Harper.

“Are you alright?” Dad asks, walking over to me.

“Yeah,” I reply, letting out a sigh.

“Do we need to call the police?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I mean he threatened her, verbally, but is that enough?”

“Probably not,” Dad murmurs, as he stands beside me, the two of us watching Harper, Mom and Sammie. “Why don’t we call them in the morning,” he adds, putting a hand on my shoulder. “Get some rest and we’ll come up with a plan tomorrow.”

I turn to my dad, who’s watching me, a worried expression on his face. “Thanks, Dad,” I say. “I know this isn’t—”

“Max,” he says, cutting me off as he squeezes my shoulder. “It’s okay.”

“Is it?” I ask, remembering the questions he asked me when he first met Harper. The questions he asked me earlier today.

“Hey,” he says, his other hand moving to my shoulder as he turns me to face him. “Don’t. Don’t ask those questions. I know how you feel about her, just like I know how she feels about you. We’ll sort this out, Max. Just get some rest tonight and everything will be different in the morning.”

I nod. “Thanks, Dad,” I reply, as he pulls me into a hug.

After Sammie has finished her ice cream, we say our goodnights and make our way down to my bedroom, stopping at the spare room next door. “This is you guys,” I say, opening the door for them. Sammie rushes in, jumping onto the bed with a laugh, while Harper waits at the door. “I’m just next door,” I tell her.

“Thank you,” she whispers, her eyes searching my face, as though she’s looking for something.

I lean in, brushing my lips against her cheek. “Get some sleep, you’re safe here,” I whisper, before heading to my room.

As I close the door behind me, I let out a groan of frustration, stepping into the room as I shove my hands into my hair. I have no idea what the fuck I’m supposed to do, how the hell I am supposed to protect Harper and Sammie from that asshole.

Even though I heard him threaten her, I get the feeling he’s good at playing the game. That he can and will talk his way out of anything, so even if I do call the police, they aren’t going to be able to do anything. The guy isn’t just an asshole, he’s an expert. An expert fucking manipulator who’s already spent years making Harper’s life hell.

And now he's fucking here.

"Jesus," I breathe out as I collapse onto my bed, my head falling, just as the click of the door opening has it snapping back up. "Harper," I murmur, standing. "You okay?"

She closes the door behind her before she walks toward me. When she's standing in front of me, our bodies close but not touching, she lifts her hand, resting it on my chest, right over my pounding heart. "I remember being here," she whispers.

"You do?" I ask, swallowing hard.

She smiles, nodding as she glances toward the bathroom. "And there," she adds, her hand slowly trailing down my chest, over my stomach to my jeans as though to remind me exactly what we did in that bathroom.

"Fuck, Harper," I moan, my hand moving to hers.

Her eyes move to my bed now, her bottom lip between her teeth as she whispers, "There too," before moving my hand to her body, placing it low on her stomach, right above her pelvis.

"You...you remember that?"

She smiles now and it's impossibly sexy, even after everything that's happened tonight. "I remember," she breathes out, before closing the distance and kissing me.



## CHAPTER 13

# HARPER

I moan embarrassingly loud as soon as his lips touch mine. There's something about this man that makes my body respond, and I never want it to end. I may not remember meeting him for the first time, but I will never forget this night.

"Shh," Max says, a smirk on his face as he holds a finger to my lips. "Do you remember what you said to me when we did this the first time?"

My memory is funny now. It's not long movies of what happened, but rather small snapshots and bits and pieces. It's still hazy at times and only certain things have come back to me, but right now, I'll take it. I don't want to force anything, enjoying every memory I now have, and wanting to create this new one with Max.

"No," I murmur, Max's fingers tracing a path along the top of my shorts, the tips of his fingers dipping lower, and again I find myself moaning. All the want and need pools between my legs, making me more wet than I ever imagined.

"You told me you couldn't have sex in my parents' house because they had been so nice to you. You didn't want to ruin that," he tells me, the reminder making me laugh. I'm sure I did say that, but I have no memory of it.

My head falls back as I let out a soft, quiet laugh, and as soon as I do, Max begins to suck at my neck, the image of the things we did in this room fresh in my mind.

“Hopefully you aren’t thinking the same thing now,” Max says, his teeth grazing my pulse, sending a jolt of desire through my body. I couldn’t turn him down now if I tried, all those memories of us, of our hands, our bodies, the way he makes me feel. It’s all more than I’ve ever wanted, and I hate that I lost the time we spent together.

“No,” I breathe out, my chest rising and falling fast with each ragged breath. “I want this, Max. I want you. I want us. I want it all.”

“I feel like I’ve waited forever to hear you say that,” Max groans, his hand gripping my ass, he lifts me up and sets me down on the dresser. My legs widen to accommodate him as he steps between them, his hard dick lined up almost perfectly with where I need him to be.

His mouth leaves soft kisses down my neck to my shoulder, his teeth trailing across my collarbone as he makes his way down my body. Stopping he bites at my nipple through the thin tank top I’m wearing, causing me to moan out with need. He’s killing me with this foreplay, but I love every second of it.

“Tell me what you want, Harper,” Max murmurs. “Let me take care of you. Let me worship your body, every fucking inch of it.”

His fingers dip into the side of my panties, running his fingers through my arousal, his thumb tracing circles on my clit, making me moan.

“Shhh,” Max says, his fingers leaving my body, soaked with my wetness, he traces a path along my bottom lip. Sucking his fingers into my mouth, I taste myself on him, and I’ve never felt so sexy and so wanted.

“I want you inside me,” I say, my words coming out louder than anticipated, desperate and feral. Max lets out a deep laugh as he strips off his shirt and all I can do is stare, my chest heaving, my body pulsing with need.

He’s this gorgeous mix of lean muscle, all sculpted to perfection and waiting for me to touch him. I want to take in his body with every inch of mine. I want him inside me, feeling him fill me, beg him to make me come. He was built to please women and I’m going to take full advantage of that.

“Really and how would you like that?” he purrs, taking a condom from the nightstand, my legs spread wide, waiting for his return as I sit waiting on the dresser.

“I want to ride you,” I reply, not knowing who the hell this demanding person is, but I fucking like her. I bite my bottom lip, watching his face change, as he stalks over to me, hooking his thumbs in my panties, he pulls them off.

“Harper, you have me so fucking turned on. There’s nothing hotter than you telling me how you want to be fucked.” Removing his boxers, he takes his erection in his hand, stroking it a few times, my eyes taking it all in.

Max moves over to the bed, sitting on the edge, he slips on the condom and as soon as he does, I’m straddling his hips, positioning myself over him. Lowering my body down onto his, we both let out a moan as soon as he’s fully inside me. He feels amazing, filling me in a way that borders on pain and pleasure, his dick bigger than anything I’ve ever had inside me.

“Move, Harper,” he commands. “Use me. Make yourself come.” His words encourage me on as I begin to move back and forth, finding a rhythm that touches places I never knew were so sensitive.

Max’s hips thrust up, meeting mine and I begin to move faster and harder, his hands cupping my breasts, his fingers teasing my nipples. The sensation moves through my body, lighting it on fire with want and need and desire.

“I love watching your pussy take my cock,” Max growls, and holy shit, each word is like a firework exploding inside my body. “Fuck, Harper, the way you ride me is like pure torture.” His head falls back, and I ride him harder, feeling my body building to its release.

“Oh my god, Max, I’m going to come,” I call out, and his thumb finds my clit, rubbing hard, getting me to the point of no return.

I explode, every muscle in my body contracting as I clench around him. I grip his arms, my fingernails digging into his skin, holding on for dear life as my orgasm rips through me.

“Fuck, yes,” Max calls out, thrusting up, jackhammering his hips into mine as he comes, taking him over the edge with me.

My body collapses on top of his, both of us struggling to catch our breath, but in the best possible way. I roll off him, and grab a tissue from the nightstand, pulling off his condom, I toss it in the trash before settling myself next to him in the bed.

“How do you feel?” he asks me, a loose smile on his face as his fingers twirl a lock of my hair.

“Like I could take on the fucking world right now,” I reply, letting out a giggle as I rest my chin on his chest, looking up at him.

“Wow, I had no idea my dick was that powerful,” he jokes, sending us both into a fit of laughter.

We lay in silence together, my head resting on Max’s chest, listening to the calming rhythm of his beating heart. How could I have ever forgotten this? There’s nothing more perfect than being here with him.

Max’s fingers now trace a path over the bruises on my ribs, the pain still there, but dull in comparison to what it was when I left the hospital. It’s crazy to me how quickly my body has healed, but how slowly my memories are returning. I almost wish it were the opposite.

“I think this is Sammie’s favorite place,” I whisper to Max in the quiet comfort of the darkened room. Both of us sated, lulled to a calm created by what we just did together.

“I know it’s her favorite place,” Max replies, tucking my hair behind my ear, his fingers tracing a soft path down my cheek. “She’s loved it here since the first time.”

“I can see why. It’s so...” I stop, wishing to find the right words for how I feel. For the last few days my life hasn’t felt like my own, anxious and confused, scared and fearful, but the moment I stepped into Max’s parents’ house, all of that faded away.

I worried Sammie would still be upset after what had happened with Tyler, but like me, she settled in as if this is her home. She fell asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow as if she knew she was safe here.

“It’s safe, Harper. You’re safe here. Sammie is safe here,” Max murmurs, his words a gentle reminder of everything I’ve been missing. I want to remember it all, but everything isn’t coming back as quickly as I hoped. I have enough though to know things here are good, that Sammie and I can call this place home and we don’t have to deal with the nightmares from the past.

“I should go check on her,” I whisper, knowing that if she wakes up and I’m not there, she’s going to come looking for me. It’s been a stressful time for her too, but I’m really proud of her for calling Max when things were getting out of hand with her dad. The level of trust she has in Max is beyond words, and I love him for coming as soon as she told him what was happening.

“I’ll go with you,” Max replies, reaching for his boxers. “Just to make sure she’s okay. Tonight was tough on her.”

Holy fucking shit, this guy is a damn dream come true. I’m still wondering how the hell I ended up with him, and to not remember everything we had together is brutal. He wasn’t kidding when he told me he’d make me fall in love with him all over again. He isn’t even trying that hard and he’s definitely winning.

“Max,” I croon, slipping my undies back on and my tank over my head, “you are too good to us.” I feel the tears well up in my eyes at the thought of ever losing Max. I can’t believe he stayed when all this happened, when I didn’t know who he was. He only ever cared about Sammie and me, never worrying how any of this would affect him.

“Never,” he responds, holding the door open for me, we both head next door to the room Sammie is sleeping in. We peek inside and see her sound asleep, her little face buried in

the pillow, her light brown hair all splayed across the white sheets.

“Could she be any cuter?” Max whispers, and I shake my head. She’s not a light sleeper, but I’m guessing she’s going to hear Max’s voice and wake up. She absolutely adores him and wouldn’t miss a chance to see him.

“Mommy?” I hear Sammie’s hoarse voice croak out, still half asleep.

“Yes, baby?” I reply, walking toward the bed, I push back her hair, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

“Can you lay down with me?” she asks, her eyes growing heavy almost immediately. “And Max too.”

I look over at where Max is standing in the doorway, not knowing what his thoughts are on something like this. Tyler would never have gotten into bed with Sammie, telling me something along the lines that she needs to fall asleep on her own or that I’m babying her.

He doesn’t even respond, just walking over to the bed and pulling back the covers. He climbs in next to her and as soon as he does, she lets out the sweetest contented sigh, closing her eyes, she reaches over and pats the other side of the bed.

“Mommy,” she says, as if to tell me that this is my spot. I slip in next to her, Max’s arm moving across Sammie’s body, he takes my hand in his, linking our fingers. Closing his eyes, I can hear the soft rhythmic breathing of both of them, and in no time, I’m asleep too.

I wake early, the sun just beginning to come through the corners of the curtains in the room. Sammie and Max are still

asleep, and I almost gasp out loud when I see the two of them. Sammie's tiny hand is resting on Max's cheek, and she's curled up against his chest. His arms are wrapped around her, almost like he's protecting her. I quietly take my phone from the nightstand, snapping a few pictures of them, feeling like I need to remember every moment now after what happened. Seeing her like this, and the way he responds to her even in a moment when neither of them realize they're doing it, has my heart nearly leaping in my chest.

I don't dare wake either of them up. They need their sleep, and I know once Sammie is awake, she's going to want to go non-stop. Swimming in the lake, eating ice cream, building sandcastles; the whole thing and while I'm here for it, I need just a little bit of time to process everything that is going on.

I have no idea if Tyler left. Max told me yesterday that Tyler would be a fool to stick around, but Max doesn't know Tyler like I do. He isn't going to give up that easily, if anything, this whole incident at my house has just added fuel to his fire. He wants to get his way more than anything. He's losing control and he hates it.

I exit the room, pulling the door closed behind me, hoping I haven't woken either of them up. I can't explain it, but I just feel so safe here. Maybe it's the gated community or the gated house. Or maybe it's just that it feels like home. I haven't felt this way about somewhere for as long as I can remember.

The trailer I lived in with my mom never felt like a home. It was a rented mess of old furniture, and it smelled like cigarettes and cat pee, despite us never having a cat. I slept on an old mattress on the floor with nothing but some sheets on it. I hated to come home, but where else was I supposed to go?



When I met Tyler, he felt like a way out, treating me like I wasn't white trash, but that all changed so quickly. I had no idea at the time, but he saw me as a victim, someone he could easily take advantage of, and as naïve as I was, I didn't think anything of it.

I take a robe from the closet in case anyone else is awake, but it feels unlikely. The sun is just beginning to rise, watching the calmness of the lake from the kitchen window, I turn and notice that someone has already started a pot of coffee.

I can see Max's mom out on the deck, a blanket over her legs, a cup of coffee in her hand. I should go out and sit with her, thank her for all she's done for Sammie, but something stops me. She's a mom just like me, but I worry she thinks I'm taking advantage of her kindness and possibly her family. She didn't say anything like that to me when we arrived, but it's how I would feel as a parent. But then again maybe that's because of my past because I have so little trust in people to be genuine.

I fill a mug with some coffee and head out to the back deck, taking a seat in an Adirondack next to Pam. The view from this deck has to be the best view of anywhere on this little peninsula of a neighborhood.

"Good morning," I say, taking a sip of my coffee.

"The moms are up early," she jokes. "I started waking up early when Max and Zoey were little, like Sammie's age, just so I could have some time to myself."

"Yeah, I try to do that too, but it's like Sammie has this radar that wakes her up as soon as I'm up," I joke, guessing Sammie will be up any minute now.

“Kids are like that,” she replies, letting out a hard sigh, pausing for a moment, she asks, “How are you doing? Max told us what happened yesterday.”

“I’m okay, thank you. I’m more worried about Sammie and Max, and the idea that I even brought Tyler back into this,” I admit, embarrassed that all of this could have been avoided if I had just given myself a few days, hell even a few hours before calling him.

“Max can handle it, and so can Sammie. It’s you I’m worried about,” Pam replies, and I can’t tell if this is her wondering if I’m going to break Max’s heart again.

I don’t know how to respond. It does feel like she’s worried about me leaving Max, but that’s never going to happen.

“I won’t ever—”

Pam holds up a hand cutting me off. She’s looking right at me, a soft smile on her face as she shakes her head. “I worry because this isn’t over yet. Your ex is not leaving. I’ve known guys like this, and I worry about your safety.”

“I do too,” I admit, the tears filling my eyes. I brought this on myself, and now there’s nothing I can do to stop it.

## CHAPTER 14

### MAX

I wake up in the spare bedroom of my parents' house. The bed is empty except for Sammie's teddy bear, who is tucked in beside me. Both Sammie and Harper are early risers, the complete opposite of me, so I am sure they've been up for ages.

Rolling onto my back, I lift my arms above my head, stretching as a huge smile pulls at my mouth, my mind going back to last night and what happened in my old bedroom before we came in here. I fucking love that it had been Harper making all the moves, that it was Harper telling me exactly what she wanted.

And I love that it's because she is remembering more and more things about us. It feels like every day, more of her memories are coming back and I can only hope that this means eventually, they'll all return. That she'll remember everything about us.

With a groan, I roll out of bed, grateful Sammie isn't here considering I've got a serious morning hard-on going on right now. Shoving my hand down my boxers, I readjust, trying to get my dick to calm down, as I wander back to my old bedroom to grab some sweats and a t-shirt, before making my way down to the kitchen and out to the back deck.

“Morning sleepy,” Mom says, smiling up at me as I walk outside.

“Hey,” I reply, walking over to where Harper sits. Leaning down, I wrap my arms around her from behind, nuzzling against her neck. “Morning,” I whisper.

She smiles up at me, her hand on my cheek. “Hi.”

With a smile, I brush my lips against hers, the hard-on I tamed into submission already coming back to life. “Have you been up for long?”

Harper lets out a soft laugh. “Yes, an hour or so. Guess you needed a little more sleep.”

I chuckle. “Maybe because someone wore me out last night,” I murmur, loving the blush that colors Harper’s cheeks.

“Max, your mom is just there,” she says, hand on my chest as she eases me back.

I give her another quick kiss. “And?”

“And, behave,” she says, trying to look serious.

Laughing, I sit down in the chair beside her, grabbing her hand as I look out at the amazing view my parents have. “Where’s Sammie?” I ask.

“In the garden,” Mom replies, pointing to where Sammie and my dad are attempting to fly a kite again, Sammie still in her pjs. “I’ll go and see how they’re doing,” she adds, standing.

I watch as she walks down the stairs and across the lawn, Sammie waving at her as she joins them. When I turn to Harper, she’s also watching them, a small smile on her face. I tug gently on her hand, pulling her over so she’s sitting on my lap.

“How did you sleep,” I ask, brushing her hair back as I press my lips to her neck.

Harper sighs, draping her arms around my shoulders. “Good, you? I can’t imagine you’ve shared a bed with many four-year-olds?”

Chuckling, I nuzzle against her, sucking gently on her skin. “Definitely not. She’s a bit of a wriggler.”

Harper laughs, pushing my hair back as she looks down at me. “Thank you for bringing us here.”

“You’re very welcome,” I say. “You doing okay after everything that happened yesterday?”

She sighs now, the smile disappearing from her face. “God, I wish I’d never called him...”

“I get why you did,” I say, my hand cupping her cheek. “But I don’t like what happened last night. It fucking scared the shit out of me, Harper, the way he was acting, the way he threatened you.”

“I know,” she whispers. “Me too.”

My hand curls around the back of her neck as I pull her closer, so her forehead is resting against mine. “I don’t want you going back to your bungalow,” I whisper. “Not now that he knows where you live, not after last night.”

She nods, her forehead still resting against mine. “We can’t just stay here,” she breathes out.

I brush my lips against hers. “I mean we can,” I tell her, knowing my parents wouldn’t have a problem with it if we did. “But you can also come and live with me.”

Harper pulls back slightly, her eyes wide. “Max, you can’t —”

“I asked you to move in with me the day of your accident,” I say, cutting her off. “You and Sammie.”

She tilts her head, an adorably confused look on her face. “What did I say?”

With a chuckle, I reply, “You said yes, you’d consider it, but that you also wanted stability.”

She lets out a scoff. “Stability, yeah, that would be nice.”

“I can give you that, Harper,” I say, pulling her close again. “I can give you both that.”

She sighs now, her eyes closing. “Do you really want to take all of this on, Max?” she whispers. “I’m not exactly baggage free.”

I exhale, easing her back a little. “Baby, open your eyes,” I whisper, my thumb brushing across her cheekbone as she blinks them open. Smiling, I stare up at her, my gaze now locked with hers. “Remember that part where I love you?” I whisper.

“Yeah, I mean no, but—”

“No buts,” I say, shaking my head. “I love you, end of story. Which means I love every part of you, even the baggage.”

Harper smirks. “It’s a lot of baggage.”

“Nah, it’s not that much,” I say, smiling. “Besides, you also come with a pretty damn cute accessory,” I say, tipping my head in the direction of the garden where I can hear Sammie laughing with my parents. Harper lets out a slow exhale, her eyes closing again. “Let me take care of you, both of you,” I whisper.

“I wish I could remember us,” she whispers, her eyes still closed. “All of us, I mean.”

“You will,” I tell her. “I love you, Harper. I know one day you’ll remember that.”

She opens her eyes now, a sad smile on her face. “I want to,” she says, and I lean up, brushing a light kiss against her lips, which Harper deepens, her fingers sliding into my hair.

“Fuck,” I groan, pulling her closer, my dick hardening in my sweats as I slide a hand inside the robe she wears. “Wanna sneak off, maybe go take a shower?” I whisper against her lips. “Might jog some more memories?”

She smiles against my mouth. “I already remembered our shower,” she murmurs.

Chuckling, I move my hand to her breast cupping it as my fingers gently tease her nipple. “Baby, we shared plenty of showers,” I say. “And we can share them every day if you move in with me.”

Harper laughs. “You’re really working this hard, aren’t you?”

I shift her in my lap. “Something’s fucking hard,” I growl, pushing my dick against her ass. “Come on, let’s sneak off,” I murmur, pulling her tank down a little.

Harper moans, her nipple a hard peak beneath my thumb. “Do you think your parents—”

“Yep, they’ve got her,” I reply, standing, Harper in my arms as I carry her inside and down to my bedroom, my mouth on her neck, sucking and licking. Kicking the door shut behind me, I walk us into my adjoining bathroom, lowering Harper to the counter as I move between her legs. With a smile, I undo the belt of her robe, pushing it open and off her shoulders.

Underneath, her nipples hard and straining against the tight fabric of her tank top. With a grin, I lean down and suck one of them into my mouth, loving the moan Harper lets out. Sliding my hand up her thigh, I brush it between her legs, against her pussy, feeling her wetness.

“Fucking hell, Harper, you’re so wet,” I groan, lifting my mouth to hers as I kiss her hard and deep.

“Yes,” she groans, pulling me closer as her hands shove at my t-shirt, pulling it off before they move to the waistband of my sweats. When she slides one hand beneath, her fingers curling around my dick, I almost come from how good it feels.

“Jesus,” I say, stepping back. Leaning in, I turn on the shower before slamming the bathroom door shut and locking it. “Just in case,” I say with a wink before moving between her legs again. Harper smiles at me and I brush a soft kiss against her lips as I slowly peel off her tank. Leaning down, I suck on her other breast this time, teasing her nipple with my tongue, her body arching into me as her hands grip my hair. I slide my hands to her hips, pushing her panties down, Harper shifting on the counter as I get them off. “I need to be inside you,” I groan, reaching for the drawer and a condom.

Harper takes it from me, tearing open the wrapper with her teeth, before she slowly rolls it on my dick, my eyes practically rolling back in my head at how fucking good it feels. But it’s got nothing on how good it feels when she guides me between her legs, both of us watching as I slowly push inside her.

“Max,” she pants, her forehead resting on my shoulder, mine on hers, both of us watching where we are joined.

“Fuck you feel so good,” I groan, as I slowly ease out before pushing inside her again.



“Yes,” she whispers. “So, so good.”

I move my hand, brushing my thumb against her clit as I lift my head, my mouth finding hers. “I love you so fucking much,” I whisper, before kissing her hard.

She moans into my mouth, her legs wrapping around my hips as she pulls me closer, the water in the shower filling the room with steam as I now start to move in long, slow thrusts, the two of us losing ourselves in each other.

“We’re moving?” Sammie asks, her eyes wide as she looks up at first Harper and then me.

“Yep,” I confirm, ruffling her hair. “You and Mommy are moving into my house. Are you okay with that?”

“Will I have my own room?” Sammie asks, her face serious.

Chuckling, I pull her onto my lap as we sit out on the back deck at my parents, glancing over at Harper who sits beside me, a small smile on her face as she watches us. “You sure will,” I say, brushing her hair back. “Would you like to live with me?”

She gives me an exaggerated head nod, her eyes wide as she smiles up at me. “Yes, I like it when you are with us.”

I smile. “I like it too. I like it a lot.”

“Does this mean we’re staying?” she now asks.

“You mean in Badger Creek?” I ask and Sammie nods.

I glance over at Harper again, who’s still smiling as she watches us. I don’t need to ask her to know the answer to this question and it’s got nothing to do with Harper going back to

work and everything to do with what's happened between us over the past day or so. She might not remember everything yet, but she remembers enough, and she feels a hell of a lot more. Enough to reassure her that even without her memories, she belongs here with me.

"Yeah," I reply, turning back to Sammie. "You're staying."

Her whole face lights up now as she turns to Harper. "Really, Mommy?"

Harper reaches over, stroking a hand over her daughter's hair. "Really, baby," she says leaning over and dropping a kiss on her daughter's head. "Badger Creek is our home now," she adds, smiling at me.

"And my place is your home too," I add, reaching out and pulling Harper close as I press a kiss to her forehead.

"YEAY!" Sammie shouts, clapping her hands together as she lets out an adorable giggle that has both of us laughing too.

"Does this make you happy?" Harper asks her. "Living with Max?"

"Yes!" Sammie shouts.

I tighten my arms around her. "It makes me happy too," I say. "Having my girls with me."

"Do you remember now, Mommy?" Sammie asks, always checking in with Harper.

"No, baby, not everything," she says, brushing her fingers across Sammie's cheeks. "But I will."

Sammie nods, turning to look at me as she says, "Max will help you. Not Daddy."

It's the first time Sammie has mentioned her dad since everything happened last night and I don't miss the way Harper flinches beside me. I drop an arm around her shoulders now, pulling her close again as I say to both of them, "You're safe with me, okay? I don't want you to worry about anything, I've got you, I promise."

It's a promise I intend to keep, even if I have no idea what this Tyler guy is capable of. As much as I hope he's got the message and left, guys like him aren't the type to give up easily. It's not so much that he wants Harper and Sammie, as he doesn't want anyone else to have them.

And that's what scares me the most.

"I know," Sammie says with a nod, before adding, "Can we have pizza for dinner?"

I can't help but laugh, amazed at how resilient this kid is. "Yes, baby girl, we can have pizza for dinner."

## CHAPTER 15

# HARPER

**W**e spent one last night in our bungalow with Max, saying a little goodbye to the first place Sammie and I called a real home. Without Zoey's offer of a place to stay, I'm not sure Sammie and I would have made it here. I owe her so much, along with Max and really everyone I've met at Badger Creek, even if my memory is still spotty at times. They still continue to support Sammie and me, and each day that passes we make new memories, memories of a place that I still want to call home.

It doesn't take Sammie and me long to move all our stuff over to Max's condo, not having come to Tahoe with much to begin with. It's even interesting that I agreed to move in with Max since this doesn't feel like something I would normally do, tending to be much more guarded. But I have this strange sense of urgency for it to happen, like this is the place I'm supposed to be.

Maybe it's the idea of having Tyler here that has me feeling like I need to be somewhere he can't get to us. Or maybe it's the fact that my memory is slowly coming back, and remembering what Max and I were before the accident feels stronger than any connection I've ever had to someone.

“Mommy!” Sammie squeals, giggling madly when I find her in the bedroom Max has made up for her. “Look!” She’s now jumping on the bed, clapping her hands as Max stands in the doorway watching her. He has an equally big smile on his face, making me feel like I definitely made the right choice to move in with him.

“When did you have time to do this?” I ask him, sliding my arm around his waist, my head resting against his shoulder.

“I bought it all before your accident,” Max sheepishly admits, and I don’t want to cry in front of Sammie since she’s so damn happy, but I can’t help it. “When you told me you’d move in with me, I couldn’t wait to get everything ready. I want stability for Sammie just like you do.”

“Mommy, why are you crying?” Sammie asks, her body still now as she watches me from her beautifully decorated bedroom.

“I’m just so happy,” I tell her, walking over to her, pulling her into my arms for a big hug. “They’re happy tears.”

“Happy tears?” Sammie questions and then lets out a laugh. “Mommy, you’re so silly.” Her giggling is infectious, and she has Max and I joining in. How can we not? She’s so damn cute and happy and fun. This is the life I’ve wanted for her since she was born and now she has it.

“This is Arendelle Castle,” Max states, a grand tone to his voice as he swings his hand under a gigantic sticker on the wall. “And this is Elsa and this is Anna,” he now says, holding up two pillows, and all of this has Sammie hooting with laughter. “And when we turn the lights off,” Max walks to the light switch, turning it off, “it looks like this.”

The room is blanketed in darkness and then suddenly the ceiling lights up with snowflakes. Sammie falls back on the bed, her eyes focusing on them as they sparkle and move around. I lay down next to her, brushing her hair back. I want to stay in this little bubble of happiness forever.

Max squeezes in on the other side of Sammie, giving her side a tiny tickle and she giggles. The contented sigh that falls from my mouth says it all.

“Who would have thought Badger Creek’s most eligible bachelor would now be living in a house that has a room dedicated to the movie *Frozen*? How are you feeling about this?” I ask him, and he reaches across Sammie, taking my hand in his.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Max replies, and everything about it feels genuine and real, something I’ve gotten used to with him over the last week or so. It’s easy to trust someone like Max, never worrying that he’s lying to me. It’s a funny feeling, but a good one.

We leave Sammie to enjoy her new bedroom, playing with the toys and dolls Max has filled the room with.

“Who helped you with all of that?” I ask him, narrowing my eyes, wondering if he really did all that purchasing and decorating on his own.

“Just me,” he replies, shrugging. “Okay, maybe Zoey helped a little, but it turns out *Frozen* is quite popular and you can pretty much find anything and everything with it plastered on it. They even have yogurt. Did you know that?” he adds, sounding a little surprised.

“And you bought it, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did. Snow flurry vanilla. Can’t pass that kind of shit up in a ski town.” He walks over to the fridge, opening it, and it’s filled with all kinds of food that will have Sammie wishing we moved in with Max sooner. “And popsicles,” Max adds, opening the freezer to show me. All I can do is shake my head. This feels like a dream, but the best dream ever.

We spend the next couple of hours getting my clothes unpacked and put away. Max has made room in his closet and given me a dresser, basically leaving me more room than he has for himself. He’s far too generous, and when he begins to move everything around in the bathroom, I stop him.

Resting my hand on his cheek, I guide his lips to mine. I kiss him softly, my eyes closing and basking in the moment of complete and utter bliss. His arms slip around my waist, pulling me closer and deepening the kiss.

“Thank you for everything,” I murmur against his lips as they trace a soft path along my neck and to my ear. Nipping gently, I let out a gasp, and my hands slide under his shirt, feeling the taut muscles of his stomach. My fingers follow the lines of his abs, finding myself wanting him again like we did that night at his parents’ house.

“It seems like you got a little sweaty with all this moving,” I now say, a devious smirk on my face. “Maybe we should take a shower?”

“Oh, I could get down with a shower,” Max replies, his hands moving to grab my ass. “And it won’t be like doing it in your bungalow shower. Mine is big, we’ve got lots of space.” I can’t help but laugh at him, and the look on his face.

“Max!” Sammie’s little voice calls out, and it stops both of us in our tracks. “Where are you?”

He looks down at me, smiling, he rolls his eyes, but he has no idea how much this interruption means to me. For the first time since I had Sammie, she called for someone else, not me. She’s never done that. Ever. Not even when we lived with her dad. It was always mommy, never daddy.

“In the bathroom in mine and Mommy’s bedroom,” he replies, not letting a second go by without answering her.

She flies into the bedroom, taking the corner into the bathroom like she’s on fire, but I know there’s no emergency. This is just how a four-year-old is. She’s excited and wants to share every second with us.

“I’m hungry,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest as she waits for us to reply. “Pizza?” she now suggests, and we both start laughing.

“We had pizza the other day. Aren’t you sick of pizza?” Max asks her, reaching down, he picks her up and tosses her over his shoulder.

“Never!” she yells back, giggling madly.

I follow them out to the kitchen, and Max opens the cabinet, taking out a box of macaroni and cheese, and what would you know, it’s *Frozen* themed.

“Would you like some mac and cheese?” he asks her, fanning his hand under the box in presentation. Her eyes widen when she sees the box, nodding her head, she climbs up onto one of the stools around the island. “We also have some yogurt and blueberries, but not the ordinary kind. These are from the forests of Arendelle and handpicked by Olaf.”



He has Sammie dying with laughter as he puts the pot of water on to boil, telling her it's going to be a few minutes, but he'll call her when it's ready. Scrambling off back to her room, I can hear her singing and talking away like she's lived here all her life. I've never seen her so comfortable and there's such a feeling of security in that.

"You spoil her," I say, coming up behind Max, my arms circling around his waist. I rest my head against his back, letting the comfort wash over me too.

"She deserves to be spoiled just like you do," he replies nonchalantly. He turns in my arms, kissing my forehead, he whispers, "I love you."

I want to say it back. I feel it in my heart. I feel it with everything in me, but it feels too soon, too new. Maybe I'm just being stupid though. Does it matter that it's early? It didn't before, and it's not really all that early since it started before I can remember.

"You don't have to say it back," Max now says, running his hand down my back soothingly. "When you're ready. It doesn't bother me because you will remember us."

He's so patient and kind, never rushing me to feel something I'm not or making me think I need to tell him that I love him before I'm ready. It's a wonderful feeling to have someone like him in my life.

"I know and thank you for always being so patient with me. It's here Max," I tell him, resting my hand over my heart. "I feel myself falling in love with you more and more each day."

I push up on my toes, kissing him, loving the way he melts into me. I can't wait to share a bed with him tonight, but more

than that, I can't wait to start my life with him. It's a future I was never able to picture, but with Max it's right.

"I'm going to share my location with you so that way you always know where I'm at," he says, his arms tightening around me, but I feel my body go rigid.

My mind immediately flashes to Tyler and when I lived with him. I was never allowed to know where he was, but the location of my phone was always on. He even questioned me if I went somewhere and didn't tell him first. I used to wonder why he had so much time to track what I was doing, knowing if Sammie and I went to the park and the library instead of the park and the pool. He'd question me relentlessly, thinking he was going to catch me in a lie.

"You okay?" Max asks, and I can tell he can feel the change in me. "What's going on, baby?" He takes my face in his hands, running a thumb across my cheek.

"I'm fine," I lie, and then I shake my head. I've told myself a million times, no more lying to please someone else, and Max would hate that if he knew I was. I let out a slow breath, reminding myself that I need to be honest with him even if it's something from my past.

"Tyler used to track me and when you said you were going to share your location with me, it just brought back those feelings. Even though you didn't even ask me to share my location with you. It's just..."

"Just hard to get over," Max says, filling in my missing words. "I get that, and I would never ask you to do something like that because of what you dealt with."

"Thank you. One day, I'll get there."

“And if you don’t, it doesn’t matter. I trust you, Harper, and I know you trust me,” Max whispers, his lips brushing against mine. He rests his forehead against mine now, letting out a soft sigh. “He checked out of the hotel. Zoey told me,” Max now says, and he doesn’t have to elaborate. We both know he’s talking about Tyler.

I nod, wanting to believe that he’s gone, but he’s not. He’s planning. He’s trying to figure out how to get back at me, how to hurt me.

“It’s over, Harper,” Max tells me. “He’s gone and he’d be a fucking fool to come back. And if he does, we’re calling the police and getting a restraining order.”

I love Max’s confidence and maybe he’s right. Tyler could have given up, not really having tried all that hard to find Sammie and me after I left. It’s my fault that he came here to begin with. I invited him back into my life by calling him. Had I just given it a few days, it never would have happened.

But I can’t go back in time and change what happened. I can only move forward and with Max by my side, things will be back to normal soon.

“What do you say we have a party?” I suggest, trying to clear my head of the negativity. “Like you did when I came home from the hospital, but with a different outcome this time.” I smile up at him, giving him a wink.

“I think we could arrange that. Let me send some texts, make some calls. We can have a housewarming party since you and Sammie just moved in,” he says.

“And some pizza,” I jokingly suggest, and we both look over at the bedroom where Sammie is currently playing.

“I know someone who would be onboard for that,” Max replies, a smile on his face now. “Sammie!” he calls. “Want to have a party with pizza?”

“Yes!” she yells from the bedroom, adding, “And ice cream.”

## CHAPTER 16

### MAX

“So, all loved up and domesticated, huh?” Alex says as he lines up the ping pong ball and sends it flying over to my side of the table.

It lands in one of the cups with a splash and he fist pumps the air, grinning at me as I shake my head and pick up the cup, throwing back the contents. We’re outside on the back deck, the music playing inside as the warm summer evening surrounds us. I might love Tahoe in the winter, but there is something really great about Tahoe summers too.

“If memory serves,” I start, wiping off the ball. “You too, are all loved up and domesticated.” I jerk a thumb toward the open doors and Delaney, who sits inside with the others as I throw the ball his way, my grin widening when it also lands in a cup.

We’re literally going drink for drink at this point because we spent most of our college years playing this game that it’s impossible to tell which of us is better at it. If anyone ever kicked our ass, it was Nick. Didn’t matter how drunk he got, he never missed. The dude has some serious hand eye coordination.

“Yeah, I am,” he says, shrugging as he downs his drink.

I laugh. “Right, so what’s the difference exactly?”

“Meh, nothin’ I guess, only you’re...” he trails off as Sammie suddenly comes running outside, dressed in her PJs.

“Max, what are you doing?” she asks, looking up at me.

With a grin, I bend down and pick her up, blowing a raspberry on her cheek as I tickle her. “I think the big question is, why aren’t you in bed, missy?”

Sammie lets out a loud laugh as she wriggles in my arms. “Cause the party is on,” she squeals. “I don’t wanna be in bed.”

Chuckling, I flip her so she’s standing on the table in front of me, my arms around her waist, holding her steady. “You should be in bed because it’s late.”

“What’s this?” she asks, ignoring me as she points at all the cups.

Alex grins from the opposite side of the table. “Beer pong,” he says, holding up the ping pong ball. “Wanna play?”

“Dude, seriously?” I ask, hitting him with a pointed look.

Alex just laughs, ignoring me as he turns to Sammie. “You just have to get the ball in a cup,” he says to her. “Like this.” We both watch as he bounces the ball to my side of the table before it once again lands in one of the cups with a splash. “And then you drink,” he adds, gesturing to the cup that now has a floating ping pong ball in it.

Sammie reaches for the cup, and I quickly stop her. “Noooo, nope, not for you,” I say, grabbing it before she has a chance. Alex lets out a loud laugh as I say, “Nice one, idiot,” before throwing back the beer.

“Why can’t I drink?” Sammie asks, pouting at me.

“Grown up drink,” I say, handing her the ball. “But you can throw this. Think you can get it into one of those cups?” I ask, pointing to the ones on Alex’s side of the table.

“Uh huh,” Sammie says, nodding as she holds the ball in both hands, her gaze locked on the cups, a look of fierce concentration on her face.

Alex just laughs, shaking his head as he mutters, “Parent of the year right there.”

“Um, F you, you started it,” I say, flipping him off even if my word censorship only makes him laugh harder.

Luckily Sammie is too busy concentrating on the cups and what she needs to do to pay us any attention. When she finally decides which one she’s going for, she lines up, her tongue poking out of her mouth as she throws the ball on the full to the other side of the table.

Alex and I both watch as it goes sailing through the air before landing in the cup closest to Alex with a satisfying plop.

“Holy shit,” I say as Sammie starts cheering, jumping up and down in my arms as she claps her hands in excitement.

“Drink!” she shouts at Alex, pointing to the cup as I let out a loud laugh.

“Dude, have you been teaching her this?” Alex asks as he picks up his cup and throws back the beer.

“No,” I say. “Why the hell would I teach a four-year-old how to play beer pong?”

“Ummmm,” he says, waving a hand over the table as if to make a point.

“Yep, okay,” I say, picking Sammie up and throwing her over my shoulder. “Definitely time for bed, missy.” I turn and walk inside as I hear her waving goodbye to Alex. I’m not sure what I was thinking letting a kid hang out with us while we’re playing beer pong, and this is definitely not something I need Harper seeing.

But as I walk inside, I see Harper standing with Elissa and Delaney, a smirk tugging at her lips as she faces the back deck, clearly having seen everything.

“Sorry,” I mouth, just as the front door opens and Zoey and Ethan walk in.

Harper just laughs, shaking her head at me before she turns and greets them both with smiles and a hug. I take Sammie to her new bedroom, knowing the second she sees Zoey, she’ll be distracted by the whole Elsa thing and I’ll have no chance of getting her to sleep.

“Right, time for sleep,” I say, tucking her into bed.

“Can I stay up with you?” she asks.

“No, baby girl,” I say, leaning over to drop a kiss on the top of her head. “Little people need to sleep so they grow up big and strong.” Sammie attempts to pout, but it’s overtaken by a yawn that has me laughing. “See, you’re tired. It’s been a big day.”

“I’m not tired,” she says, even as she lets out another yawn.

“Yeah, you are, come on, lie down and I’ll hang with you until you fall asleep, okay?”

“Promise?”



“Promise,” I say, pulling the covers up as she settles beneath them.

Sammie gives me a nod before closing her eyes and turning toward me. I watch her, wondering how it is that this kid and her mom have taken up such a huge place in my heart. I always knew I wanted a family one day, but it always seemed like something that would happen in the future, not straight out of college.

But it doesn't matter how quickly it has all happened, now that I have it, I don't ever want to lose either of them.

Sammie's breathing slows, evening out in a way that tells me she's fallen asleep. As carefully as I can, I roll off the bed so as not to disturb her, just as Harper appears in the doorway.

“She asleep?”

“Yes,” I whisper, walking toward her. “Sorry about the beer pong,” I say, my hands on her hips as I guide her outside, pulling the bedroom door closed behind me, even though once Sammie's out, she's pretty much out for the night, which is good.

Harper laughs. “It's okay, Max.”

“It is?” I ask, pulling her closer. “Felt like shitty parenting to me.”

Harper pushes up on her toes and brushes her lips against mine in a soft kiss. “Really, cause it looked like great parenting to me.”

I chuckle, sliding my hands from her hips and around her waist as I hold her against me. “Teaching a kid to play beer pong?”

She lifts a shoulder, shrugging. “Getting her ready for college,” she suggests playfully. “And it’s not like you let her drink the beer. I mean you didn’t, did you?”

Laughing, I grab her ass, giving it a hard squeeze as I lean down to kiss her again. “No, I didn’t.”

“So,” she says, her hands sliding down my chest. “I think we’re good.”

“You know what I think would be good?” I murmur.

“What?”

“You and me and that hot tub after everyone’s gone home tonight.”

Harper smiles. “You’re on.”

“Did you have a good night?” I ask Harper, as she climbs into the hot tub to join me.

“I did,” she says, smiling. “I actually remembered a couple of things I’d done with the girls.”

“That’s fantastic,” I say, watching as she sinks beneath the water.

“Did you have a good night?” she now asks.

Grinning, I grab her wrist, pulling her over so she’s sitting between my legs, her back resting against my chest and my arms around her waist. “Yes, although our night isn’t over,” I murmur, nuzzling her neck.

Harper turns around so she’s straddling me, her arms hanging loose over my shoulders. “No, it isn’t,” she whispers, shuffling closer before she starts to slowly grind against me.

Neither of us are wearing anything and fuck me, does it feel good.

“Harper, babe,” I whisper, my hands sliding up her back, as my mouth finds hers in a deep kiss. I’m already hard and with the way she’s moving against me, I’m getting dangerously close to sliding inside her.

“Hmmm?” she murmurs, not stopping the kiss as she shifts again so the tip of my dick just slips inside.

“Fuck,” I groan, my hands now cupping her jaw as I gently ease her back a little. “Condom, babe, we need a condom.”

She tries to shift again, as she whispers, “I’m on the pill.”

“I know, but—”

Harper freezes, pulling back as her eyes meet mine. “We’ve had this conversation,” she whispers.

I smile up at her, tucking her hair behind her ear as I nod. “We have,” I say, chuckling a little. “Although we weren’t quite at this part of the whole thing when we did have it,” I add, dropping my eyes to where we are almost joined beneath the water. All it would take is one small shift of either of our hips and I’d be inside her.

Bare.

And fuck me if it’s not taking monumental amounts of self-control not to move and make it happen.

Harper smiles, her eyes widening as she says, “I remember that. It was the first time you slept over at my place. You went down on me first and then we had sex, oh my god!”

Now I’m laughing, shifting her back a little so there’s no chance of this going any further. “Fuck me, babe, I love when your memories come back.”

Harper smirks, grinding up against me again. “Is that what you call this?” she teases.

Wrapping my arms around her back, I pull her close, dropping my mouth to her breasts as I suck on her nipple, loving the groan she lets out and the way it hardens beneath my tongue. “Cheeky,” I murmur, moving my mouth to her other breast. “But I do need to go and get that condom before this goes any further.”

Harper pushes my head back, her hand brushing the hair back from my forehead as she drops a kiss on the end of my nose. “Do you?”

“Harper,” I murmur, knowing that while her memories might slowly be returning, they aren’t all back yet and the last thing I want is her doing something because she thinks she should. I don’t want her to have any regrets about us.

“What?” she whispers, her mouth moving to mine. “I trust you, Max. I don’t need to remember everything to know that.”

“Fuck,” I groan, torn because I want so badly to stay here with her and do everything she’s suggesting, even if I know that I should go and get a condom because it’s the right thing to do. “Babe, I know you do, but...shit,” I grunt as she drops a hand beneath the water and circles her fingers around my dick.

“But what?” she teases as she gives me a long, slow stroke.

I let out another moan, my head falling back as she continues to stroke me. “But you know what,” I say, my eyes practically rolling back in my head at just how fucking good this feels. “We said we’d use them. Do you remember that?” I get out, my words breathless because of the way she’s touching me right now.

She doesn't say anything, just kisses me again, her tongue teasing me, her teeth nipping at my bottom lip as she continues to move her hand beneath the water. My hands grip her thighs, holding her even as I'm desperate to be inside her.

"Max," she whispers against my mouth.

"Yeah?" I grunt, staring up at her as she straddles my hips, turning me on more than I ever thought possible.

She smiles now, as she shuffles closer, positioning my dick against her. "I love you," she whispers, before she slowly sinks down, taking me inside her.

"Holy fuck," I breathe out, my hands moving to her hips, stilling her when I'm buried fully inside her. "Harper."

She places a finger on my lips, smiling still as she says, "I want this. I want you."

My arms circle around her waist as I pull her in for a hard kiss. "Jesus, baby, I want you so bad," I groan as I slowly lift her up before sinking inside her again. "So fucking bad."

## CHAPTER 17

# HARPER

**T**he moment he's inside me, it's like my world comes alive, everything changing into bright colors and wonderful feelings, feelings I never want to forget. It still hurts that I can't remember everything, but each day, we're slowly making up for it.

I do love Max and for the first time in my life, I understand and know what it feels like to be loved back. Not a day has gone by that Max hasn't spent it being my equal partner, my biggest supporter and my ride or die. He could have easily given up. He could have turned his back and walked away after he found out I had a kid, after the accident, after the drama with Tyler, but he stayed. He's always stayed.

He feels amazing inside me, the two of us moving slowly together, wanting this so badly. Neither of us ups the pace, just moving in time, the feeling of complete and utter bliss washing over both of us.

Max's head falls back, moaning out my name as I ride him, his fingers finding my clit and rubbing. He knows it won't be long if he doesn't stop, my body responding to him, needing his touch.

"Max," I call out, my body shuddering as we both begin to move faster. I'm so close, but I want to make this last. "I'm

going to come,” I moan, not able to hold back any longer, I clench around him, his fingers rubbing me until I push his hand away, too sensitive to take anymore.

My body gives way, falling against him as he stills inside me. We aren't done, but I need a few seconds to regroup and let my body come down from this high.

With our breathing heavy, and my mind clear, I look down at Max, his lips parted, his eyes watching me, taking in everything we've just done.

“Don't worry, we're not finished,” I tell him, my lips brushing along his and the groan he lets out, only makes me want this even more. His hands grip my thighs, his fingers pressing hard into my flesh, and I move against him.

“Thank fuck,” he growls, and it makes me laugh, remembering how we once talked about it being okay if only one of us got off. This isn't one of those times. But when I go to stand up, Max's fingers tighten on my hips, holding me to him. “Where are you going?” he questions with this hilarious panic to his tone.

“Right here. Settle down,” I tease as I turn and bend over, waiting to see if he understands what I want. And without missing a beat, he pushes inside me, his hips thrusting against my ass.

“I'm not going to last long, Harper,” Max hisses, as if he's holding back. “I want you to come with me.”

He thrusts into me harder, his hand reaching around to palm my breast, and I know he's close. Sliding my fingers between my legs, I begin to get myself off, the sensation of Max inside me and my own touch has me moaning so loud that there's no way the neighbors can't hear. But I don't give a

fuck. This is what it sounds like when two people are so connected, so in tune with each other.

“Max!” I cry out, my body coming undone under his control. He pushes into me hard, one last long, rough thrust, emptying himself into me.

“Shit, Harper,” Max croons, wrapping his arms around my waist, he presses a kiss to my shoulder. “That was so fucking good.”

“It really was,” I reply, looking back over my shoulder at him, a sated look on his face, his breathing beginning to slow.

“I’m going to go grab a beer and a slice of leftover pizza,” Max now says, pulling himself from me and I flop down on the bench in the hot tub. “You want something?”

“Some water and a slice of pizza,” I tell him, letting my head fall back, enjoying the heat from the hot tub mixed with the cool night air.

“Gonna need to toss some more chlorine in there,” Max jokes, wrapping a towel around his waist as he exits the hot tub. “Maybe the condom would have been a good idea.”

“What, you didn’t like fucking me bare?” I ask him, pretending to be insulted. “We can go back to condoms if you want.”

“No, no,” Max immediately responds, shaking his head, a huge smile on his face. “It was...it was fucking perfect.”

“Good. I hoped it would be.”

Max disappears into the house only to reappear seconds later empty-handed. His eyes are wide, but I can tell he’s holding back a laugh.



“I don’t know if I should laugh or be mortified,” he says, and I sit up a little taller, taking him in and wondering what’s happened. My guess would be that the neighbors complained about all the noise, and rightfully so, it’s late. “I feel like we’re going down as parents of the year now for sure.”

“What’s going on?” I ask, climbing out of the hot tub and wrapping myself in the robe I have hanging on the hook nearby.

“Our daughter is crying,” he says, and I’m totally caught off guard. It’s not Sammie crying that gets me, even though it should. It’s that he called Sammie *our daughter*.

“Our daughter?” I question, feeling my heart race with straight up fucking happiness. This is a huge declaration coming from Max, something he doesn’t have to say, but he still does. He’s taken on being a dad overnight and I wouldn’t want to be on this journey with anyone else.

“Yes, our daughter. She heard you screaming and is worried something is wrong. I tried to calm her down, but she wants to talk to you.” The smile on Max’s face is ridiculous, he’s grinning from ear to ear, his cheeks flushed this adorable shade of pink. Embarrassment and pride look good on him.

“I was screaming, huh?”

“Oh, you definitely were,” he replies, his smile widening even more.

“Don’t look so damn proud of yourself, Max Holden. You made our daughter cry.” I have my hands on my hips as I walk over to him, pushing up on my toes to give him a kiss. “I’ll go check on her. I’m sure she’s fine.”

He slaps my ass as I go by, making me giggle, and hopefully Sammie can hear us laughing and that stops her

from crying. I know she's been through a lot, especially with everything that happened recently with Tyler. I do feel a little guilty that she's upset, but it's also kind of funny too. One day she's going to remember this and be completely mortified that her parents were having sex when she thought something was wrong.

This is going to be a moment that I remember forever too, but for a totally different reason. This is the moment I know Max is the man I'm going to spend the rest of my life with. Hearing him call Sammie our daughter and knowing that he doesn't have to be this good to us, but he is.

I walk into Sammie's room, the only light coming from the snowflakes that are reflected on the ceiling and I can hear her sniffing.

"Mommy," she says, her voice totally pitiful. "Why were you yelling? Are you okay?" Her sweet little voice, filled with concern, breaks my heart. She is honestly the most caring little kid ever.

"Oh, baby, I'm fine. Max and I were just goofing around." I sit down on her bedside, pushing back her hair, I place a kiss on her forehead.

"You were having fun?" she now asks.

"Yes, we were. It was all fun yelling. Nothing bad, I promise."

"You were having fun without me?" she now wails, and I know she's just tired. We woke her up in the middle of the night after she had already been up late, and after having a day filled with lots of fun.

"We were. Sometimes mommies and daddies have fun without their kids," I now say, shrugging, because this is all

really new to her. I never had any fun with her dad, but with Max, it seems like that's all that happens with us.

“And I heard Max say you were going to have some pizza,” she now wails, “without me.” I have to bite down on my cheek to keep from laughing. The last thing I need is my kid to think I'm laughing at her. She's so overtired and crabby right now. She just needs to go back to sleep.

“How about I tell you a story and lay here with you till you fall asleep?” I suggest, and she snuffles first before letting out a hoarse, “yes” in response.

It only takes about two minutes before she's back asleep, her breathing slow and even. I slip myself out of her bed, closing the door behind me as I leave.

I find Max on the couch, munching on a slice of pizza, a beer on the coffee table. He's watching TV, still shirtless, but at least he has underwear on now. His feet are crossed at the ankles, and I can tell by the look on his face that he's still thinking about what just happened.

“Are you okay?” I ask him, letting out a soft laugh. “That was pretty traumatic. You had to field your first sex conversation.”

“Babe, I didn't even mention that we were having sex,” he whisper-shouts, his eyes wide, his words laced with fear. “I hope you didn't. Sammie doesn't need to know that we do that.”

“I didn't tell her. That would really be grounds for parents of the year,” I joke. “I just told her we were having fun and that I was yelling because I was having a good time.”

“She's so tired,” Max says, slipping his hand into mine when I sit down next to him. “And after everything that

happened with..." Max doesn't say Tyler's name, stopping short, and he doesn't have to continue. I know what he means, and it does show that this all does affect Sammie even if she is resilient.

"Yeah, I know. I'm sure she was scared, but it was still kinda funny. I actually thought the neighbors had called the police or something." I start laughing, and Max gives me a gentle shove.

"I'm glad you think this is funny. We scared the shit out of her by having sex," Max groans, covering his hands with his face now. "I scarred her for life."

"What's really going to scar her for life is when she remembers this night and realizes we were having sex," I say, not being able to control the laugh now. "We're safe here, Max. We're happy and we're not going anywhere."

"Good, so that means I've got a while before I have to actually have the sex talk with our daughter," he says, and there it is again.

"Yep, our daughter."

We are back to our normal routine a few days later, both of us a little rushed as we try to manage it all and get out the door and to work. Max is back at the station and he's on shift for the next three days. He took one for the team today and dropped Sammie off at his parents, and I headed into the lodge.

Pam had offered to watch Sammie twice a week instead of having her go to daycare, which is so helpful. Sammie loves going there and spending time with Pam and Jeff, and it keeps Max or me from having to rush to pick her up at the end of the

day. Although Sammie will be starting preschool next year, half days only, and spending the rest of the afternoons with Pam from then on.

I'm sitting at my desk in my little office when a knock comes on the door. "Come in!" I call out, and the door opens. I find one of the desk attendants standing there, a little smile on her face.

"Hey, Harper, there's someone here to see you. Should I send him back?" she asks, and for a split second it feels like ice has been poured into my veins. I freeze, my breath leaving my lungs in a rush as I picture the man being Tyler.

I swallow hard, trying to clear my head to answer her, but my words seem to stay stuck. Most of the people working here know about Tyler and what has been going on since my accident. Zoey even went as far as to post a picture of him behind the front desk of the lodge to help the staff know he isn't supposed to be here.

"It's not your ex," she quickly says, biting her lip in a nervous way. "I should have told you that before. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. No big deal," I tell her, but holy fuck it is a big deal. Everything feels like a big deal when it comes to it possibly being Tyler. "I'll just come out there."

I follow her out of my office and down the hallway that leads to the lobby of the lodge. I can hear the bustling of the guests, the laughing and the sounds of feet running up and down the hard wood floors. It's the sound of people enjoying themselves and it eases some of my fear. Nothing can happen to me while I'm here and I know that. There are too many people around.

“Right there,” the desk attendant says, pointing to a man standing near the unlit fireplace. He doesn’t look at all familiar and I hesitantly make my way over to him.

“Can I help you?” I ask when I’m about a foot away from him. He turns and looks at me, reaching into the breast pocket of his shirt, he takes out an envelope.

“Are you Harper Neely?” he asks, looking me over like he’s seen a picture of me before and is trying to make sure I’m the right person.

“I am,” I reply. “What’s this about?”

“I’m a process server,” he says, holding out the envelope to me. “This is for you.”

He doesn’t wait another second, leaving just as quickly as he came. And when I slide my finger under the seal of the envelope, taking out the papers inside, I’m met with something that makes my blood boil instantly.

Fucking Tyler filed a restraining order against me.

And he listed Max as the other respondent.

## CHAPTER 18

### MAX

It's a quiet day at work, which considering this is my first shift back since Harper's accident, is a good thing. It feels weird being back here and I'm still not sure I should, but I'm going to stick it out for now.

As much as I would love to say fuck it and quit, I also get what Dad said to me. I should not be making those kinds of decisions right now and even though Harper has moved in with me and is slowly getting her memories back, I know it's all baby steps. We still have a long way to go.

The good news is that her asshole ex seems to have disappeared, which is definitely a weight off my shoulders. I do not trust that guy one bit and I don't want him anywhere near my girls.

"Max! Someone to see you," one of the guys yells from the front bay.

Smiling, I stand from the table in the break room, wondering if it's maybe Harper dropping by to say hello. I know she had to work today but given this is the first day we've spent apart since we reconnected, I can't help but wonder if she misses me half as much as I miss her.

I swear, having her living with me now is fucking perfect. I love knowing she's going to be there when I come home.

Love falling asleep beside her and waking up next to her too. And I really love everything that happened in the hot tub after the party.

Her admitting she loves me again. Fucking her bare in the hot tub, even the whole thing with Sammie, which was as hilarious as it was embarrassing. Thank fuck she wanted Harper when she got woken up, because I did not know how I was supposed to explain me fucking her mom in the hot tub to her.

Guess shit like that is something I'm going to have to learn, because I'm sure it's going to come up again. We've been lucky to get away with things already, I'm sure that luck is going to run out soon.

I wander out to the front of the station, hoping to find Harper waiting for me but instead I find a guy I don't recognize.

“Max Holden?” he asks.

“Yep, that's me, can I help you?”

He holds out an envelope, as he says, “You've been served.”

I take the envelope from him and without waiting for a response, he turns and walks out of the station. I have no clue what this is about, but when I tear open the envelope and pull out the documents, I can see it's a restraining order against me, lodged by Tyler LaFrey.

“What in the actual fuck?” I say out loud, immediately pulling my phone from my pocket. I have no idea how the hell this guy thinks he can file a restraining order against me, especially considering it's him who showed up here, harassing Harper, but there's no way I'm going to let this fly.



I open my phone to call Harper, but before I can, my screen lights up with an incoming call, her name filling the screen.

“Hey, babe—” I start, but am cut off immediately.

“Max, I’m so sorry, but Tyler, he’s...he’s...”

“Yeah,” I say, exhaling. “I just got served a restraining order. I was about to call you.”

“Me too,” she says, and I can hear she’s crying. “I’m so sorry, I never thought he’d go this far.”

“Harper,” I say, wishing I could be with her right now. “It’s not your fault. This is all on him, not you. Are you okay?”

“No,” she cries. “I’m embarrassed and angry and so fucking sorry, Max, I know you didn’t sign up for this.”

I glance around, wondering if it’s possible for me to duck out so I can go and see Harper right now. I know it’s my first shift back since everything happened, but right now, I need to be with her because I don’t want her dealing with this on her own.

“Babe, listen to me,” I start, shoving a rough hand through my hair. “This is not your fault, okay? Not at all. And there is nothing for you to apologize for either. This is on him, not you.”

“But you didn’t—”

“Harper,” I say, my voice firm. “Don’t. I love you, which means I love every single part of you. There is nothing that can happen that will scare me away, okay. Nothing.” I hear her sniff through the phone, a slight rustling noise, as though she’s brushing away her tears. “Where are you right now?” I ask.

“At work,” she replies, letting out a hard exhale.

“Why don’t you go see Zoey, ask her if you can go home?”

“No, I can’t do that,” she says, quickly. “I’ve already had so much time off.”

“Zoey will understand,” I say. “I’ll call her.”

“I know,” she says. “But it’s okay. I want to be here right now.”

She doesn’t say it, but the tone in her voice tells me this isn’t just about the restraining order and what’s happened today. “Are you scared he’s still here?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she whispers. “Maybe a little.”

I let out a long breath as I turn and head back to the break room. “Okay, I’ll tell you what I’m gonna do,” I start, even though I have no idea if I’m even going to be able to pull this off. “I’m going to make some calls and then I’m going to head over to Badger Creek to see you. I know you’re scared, and I get that, so stay where you feel safe until I can sort something out.”

I have no fucking clue what that’s going to be considering I’m on shift for the next three nights, but there’s no way I can let her go home to our place this scared. As much as I’m certain Tyler has left, I don’t know for sure and until I’ve spoken to our lawyer and gotten a plan in place, I don’t want Harper or Sammie in any danger.

“Max, you’re on shift, you can’t come over here,” she says, her words quiet.

“I know, babe, but I can still drop by,” I tell her, knowing I’ve done it plenty of times in the past. “And hey, if you want to pull the fire alarm so I have a legit excuse to show up, then I’m all for it,” I tease.

Harper lets out a surprised gasp before she says, “Oh my god, I remember that day.”

“Yeah?” I say, smiling despite the shitty situation.

“Yes, you got a call out to the lodge not long after I started working there. I remember not knowing if you were flirting with me or not.”

I chuckle, loving that yet another memory has come back to her, even if it’s partly because of this latest development. “Oh, I was flirting, babe,” I tease. “Guess it worked too, huh?”

“Yeah,” she whispers, but I can tell she’s smiling a little.

“Okay, give me twenty minutes or so and I’ll swing by.”

“Okay.”

“It’s going to be alright, Harper,” I tell her. “I love you and I won’t let anything happen to you. Or Sammie.”

After we hang up, I immediately call my dad to see if he can tee something up with the family lawyer. “Hey, Max, how’s the first day back going?” he asks.

“Good, up until about five minutes ago,” I respond, before quickly filling him in on everything that’s happened.

“I’ll call Gerry and set up a time with him,” Dad says when I’m done. “We’ll get this sorted out, Max, don’t worry.”

“I know,” I say, exhaling. “And thanks, Dad, I appreciate it.”

“Neither you nor Harper have done anything wrong,” he continues. “This guy sounds like a real piece of work and I’m not sure how he’s even managed to file a restraining order in the first place.” Dad pauses for a moment, before continuing. “He doesn’t know where you live right?”

“No,” I reply. “And Harper and Sammie have moved in with me too, so he doesn’t know where they are either.”

“Good, that’s good,” Dad replies. “Tell Harper if she wants to come and stay here while you’re working, that’s totally fine.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I breathe out. “I really appreciate it.”

“You don’t need to thank me,” he replies. “I know how much they mean to you, Max. And when they’re important to you, they are important to us too.”

I nod, even though he can’t see me, grateful for his support. Not that I would ever have expected anything less, but I also know that this whole situation is unusual, and probably not the relationship they expected me to end up in. I guess neither Zoey nor I have taken the easy route with that, but regardless of what’s happened, Mom and Dad have always been one hundred percent behind us.

“Thanks, Dad,” I say. “I’m gonna head over to see Harper now, so I’ll let her know.”

“I’ll call security and have her listed at the gate and then I’ll call Gerry. I’ll keep you posted on that.”

After Dad and I hang up, I head into the office to let Jim know what’s going on and ask if he’s okay with me heading over to the lodge for a few minutes. We don’t typically go out alone when we are on shift, but Jim immediately says yes. He was there the night of Harper’s accident and saw what happened, so he gets it, and I could not be more grateful for having such an understanding boss.

I text Harper on my way over to let her know I'm on my way, pulling into the front of the lodge when I get there.

Inside, I don't stop, walking through the lobby and back to Harper's office. The door is open and when I look inside, she's sitting at her desk, staring at the computer.

"Hey, baby," I say, walking in and closing the door behind me.

Harper stands, her face awash with worry and fear as she moves from behind her desk. Closing the distance between us, I pull her into my arms, pressing a kiss to her temple.

"You okay?" I ask.

"No," she says, wrapping her arms around my waist as she rests her head on my chest. "I can't believe this is happening. Can't believe I was stupid enough to call him."

I pull back, cupping her face in my hands. "Hey, this isn't your fault," I tell her. "You lost your memory, you didn't know anything else but him," I add, still hating that any of this ever happened in the first place. They still have no idea who even hit Harper that night and I'm guessing at this point, they will never find out who did it.

"But he's here because of me," she says, tears now falling down her cheeks.

I brush them away with my thumbs, before leaning in to kiss her. "But I'm not going to let anything happen to you," I tell her. "My dad is calling our lawyer and we are going to sort all of this out. He's not going to hurt you, baby, I promise."

"Max," she wails, her tears still falling. "I can't ask you to do that."

Smiling, I drop another kiss on her lips. “You aren’t asking me to do anything,” I tell her. “You and Sammie are my everything and I will do anything I can to protect you both. I know you’re scared, but I promise you we will sort this all out, okay?”

Harper stares up at me, her eyes shining with unshed tears as she gives me a tiny nod.

“And if you want to stay at Mom and Dad’s while I’m working, that’s totally fine. They’ve added you to the security list, so just head over there whenever you want.”

She lets out a sob, her forehead falling onto my chest as her arms tighten around my waist. “I honestly have no idea what I did to deserve you,” she whispers, her words muffled.

Gently easing her back, I drop a quick kiss to the end of her nose. “You showed up here with that sassy little girl of ours and let me flirt with you,” I say. “How could I ever resist either of you?”

She smiles now, pressing up on her toes as she brushes her lips against mine. “I never stood a chance with you,” she whispers.

Grinning, I slide a hand down to her ass and squeeze it gently. “You think I stand a chance at a little office action now?” I tease. “We can try and keep things quiet so the whole hotel doesn’t know.”

Harper smirks at me, the memory of the other night and Sammie hearing us still making both of us laugh. “You really think that’s a good idea, what if you get an emergency call?” she asks, tipping her head toward my shoulder where the walkie rests.

I let out a loud laugh, my head falling back. “Baby, there’s only one emergency I’m thinking about right now,” I say, pulling her against me as I squeeze her ass again. “Because I’m not sure I can go three nights without being inside you again. Not after the other night.”

Harper lets out an adorably sexy smile, her hands sliding up my back as she leans in and kisses me. “That was so hot,” she whispers.

## CHAPTER 19

# HARPER

**M**ax is good at distraction and while I love his ability to move the topic away from the stress of what is happening, we can't laugh this one off, we can't have sex in my office like our world isn't about to get a whole lot messier. The worst part is this is a world I just got back, a world that I'm finally starting to remember and now it's being threatened by the person I tried to get away from.

And it's all being caused by me.

Had I never called him.

Had I never left.

Had I just stayed.

None of this would be happening to Max.

But then I would never have met Max in the first place, and that feels like a nightmare in itself.

I look up at Max, my eyes now welling with tears, hating that I brought this on myself, and now I've gotten Max wrapped up in it. It's bad enough that I have to call Tyler Sammie's dad, having a never-ending connection to him, but I swore when I left Florida I would cut him out for good.

Out of my life and Sammie's.



I used to think that it was one thing that pushed me over the edge and made me leave, but I know that's not true.

It was all those comments, the constant feeling of walking on eggshells, not knowing which version of Tyler I was going to get: the one who pretended to love me when I cooked dinner or did the grocery shopping, or the one who screamed at me when Sammie woke in the middle of the night crying.

I still remember going to my first ultrasound when I was pregnant with Sammie, hoping with everything in me that he would be there, but of course, he wasn't. Just as the tech was putting the gel on my stomach, my phone rang, seeing Tyler's name, I picked it up. I remember the way my heart raced, a smile tugging at my lips, thinking that maybe he regretted not being there. Only it wasn't him calling to find out how things were going. It was a butt dial where I was subjected to listening to him talk about the sex he had with some chick he picked up at a bar the night before.

I was told none of this happened, and I still don't know if he was talking about him hooking up with some girl or that he had butt dialed me. Telling me something never happened was his go-to phrase.

My memory floods with the horrible situation I left, making me feel the pull of tears once again, but also the anger simmers beneath the surface, telling me to fight this, to fight him.

He doesn't get to win this time. This is my life now, and he has no control over it. Fuck his restraining order, his over-the-top ploy to make people feel sorry for him. He knows how to play the game and he's in this for the long haul.

But so am I.

I wipe at my eyes, hating that I'm scared, that I'm wasting tears on him, but it's hard not to be an emotional wreck. This isn't even the tip of the iceberg with him, and I let my thoughts wander to all the scenarios that could happen.

He knows Sammie is the most important person to me, and he's going to use her as a pawn in his game, but that's when I'm going to snap. He's wanted nothing to do with her since the day she was born, hell, since I found out I was pregnant, but now it's going to be his catalyst to get back at me. He's going to play the victim and say I kept Sammie from him. That he tried to be a dad, but I wouldn't allow it.

"It's not going to end here, Max," I say, wishing we could go back to the lighthearted conversation from just a few minutes ago.

"I know, babe and I don't care. I've told you over and over that I'm in this forever. I will do whatever it takes to protect you and Sammie from this asshole."

"He didn't leave. He's still here," I reply, my heart clenching in my chest at the idea of Tyler lurking around, waiting for the perfect moment to catch me doing something he can use against me.

"Fuck him," Max spits out, his words said with such conviction that I believe him. "You and Sammie are staying at my parents'. He can't find you there."

I nod, wondering if hiding is the right thing to do. I should face this head on, try to talk him out of all of this, but I know that's never going to work.

My brain is a mess of jumbled thoughts that don't seem to want to come together. Rightfully so, he's fucked with me for so long that being put back in this situation again has me

feeling like I did when I was with him. It's exactly what he wants. He wants me weak and scared.

"I'm going to have my mom pick Sammie up from daycare soon and take her to their house so you can stay at work without worrying about her," Max says, taking charge of the situation. "When you're done with work, I'm going to have Alex bring you to my parents' too."

"Max, I am not putting Alex out. I can get myself over to your parents'," I say, in an attempt to take a small bit of control over the situation.

Max vehemently shakes his head. "I will not leave you unattended. That's what this asshole wants. He's not going to fucking stroll into your office. He's smarter than that. He's waiting for you to be alone."

Max is right. Tyler would never do anything publicly, and as much as I hate to involve anyone else in this mess, I do need Alex to drive me over to Max's parents' house.

"Fine," I concede, knowing there is no point in arguing. We're both stressed and we don't need to put that same pressure on each other.

"I've got to get back to work. Text Alex when you're done and wait in the lobby for him," Max says, and a small smile forms on my lips. It's funny how I left Tyler's controlling ways, but welcome Max's demands. It's different though. Max is protecting me, not trying to control me.

He pulls me into his arms, holding me tightly, he drops a kiss on the top of my head. Just the feeling of his weight has a calming effect on me, and I let out a hard sigh.

"It's going to be okay, babe," Max assures me. Taking a long pause, I can feel his chest rise and fall with each breath

and what he says next is something I know takes a lot for him to say.

“My family has money, Harper, and they will spend every penny necessary to fight this for you.” He pulls me away from him, his gaze fierce, his lips pursed, and I don’t bother to argue. Maybe it’s time that I find someone who puts me first, someone who cares about me and our future together.

The hours pass quickly at work which is a nice distraction from everything. I haven’t been here during the winter season, but these summer tourists keep this place busy too. I’ve spent most of the day running around, taking care of restocking rooms, making schedules and ordering items to update some of the more outdated rooms. It isn’t until my phone chimes out with a message from Alex that I remember this nightmare that I’m living.

I meet him in the lobby, where he waits with a goofy grin on his face. I haven’t spent a ton of time with Alex and have no memory of him from before the accident, but I do know he’s always up for a laugh. Max has described him as always up for a good time, carefree and aloof.

He holds out his arm to me, motioning for me to take it as he says, “Your escort, miss. Although, I don’t put out. I think that would piss off our significant others.”

“Thank you for doing this. I’m really sorry that I’ve had to ask for your help,” I say, and Alex closes his eyes, shaking his head a little.

“Please, Max is my best friend. I’d do anything for him. He’s the reason I have a job here and how I met my girl.

Helping him out is the least I can do. Plus, he's never been into anyone like he is with you, so I think he'd kill me if I said no."

Alex lets out a hardy chuckle as we exit the lodge, heading to where his car is parked. As soon as we leave the building, I'm hit with this overwhelming sense of anxiety. My heart begins to race and I can feel the sweat form on my forehead.

My arm tightens around Alex's and when it does, I feel him look over at me. "You okay?" he asks, genuine concern on his face.

"Yeah, it's just..." I can't find the right words to describe it. If you've never experienced the feeling of being stalked, people would just say you're crazy. I've been called crazy enough in my life that I don't want to hear it again. My thoughts stay hidden, buried deep inside me where only I can hear them.

"You're not crazy, Harper," Alex suddenly says, my once hidden thoughts now out in the open, like he read them straight from my mind. "It's called trauma and holy shit, it fucks up your life."

He stops outside of an SUV that looks similar to Max's, he opens the passenger door for me, and I climb in.

A few seconds later, he's sitting in the driver's seat and starting up the engine. Before backing out of the spot, he looks over at me. "I dealt with it after the avalanche. Fucking nightmares. Waking up thinking Delaney was dead. I started to feel like I was crazy, and I was afraid to tell anyone. I figured they'd all just tell me to get over it or whatever, but they didn't."

I take in what he says, realizing that I'm not the only one who's dealt with some tough things. It is hard to share, and

Alex is right. I'm worried people will think I'm being a complainer, and that I should just get over it.

"I know it's not the same thing because that dude fucked with your head, but I know what it feels like to not have control over your thoughts. It's some scary shit," Alex adds. "I started seeing a therapist and he put me on meds. Made a fucking world of difference. Laney too."

"Thanks," I tell him, taking his advice to heart. He's right, I do need a therapist, and after all this is over, I'm going to need that and a really stiff drink. "I really appreciate your story. It does help. I've been thinking I was crazy for the last six years of my life."

"Trauma will do that to you. If you want, I'm happy to share my therapist's name with you," he adds, and again I find myself nodding.

"Sometimes I blare The Chicks "Gaslighter" album and that helps," I say, trying my hand at a little humor. "But, yes, I think the therapist would be a better idea. I just never had the..." Again, I find myself stopping, worried that I'm over-sharing.

Alex looks over, his brows going up as if he's waiting for me to finish. "You don't have to censor yourself for me. You know who my girlfriend is, right? Laney doesn't stop anything from flying out of her mouth." He chuckles a little, giving a shrug, almost in encouragement.

"I never had the means to get a therapist. No health insurance. No way of getting myself there. I took public transportation to the hospital to have Sammie." I can feel my face heat up, and I need to get over the embarrassment of what my life used to be. I had no control over it. I was a fucking teenager with zero support.

“Now you do,” Alex says with certainty, and he’s right. My job at Badger Creek has afforded me more than I could ever imagine, one of those things being healthcare for Sammie and me.

“I do, and not just from my job, but from everyone I’ve met here. I lost my mom shortly after Sammie was born, not that she would have been any help anyway, but it’s weird to think I had to come across the country to find my family,” I say, feeling oddly comfortable with Alex. He’s so relaxed and easy to talk to. I can see why Delaney and Max were drawn to him.

“Yep, same here. Although, Laney was the one who helped me rebuild my relationship with my dad after the avalanche,” Alex says, and I realize I know very little about him. He might be Max’s best friend, but Max isn’t one to share someone else’s story.

“It sounds like Badger Creek really helped you too,” I tell Alex, recognizing what my life could be like if I continue to stay here.

“It did and we’re all here to help you too, Harper.”

## CHAPTER 20

### MAX

I'm day two into my three day shift back at work and I can't seem to focus. All I can think about is Harper and Sammie and even though they're both staying with my parents while I'm at work, I still can't stop worrying. Still can't stop thinking that I should be with them, not here at work.

After the restraining order thing, Dad organized with the family lawyer to come and meet with me and Harper as soon as I get off work. In the meantime, Harper is continuing to work, although someone is always driving her there and picking her up, while Sammie stays with Mom and Dad. Even though Tyler doesn't have permission to get her from daycare, I prefer that she's with my parents, in the safety of their gated house.

Because I think Harper is right when she says Tyler hasn't left, and while I don't know where he is right now, I'm not taking any chances. I feel better knowing they are safe when I'm not around.

Which once again has me questioning why the fuck I am at work and not with them.

A hand landing on my shoulder surprises me and when I look up, I see Jim standing next to me, a confused expression



on his face.

“Hey,” I say.

“You okay?” he asks.

I shove a hand through my hair, standing as I walk over to the fridge. “Yeah, sure,” I reply. Jim lets out a half laugh and when I turn, I see he’s leaning back against the counter, his arms crossed over his chest as he watches me. “What?”

He raises a brow. “Well, I called your name like two times and you didn’t even hear me and when I put my hand on your shoulder now, you practically jumped out of your seat,” he says. “What’s going on?”

I blow out a breath. “Nothing,” I lie.

He lets out another laugh, shaking his head as he says, “Bullshit, Max, talk to me.”

I lean back against the opposite counter, mirroring his pose as I say, “I’m just worried about Harper.” It’s way more than that, but I don’t like bringing my personal situation to work even if Jim is well aware of what’s been going on these past few weeks.

“Are her memories not coming back?” he asks.

“No, it’s not that,” I reply, shaking my head. “They are, slowly, it’s just...”

“Just what?”

I let out another breath, scrubbing both hands over my face as I try to figure out how to explain what’s going on, or even if I should tell him at all.

“You know, I might be able to help if I knew what was going on,” Jim says, when it’s clear I’m not going to say

anything. “And you know that whatever you tell me, it stays between—”

“I think I need to quit,” I suddenly blurt out.

Jim gives me a shocked look. “What, why?”

“I don’t know, I just...” I start, shaking my head. I have no fucking clue what I should be doing right now. All I know is that I want to be with Harper and Sammie.

“Max, tell me what’s going on.”

I look up at my boss and mentor, the guy who took a chance on me straight out of college, giving me a job I always wanted. And then I just let everything out, telling him about Harper’s ex and him showing up in Badger Creek, about the restraining order and my fear that it’s going to get worse before it gets better.

“Yeah, okay,” Jim says when I finally finish. “I can see why you’re worried. But tell me why this is making you want to quit. I thought you loved this job?”

“I do,” I admit. “But being away for three nights in a row is hard,” I tell him. “They’re all I can think about and I’m worried that I’ll fuck up again like I did the night...”

Jim walks toward me, stopping in front of me as he puts a hand on my shoulder. “I get it,” he says, offering me a sympathetic smile. “I really get it, Max, but I do think maybe you’re making a pretty big decision at a time when you’re probably not in the right frame of mind to be making it.”

“Yeah, I know, but—”

“I tell you what,” Jim says, cutting me off as he gives my shoulder a squeeze. “How about instead of quitting, you take the rest of the summer off. Get this situation sorted out, go

back to your job at Badger Creek in the winter and then next year, you see how you feel. Sound good?"

I blink in surprise, not expecting him to respond like this. "Seriously?" I ask.

Jim laughs, squeezing my shoulder once more before dropping his hand. "Yep, seriously," he confirms. "Oh, and by the way, your break starts now. Go home, Max."

It's late by the time I pull into my parents' place. I swung by my condo after work to change and also grab some stuff for me and the girls. Now that I'm not working for the rest of the summer, we could stay at my place, but considering the time, I figure we can stay with Mom and Dad at least for tonight.

Letting myself in, I hear the sound of the TV coming from the living room. Wandering down, I find Dad sitting in front of the TV with a beer, watching the news.

"Hey, Dad."

"Max," he says, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

Exhaling, I drop onto the couch beside him. "Um, I sorta quit my job," I say. "Well, I'm taking the rest of the summer off anyway," I add, glancing at him. Dad opens his mouth to say something, but I cut him off before he has a chance. "I can't do it, Dad. I can't be away from them while all of this shit is going on. Jim said I could come back next summer, and I just really think this is for the best right now."

Dad just smiles as he says, "I was just going to say that I support you, whatever you think is the right thing to do."

I give him a wry smile. "Is that right?"

Dad laughs, shaking his head at me. “Yeah, Max, it is. I get that you’re worried and want to protect them, so if this is what it takes, then this is what you should do.”

I nudge him with my shoulder. “You know, I’m still up for that job at Holden if you need me.”

He lets out another laugh, clapping a hand on my shoulder. “Yeah, yeah, anyone would think you had some pull at that company, geez.”

Laughing, I ask, “Where is everyone?”

“Bed,” Dad answers. “You wanna grab a beer and hang out?”

“I think I’ll go to bed too,” I reply, laughing when he elbows me in the side and gives me a knowing look. “See you in the morning.”

I wander down to my bedroom, stopping by the spare room first. When I open the door, I expect to find both Harper and Sammie asleep in the bed but am surprised to find only Sammie.

Quietly, I walk into the room, smiling at the *Frozen* lamp that’s now sitting on the nightstand, clearly put there by Mom. In the middle of the large bed lies Sammie, asleep with a teddy bear wrapped in her arms. Unable to resist, I lean down to gently place a kiss to the top of her head.

“Max,” she says sleepily as I pull back.

“Hi, baby girl,” I whisper.

“You’re here,” she says, struggling to blink her eyes open.

“I’m here,” I whisper, giving her another kiss. “Go back to sleep, I’ll be here in the morning, okay?”

“K,” she says, her eyes staying closed now as she drifts back off.

I wait a few moments just to make sure, before quietly leaving the room and heading to mine. When I open the door, Harper is lying on my bed, the lamp on the nightstand on as she scrolls through her phone.

“Max,” she says, clearly surprised. “What are you doing here?”

Smiling, I drop the bag I packed and make my way over to the bed, crawling onto the covers as I lean in and give her a kiss. “Finished work early,” I whisper, kissing her again.

“Early? What do you mean, why?”

“Because Jim said I could,” I whisper, sliding my hand up her side. “He gave me the rest of the summer off.”

Harper puts a hand on my chest, easing me back. “Wait, what? What do you mean he gave you the summer off?”

Letting out a sigh, I flop onto the bed beside her. “I can’t focus while I’m away from you, Harper,” I admit. “It’s affecting my job and when I tried to quit, Jim offered me the summer off instead, so.”

Harper doesn’t say anything and when I glance at her, she’s got a look on her face that’s half worry and half sadness. “This is because of me,” she whispers.

Reaching over, I grab her hips and hoist her over so she’s straddling my lap. “Of course it’s because of you. But not in the way you think,” I whisper. “I love you, Harper and this is exactly what I want.” I slide my hands up the side of her body, bringing her close as I press a kiss to her lips. “Stop thinking this is your fault.”

“But it is,” she murmurs.

Pushing her tank up and over her head, I shake my head. “Nope, not even close.”

“Max,” she groans as I pull down her bra cup, leaning in to suck one of her nipples into my mouth.

Smiling, I gently bite it before undoing the clasp of her bra and pulling it off. “Not. Your. Fault.” I repeat, looking up at her. Harper stares down at me, a worried look on her beautiful face. With a grin, I let go of her and yank off my t-shirt, throwing it onto the floor. “I’m not changing my mind, babe,” I say. “So you can either sit here and pout at me or we can get these clothes off and have some fun.”

She rolls her eyes now, but there’s a smile on her face as her hand drops to the waistband of my jeans, her fingers undoing the button. “Some fun huh? What kind of fun?”

With a grin, I flip her so she’s lying on her back. “The naked kind,” I reply, before I pull down her shorts and panties.

Harper laughs, her hands shoving at my jeans, the two of us struggling with the denim until they are finally off. As soon as we’re both naked, I cover my body with hers, brushing the hair back from her face.

“I love you,” I whisper.

“I love you, too.”

Smiling, I brush my lips over hers. “Never gonna get tired of hearing that,” I murmur, my hand sliding down her body, over her hip and to her knee. Hitching it around my hip, I move, my dick brushing against her. Harper shifts her hips, angling them toward me so I can slide inside her, the two of us groaning at the connection.

“God, you feel so good,” I whisper, slowly pulling out before sinking inside her again.

She smiles against my mouth, her hand wrapping around my neck as she holds me close. “So good,” she says before kissing me, deeper this time, her tongue teasing mine as she pushes her hips up off the bed as though to encourage me.

I follow her lead, thrusting my hips against hers in long slow movements, loving how good she feels beneath me, how good it feels to be inside her. Harper’s hand runs up my back, her nails scoring my skin as she continues to kiss me.

I can feel her heart pounding in her chest, which is pressed against mine, my own heart beating in a matching rhythm as we continue to move together, our bodies so connected it’s impossible to tell where I end and she begins.

Sex has never felt this fucking good before and I know it’s because of everything else between us, the way I feel about her and the way she feels about me. I don’t ever want to lose this. Don’t ever want to lose her.

“Fuck, Harper,” I moan, my thrusts deep.

“Max,” she murmurs, her body arching into mine.

I move a hand between us, my fingers finding her clit as I gently stroke and tease her, knowing it’s not going to take much. “I want to make you come, Harper,” I whisper against her lips.

“Yes,” she moans, her body arching again. “Yes, yes.”

And then I feel her, the way she clenches around me, her nails digging into my back as she comes around my dick. It’s all it takes, as I thrust inside her one last time and come hard, her name falling from my mouth on a low groan.

## CHAPTER 21

# HARPER

I wake early to the sound of giggling, and then Sammie crawling across the bed, climbing on top of Max. I hear him groan out loud, letting out an oomph too as Sammie jabs a bony knee right into his stomach.

With his large, calloused hands, he heaves her off him, holding her in the air like she weighs nothing, dangling above his head. Her giggling is so loud that there's not a chance the whole house isn't awake now, despite the size.

She squirms around, laughing wildly until tears begin to stream down her cheeks. "Max, put me down," she wails, looking like a fish flopping around out of the water.

"Never!" he retorts, his word said with a deep raspy tone that seems to only make her laugh even more. "We need to do something about those knees you use as weapons. I think you punctured my spleen."

"I don't even know what you're talking about!" Sammie squeals as Max gently dumps her in between us on the bed.

She rolls toward me, burying her sweet little face in my neck, her hot tears pressing into my skin reminding me of her happiness. I can't believe there was a time I thought about leaving here and taking her away from everything that has made her life better.



“It smells like pancakes,” Sammie whispers against my skin, her eyelashes fluttering along my neck as she wiggles around.

“I smell like pancakes?” I ask her, not sure where this came from.

“No, Mommy. You smell like a mommy. The air smells like pancakes. Do you think Pam is making pancakes? Can I go check?”

Before I can answer her, she’s scrambling from the bed, those weapon-like knees jab both Max and me numerous times as she tries to untangle herself from the blankets and sheets. Finally getting free, we watch her disappear out the door, not even looking back.

“She’s a force to be reckoned with in the morning. Hopefully my mom is out there making pancakes, or we might want to get up,” Max jokes, but there are times that I still worry he doesn’t know what he’s getting himself into.

He went from being Badger Creek’s most eligible bachelor to being a dad to a kid that isn’t even his. All of this basically happening overnight. He still hasn’t gotten to experience a sick kid or puking at one in the morning, and I wonder if he’s going to rethink this whole thing.

“You sure you’re okay with this?” I ask, waiting for an answer. I’d love to know his honest opinion of the situation. It’s not just me having a kid, it’s the situation with Tyler and all the drama that has followed me since moving here.

“Okay with what? Sammie making pancakes in my parents’ kitchen?” he questions, hitting me with a confused look. “She is only four, so no, I’m not really keen on her using

a gas stove and a hand mixer. Oh, and shit, cracking eggs. It's gonna be a big ass mess."

He tosses back the sheets, about to leave the bed, when I reach over, taking his hand in mine. "I don't mean that. I mean...I don't know. I just mean this whole thing."

"Harper," he says, sitting on the edge of the bed, my hand in his as he looks over at me. His face is serious, his eyes focused on mine, and I take in a deep breath.

"This is a lot, Max. Do you ever think you'll get tired of playing dad to someone else's kid? What's going to happen when she pukes in the middle of the night or when she's a teenager and she's horribly difficult?"

Everything comes out of me in a rush and I'm starting to wonder if it's not Max, but me. Am I trying to push him away, worried that he'll leave so I should do it first? I still feel like this is all a dream. The whole not remembering after my accident, but he did his best to show me that he's in love with me, winning me back.

"I'm not playing dad to someone else's kid, Harper. If you haven't noticed, I pretty much am Sammie's dad. I want to be here to help you with all of it, even the puking and the bitchy, impossible teenager that she'll become. Although, I can't seem to picture that right now," he says, smiling at me. "She's never going to be a bitchy teenager like Zoey was. Sammie's perfect."

I shake my head, letting out a scoff and a laugh combo. He's too funny because we both know Sammie will get there eventually. Clearly neither of us are prepared for it though, so at least we're in it together.

“Do you believe me yet? If not, I’ll tell you every day till the day we die if you want,” Max adds, turning on the bed and moving closer to me. Taking my face in his hands, he kisses me softly, sweetly and with so much promise. “I’m here forever, Harper.”

“And so am I,” I finally say, convincing myself that I need to stop worrying that things will go wrong and start enjoying all the things that have gone right. We might have a battle ahead of us with Tyler, but he will give up eventually. This whole restraining order thing is just his way of trying to make me give in.

“We’re meeting with the lawyer today,” Max now reminds me just as Sammie comes busting into the room.

Her chubby little cheeks are crusted with what I assume is whipped cream and she’s holding a strawberry in her hand. The smile on her face is infectious, none the wiser of the issues that her mother and Max are dealing with. But that’s okay. I want her to be blissfully unaware.

“There’s pancakes!” she shrieks, her brown eyes wide and wild. “Come!” She reaches out, taking Max’s hand in her little sticky mess of a hand, tugging him toward the door.

“Don’t touch anything else!” I call out, worried about the pristine house that Pam keeps and my little sticky monster running around it.

Two hours later, Max and I have cleaned up the kitchen and Sammie is off to the Holden offices with Pam. She offered to take Sammie out of the house so we could meet with the lawyer, and Sammie was more than interested in seeing what a real job looks like. Those were her words, not mine. I guess

she doesn't think working at the Badger Creek Lodge is a real job.

Max's dad is sitting with us at the kitchen table, while my heart is racing, my nerves basically fried from just trying to keep it together. It's hard not to wonder if Max's family thinks I'm crazy or that I'm a liability or god forbid, taking advantage of Max.

"We're all here to help you, Harper," Max's dad suddenly says, and it feels like he can read the expression of anxiety blanketing my face. "This isn't your fault."

I'm about to thank him when the doorbell rings, signaling the arrival of the lawyer, and I never thought there would be a time in my life where I'd be meeting with a lawyer. Living in Florida, I could barely afford to buy groceries, saving every penny I could to leave Tyler. But now I'm sitting in a house that I thought only existed in movies along with a boyfriend that I also thought the same about.

Max's dad returns with an older gentleman who has a thick mustache and is carrying a well-worn leather briefcase. He's wearing a black suit that has obviously been tailored to fit him, and while he looks like he should be bothered by the pettiness of mine and Max's issues, he never gives off that vibe.

"You must be Harper," the man says, extending a hand to me and I stand up to greet him. "I'm Gerry Giancola, the Holden lawyer and while most of my experience is not with domestic relations, I'm happy to help out."

"Thank you, I really appreciate it," I reply, but I fall silent from there. I have no idea where to begin or what I'm supposed to tell him. Luckily Max jumps in and begins to fill Gerry in on what has happened over the past several weeks and also everything that happened when I left Florida.

“Okay, so my recommendation would be to file for an emergency custody hearing,” Gerry says, and I instantly shake my head. Fear washes over me, and all I can picture is this going awry.

What if Tyler gets visitation? What if I’m forced to move back to Florida since I took her from him without permission? I can’t open up that option. Right now he doesn’t want Sammie, but if I put that idea in his head, he’s going to jump at the chance to ruin what I have here.

“I can’t do that,” I blurt out, the tears brimming in my eyes as my thoughts spin wildly out of control in my head.

“Harper,” Max says gently, his hand resting on my thigh. He leans in, pressing a kiss to my temple as he whispers, “It’s okay. He’s here to help.”

I nod weakly, swallowing back the feeling of acid that rises up in my throat. I can’t even imagine Sammie being left alone with Tyler. The idea kills me, and it feels like that’s exactly what is going to happen if I push to say it all out loud.

“We’ll file the emergency order requesting you to be the sole custodial parent,” Gerry goes on to say. “After all the information I have gathered from Max and Pam, I can’t see a judge granting visitation to your ex. We’ll also file to have yours and Sammie’s permanent residence be listed as Lake Tahoe.”

Again I find myself nodding absentmindedly, trying my best to take in everything that the lawyer is saying, but finding a lot of it is going over my head. All I want now is for this to just go away, but I know it’s not that simple.

“Given he has filed a restraining order against you and Max, we will in turn request that the court bar him from

interacting with your daughter. That means he will be unable to pick her up from school or daycare, or anywhere. With you being the sole custodial parent, he will not be able to interact with Sammie based on his restraining order,” Gerry continues, letting out a slight chuckle. “He’s fucked himself.”

Max and Jeff both laugh at the lawyer’s crassness, and while I’d love to laugh too, I can’t find it in me to. It’s just too much.

“He’s not listed as Sammie’s dad on her birth certificate,” I tell him, hoping this will help too. “But I do have a paternity test that says he’s the father.”

“This is good, all really good information,” Gerry replies, taking a few notes on a legal-size yellow notepad. “And you don’t receive child support, correct?”

“No, never.”

“Okay, good, good. And when you lived together, he paid all the bills?” Gerry now asks.

“We lived together on and off. He would kick me out whenever he felt like he needed to remind me that I had nothing,” I admit, hating the way it sounds coming out of my mouth. I would never put up with that shit now.

“Did you contribute to the finances?” he now questions, and I shake my head.

“I never had a job.”

“Perfect. As much as this sounds dire, everything you’re telling me is making the perfect case for you to be granted sole custody. You were the child’s primary caregiver and still are, but now you’ve started providing for her, including carrying the insurance and paying for daycare,” Gerry now adds, almost like he’s clarifying, but also reassuring me in the same breath.

“Sammie and I were never on his insurance when we did live in Florida. He refused, so she was on state-funded medical insurance,” I say, again, feeling like a failure when I think how I could have left, that none of what he was doing was benefiting either Sammie or me.

“Wonderful. We will have the perfect paper trail to show he’s a deadbeat,” Gerry says, and calling Tyler a deadbeat feels like the first thing that makes sense to me.

Gerry finishes up by explaining the process of filing and how family court and custody will go. He then tells me he’ll come by tomorrow with some paperwork for me to sign. Once that is done, it will all be filed and hopefully the court sees that I’ve been taking care of Sammie by myself for the last four years.

It sounds simple, but something tells me it’s not going to be that easy.

## CHAPTER 22

### MAX

**T**he courtroom looks nothing like they do on TV. If anything, it looks like an outdated conference room, with an elevated podium thing at the front where the judge, an old guy, sits his eyes scanning the papers Gerry handed him.

He's been reading them for ages, hours it feels like and the longer he sits there, not responding, the worse I feel. Harper sits beside me, bouncing her knee, her sweaty hand in both of mine as she stares at the judge. Almost like she's willing him to speak, to react, to do anything.

On the other side of her is Gerry, who's making notes on his notepad and looking like he hasn't a care in the world. I guess in a way he doesn't, because he gets paid regardless of today's outcome, but I also know that isn't true. The guy's been our family lawyer for as long as I can remember and I know he's invested in doing everything he can to help us, regardless of whether that's for business or personal reasons.

Behind me, sits my dad, periodically leaning forward to drop a quick reassuring hand on my shoulder. He should be at work, but just like always, he's here, without me even asking him to be, he's here for us.



The judge clears his throat and looks up from the papers. Beside me, Harper jumps, and I squeeze her hand in mine, wishing I could make all of this go away for her. I know she's scared, and I know she feels guilty too, like this is somehow all her fault and I wish I could take all of that away from her as well.

"Ms. Neeley," the judge now says, his gaze turning to Harper.

She jumps to her feet, Gerry and I right behind her. I rest a hand on her lower back, my other one still holding hers. "Yes, Sir," she squeaks out, her voice shaking with nerves.

He glances down at the papers again, his face expressionless. "This is certainly an interesting situation you've found yourself in," he says, when he looks back up.

She swallows hard. "Yes, Sir."

He offers her a small smile before he shuffles his papers. "And you say you've been caring for your daughter..." He pauses for a moment to check his notes, before continuing, "Sammie, for four years now?"

Harper nods, her fingers tightening in mine. "Yes, Sir. Her father was never interested in her, before or after she was born. I...I've been the one taking care of her."

The judge nods at this, giving her another smile. "And doing a fine job of it from what I can see here," he says waving his pen over the papers. "Which is why I am granting your order and awarding you sole custody," he says, continuing. "The father in question clearly hasn't played a role and even now, doesn't seem to be either. I accept there were clearly circumstances that led you to take the child out of the state of Florida and bring her to California. I also note you

have filed to have Lake Tahoe listed as your permanent residency.” He pauses to look down at his notes again and I risk a quick glance at Harper.

She’s standing beside me, her whole body shaking as she stares at the judge, tears streaming down her face. Despite the news he’s delivering, which to me sounds pretty fucking good, she still looks terrified. I can’t help but wonder if she’s hearing any of what he’s saying to her.

“I note the child is settled and attending daycare and that you also have a job with sufficient salary and benefits to support her and so I see no reason why you shouldn’t continue in the role you have been doing since she was born. Ms. Neeley,” he says, dramatically signing his name on the papers. “Sole custody of Sammie Neeley is hereby granted to you.”

Beside me, Harper lets out a long exhale, her body practically collapsing into my arms as I wrap them around her, pulling her close.

“You won, baby,” I whisper, my mouth at her ear. “You won!”

She’s sobbing now, her body still shaking, and I hold her tighter, mouthing a quick thank you to Gerry over her shoulder. He smiles, nodding at both of us before turning back to his notes. When I glance at Dad, he is also smiling as he watches the two of us.

“Thanks, Dad,” I say, my words hoarse.

He shakes his head, stepping around the small barrier and joining us. “Nothing to thank me for, I’m just really glad it’s turned out this way,” he says. “Congratulations, Harper, you deserve this,” he adds, turning to her.

She pulls back slightly, swiping her fingers under her eyes as she brushes away her tears. “Thank you, Jeff. I don’t know how I can ever repay you and Pam for everything you’ve done for me and Sammie, but from the bottom of my heart, thank you.”

Dad squeezes her arm affectionately. “And you also don’t need to thank me, Harper. You’re part of the family, we’re always here if you need us.”

Harper sniffs as she rests her head on my shoulder, still crying, although she’s smiling now as she whispers, “Thank you.”

I squeeze my arm around her waist, just as Gerry steps over and says, “Sorry to interrupt, but we do have some paperwork to sign. Harper, can I borrow you for a second?”

Harper nods and I press a quick kiss to her temple before letting her go. She joins Gerry at the desk as he lays out some papers in front of her before handing her a pen and talking her through it all, showing her where to sign.

“You did a good thing, Max,” Dad says, standing beside me.

“I don’t feel like I did anything,” I say, still watching Harper.

Dad chuckles, throwing an arm around my shoulders. “Yes, you did.” I turn to him, curious. If anything, he and Gerry are the ones who did something, not me. Dad’s smile widens. “You stayed strong, and you held your ground,” he says. “You convinced her that you’re in it for the long haul and that you will look after her and her daughter.”

“I will,” I say, nodding.

He laughs again. “I know, that’s what I’m saying,” he says. “Also, I’m proud of you.”

“For what?” I ask, still confused.

He tugs on me, pulling me into a side hug. “For being such a great guy, you dumbass,” he says with an affectionate laugh.

After all the paperwork has been done and we’ve said our thanks and goodbyes to Gerry and Dad, I pull Harper into my arms.

“I’m proud of you, baby,” I whisper as I brush my lips against hers. “You did it, he can’t ever take Sammie away from you.”

“He isn’t going to like this,” she says, looking up at me.

I smile, brushing the hair back from her face. “He doesn’t have a choice,” I tell her. “And the fucking idiot can’t come anywhere near you or Sammie anyway because he’d be violating his own idiotic restraining order.”

Harper nods. “I know, it’s just...”

“You’re worried this isn’t over?”

“I know it isn’t over,” she says. “Tyler likes control, and this has taken that away from him. He never wanted Sammie, but he liked thinking he could have her whenever he wanted.”

I let out an exhale, cupping her face in my hands. “I know, babe,” I say. “I know this isn’t over and we still have a long battle ahead of us. But I’m in it with you, okay. I’m not going anywhere.”

Harper smiles now, lifting her hand and resting it against my chest. “I know,” she says, pushing up to kiss me. “And I

love you for that.”

“Oh my god, finally she believes me,” I tease, smiling because I’m glad she finally accepts how serious I am about her and Sammie and having them in my life. “And also, I love you too,” I say, kissing her again. “What do you say we swing by Holden and grab Sammie and then go home and celebrate?”

“I think I’d like that.”

“Babe, I’m heading out to grab dinner, you need anything?”

Harper looks up from where she’s helping Sammie with a puzzle. “Nope, I’m good.”

“You sure?” I ask, walking toward them. “There’s nothing else you want?”

She smiles now as she mouths, “You,” at me.

Chuckling, I bend down, whispering, “The second she’s in bed,” before giving her a soft, slow kiss. “Back in a sec, squirt,” I add, dropping a kiss to the top of Sammie’s head.

“I’m not a squirt,” she calls.

Laughing, I ruffle her hair before grabbing my keys and heading out to the car. We’re back in my condo now, so it’s only a short drive into town. I find a parking spot on the main street close by Tony’s place. It was Sammie’s suggestion, her request for queso pretty much a weekly occurrence now.

I’m turning into the alleyway to the restaurant when I suddenly hear my name called. Turning back, I don’t see anyone I know, the streets quiet for a Wednesday night.

Shaking it off, I start walking again, only to hear my name called again.

“Hello?” I call out, immediately feeling like a fucking idiot. This isn’t some crime show or whatever.

I’m about to turn around and head down to the restaurant when someone steps out from the building on the corner. It takes me a second to figure out who it is but as soon as I do, I’m stalking toward him, my blood boiling.

“Careful,” he says with a sneer. “You wouldn’t want to violate that restraining order now, would you.”

I stop, my hands clenching into fists at my side. “Pretty sure you’re the one who approached me, asshole, so if anyone’s violating it...”

Tyler lets out a laugh as he waves a hand about. “And yet there’s no one here who can corroborate that,” he says, a tone in his voice that suggests that’s exactly the way he planned this.

“What the fuck do you want?” I spit out. My heart is pounding in my chest with a combination of fury and fear coursing through my veins. I’m not scared of Tyler, not in the least, but I am scared about what he might do.

Even though Sammie is safe now Harper has sole custody of her, Tyler doesn’t know this. Gerry said we could serve him a notification, but considering his address is in Florida and we had no idea where he was, Harper felt it was pointless. I think she also thought it would only infuriate him even more and with that I had to agree with her.

Tyler takes a step toward me, a menacing smile on his face. The restraining order is for fifty feet and we both know he’s still outside that.

“I want what’s mine,” he says, his words low and ugly.

“A punch in the face then?” I say, my words laced with sarcasm.

“Fuck you,” he spits. “Harper is mine and I want her back.”

I scoff, rolling my eyes. “You never even wanted her in the first place,” I say. “Her or Sammie. You just want to think you can control her, that’s all. Well guess what, dickhead, you don’t, and you never will. Now fuck off and run back to Florida. No one wants you here.”

Tyler laughs, shaking his head at me as he takes another step closer. “You think I’m scared of you, pretty boy. You with all your money and connections. Guess this is just a little white trash vacay for you, isn’t it? Slumming it with—”

“Say one more fucking word and I will end you,” I snap, my fists tightening.

“Careful,” Tyler says, brow raised. “Pretty sure this is less than fifty feet.”

I glance down, not realizing in my fury that I’ve moved closer to him. Sucking in a hard breath, I force myself to step backwards, despite every single cell in my body urging me, screaming at me to move closer to him so I can put my fist in his smug fucking face.

Tyler laughs, crossing his arms across his chest. “Enjoy your ride with my girl because it won’t last much longer. I’ll be seeing you Max, Holden,” he taunts before he turns and walks away.

## CHAPTER 23

# HARPER

I'm in the kitchen cutting up some strawberries and cucumbers for Sammie to eat with dinner, while she hums to herself, coloring the millionth picture of Elsa. I can tell she's hungry, looking up to see what I'm doing, and I hear her little tummy growl. There's been a lot of drama these last few days, and I hate that I've let it get late, making her wait to eat.

Max and I decided not to include her in any conversations about her dad or what happened with the custody hearing. She doesn't need to be involved, being too young to be burdened with the overwhelming idea of adult issues.

I set the rainbow-colored plate of food down in front of her, loading it down with a handful of blueberries and a couple of baby carrots, in hopes of encouraging her to eat more than just her weight in queso. She's generally a great eater, but she's been spending her days with Pam, who I adore and appreciate more than I could ever express, and I'm sure she's been spoiling Sammie with treats.

The noise of the key in the lock causes Sammie and I both to look up, catching Max coming through the door, his arms loaded down with our dinner.

"For the Queso Queen," he announces, smiling as he sets a couple of brown paper bags on the table, each speckled with



grease spots. “And if you do a solid job eating those fruits and veggies your mom so nicely cut up, I have a surprise for you.” He leans down, dropping a kiss to the top of her head, and I swear I catch a flash of anger move through him, but it passes quickly. Something feels off, and I can tell by the way his jaw is tight, the corded muscles of his neck prominent.

But it all passes quickly, almost as though I dreamed it. I watch as Max smiles at Sammie, a wry smile that always makes her giggle.

Pulling from the back pocket of his jeans, Max holds up two bags of M&Ms, making Sammie’s face light up with happiness.

“Can I have the red ones?” she asks, and it’s with that question I find myself overcome with a sense of déjà vu, or better yet, hopefully a real memory.

“Did you bring Sammie a bag of only red M&Ms?” I blurt out, my heart racing at the idea of having something else come back to me. I can picture Max standing in the kitchen of the cozy ski bungalow Sammie and I used to live in, the one Zoey allowed us to stay in when we first moved to Badger Creek.

It’s all so vivid and clear and my heart begins to race, a swirl of nervous, yet excited energy floods my body. This feels like a real memory, something that has come back to me at a time when I truly need it.

“I did,” Max responds instantly, as he and Sammie watch me, seeing if I’ve just triggered a memory. It’s been something they’ve both done since my accident and watching their faces when I do finally remember something gives me this incredible sense of joy.

“Mommy!” Sammie shrieks, jumping up from her chair, she runs to me, throwing her arms around my waist, nearly knocking me over. “You remember!”

“I do!” I shout, as I scoop Sammie up into my arms, holding her closer as Max comes over and puts his arms around both of us.

“It just takes time,” Max says, his lips pressing to my temple, lingering there for a few heartbeats. “It will all come back, but even if it doesn’t, you still have us.”

We spend the rest of the night eating our tacos with Sammie housing queso like usual, but also picking through the plate of fruits and veggies, expertly selecting the ones she wants. Max has taken to calling her Queso Queen Produce Inspector, which just elicits a flood of laughter from her.

When it’s finally time to put Sammie to bed, that anger I thought I saw in Max when he returned from Tony’s has long since faded, not only in my memory but on his face too.

We both kiss Sammie good night, making sure she has her obligatory glass of water beside her bed, sitting on the purple painted nightstand that matches everything else in the room. It was a two-book night and Max read one and I read the other, and now she’s finally drifting off to sleep.

Pulling the door closed behind me as I let out an exaggerated sigh. Today was a good day. It feels right to be back at Max’s house, which is now all of our house, and to have the custody hearing out of the way. Having it all be legal and on file at the daycare is exactly how I wanted this to play out; it’s how it always should have been.

We both collapse on the couch, letting out a collective groan, which makes us both laugh. It's been a long week for both of us.

“There's something I need to tell you,” Max says, hitting me with a pointed stare, and instantly my heart begins to hammer. Nothing good can come from starting a conversation with what he's just said to me.

In the past, before I met Max, something like this would have struck fear in me, and my mind would have begun racing. I would have started panicking, wondering if I was going to have to find a place for Sammie and me to live or that I would have to be able to retrace everywhere I went that day in order to account for all the questions I would have been hit with. But with Max, I know it has nothing to do with our relationship.

“What happened?” I ask him, my mind flashing back to when he walked in the door with our dinner in hand, his face now burned into my memory. Something was wrong, and I should have caught it then rather than make him wait till now to tell me.

“I ran into Tyler when I was picking up dinner,” Max says, not waiting to hit me with the news. “He was...” Max stops short, letting out a hard breath as he runs his hands through his already disheveled dark blonde hair. “He tried to push the restraining order, making it seem like I was the one breaking it.”

“Sounds about right. What did he say?” I can't even imagine how Max kept his composure, already fired up over the restraining order and all the bullshit Tyler has been pulling.

“Just his usual manipulation and shit,” Max replies, trying to make it sound like it wasn't a big deal, but we both know it is.

He hasn't left Tahoe, and soon he's going to find out about the custody hearing, which will probably send him off the deep end. It has nothing to do with Sammie and everything to do with me. He knows that Sammie is a way to fuck up my world, and he's not above using his own daughter in that way.

Not that he ever considered her his flesh and blood, rather just someone who happened to be around and was connected to me. He treated her like an object, an annoying one at that.

"Max, what did he say?" I press, knowing there's more to the story than he's letting on. His eyes bore into mine, and he doesn't need to say anything more.

"He said that you'd be back together with him soon," Max admits, and I wait to see if there is any sign that Max believes this.

"He's full of shit," I spit out, rage burning through me, making my body surge with heat. "I worked way too fucking hard to get Sammie and I away from him. I would never..." I pause, the thought hitting me that Max might be concerned that I would leave him. Despite Max's confident persona, we all have our insecurities and me leaving might be his.

I take his face in my hands, guilt fluttering in my stomach at how he might be feeling. If anything, I always thought he'd be the one to leave me and all my baggage.

"I'm not ever going back to Tyler. He can say it all he wants, but it doesn't make it true," I say, leaning in closer to gently glide my lips over Max's. "We love you way too much to be anywhere but here with you."

"I know," Max says, kissing me back, his hand gripping the back of my neck, pulling me closer to him. "I just worry about how far he's willing to take things."

“I wish I had an answer for you, but I have no idea. It’s why Sammie is staying with your mom while I’m at work. It’s why I don’t leave work alone. It’s why I go to Elissa’s or your parents’ when you’re not here.”

It’s such a horrible feeling knowing Tyler is still here, lurking and waiting for the perfect moment to try to ruin my life. Like he hasn’t ruined the last six years of it already. I have very few regrets in my life, but he is absolutely the one thing I regret the most.

It’s so hard to think that because without him I wouldn’t have Sammie, but he’s also the biggest source of trauma in my life. And he still continues to be. I hope that one day Max and I will look back on this and it will be nothing more than just a blip on the radar.

“I just want him to fuck off back to Florida and find someone else to torment,” Max quips, his teeth clenched, and his hands curled into fists. He’s trying to hold back his anger, but he needs to just let it out. Tyler is enraging and pushing Max to finally snap.

“Do you have any idea where he’s staying?” I ask, wondering if he told Max or if maybe Max followed him after leaving Tony’s. If we know where Tyler’s staying, we can have him served with the custody hearing paperwork, and maybe he’ll realize how serious I am about him just going away.

“Nah, it’s not like we were up for having a chat,” Max says, chuckling a little. “I didn’t invite him to sit down and have a beer and talk custody of his daughter.” Max pauses a second. “But I did want to punch him in his fucking face. Took a lot of internal dialogue to talk myself out of it.”

“I bet it did, but for the record, you are more than welcome to wail all over him if you see him again,” I say, laughing. “That’s just a joke, by the way. We both know nothing good can come of that.”

“You wanna watch a movie and eat the rest of the M&Ms?” Max asks, a stillness falling over the room, both of us trying to move on from him running into Tyler.

“Yeah, but I really only like the red ones and my damn kid ate them all,” I joke, cuddling into Max’s side, his arm instinctively encircling me, as he folds me in closer.

“Our damn kid,” he corrects, looking down at me with a smile on his face. “Don’t worry, I bought another pack just for us.”

“Max Holden, you’re my hero.”

We must have fallen asleep on the couch, our bodies curled around each other, Max’s hand holding onto me tightly when I wake to the sound of fireworks. A long popping sound echoing in the vast quiet of the night, and scrunch my eyes shut, the glow of the TV too bright for the darkness.

I shift away from Max, looking at my watch and seeing the time glow 2:17 am. Who the hell is setting off fireworks at this hour? I groan out loud, worrying about the sound waking Sammie, knowing she’s been a little on edge with everything that is going on even if she is still blissfully unaware of the reality.

“Fucking tourists,” Max mutters, tossing an arm over his eyes. “They’re probably lighting shit off out near the lake.”

I lean over and switch off the TV, a strange feeling of anxiety builds as the room goes fully dark. I can't stop thinking about Max running into Tyler and what's going to happen when Tyler realizes I've taken away his one bargaining chip. It wasn't so much me that took it away, but more the court when they realized that he's had nothing to do with Sammie since the day she was born.

"Come on, babe," I say to Max, pushing his hair back and kissing his forehead. "We should go to bed."

He lets out this cute little grumble, burrowing into the back of the couch as he tries to get comfortable again.

Then it happens again, the rapid-fire popping sound, one after the other, quick and missing the sporadic inconsistency of fireworks.

"You sure that's fireworks?" I ask, walking over to the sliding glass door that overlooks the mountain. We are a short distance from the lake so it's not like I could see it anyway, but I might be able to see the brightly colored flashes fill the sky.

"What else would it be?" Max asks, his voice hoarse, his eyes closed as he meanders blindly toward our bedroom.

"I don't know." My response is soft as my mind is filled with all kinds of scenarios, the strongest being that it's not fireworks. "What if it's a gun?" I now suggest, thinking that Tyler would be just crazy enough.

"A gun, Harper? It's not hunting season, and even if it was, you can't hunt at the basin anyway," Max answers, his response a confident take on my crazy thought. "It's fireworks, babe. Tourists get drunk while boating and light shit off." He rolls his eyes, letting out an exhausted sigh as he climbs into bed. "Come to bed. It's nothing."

“You’re right.”



## CHAPTER 24

### MAX

**T**he alarm wakes us before Sammie does and with a groan, I roll over, pulling Harper into my arms. Not sure I'm ever going to get tired of waking up to her in my bed. It is literally my favorite way to start the day, especially mornings like this when it's quiet and just the two of us.

"Morning, baby," I whisper, nuzzling into her hair. "You sleep okay?"

"Hmmm," she grumbles, silencing the alarm before she rolls over so she's facing me "Yes, you?"

I smile, my eyes still closed as I pull her close and brush my lips against hers. "I always sleep well with you." Harper giggles and I open my eyes. "You laughing at me, miss?" I ask, my hand snaking down to her ass and giving it a hard squeeze.

"Maybe," she teases, leaning in to kiss me again.

"Maybe," I repeat, pulling back a little as I give her ass another squeeze.

Harper giggles again, her hand moving to my chest as she smooths it down my stomach toward the waistband of my boxers, her fingers teasing at the elastic. "What, do you wanna

debate whether I'm teasing you or do you want to make the most of the fact we've woken up before you-know-who and have some fun together. Of the naked variety?"

Now it's me laughing, as I roll her onto her back, my hand already slipping beneath her tank to grab her boob. "Pretty sure you know the answer to that one, babe."

An hour or so later, we're up and me and Sammie are walking Harper to work. Even with the end of summer, it's a beautiful day, Sammie skipping along on the sidewalk in front of us as we head toward the lodge.

"So, what are you going to do today?" Harper asks.

My arm is slung across her shoulders, hers around my waist. "I don't know, I might head into Holden and see if I can help."

"Finally going into the family business, huh?" she teases, elbowing me in the side.

Chuckling, I press a kiss to her temple. "Maybe."

"You sure you want to give up being an EMT?" she asks, a seriousness in her tone now. "I know how much you love that job."

Exhaling, I squeeze her shoulder, pulling her closer. "I do love it," I admit. "But right now, you and Sammie are my priority, and I don't want to be stuck at work if something should happen."

Harper nods in agreement, even though I don't miss the flash of guilt that crosses her face. "I guess you were right about the firecrackers last night."

Smiling, I pull open the door to the lodge, sneaking a quick kiss in as I murmur. “Spend a couple of summers here, babe and you’ll learn all about the dumb shit tourists do.”

“Can’t wait,” she whispers, smiling up at me.

We say our goodbyes, me reminding Harper that I’ll be here when her shift finishes to walk her home. She doesn’t try to talk me out of it and I’m fairly certain the knowledge that Tyler is still in town is enough to convince her that we both still need to be careful.

I’m not sure what that asshole was thinking last night, showing up in town, but it was clear he was trying to provoke me. And as much as I’d have loved to have punched him in the face, there was no way I was giving him the satisfaction of breaking that stupid restraining order.

“Are we going to Pam’s now?” Sammie asks, as I pick her up and put her on my shoulders.

“I don’t know, do you want to go to Pam’s?” I ask, my hands curled around her ankles because I know what’s coming next.

“Yes!” she shouts, kicking her little legs out.

Laughing, I hang onto her legs before she inflicts too much damage. “You don’t want to come to Holden with me?” I ask, knowing it’s pointless because any chance Sammie has to hang out with my mom, she takes it.

I’m pretty sure the feeling is mutual though, Mom fully embracing Sammie like she is legit her granddaughter. I’m really glad too, because that’s exactly how I see Sammie too, as my daughter. That asshole, Tyler might be her biological father, but there’s not a chance in hell he’s anywhere close to being her real dad.

It's obvious he sees Sammie as nothing but a pawn in this whole manipulative game he has going on with Harper, using her daughter, the thing she cares most about, to fuck with her. It fucking kills me that he can do this and even though I know she now has sole custody of Sammie, after last night, I also know things are far from over.

"No, I wanna go to Pam's," Sammie says.

I glance up at her smiling face. "Are you saying you prefer hanging out with Pam over me?" I ask, a mock wounded look on my face.

Sammie grins, a cute giggle falling from her mouth because she knows I'm only teasing her. "No!"

"No?" I ask, reaching up to tickle her sides.

"NO!" she says, laughing, her head falling backward.

Grinning, I flip her over my head and onto the ground now we've reached home again, not minding where she chooses to spend today, as long as she keeps laughing and smiling like this. We've basically kept as much as we can from her when it comes to all the shit that's going on with Tyler. She doesn't need to know what her dad is really like, although I'd put money on her having already worked it for herself. The kid might only be four but she's pretty savvy and has certainly lived more of a life than most four-year-olds have.

"Max, look," Sammie suddenly says, her little arm out in front of her. "Your car."

I turn to look at what she's pointing at and it's then that I notice what's happened to my truck. "What the fuck?" I mutter, forgetting for a second to censor my words.

I walk toward it, Sammie right beside me as I run my hand over the side panel that is now completely destroyed thanks to

some asshole firing what I'm guessing was an air rifle at it. There are tiny dents and holes everywhere, literally covering the entire driver's side and when I glance at the back tire, I can see it's completely flat, like it's been shot at too.

I walk around the car, my eyes taking in the damage across the back and the passenger side, and the dings all over the hood. When I've made a full lap, I stop, one hand in my air, the other on my hip as I take in the damage.

"Max," Sammie whispers.

I glance down to find her looking up at me. "Yeah?" I ask, wondering what she's thinking right now.

Sammie throws both her arms out toward the car as her eyes widen and she whispers, "What the fuck," almost like she isn't sure if she should be saying it.

I laugh despite the situation, reaching down to pick her up as I glance around, like whoever did this is somehow still going to be hanging out on my street, waiting to see my reaction to what they've done. But I know they won't be, because even though the noises Harper and I heard earlier this morning, the ones that woke us up weren't exactly a gun, I now know they weren't fireworks either.

And I'm absolutely fucking positive I know who did this.

"Okay, first up," I say, letting out a breath. "Do not use that word in front of Mommy, okay. Or anyone actually," I say, waiting for Sammie to nod in acknowledgement. "And secondly, I think we will head over to Pam's."

After I change the flat tire, I text my dad before we leave to check that he's still at home before bundling Sammie into the

car. It doesn't take long to get to my parents' place and as soon as we arrive, Sammie is running inside, calling out to my mom.

"Hey, Dad," I say as I follow her into the kitchen. "You got a sec?"

Dad gives me a look, clearly sensing that this is something not to be discussed in front of Sammie as he gets up from the table and follows me back outside to where my car is parked.

"Jesus," he says, when he sees the damage. "When did this happen?"

"Last night," I tell him. "Harper and I were woken early this morning. She thought it was a gun and I convinced her it was just tourists lighting fireworks, but obviously..." I trail off, waving a hand at my car. "Oh, and yeah, I also got a little visit from Tyler yesterday when I was picking up dinner. Just outside the restraining order but he was clearly trying to get me to break it."

"Shit, Max," Dad says, turning to face me. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," I reply, blowing out a breath. "I mean I'm pissed off about my car, but—"

"Cars can be replaced," Dad says, cutting me off.

"I know," I say with a nod. "But you know." This car was a gift from my parents when I first got my license. It's nothing fancy, just a standard SUV, but it is my first car, and it means something to me.

Dad waves a hand as he steps closer, slowly walking around my car to inspect the damage. "Have you called the insurance company?"

“No, I only noticed it just before we came over here,” I tell him. “I walked Harper to work this morning.”

Dad nods, eyes still on my car. “And last night, with Tyler, did you tell the police?”

“I mean technically, he didn’t do anything wrong, right?” I say, shrugging, even though I’d love nothing more than to get that asshole in trouble.

Dad walks over so he’s standing beside me again, the two of us still looking at my car. “Technically, no,” Dad concedes. “But it’s a pattern of behavior and all things considered, I think it’s something the police should know about. This too,” he adds, gesturing to my car.

“I mean we can’t prove it was him,” I say, even though we both know it was. Dad glances sideways at me, a smirk on his face. “What?” I ask.

He raises a brow, that smirk widening as he says. “You park your car in the drive or the garage?” he asks.

“Drive,” I admit, knowing I get lazy with putting it away in the summer.

“And the last time I came over, pretty sure you had that Ring doorbell installed, right?”

“Oh shit!” I say, pulling my phone from my back pocket.

Dad watches over my shoulder as I call up the Ring app, both of us seeing the camera activation that happened at 2:14 am this morning. As I play the video, holding the phone close as both of us stare at the screen, I don’t miss the dark figure that walks up the drive to my truck. Whoever it is, is wearing jeans and a hoodie, their face hidden from the camera, but still clearly a male.

We watch as they line up an air rifle and systematically shoot at my car, slowly walking around it until they have shot up every panel and then some.

“Fuck me,” I mutter, replaying the video as I try desperately to get a glimpse of this asshole’s face.

“Think Harper might be able to tell if it’s Tyler?” Dad asks.

“I think it’s him,” I admit. “He’s the same build and after our run-in yesterday, shit after everything, I wouldn’t put it past him to do something like this.”

“We need to call Gerry and then the police,” Dad says.

“Yeah,” I admit, blowing out a breath. “And here I was thinking today would be my first day at Holden, working for my old man.”

Dad chuckles. “Oh, sorry, did I forget I gave you a job there?”

“Smart ass,” I say, punching him in the arm. “I told you I’d help out when I took a break from my EMT job.”

Dad raises a brow at me. “I thought you took a break so you could spend time with Harper and Sammie?”

“Yeah, and I will,” I tell him. “But I can still work when Harper’s at work, can’t I?”

Dad laughs now, throwing his arm around my shoulder. “Just giving you shit, Max. You know I’d love for you to come work at Holden.”

“Fucking knew it,” I mutter, elbowing him in the side.

“Come on,” he says, turning me back toward the house. “Let’s go inside and make some phone calls, see if we can’t



get this guy arrested or something.”

“God, that would be nice,” I reply as we make our way inside.

Just as we reach the front door though, Dad pauses, turning to look at me. “Max.”

“Yeah?” I ask.

Dad lets out a long slow breath as his gaze meets mine. “You know what this means, don’t you?”

“What?”

“Tyler now knows where you live,” he says.

“Shit.”

## CHAPTER 25

# HARPER

I've only been at work for about twenty minutes when my phone starts ringing. Not that it's unusual here, because it is a work issued phone and most of the housekeeping staff will call me from time-to-time to help them out with something or to show me damage to a room or whatever. But this is different, because it's Max's name lighting up the screen.

"Is Sammie okay?" I ask without even greeting Max when I answer the phone. She's always my first concern, especially with everything that is going on. I can hear my heartbeat pulsing in my ears as I wait for Max to respond.

"She's fine, babe," he responds, not even letting a second pass between us before answering. The sigh of relief that escapes my lungs tells me I was holding my breath. "She's still here at my parents' and playing along the lake. My mom is on the deck watching her."

"Is everything else okay?" I now ask just as Elissa stops in the doorway to my office. I silently flag her in, holding up one finger to tell her I'll be done in a minute.

"Yeah, I mean, kinda," Max says, and my heart drops to my feet. "I know you're at work and everything and I usually

wouldn't bother you, but I don't want you to find out from someone else."

"Max, what's going on?" I can hear the panic in my voice and Elissa's eyes go wide as she sits down in a chair across from my desk.

"After we dropped you off at work, Sammie and I headed back over to the condo," Max starts, taking a deep breath, which only has my mind desperately screaming for him to continue, but the words stay trapped in my throat, scared for what he's about to say. "And my car was all shot up."

"Like with a fucking gun?" I practically shout, and again Elissa stares at me wide-eyed. "I told you it wasn't fireworks, Max. It was him. It was fucking Tyler. Did you call the police?" Everything leaves my mouth without a pause, never letting Max speak, but I'm so damn angry that Tyler is taking things even further.

"No, it was some kind of air rifle or something, but my car is all fucking dented and he flattened one of my tires. Taking it to the shop soon." He sounds relaxed about it all, but I know he's doing that for my benefit, trying to keep me calm.

It's a losing battle though. I'm over all of this, and the more I think about it, the angrier I'm getting. I'm tired of pretending this is all going to go away, but having no idea what I should do.

"The bigger concern is that he knows where we live now, Harper," Max says, and I finally hear the anger laced with fear in his voice. "I want you and Sammie at my parents' house all the time now."

I'm not going to argue with him. Sammie has always felt safe at the Holdens', and I'd be lying if I said it didn't feel like

the safest place I've ever been too. The gated community, the guard, and the gated house too.

"We can do that," I reply, trying to figure out what I need to get from the condo before we can essentially move into Max's parents' house. "Elissa is here with me, should I ask her if she can drop me off at your parents'?"

"I'll pick you up. I'll get a rental while my car is being fixed and my parents are going to let you borrow a car so you can come and go from work," Max says, and I swear these people have got to be sick of dealing with my shit. Borrowing cars, watching my kid, staying at their house, but they've never once made me feel like a burden. If anything, they've made me feel welcome, like family.

"Max, they don't have to do that. I can have Elissa pick me up," I say, and Elissa nods, mouthing the words "of course" as she listens in on the conversation.

"It's not a problem, Harper. You take the car. This way you can come and go as you please," Max tells me. "I'm going to be helping out at Holden, and this will give me peace of mind that you're getting to work safely."

"Fine," I concede, knowing it's not worth arguing with Max. He's too protective for that. "You didn't answer my question, did you call the police?"

"I did and I called Gerry. It's being taken care of. Nothing for you to worry about, and I don't want you at work stressing that this is too much for me. It's not. You know that already."

His words are firm, and a smile tugs at my lips. He knows me so well because this is exactly where my mind went when he told me what the plan was.

“Love you, Max,” I say, swallowing back the constant threat of tears. Without Max I’m not sure where Sammie and I would be. I was lucky to have gotten a job at Badger Creek that came with housing, but meeting Max was fate.

“Love you too. Don’t worry about anything. I’m taking care of it. Sammie is good. She has no idea that this has anything to do with her dad,” Max assures me. “But she is the one who noticed the car.”

I close my eyes, letting out a hard breath, trying to calm myself down, and wondering how I’m going to explain all of this to a naïve little four-year-old. It will come someday, but today is not that day.

“What did she say?” I ask softly, my heart breaking.

“She just pointed out that something had happened to the car,” Max tells me. “She didn’t seem too fazed by it. You know how she is...” Pausing, he then says, “resilient.”

I don’t want her to be resilient. I don’t want her to have to look back on her childhood and talk about how it made her stronger. I want her to have the normalcy I never had, and I left Florida for that reason. Yet, I allowed Tyler back in our lives when I called him.

What if it doesn’t make her stronger. All the fucking adversity I dealt with didn’t make me stronger. If anything, it made me more susceptible to the likes of Tyler. He saw my vulnerability and my need as weakness. I never want that for Sammie.

“I don’t want her to be resilient,” I spit out, not trying to make Max the bad guy for saying it. I know he’s just trying to make me feel better. “I want her to have a normal childhood.”

The line falls silent, but I can hear Max's steady breathing. The tears flood my eyes as Elissa reaches across my desk and rests a comforting hand on my arm.

"I want her life to be uncomplicated and I want her to speak her mind and I want her to be strong but not because of her mother being a fucking shit show." It rushes from my lips, desperate to escape as I worry about her future. Saying it out loud makes it way too real.

"Harper, I will make Sammie's life everything you want it to be and more. We will do it together. I promise you," Max assures, his voice low, his words measured with kindness and sympathy.

All I can do is nod, my emotions taking over, the vulnerability too much.

Elissa squeezes my wrist, her hand still resting there as she gives me a sweet smile filled with comfort and support.

"I've got this," Max now says, cutting through my thoughts and reminding me that I can handle this. I've made it this far and I'm not going to let Tyler take any of my progress away from me.

"Thank you. I'll see you after work," I reply, trying to keep my sour thoughts from invading even more.

We end the call with each of us saying I love you, and there's something so comforting about it. Max means it every time it leaves his mouth, reminding me that I've found my forever with him.

"What's going on?" Elissa immediately asks when I end the call. She rests her elbows on my desk, her gorgeous, rich blue eyes focused on me, intent and wanting to help.

“Just more bullshit with Tyler,” I reply, rolling my eyes, but Elissa isn’t here to listen to the condensed version of things. She’s become my best friend since starting here at Badger Creek, helping me become comfortable and listening to me when I need it, and stuck by me even after my accident.

“I figured that, but you know you can talk to me, Harper. I’m like Max, I’m not going anywhere. You aren’t going to scare me away. Plus, what the hell else do I have going on in my life besides the drama of working here?” she says, a joking quality to her words.

“So last night I heard what Max convinced me were fireworks, but I guess Tyler was out in the parking lot shooting at Max’s car. What a fucking psycho.” I shake my head, trying to imagine what it might be like to be Tyler and why he thinks any of this is normal.

“Like with a real gun?”

“No, it was some air rifle thing, but he flattened one of the tires and put a bunch of dents in the car. It’s all for attention and this bizarre way he thinks he’s going to get his way.”

“What does he want?” Elissa now asks, not understanding what it’s like to be in the type of abusive relationship I was in with Tyler for six years.

“He wants...” I stop, pursing my lips as I try to understand what the hell he even wants. “I don’t fucking know what he wants. He’s sick and can’t handle that I left him.”

“Why did you stay?” Elissa asks, and I’ve been waiting for someone to ask me this question since the day I arrived in Tahoe. I knew it would come up eventually, curiosity gets the better of people in a situation like mine.

I wish I had an answer for this question that wouldn't make me sound weak, but all I have are excuses. And while they are the truth, they sound like bullshit, lines that make people secretly roll their eyes, or gossip to a friend about how they'd leave if they were ever in that situation. It's not as easy as it sounds.

"I don't ask it because I'm judging you," Elissa adds, and I know she'd never judge me. "I want to know. I want to know what it was like for you, so you never repeat the same mistake. Not that I think Max would ever."

"He wouldn't," I assert. Max is so far from being Tyler it's not even funny. It's what has drawn me to him. It's what has made me so comfortable with him so quickly. It's why after my accident, I found my way back to him.

"It might be good for you to talk about it too," Elissa says. "Kinda like therapy, but with your best friend."

I chuckle a little at her comment. I've never talked about it with anyone. When I was sixteen and tried to talk to my mom, trying to see if what was happening was normal, she yelled at me. She told me that my relationship was petty and couldn't possibly have any problems. She didn't care to listen.

"I stayed for so many reasons, and all of them were wrong," I admit.

"They weren't wrong at the time, Harper," Elissa assures, a small smile on her beautiful face.

Nodding, I know what she means. She's right. They felt right at the time, but looking back, I was so messed up, I couldn't possibly understand right and wrong.

"It all happened so slowly, but then so quickly, if that makes any sense. One minute we were kids in high school and



the next I was a mom at eighteen with nowhere to live. He took advantage of that. I wanted to be a family, to have the family I never did growing up. I stayed hoping things would change, but I also had no job, no money, no self-esteem.”

“What makes a person want to fuck up another person’s life the way Tyler did yours?” she asks, and I can hear the genuine curiosity in her tone.

“I wish I knew. The worst part is that I knew it wasn’t right, but it wasn’t physical and that somehow felt less wrong.”

“I get that,” Elissa says. “Like he didn’t hit you so how bad could it be.”

“Exactly. And his father was the same way. Learned behavior making him feel like he was entitled to be in control of everything, including me.” It feels weird to share my thoughts out loud. They’ve lived in my head for so long, just festering and growing, encouraging me to leave, but afraid to share them.

“I’m glad you left,” Elissa tells me, and I smile at her.

“So am I.”

“Sammie is going to be okay,” she now says as if she’s reassuring me back from my conversation with Max. “I’m not a mom, but she’s an amazing kid all because of you.”

“I think you have to say that because you’re my best friend,” I tease, lightening the mood.

“Maybe, but in this case, I mean it,” Elissa replies. “When I tell you you’re a good skier, that’s probably a lie.”

“What if I am a good skier?” I question, both of us laughing now.

“Really? I would guess you might be a decent skier, but not good,” Elissa jokes, narrowing her eyes at me.

“You worried I’m going to give you a run for your money?” I hit back, my head falling back in a fit of laughter.

“I’m worried you’re going to break a limb and we’re going to have to call your hot medic boyfriend to come rescue you.”

“That sounds much more accurate,” I reply, watching Elissa’s eyes crinkle up with laughter. “Thanks for making me laugh,” I say. Now it’s me reaching across the desk to rest a hand on Elissa’s arm. Giving it a little squeeze, I let out a content sigh.

“Of course. I’ll always be here for you, Harper.”

“Back at you.”

## CHAPTER 26

### MAX

“Alright, thanks for that,” I say, blowing out a breath as I pace the kitchen. “And yep, keep me posted, thanks.”

“So, what’s the verdict?” Dad asks as I hang up.

“Pretty much what we expected,” I tell him. “Cops can’t get anything to ID the person from the Ring footage and no one knows where Tyler is, so they can’t pay him a visit to ask what the fuck about him confronting me last night, so yeah...” I shrug, knowing that it was stupid to expect anything different given Tyler has basically vanished and he managed to keep his face covered the whole time he shot up my car.

“Are they trying to look for him?” Dad asks, crossing his arms over his chest as he leans back against the counter.

“Yeah, and they said they’re going to call the cops in Florida too and get them to pay him a visit, even though we all know that’s a waste of time,” I say, blowing out another breath. “I just wish we knew where the hell he was.”

“Gerry’s looking into it,” Dad says.

“Wait, what?”

He smiles at me as he pushes off the counter, walking over to the coffee machine and pouring himself a cup. “He’s

looking into it,” he repeats. “He’s pretty connected here, so you know...”

I narrow my brow, my gaze still on my dad as he casually adds creamer to his coffee and walks over to the breakfast bar and takes a seat as though what he’s just said isn’t that big of a deal, even though that smirk of his is still on his face.

“Is Gerry connected to the mob?” I blurt out. I might have known the family lawyer for years, but up until yesterday I’d never actually had anything to do with him.

Dad bursts out laughing, nearly spitting the sip of coffee he just took all over the place. “Why the hell would you ask that?”

I shrug. “I dunno, he is Italian. And a lawyer. I’ve seen the *Godfather*, I know how this shit works.”

Dad lets out another loud laugh, shaking his head at me. “You think Tyler’s going to wake up with a horse’s head in his bed, huh?”

Now it’s me laughing. “I mean it wouldn’t be such a bad thing now, would it?”

“No, although I’d much rather we just find him, have the cops pay him a visit and then he disappears.”

Smirking, I say, “And by disappear you mean...?”

“Oh man, you have watched way too many movies, Max,” Dad says.

Chuckling, I glance at the time on my phone. “Maybe, in any case, I gotta go pick up my girl. Let me know if Gerry manages to whack him while I’m gone.”

“Stop!” Dad shouts, the sound of his laughter following me as I head out of the kitchen.

I make my way down to Harper's office, walking in to find her standing beside her desk. "Hey, babe," I say, wrapping my arms around her from behind as I nuzzle her neck. "Wanna go for a ride?"

Harper giggles, her hands covering mine as she glances back at me. "A ride huh, you have somewhere in mind?"

I close the distance, pressing a hard kiss to her mouth. "Maybe, yeah," I whisper, spinning her around so she's facing me. "You up for it?"

She smiles, throwing her arms around my neck. "With you, I'm up for anything."

"Oh is that so?" I ask, brow raised in question, as I add in a low murmur, "I'll remember that."

Harper laughs and I swear it's like music to my ears hearing it. I love that despite this shitshow with her ex, we can both still find ways to laugh and enjoy being together again. I know all of her memories still haven't come back, but it feels like every day something new returns. Like every day brings us even closer than the day before, like even if her memories don't all return, it won't matter because we've already fallen in love all over again.

"What's going on in this head of yours?" Harper asks, her hand cupping my cheek.

With a grin, I lean in, brushing my lips against hers. "Oh, just thinking about how much I love you."

She giggles again, her thumb stroking my cheekbone. "Has anyone ever told you how sweet you are?"

I burst out laughing. "Nope, never."

“Well you are and I love it.”

With a grin, I grab her ass, giving it a hard squeeze. “Well, just for record, I can also be naughty, babe, now let’s go.”

We head out to the rental car I have while my car is in the shop. The police have already taken a look at it and my insurance company has reviewed the claim too, which with the video footage I have, is pretty cut and dry. I’m not sure how long it’s going to take to fix it, but at least I still have some wheels.

“So, are you going to tell me where we’re going?” Harper asks, as I back out of the parking lot.

“Nope,” I say, glancing over at her.

She smiles, turning sideways in her seat as she rests her hand against the back of my neck. “It’s a surprise then?”

Chuckling, I reach over and give her thigh a squeeze. “A surprise and us also making the most of having live-in babysitters at the moment.”

“Max!” she says, squeezing my neck. “We can’t take advantage of your parents like that, we should head home.”

“Bullshit,” I scoff. “We can and totally are taking advantage of it.”

“Um, no, not when they’re already doing so much for us.”

“Relax, babe,” I say, reaching for her thigh again. “You know Mom and Dad love hanging out with Sammie. She’s like their first grandkid, so you can bet your ass they’re up for it.” Harper doesn’t say anything and when I glance over at her, I can’t help but laugh at the shocked expression on her face. “What?”

“They think of Sammie as their grandkid?” she asks, her words a low whisper.

I stop at a red light, turning so I’m facing her, I hook my hand around the back of her neck and pull her closer. “They do,” I whisper, brushing my lips against hers. “Just like I think of Sammie as my daughter. Are you okay with that?”

“Okay,” she says with a sob. “Okay? Of course it’s okay, it’s amazing.” There are tears in her eyes now as she smiles back at me. “How the hell did I get so lucky finding you?”

With a grin, I lean in and give her another kiss just as a horn sounds behind me, telling me the light is now green. “I mean, I’m pretty sure I’m the lucky one here, babe,” I say as I indicate to make the turn.

“Uh ah,” she says, shaking her head. “It’s definitely me. Not only did I land Badger Creek’s hottest bachelor, he also fell in love with me and my kid and stuck by me when I lost my memory and my asshole ex showed up. So yeah, I’m absolutely the lucky one here.”

I burst out laughing. “Badger Creek’s hottest bachelor?” I ask.

She smirks. “That’s what you got from that?”

I grin, giving her a wink. “Well, that and all the other stuff, but tell me more about this hottest bachelor thing.”

She laughs, shaking her head a little. “Well, that’s what people say. It’s one of the first things Elissa said to me when you and I first started dating.”

“Okay, holy shit,” I say, grinning. “Can you *please* mention this in front of Zoey? And Alex and basically all of our friends. This is fucking gold.”

Now it's Harper laughing as she leans over to squeeze my thigh. "Well, I don't know, I wouldn't want you to get a big head over it now, would I."

I grab her hand and move it so it's resting over my dick. "I thought you liked it when I got a big head?" I tease.

Harper lets out a sexy laugh, her head falling back as she gives me a gentle squeeze. "Oh, you know I do, Max Holden. But before that happens, you sure you aren't going to tell me where we're going?"

"Nope, it's still a surprise," I say, smiling. "I mean unless you want to reassess mentioning my Badger Creek's hottest bachelor status to our friends, I mean."

Smiling, she leans over to press a kiss to my cheek. "You're impossible," she whispers.

"And you, beautiful, are lucky we are now here," I say, as I pull into a parking spot and switch off the engine.

Harper turns to look out the window, her eyes scanning the picnic area by the lake. It's still light, although the days are shorter now summer is over. "The lake?" she asks, turning back to me.

Laughing, I get out of the car, grabbing the bag from the back seat. "Dinner by the lake," I say, walking around to her door. "Just you and me."

Harper smiles as she gets out of the car, slipping her hand into mine. "So sweet," she teases, elbowing my side.

"No, babe," I say, slinging my arm around her shoulders. "This town's hottest bachelor, remember?"

"Oh god," she says with a groan. "You are never letting this go, are you?"



Chuckling, I press a kiss to her temple as we walk down to one of the picnic tables. “I mean technically it’s old news because I’m not a bachelor anymore, but I think we can comfortably still use Badger Creek’s hottest—”

“Smartass?” Harper suggests.

I reach down to give her ass a smack. “I was gonna say boyfriend actually.”

She smirks, hooking her finger into the neck of my t-shirt as she pulls me closer. “You are definitely that,” she whispers, her lips brushing against mine.

“Hmmm,” I murmur, deepening the kiss. “Right let’s eat so I can take you home and revisit this conversation while we’re naked.”

She laughs, taking a seat at the table. I sit beside her, pulling the food from the bag. “You think it’s safe for us to be out here, like he isn’t...” She trails off, but she doesn’t need to finish her sentence for me to know what she’s thinking.

I reach for her hand, squeezing it gently before I lift it to my lips and press a soft kiss to her palm. “It’s still light out,” I say. “And we aren’t that far from the lodge. We won’t stay long, I just wanted to—”

“Take advantage of our built-in babysitter,” she asks, a teasing smile on her face.

Grinning, I lean in and kiss her. “That yeah, and also see if maybe you remembered this place?” I wave a hand in front of us, watching as Harper turns to take it all in again.

It was lunch when we came here together, so it looks different now, but this is the exact table we sat at when I brought her here. It’s also when I resisted kissing her too,

almost fucking things up by telling her I was gonna wait until she was begging me to kiss her.

Back then, I had no clue about her past or her asshole ex and just how the words would sound. But I'm hoping that's not the part she focuses on if her memory does come back with us being here. She didn't remember it the last time we came here, but maybe this time will be different.

I watch as Harper's gaze moves slowly over the lake and the other picnic tables, the lodge nearby and then the food that I've brought for us. When she's done, a slow smile spreads across her face as she turns back to me.

"I think I do remember," she whispers. "We had lunch here and we almost kissed and..."

"And I said something stupid," I admit, not wanting to hide anything from her.

She shakes her head at me. "No, I mean, it wasn't your fault and you weren't to know."

"I know," I say. "But still, I can see now how what I did say could've been triggering for you."

Harper gives me another smile, her hand moving to cup my cheek again. "You know what else I remember about that day?"

"What?" I ask.

"You coming over to apologize. To apologize for something you didn't even fully understand, even though you were accepting full responsibility for it." She leans in to kiss me. "That, Max Holden, takes a lot of integrity and guts you know."

I smile, our foreheads resting together, her hand still on my cheek. “A lot of hotness too, right?”

Harper lets out a loud laugh, her head falling back as the sound fills the late afternoon. I can’t resist leaning in to kiss her neck, slowly trailing my lips up to her jaw, before pressing a series of soft kisses to her mouth.

“I love you so much, Harper,” I whisper, my lips against hers. “I think I knew it even back then.”

She smiles, her eyes locked with mine. “I think I did too,” she whispers. “I think I’ve always known it, even when I didn’t remember.”

I kiss her again. “Do you still feel like you’ve lost some memories?” I ask, never really knowing if everything has come back to her yet.

Her smile widens as she runs her thumb along my bottom lip. “I don’t think so, maybe only a few,” she adds. “It feels like this, us, has been everything I remembered it to be though, everything I wanted and needed.”

Now it’s me smiling. “And I promise you, Harper, it’s only going to get better too.”

## CHAPTER 27

# HARPER

**W**e're all up and bustling around the kitchen, getting ready for work and making breakfast and having coffee. It's like the family I always wished I had growing up, like the kind you see on TV shows or movies, and Max's family is just that.

Sammie is sitting on a stool at the island, happily eating her pancakes that Pam slathered in syrup while Max and I are drinking our coffee still trying to wake up. This feels like a dream, almost as if everything that is going on around us isn't happening. The Holden house is a bubble of security and happiness, and as much as I want to stay here forever, I know we can't.

"Mommy, what day is it?" Sammie asks, her question coming out absentmindedly. Her little mouth full of pancakes as she asks, looking over at me.

"It's Wednesday, not ballet day," I tell her, thinking I know what she's going to ask. She's always wondering when it's ballet day. It's one of her favorite things and I'm so glad she's been able to continue to go with my work schedule and after the accident.

"It's cheesy rice day," she now wails, and Max looks over at me, eyes wide, brows going up at Sammie's reaction. "I

want to go to daycare today. Please, please, please.” Her begging makes Max laugh, but I can tell by the look on his face that he’ll give her whatever she wants.

“You’re supposed to go to the Holden offices with Pam, baby,” I say, not wanting to tell her the real reason she’s been away from daycare.

“Mommy, I missed cheesy rice last week,” she whines, and Pam comes over and smooths Sammie’s hair down, dropping a kiss to the top of her head.

“I can pick her up after lunch if you want?” Pam offers, and she’s just too kind to Sammie and me, trying to help us through this.

I don’t answer right away, processing the situation and wondering if it’s really all that bad of a thing to let Sammie head back to daycare. She misses her friends and the socialization, not to mention the cheesy rice.

“Please,” she croons, dramatically laying her head down on the counter, covering it with her arms. “Cheesy rice,” she now whispers, letting out a defeated sigh.

“Man, she’s damn good,” Max says, his voice low as he sidles up alongside me. “I mean, it should be okay, right? They have the paperwork on file at the daycare.”

He makes a good point. I can’t keep hiding. It’s doing us no good and it’s no way to live our lives. Sammie loves going to daycare, and I never want it to be something that she associates with all the drama that has followed us from Florida.

I look at Pam for her opinion and really just a mother’s support, something I’ve never had before. She nods slightly at Sammie, giving me a simple smile.

“She’ll be just fine there, Harper,” Pam says, taking my hand in hers and giving it a little squeeze. “She misses being there, and I’m not saying I don’t want her spending the day with me, because you know I do, but she needs all her little friends and cheesy rice.”

We both laugh at her last comment. The damn cheesy rice has always been Sammie’s favorite, and I’m pretty much the worst mother on the planet for keeping her from it.

“I tried to make the cheesy rice last night,” Pam admits, clenching her teeth and wrinkling up her nose. “Not the same. Failure as a grandma.” She shakes her head, pushing out her bottom lip in a pout that has Sammie throwing her arms around Pam.

“Grandma Pam, you can’t make cheesy rice, but you make the best pancakes,” Sammie tells her, and be still my damn heart.

“Grandma Pam,” I mouth to Max, my eyes flooding with tears. I can’t even believe this is my life and how effortlessly Sammie has adapted. It’s all because of how unconditionally Max and his family have accepted us.

“Did you see my mom’s face when Sammie said it?” Max says, his mouth lingering near my ear, and when I look over at Pam, she also has tears in her eyes.

Pam has picked Sammie up off the stool and is holding her in her arms, swinging her around, all the while, telling Sammie she can call her grandma. It’s so cute, and I’m so glad Sammie has the Holden family in her life.

“Okay, fine, daycare it is today,” I say, conceding far more quickly than I would have thought. But this is our home and Sammie is safe at daycare. I have to keep telling myself this,

not to mention all the people we have looking out for us. Nothing is going to happen to us at Badger Creek.

An hour later Sammie and I arrive at the daycare driving a Range Rover and feeling a little self-conscious. First, it's not my car and I'm nervous I'm going to randomly crash this baby that's worth more than I make in a year, and because it feels like everyone is staring at us.

No one is staring. It just feels that way. I'm not used to the luxury that Max's family has afforded us, but I need to learn to deal with it.

Max went off in the rental to help with inventory at some of the Holden retail stores while Pam and Jeff headed into the offices. And here I am back at Badger Creek, dropping Sammie off at daycare. This is our normal and I love it.

"I want to ring the bell," Sammie announces, unbuckling herself from the booster seat and jumping out of the car. She scrambles up to the steps, pushing the little doorbell, she waits for the desk attendant to answer before telling the voice that it's Sammie.

"Sammie? Where have you been?" the woman behind the desk says, smiling brightly. It's the welcome back that both Sammie and I need.

"I was at Grandma Pam's," Sammie tells her. "You know my Grandma Pam. She's the one who picks me up to go to ballet. I got to go to her office and make copies of my hands and eat candy." Sammie slaps a hand over her mouth, giggling wildly. "I wasn't supposed to tell you that."

She wraps her arms around my waist, giving me a hug and I lean down and return it. “You have a good day, baby. I’ll see you later. Love you.”

“Love you, Mommy,” she replies, disappearing into the classroom, and already I can hear her giggling and shrieking with excitement at seeing her friends again.

“So, Grandma Pam,” the desk attendant says, smiling at me now. “You’re one lucky girl and so is Sammie.”

“I know. It feels like a dream,” I admit. “Almost like I’m a damn princess and I’ve met my prince charming.” I sound like Sammie now and all her love of the Disney Princesses, but that’s exactly how it feels.

“I don’t think you’d be the only one to feel that way, landing Max Holden,” she replies. “You and Sammie deserve it. Have a good day, Harper.”

I start to walk out, pausing at the door, I turn around and ask, “You have that court document on file, right?”

“We do, and to reassure you, we take those very seriously. Sammie is safe here with us.”

My day passes quickly, but it’s the kind of day I love. I was busy all day and got to do some interviews for open positions. I also had lunch with Elissa and Zoey, finding a balance between normalcy and feeling safe.

I head over to the daycare to pick Sammie up even though Pam said she’d pick her up after lunch. I texted Pam, saying to leave Sammie there so she could continue hanging out with her friends. As much as Pam loves spending time with Sammie, she still does have a job to do. I would think it would



be a little difficult with a four-year-old in tow, but Pam never lets on that it is.

I stop in the parking lot, pulling out my phone to text Max and let him know that I need to stop by the condo and pick up a few things. We both agreed that while we need to get back to normal, we also need to be cautious. We plan to stay at his parents' house for another week or two, hoping Tyler gets tired of playing his games and goes back to Florida.

*Me: I'm going to swing by the condo and pick up some clothes for Sammie and me. Sammie also wants her Frozen blanket from her bed.*

*Max: Sounds good. Text me when you're on your way. Do you want me to meet you at the condo?*

*Me: Nah. It's all good. I'll be in and out quickly and I have your parents' car so no walking, remember?*

*Max: I remember. See you soon. Love you, babe.*

*Me: Love you.*

Sammie is excited to see me when I come through the door at the daycare. She waves at me through the little window while I collect her backpack and the papers from her mailbox.

"How was your day?" I ask her when she comes running out to greet me. I gather her up in my arms, carrying her out to the car as we tell everyone to have a good night.

"The cheesy rice was so yummy," she squeals, giving the cutest shudder of excitement when she mentions her favorite food.

“Good. I’m glad you loved it. We’re going to go by our house to grab some clothes and you can get your blanket while we’re there, okay?” She nods as I plop her into her booster seat in the back of the car, swinging her legs in as she expertly buckles herself in.

I check the booster before we’re off and heading to the place we hope to call home again soon. I really do love living in Max’s condo with the hot tub and the gorgeous view of the mountains. I can’t wait to see what it all looks like covered in snow as the ski season approaches.

“Okay, grab your blanket and I’ll get our clothes,” I tell Sammie as we unlock the door and head inside. “What do you want for dinner tonight?” I now ask, as she disappears into her room. She doesn’t answer me, but I don’t think anything of it, gathering what I need and putting it into a bag.

“Sammie!” I call, knowing she’s gotten distracted playing with toys in her room. I’m smiling as I walk down the short hallway toward her room, but before I can get there, I catch a glimpse of something out of the corner of my eye in the living area.

“Mommy,” Sammie says, her word ragged and fearful, and my heart stops the second I see him holding her.

“Put her down!” I scream, catching the smarmy smile on his face, making me want to do more than scream. “I’m calling the fucking police! You’re violating the restraining order.” I try to sound confident, but I can hear my words breaking down, my panic taking over, and all I care about is getting Sammie away from him.

I don’t know what to do. My phone and my purse are on the counter right where Tyler is standing holding Sammie.

She begins to squirm in his arms, flailing around, she starts crying, begging him to put her down, but his grip on her only tightens.

“Where’s Max?” Tyler hisses, his question laced with venom. “Not here to save you this time, huh?”

“He’s on his way here. He’ll be here any second,” I lie, trying to keep Tyler here, keep him talking. I have no idea what he’s capable of, but with the way he’s holding Sammie, he has something planned. He planned all of this. He must have been watching us, waiting for us to come back here.

“You’re full of shit, Harper,” Tyler jeers, narrowing his eyes at me. “You fucking left me. I told you if you ever left there would be hell to pay. You brought this on yourself.”

I notice the door to the condo is open, and with it still being summer, I can only hope that people have their windows open, and so I do the only thing I can think of.

I scream.

I scream so loud that I pray everyone in the complex hears me.

“Keep screaming, you bitch!” Tyler yells, and I don’t stop, not wanting to leave Sammie, I stay firmly planted where I am as the two of us face off. “You fucked with my world. Now I’m about to fuck with yours.”

And before I realize what is happening, Tyler is leaving out the door with Sammie in his arms.

## CHAPTER 28

### MAX

“So finally caved and you’re working in the family business, huh?”

I look up from where I’m sitting on the floor in the back stockroom as Marco walks in, a smile on his face as he leans against the door frame, his arms crossed over his chest. I’ve known the guy for years and he’s worked for my parents for probably even longer. Shit, he probably worked here back when my granddad ran the show.

“Well for a bit, yeah,” I say, grinning as I stand up and hold a hand out to him.

It’s late afternoon, but Marco has only just arrived. The store stays open late a couple of nights a week, even in the summer and I’m guessing he’s doing the late shift.

He grins as he takes my hand. He’s about twenty years older than me, but he’s lived and breathed Lake Tahoe and Badger Creek and skiing for as long as I can remember. Not sure if he just loves to ski and sees working here as a good opportunity to do that or if he ever wanted more from all of this, he’s never really said. He just loves doing what he does it seems.

“How’s Harper doing? She good?” he now asks.

It's not like he knows Harper. In fact, I'm not sure he's ever actually met her, but this is a small town and gossip travels fast, especially when it's connected to the Holden name, as much as I hate that.

"Yeah, she is good," I say smiling just as my future brother-in-law appears beside Marco. "Hey, Ethan, what are you doing here?"

Ethan grins as he steps toward me and we do that one handed half shake, half hug thing. "I could ask you the same question," he says.

I roll my eyes, but I'm smiling. "Just helping the olds out for a bit, you know how it is," I say, shrugging.

Ethan chuckles, his hands in his pockets, dressed in one of those designer suits he wears to work every day. He seriously is one really cool guy and even dressed like he should be on Wall Street, he somehow fits in here.

Ironic given he can barely ski. Although I know Zoey is teaching him.

"Yeah, so about that," he starts, a cheeky grin on his face as he rocks on his heels. "Zo says you owe her five hundred bucks."

"Ahhh, fuck me," I say my head falling back with a groan. I'd forgotten about the pact she and I made back when we first worked up the courage to admit to each other that neither of us wanted to work for Holden. "How the hell did she find out so quickly?" Ethan and Marco both grin at me and of course I don't need to ask that question. Small town and all. "So that's why you're here, to collect?"

Ethan laughs, shaking his head. "No, I'm here for work, my gorgeous fiancée just asked that I pass on the message."

“I’m surprised she’s not here in person,” I mutter.

“Oh I had to talk her out of it,” Ethan replies with a chuckle. “So yeah, you’re welcome.”

I roll my eyes at him again as I say, “You need me or Marco?”

“You, if you have time?” he says. “I want to get a head start on some of the sponsorship stuff.”

He waves a folder at me as if to explain. I know it relates to the ski academy he’s opening, the one Alex and Del are also involved in. He’s given Holden first and exclusive rights to any sponsorship opportunities, which is both awesome and yet another example of what a cool guy he is.

“You sure you don’t want to talk to Dad about that?” I ask him, knowing this isn’t retail stuff, this is corporate. And way above my paygrade. I might understand the family business, having grown up surrounded by it, but I’ve never been directly involved. And today is like my first official day and I’m hardly at the executive decision-making level.

“Nope,” Ethan says, shaking his head. “Besides, it was Jeff’s idea that I come and talk to you.”

“Huh,” I say, surprised, but also not surprised.

Ethan and I spend the next thirty or so minutes going over the sponsorship proposal he’s put together. I don’t have a lot of experience with this kind of thing, although I did see the deal my parents offered Nick when he first joined the US team and I also know Ethan is not the kinda guy who’s going to fuck my family over.

I mean shit, he *is* my family, he doesn't need to be married to Zoey for it to be official.

“So, what do you think?” he eventually asks.

I laugh. “I mean yeah, it looks good, as much as I know about this shit,” I say.

“Feel free to take it with you and have a think, chat with whoever you want,” he says. “You know we can change whatever.”

I turn to him. “I know it's all good, Ethan, you're not exactly gonna...”

“Fuck this up?” he offers, chuckling.

Letting out a laugh, I slap his arm. “Exactly, you wanna go grab a beer?”

“Yeah, sounds good,” he says, pulling his phone out. “Let me just call Zo.”

“Ugh, god, so pussy whipped,” I tease even as I pull my own phone out.

Ethan grins, his brows raised as he says, “You better believe it.”

Before he has a chance to call my sister though, my phone is ringing, Harper's name flashing on the screen. Smiling, I answer it, even as I hear Ethan chuckle and mutter something about pot and kettle.

“Hey, babe, you—”

The rest of my words are cut off by Harper's loud scream. “He took her! Oh my god, Max, he took her!”

My spine straightens with a jolt as my heart suddenly starts crashing against my ribs. “What do you mean he took her?” I

ask. “Who?”

“Tyler,” Harper wails. “He took Sammie, he has my daughter!”

“Fuck!” I curse, Ethan’s attention immediately focused on me as he mouths, “What do you need?”

I shake my head as I try to focus on Harper and finding out exactly what happened. “Babe, I need you to tell me what happened, where are you?”

“At home, at your condo,” she sobs. “We came here to get some stuff and he was in the house, waiting.”

“Jesus christ. Have you called the police?”

“No, he just left and I...I...oh my god, Max what are we going to do, he’s going to...” The rest of her words are cut off by her sobs as she breaks down and starts crying, the situation clearly overwhelming. My heart is racing in my chest now, my blood pounding, anger and fear both coursing through my veins.

I turn to Ethan, my phone still pressed to my ear as I say to him, “Harper’s ex has kidnapped Sammie, I need to get over there. Can you call Dad and tell him, he’ll—”

“I’ve got it, Max,” Ethan says, cutting me off, already scrolling through his phone.

I nod, grateful that he is here. “Harper, babe, I’m coming to you, okay. Don’t leave the condo, I’ll be there in a sec. I’m going to call the police on the way, alright?”

She doesn’t answer me, just another sob echoing down the line and breaking my heart.

“Harper,” I repeat, her name firm. “Babe, tell me you heard me, please?” My voice cracks on that last word, the



nerves I'm trying so hard to keep at bay finally leaking through.

I fucking knew this guy was bad news but fuck I don't think I ever could've predicted he'd go this far. He might not know about the custody order, but breaking and entering, kidnapping, fucking hell. The only good thing in all of this is he's now totally fucked in the eyes of the law.

If we find him.

And Sammie.

Jesus, if he hurts her, he won't have to worry about the police because I'll fucking kill him myself.

"Harper," I repeat, gentler this time. "Talk to me, baby. Tell me you heard me."

"Okay," she whispers, still crying.

"Okay," I repeat. "I'm leaving now, I'll see you soon. Love you."

I hang up, turning to Ethan who's already off the phone. "Jeff is calling Gerry and they will meet you at your condo," he says, straight to business. "What else do you need me to do?"

I blow out a breath, shaking my head. "I don't know," I admit. "I'm heading over there now and calling the police," I tell him. "What else should I do?"

I don't even know why I ask this, and it fucking sucks that this is a question that Ethan probably knows all too well how to answer given everything that happened with Zoey.

"Go to Harper," he says, his hand on my shoulder. "I'll let Zo know and if you need anything, *anything* at all, Max, let me know."

“Thank you,” I blurt out as he pulls me into a hard hug.

He nods, slapping my back once before letting me go, his face filled with sorrow.

I run out to my car, the phone already at my ear as I call the police to explain what’s happened. It all falls from my mouth in a rush and several times the person on the other end has to ask me to repeat myself. When I’m done, I hang up, even though she wants me to stay on the line, but I can’t, not when I need to get to Harper.

When I get home, I see the door to my condo is open and Harper is standing in the doorway, sobbing. She looks completely wrecked and I rush from my car and gather her into my arms.

“Baby,” I murmur, pulling her close. “Are you okay? He didn’t hurt you, did he?”

She’s covered her face with her hands, even as she buries it against my neck. “No,” she says, her voice muffled.

I gently ease her back, brushing the hair from her face before swiping my thumbs across her cheeks to brush the tears away. “Did he walk or did he have a car?” I ask, knowing the police asked me the same thing. It was a question I couldn’t answer, and I hated that I didn’t know all the facts, hated that I wasn’t here to stop this, to protect them like I promised I would.

Harper lets out another sob, her body shaking in my arms. “He took your parents’ car. Oh god, Max, what are we going to do?”

“Shhh, babe, it’s okay, it’s going to be okay,” I say, even if I have no fucking clue. I pull her close again, just as two cars pull up outside my condo. The first is my dad’s and second is Gerry’s, the two of them racing up to us.

“Is everyone okay?” Dad immediately asks.

I nod. “Yeah, she’s fine, he didn’t hurt her,” I say.

Dad nods, just as a third car pulls up, the door opening to reveal the same detective that worked Zoey’s case. The four of us watch as he walks toward us, a solemn look on his face, two police officers behind him.

“I’d like to say it’s nice to see you all again, but unfortunately in my line of work that would be a lie,” Detective Simmons says, shaking hands with first my dad and then Gerry. Turning to me and Harper, he offers his hand to me before introducing himself to Harper. “Ms. Neeley, I’m here to help, it’s my job to find Sammie and I promise I will do everything I can to bring her back.”

“Please find her,” Harper pleads, the tears still streaming down her face.

“We’re going to do everything we can,” he says again, never confirming that he will actually find her. “Can we go inside and talk, I’d like you to take me through everything that happened.”

Harper nods and the five of us go inside my condo, while the police officers stay outside. It looks exactly as it always has inside, the fucker thankfully not doing anything shit, like tearing the place up. Beside the couch sits a bag that Harper obviously packed and, on the counter, sits her phone.

“So can you take me through everything that happened from the moment you came home,” the detective asks.

“Yes,” Harper replies, the word barely audible as she starts to describe how she and Sammie came here after work to grab some things to take to Mom and Dad’s place. Her voice is a low monotone as she describes it all, only stopping when the detective interrupts to ask her a question about something she’s said.

When she’s done, her tears have stopped, although her cheeks are still wet with them. Pulling her close, I brush a kiss to her temple as I whisper, “You did good, babe.”

Harper sniffs as she turns to my dad. “Jeff, I’m so sorry,” she says. “He took your car, he...”

“Harper, sweetie,” Dad says, stepping close as he puts a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Please don’t worry about that. Cars can be replaced, the only thing I care about is Sammie and getting her back.”

Harper nods as she starts crying again. I pull her into my arms once more, giving Dad a grateful nod over the top of her head.

“So now what?” I ask the detective.

He offers me a small smile as he turns to my dad. “So, first things first, I’m going to guess your car is connected to the Range Rover network?”

Dad’s eyes immediately widen as he pulls his phone from his pocket. “Shit, yes. God, why didn’t I think of this?”

Detective Simmons smiles as he says, “You mind putting it on speaker while we call them.” He gestures to Dad’s phone. “This might be a good lead on where they’re going.”

## CHAPTER 29

# HARPER

I'm numb. I can hear people moving around me, but everything feels slow and dull and muffled, like I'm under water. My eyes close, and my head spins, growing dizzy, I feel like I might pass out, so I lay down. My head hits the pillow on the couch and my brain begins to replay everything that happened just minutes ago. I can't focus and when I open my eyes, I'm just staring into a blurry background.

I watched Tyler walk out of the house that Sammie and I share with Max, a place that was supposed to be our home, our safety and our return to normalcy. He had Sammie in his arms, holding her tightly as she struggled to break free, the keys to Max's parents' car in his hand.

He left with her, and I was too scared to stop him, fearing the worst and having no idea what he would do to her. But as it repeats in my head, I beg to do things differently.

Max bends down in front of me, pushing back my hair, he lays a soft kiss on my forehead, and I close my eyes again. Taking in a slow breath, I feel like I need to tell myself to breathe, that my body is so lost without Sammie that it can't function.

“We have the tracking on the car,” I hear a voice say and I instantly sit up. “I’ll call it in and get some squad cars on it. The Amber Alert has been sent.”

“Max, get your keys,” I shout, jumping up from the couch, I grab his arm, dragging him toward where I see them sitting on the counter. “I have to get to her.” The tears are spilling down my cheeks, the desperation eating at me. Waiting on the police feels pointless and useless, I need to be a part of this.

“Harper,” Max tries and I’m certain the look I hit him with has him rethinking the way he’s just said my name. “I’ll get the keys.”

“Give us the location,” I literally demand of the detective, my voice not sounding like my own. This is what it feels like when you lose a piece of yourself. I feel like my heart has been ripped from my chest, my eyes flooding with tears every time I picture Sammie’s face.

She has to be terrified, and I can’t stop thinking the worst. What if he kills her? I will never recover from something like that. Losing her would be my end. She’s been the reason I’ve continued pushing forward, wanting to make her life better and look where it has gotten us.

“Ms. Neely, I understand that you want to find your daughter, but we are asking that you stay here at the house while we do our job,” the detective says, and again, my face gives away exactly how I’m feeling. This man is looking to get punched in the throat if he thinks I’m going to sit here and wait.

I already stood by and let Tyler take her, I will not allow Sammie to go through this alone. She needs to know that I’m looking for her, that I will find her.

“I’m going to take her for a walk,” Max tells the detective, lacing his fingers with mine, he tugs me toward the door. “Please understand that she’s struggling here.”

I hate that he’s trying to defend me or make excuses for why I’m behaving the way I am. The rage builds inside me, wanting to scream out loud. No one in this room understands what I’m going through. Their daughter is not missing, and then I see Pam across the room, not realizing she must have come in with Max’s dad. She’s watching me, her eyes filled with tears, and I remember Max mentioning that Zoey was abducted once too.

I walk over to her, letting her take me in her arms, the two of us cry together. She does understand, she knows what I’m going through and she’s the only one I want to be with besides Sammie. I need a moment with her to help me get through this.

“They’re going to find her, sweetie,” Pam whispers in my ear. My head is resting on her shoulder as a sob escapes my lips. My body shudders in her arms, Pam’s hand rubbing circles on my back, trying to soothe me.

I feel Pam slide something into the back pocket of my jeans. It’s discreet and I’m sure no one noticed, then she whispers, “Max knows the code to my phone. Take it and find her. You can track the car.”

She steps back, her hands resting on my arms, she smiles, but it’s weak. She’s equally as broken as I am, and for the first time in my life, I know what it feels like to have a mother.

“Go for a walk with Max,” Pam prompts, running her hands down my arms. “The fresh air will help.” Taking my face in her hands, she kisses my forehead. “I love you as if you were my own daughter. And Sammie too.”

“Thank you,” I murmur, my words filled with a soft gratefulness that I’ll never be able to express. This family has done so much for Sammie and me, and I can’t imagine my life without them now.

I run my hands under my eyes and down my cheeks, wiping away the newly shed tears. Pam has given me hope that I can find Sammie before the police do. I know what Tyler is like and even if the police do find him first, he isn’t going to give up easily. Sammie needs me there.

I want to tell Pam thank you, but I stay quiet, not wanting to give away that I’m going to leave and track the car. The detective won’t like it, but it’s not his daughter in that car.

“You ready?” I ask Max as I make my way toward the door. “Your mom is right, fresh air might help.” The lies fall from my lips so naturally, and I have a small bit of guilt, but when I look over my shoulder, I see Pam watching me. A simple, knowing smile crosses her mouth.

Without words, she tells me she would do the same thing. If she had this option when Zoey was missing, she would have taken it without hesitation.

As soon as Max and I are outside, I race to the rental car, looking back to make sure he’s following me. It takes him a few seconds to understand what is happening and I swear if he tells me this is a bad idea, I’m going to lose it.

“Harper,” he starts, the keys in his hand as I pull his mom’s phone from my back pocket, “are you—”

“Don’t you dare ask me if I’m sure,” I bark, cutting him off. “I have never been more certain about anything in my life.” I let out a hard breath.



“I was just going to ask if you’re driving,” Max replies, winking at me. “Let’s go find our daughter.”

I need to be there when Sammie is found, but beyond that, I might be the only one who can talk some sense into Tyler. It’s me he wants, not Sammie or Max or anyone else, just me.

This has always been about me, and I should have known better than to push him but thinking that feels wrong. He can’t keep treating people like this and acting like I’m the one to blame. Max needs to be ready because if anything happens to Sammie, I’m going to kill Tyler.

I climb into the driver’s seat and Max in the passenger seat, his mom’s phone in his hand as he pulls up the app for the car.

“Just tell me where to go,” I announce, starting the car, and not giving it a second thought as I back out of the parking spot.

It’s probably not the best idea that I’m out here driving around with my head all fucked up, but I don’t want anyone else in charge of finding my kid. The police have the location and are on their way there, but what they’re going to come across when Tyler sees them isn’t going to be good.

“Turn left at the light,” Max tells me, and I take the turn faster than I should, but I don’t care. “Babe, we want to make it there. Slow down just a little,” he now says, and my eyes fill with tears once again, clouding my view.

“Max, I can’t slow down. I need to get to her,” I sob, trying to keep my focus, but failing. I pull over to the side of the road, the tears falling hard and fast. “I need you to drive.”

Without saying anything more, Max switches seats with me, stopping behind the car to pull me into his arms.

We stand together for a few seconds, the cars speeding past us, my heart slamming wildly out of control in my chest, and I can feel Max's doing the same.

"I want to kill him, Harper," Max whispers, his words controlled but the anger nearly palpable. "I hate that I want to. I hate this feeling."

"I want to kill him too. I can't believe he's done this. It's far worse than I ever would have thought," I cry, trying to get myself under control, but every time I think of Sammie with him, scared and possibly hurt, I can't control anything.

I press my cheek against Max's chest, taking a deep breath and finding comfort in being close to him. I need this to all be over. I need Max, Sammie and me to be back at home together, curled up on the couch watching *Frozen* and eating M&Ms. We had the perfect life before I brought Tyler back into it.

"Max, I feel so guilty," I say through a strangled sob. "If I had never called him. If I had just waited. None of—"

Now it's Max cutting me off. "No, Harper, we aren't doing that. None of this is your fault. This is not something normal people do. They don't kidnap their kid to get back at their ex for breaking up with them. It's not fucking normal."

"I know," I cry, my fingers tightening on the hem of Max's shirt. "We need to find her."

It takes us about an hour before we come across where the car seems to have stopped according to the app. It's in the middle of nowhere, the mountains on one side and the forest on the other. The only way we know we're in the right spot is the

hoard of police cars surrounding a small gas station. I can see Max's mom's SUV. It's running in the parking lot, and while I can't see Sammie in the backseat due to the tinted windows, I can see Tyler in the driver's seat.

I jump from the car, running toward the building, but as soon as I get close enough, I'm caught by the arm of a large police officer dressed in SWAT gear.

"No!" I scream. "That's my daughter in there. Please, I can help." I'm shoving the man away, but it does nothing to move his oversized frame.

"We can't let you go in there. It's a hostage situation and we have to assume the driver of the vehicle is armed," the officer says, but it goes in one ear and out the other, only caring about if Sammie is in the car or not.

"Is my daughter in the car?" I ask, begging with desperation. "Please let me go over there. I might be able to talk to the driver. He's my ex and the father of my daughter."

"We can't let that happen," the officer says, his words firm, and again he reaches out to stop me when I try to move closer.

"Sammie!" I scream, a gut-wrenching strangled sob leaving my mouth as I call her name over and over. Falling to my knees, Max comes up behind me, wrapping his arms around me. I'm failing her. I've failed.

And just when I'm about to tell the police to do more than just stand there, the SUV suddenly takes off, peeling out of the parking lot. The wheels screech, startling me, and I'm on my feet chasing the car with Max trailing closely behind.

The police scramble to their cars, which leave the parking lot just as quickly as Tyler has, following behind and again I

find myself falling to my knees as I watch the car carrying my daughter disappear down the road.

I'm sobbing so hard I can't even see my hand in front of me. He's fucking with me by letting me get this close only to run off with her again. There's no doubt that he saw me, waiting for the moment when I thought it might be over.

Seconds later I hear it, the sound of metal scraping, and then there's a loud boom. I turn back looking at Max, knowing what that sound was.

"Max!" I scream, my head in my hands, my mind picturing the scene, terrified as to what has happened. I can't control the tears, sobbing so hard I can't catch my breath, and there's no way I can pull myself up off the ground.

And when I finally look up, that's when I see Max running toward where the noise is coming from.

## CHAPTER 30

### MAX

**M**y legs are burning, my whole body shaking as I run toward the noise, that loud boom that's now only drowned out by the pounding in my ears. Terror courses through me, my hands shaking, even as I clench them into fists and push harder.

The road is hard beneath me, every step I take sending a hard jolt up my legs and into my chest. But then the smell of burning rubber hits me, the stench overwhelming and almost enough to bring me to my knees.

I can see the car. What's left of it anyway, the gray Range Rover practically impaled by a tree that's all but cut the hood in half.

"Fuck," I scream, bile rising up in my throat as I take in the smoke and the weird sounds that are coming from the car.

Behind me I hear tires screeching, see the flash of red and blue in my periphery as a roar of voices all talking at once drowns out the sounds of the Range Rover's fucked up engine. It's getting dark, a chill now filling the air, but I don't stop running toward the car.

I need to get to her, need to know she's safe. She has to be safe. She *has* to be.

As I come to a stop by the passenger side of the car, I can see the front windshield has completely shattered. Both of the airbags have blown too, and Tyler's body is halfway out of the car, his face bloodied and cut to shit as it lies against what's left of the hood.

Not wasting any more fucks about Tyler, I lean in and hit the unlock button before moving to the back door and yanking it open to find Sammie, strapped in her booster seat, tears streaming down her face as a long wail falls from her mouth.

"Oh fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck," I mutter as I undo her seatbelt. "I've got you, baby girl, I've fucking got you," I say, pulling her from the seat and into my arms.

Sammie wraps her arms around my neck as I hold her close, one hand cupping the back of her head, the other wrapped tightly around her trembling body. My heart is pounding in my chest, my own body still shaking as I try to comfort her.

"I've got you," I whisper, kissing the side of her head. "I've got you."

"Max," she cries, her voice muffled against my neck.

"Are you hurt?" I ask as the police move toward us, one stopping at my side as the rest go to check on Tyler. "Sammie, did he hurt you?" I ask again, gently easing her back as my gaze moves quickly over her, looking for any sign of injury.

"Sir, we need to get her—"

"I'm a medic," I snap, not taking my eyes off Sammie. "I've got this." The police officer clears his throat but doesn't say anymore as he takes a step back. "Talk to me, baby girl, I need to know if you're hurt," I say, gently brushing her tears away.

“No,” she says, sniffing. “I buckled myself in like you taught me.”

I smile at this, my smile turning to laughter as Sammie now reaches out and brushes her tiny hand across my cheeks, which I realize are also wet with tears. “Good girl,” I whisper, pulling her close again. “I’m so fucking proud of you.”

“Sammie!” I look up to see Harper pushing her way through to us, tears streaming down her cheeks as she all but manhandles the police officer standing next to me out of the way. “Oh my god, Sammie, baby, are you okay?” she asks as she pulls her daughter from my arms and into her own.

“Mommy,” Sammie cries, her tears back.

I step close, wrapping the two of them in my arms. “She’s okay, Harper, she’s okay.”

“I put my seatbelt on,” Sammie says, offering Harper a teary smile. “And Max said the word fuck a lot.”

This finally elicits a laugh from both Harper and me as I hold them both tighter and say, “Yes, but you don’t say that word, do you, baby girl?”

Sammie grins at me, her eyes sparkling as she shakes her head and I get the distinct impression this won’t be the last time I hear this word come from her lips. Or the last time I tell her not to use it. Somehow though, I think I’m okay with that.

“We really should get her checked over at the hospital,” the police officer now says, finally interrupting us. “Just to be sure.”

I pull back a little, still keeping them close. “Yes, I know,” I say, giving him a nod, knowing that injuries like whiplash don’t always make themselves known immediately. If I have

my way, Sammie will be getting a full check over, CT scans, MRIs, everything to rule out any possible injuries.

He gives me a quick nod, finally offering us all a smile as he turns his attention to Sammie now. “You’re a very brave little girl, Sammie,” he says. “You did a good job putting your seatbelt on,” he adds, clearly having overheard our conversation.

Sammie gives him a big smile as she says, “I know, Max taught me.”

The police officer laughs now, giving Sammie a wink before he turns back to us. “An ambulance is on its way,” he says just as the sound of sirens fills the night.

“We can take her to the hospital,” I say, knowing there’s not a chance in hell I want to leave her right now.

The police officer offers me a smile that I’m sure is designed to take the sting out of what’s about to say next. “I know you’re a medic, but—”

“He’s an EMT,” Harper chimes in and I smile, squeezing her hand.

“An EMT,” he repeats. “But if you could just let the paramedics check her out first, then you can go with her to the hospital. Sound good?”

“Yeah,” I reply with a nod, knowing that I fucked up once when things were too personal for me, I don’t want to do it again.

There are two ambulances and they both pull to a stop, the sirens switching off, even as the lights keep flashing. “Max, look!” Sammie says, pointing up at them as we make our way over.



“I see them, baby girl,” I reply as the doors to one open and Jim climbs out. I’m immediately relieved, really fucking glad that someone as senior and competent as Jim is here. It’s not that I don’t trust the other EMTs I work with, but Jim is above and beyond, and I know that he’s the perfect person to check Sammie over.

“Hello,” Jim says, smiling at Sammie as he holds out a hand to her. “My name is Jim, is it okay if we check you over, make sure you aren’t hurt?”

Sammie glances at me and I give her a small nod and a smile of encouragement before she turns back to Jim. “Okay, but I’m not. Max already checked.”

Jim laughs at this, giving me a quick pat on the shoulder before he opens the back doors of the ambulance and asks Harper to hop in with Sammie. I wait outside, knowing that he doesn’t need me in there getting in the way.

While he asks Sammie a bunch of questions and checks her over, distracting her with his pen light, I turn back to the wreckage of my mom’s car and the police surrounding it and it’s then that I notice someone has draped something over Tyler’s body.

And that none of the paramedics from the other ambulance are bothering to check him out.

Which can only mean one thing.

I glance back in the ambulance and see Harper and Sammie are both distracted by Jim, before turning back and making my way toward the car. The officer who stood by as I pulled Sammie from the car and checked her over, sees me coming and steps in front of me.

“Please, Sir, I need you to stay back.”

“I know, I...” I glance over his shoulder at the car again. “It’s my mom’s car he stole and I...” I trail off, staring at the wreckage, amazed that Sammie has somehow managed to come out of it apparently unscathed. Fuck getting my car back, I’m trading it in for a Range Rover.

“He um...” I start, my eyes still on the car. “He wasn’t wearing a seatbelt?”

The cop glances back over his shoulder at the car. “It would appear that way, yes.”

“And he’s... Is he...?”

The cop turns back to me, swallowing hard as he debates answering my question. He’s probably not supposed to tell me, but I can tell from the look on his face that he knows I already know the answer to my own question anyway. He knows I’m an EMT, that I’ve probably come to the scenes of accidents like this. That I understand what it means when you cover a body.

“He is,” the officer says.

“Dead,” I say, needing to know for certain.

“Dead,” he confirms.

I let out a hard exhale, the relief that floods through me practically overwhelming. It’s not like I’m glad someone is actually dead, but fuck, after everything this guy has done to Harper and Sammie, I am fucking glad he is out of their lives.

Permanently.

Even if I don’t want to think about what it means that I think that.

“So, what happens now?” I ask as we both watch the team of police scour the car. Someone has put some floodlights up

and I notice now, for the first time, the tire marks on the road. Fuck, how fast was this guy going? With his own daughter in the car too. His daughter who buckled herself in because apparently, he didn't give enough of a shit to do it for her.

Never have I been more grateful for teaching Sammie how to do it.

"We'll investigate the accident," the officer says, waving a hand at the car. "But all things considered, it's pretty much a closed investigation. The main thing is making sure she's okay," he adds, glancing back over at the ambulance.

"Yeah, we'll make sure that happens," I say, just as my phone starts to ring.

Pulling it from my pocket, I see my dad's name flashing on the screen. I answer, lifting the phone to my ear with a "Hey, Dad."

"Where are you? Have you got her? Is Sammie okay?"

I smile, knowing that I'm not the only one in my family who's bonded with this sassy little four-year-old and her mom. "Yeah, she's okay," I tell him. "Jim's checking her out now and we'll take her to the hospital to be sure, but she's good. She knew to put her seatbelt on."

Dad exhales with a chuckle. "Of course she did. She's always telling us how you taught her that."

"Yeah," I say, the word catching in my throat as a wave of emotions suddenly hits me. I could have lost her today. I could've lost Harper a couple of months ago. The two most important people in my life and I could have lost both of them.

"Max, are you there, are you okay?"

I clear my throat, swallowing hard as I say, “Yeah, I’m here.”

“But are you okay?”

I shove a hand through my hair, turning as I head back to the ambulance, smiling as I see Sammie listening to Jim’s heart with his stethoscope in her ears. “I don’t know,” I admit.

Dad blows out a breath. “It’s a lot, everything that’s happened. It’s okay if you’re not alright.”

“I know,” I breathe out. “He’s dead, Dad.”

“Tyler?”

“Yeah,” I say, nodding. “He’s dead and I’m fucking glad he is.”

Dad chuckles now and I can picture him smiling as he says, “Yeah, that’s okay too.”

I reach the ambulance. “Also, Mom’s car is toast, so yeah, might be time for an upgrade.”

He laughs again. “I mean she has been saying how much she likes the new BMW, so I guess this might be a good excuse,” he says, even though I know he’d have bought her whatever car she wanted. “Where are you right now?”

Exhaling, I look around, trying to figure out exactly where we are. “I don’t really know,” I admit. “The rental is at some diner and we’re maybe a mile down the road.”

“Ok, we’ll find you,” Dad says. “I know you’ve got Pam’s phone, so we’ll track that and go with you to the hospital. Getting Sammie checked over is important.”

I swallow, that emotion hitting me once again. “Thanks, Dad,” I manage to choke out. “For everything.”

“Always, Max,” he says, and I can hear the smile in his voice. “Sammie and Harper are family, you know that.”

*Yeah*, I can’t help but think. They really fucking are.

*My family.*

## CHAPTER 31

# HARPER

**A**fter my accident, all I wanted was to remember, feeling like I lost some of the best times of my life: meeting Max, watching Sammie turn from a toddler to the amazing kid she's become, seeing her relationship with Max blossom into something more than just friendship, and finding my forever family.

But now, riding in this ambulance, I long to forget everything that just happened. It will be forever burned into my memory, almost losing Sammie is something I never want to experience again.

I'm still crying hysterically, trying to calm myself down is not something I'm currently capable of, and I'm sure I'm scaring the hell out of Sammie. She keeps telling me she's okay and while I know that physically she's probably just fine, all I can think about is the long-term effects being kidnapped by her father is going to have on her. This isn't something she's going to rebound from, being resilient and all that shit.

"Mommy, it's okay," Sammie says as Jim monitors her vitals, calling out turns and numbers at the same time. "You can stop crying now."

"I know, baby," I reply through the sobs, my heart breaking as I listen to her try to be the one to calm me down. It

should be the other way around. I wish Max were here with us and not following behind with his parents.

I really wanted him with us, but we were told there just isn't room for all of us in the back of the ambulance. Jeff and Pam arrived just as we were leaving to take Sammie to the hospital, and I was sobbing once again when I saw them pull up.

Just seeing them here, knowing they care enough to show up for us, not just Max, but Sammie and me, reminds me that this is my home. This is what a family should be. They should care and love no matter what.

"Harper," Jim says, resting a comforting hand on my arm, "I'd like to give you something to help calm you down. Only if you're okay with it. Nothing major. It'll just help with the anxiety."

"Okay," I reply, my hands shaking as he moves my arm over toward him, injecting something quickly and within a few seconds, I feel my breathing finally start to slow down, my heart rate returning to normal.

"Better?" he asks, and I nod, letting out a slow breath, my body finally feeling like I have control of it once again.

He calls out another turn, and the ambulance arrives at the emergency room bay, the driver jumping out before the car is even in park.

"I'll make sure Max knows what room you're in," Jim tells me, hopping out the back, he pulls the gurney out and I exit after, following Sammie as she's wheeled into the triage hallway.

Jim gives the gurney a little wiggle, and then spins it so Sammie is facing me, a huge smile on her face as she giggles.

It's the most beautiful sound in the world; it's a sound I thought I might never hear again. I don't think I could have lived without her.

"Again, Jim!" she calls out, laughing, her head falling back against the pillow. "Faster!" she demands through giggles.

"Sorry, Sammie, time for me to head out. You're in good hands here with Jackie." He motions to the woman who is now looking over the clipboard that Jim's partner handed her.

Jackie begins immediately asking me questions and taking my insurance card and I'm so grateful for whatever that was that Jim gave me, because I can answer her without sounding like a sobbing mess.

A few minutes later, as Jackie is getting all the information down, Max comes flying down the hallway, finding us, and pulling me into his arms.

"Longest fucking ride of my life," he mutters, wiping the sweat from his brow. "What's going on?" He looks at the nurse, waiting for her to answer.

She lets out a sigh, and hits Max with a look that tells him he needs to shut up. I find a giggle pushing its way up, the first laugh I've had since all of this happened.

"Max, I'm doing my job," she tells him, rolling her eyes. "How much faster would you like me to work?" She's an older woman with gray hair, and a weathered face that shows she's spent years working in the ER. The stress showing on her body, and in her response to Max.

I can tell she's good at her job, and one of the things she hates is being questioned by someone younger than her, especially someone who doesn't do the same job as her.



“Why isn’t she in a room yet?” Max nearly demands, and I have to reach a hand out, gently patting his chest.

“She’s doing what needs to be done, Max,” I whisper, hitting him with a strong stare. It’s funny because normally it would be me on edge, but whatever Jim gave me is definitely doing the trick. “You should go find Jim. He’s got something in a syringe that will take the edge off.”

“Okay, that’s everything,” Jackie says, handing me back my driver’s license and my insurance card. “I’d tell you wait in the children’s waiting area, but I’m certain Max will lose it,” she jokes, pursing her lips as she looks at Max.

“You know that an ambulance negates the wait, Jackie,” Max reminds her, a hint of frustration in his voice. “Who’s the doctor tonight?”

“It’s Waterson, and Sammie, you’re in room two, sound good?” Jackie says, now directing her attention at Sammie. “Let’s go. I’m going to hand you off to Rachel and she’ll get you all settled, and if you ask nicely, I think she can find you something to eat. Maybe even some ice cream.” Jackie winks at Sammie as another nurse takes the gurney and wheels it into a room.

The lights are low, and it smells of bleach, reminding me of when I was in this same hospital after my accident. I have no idea if I will ever get all of my memory back, and while I’m still missing pieces, I made the right call staying here with Max.

“The doctor recommends a CT scan to check for any internal bleeding and it’s just concussion protocol after an accident like this,” Rachel, the nurse says. “Someone will be in to get Sammie. Only one parent is allowed with her.” She

looks at both Max and me, waiting for us to decide, but Sammie decides for us.

“Max, Mommy,” she says. “Right, Daddy?”

She stops both of us in our tracks, the way she so naturally calls Max daddy, and whatever Jim gave me is no match for this moment. The tears spill over, and I can tell Max is trying to hold it together, his jaw clenched, and my eyes fall to his throat as he swallows hard.

“Of course, Sammie,” Max replies, not missing a beat, while I’m over here blubbering once again.

We’re saved by Pam and Jeff coming into the room, and Max looks over at me, that tense swallow happening again.

“Can you stay with Sammie for a few minutes?” he asks his parents and they both respond instantly. “Harper, I need to talk to you,” Max now adds, taking my hand in his.

I can tell by the look on his face that something is wrong, and I’m not sure I can take anything else at this point.

He leads me out into the hallway, stopping just outside the door, he looks over to make sure it’s closed. He closes his eyes, letting out a slow breath.

“Just tell me, Max,” I plead, desperate to get past all this drama. I’m still crying, hearing Sammie call Max daddy has my mind all kinds of fucked up.

I love that Sammie loves Max, and that she has so willingly accepted him into her life, making him the first male figure she’s had that treats her the way she should be treated. But I worry about what that all means. Tyler doesn’t want her, and if I want this to be a permanent thing, I’ll be back in court, asking Tyler to give up his rights.

And that's when it hits me.

"It's about Tyler, isn't it?" I hear myself say, but my voice sounds lost and hollow. "Isn't it? Just tell me."

"He's dead, Harper. He died in the car crash. He wasn't wearing his seatbelt," Max says, his voice calm and rational as my knees start to give out.

Max catches me, holding me to his chest as I cry, deep guttural sobs. My thoughts are a jumbled mess, my emotions all over the place.

The relief I feel is like nothing I've ever experienced, but right on its heels is guilt. I shouldn't feel grateful that the father of my daughter is dead; that makes me a horrible person.

"It's okay, Harper," Max whispers into my hair, holding me to him with a force that should calm me down, but it does nothing. "You can cry. It's okay for you to be upset. It's okay for you to be angry or sad or whatever you're feeling."

"I hate him and that makes me feel so awful," I admit through the tears, taking in a ragged breath. "But it's over, Max. It's finally over."

I'm clinging to Max with such intensity, my fingers digging into his skin as I pull him as close to me as possible. He's always been my safe place, my comfort, and my constant. He's been here through mine and Sammie's move to Tahoe, my accident and now Sammie's, and all the shit with Tyler. He has stood by me and for that I will never be able to repay him.

"I don't ever want to romanticize him. Ever," I say, my words harsh and firm. "He wasn't a good person. He kidnapped my daughter. He could have killed her. I will never

forgive him for any of that.” I feel the anger in my body take over. I want to punch something. I want to scream out loud.

“You don’t have to. Your memory of him is yours. You are allowed to hate him. You are allowed to be angry,” Max tells me, his hand rubbing a circle on my back. His lips linger on the top of my head, my tears finally slowing.

“Has anyone gotten in touch with his parents?” I now ask, wondering how all of this is going to play out. “They’ve always hated me. They didn’t want anything to do with Sammie.”

“I don’t know, and I don’t think that’s any of our concern. Our daughter is in the hospital and that is our number one priority,” Max says, and he’s right.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. As much as everyone says Sammie is resilient, we have a long road ahead of us. This is news that I will have to break to her, and while she never had a relationship with her dad, there is going to be some trauma from the kidnapping and his death.

She witnessed all of this. She was in the damn car when he was killed, and even if she acts like everything is fine, it isn’t. I won’t be like my mother. I won’t tell her she’s okay and that she’s being dramatic. She needs a therapist, we both do.

Sammie will always be my top priority, like Max said, loving that he is on this journey to help Sammie and I heal from all of this.

I lean into his embrace, closing my eyes, I let my body relax, needing him to help me through this. I can’t imagine what my life would be like without him, without Pam and Jeff or Elissa.

When I left Florida, I just knew I needed to get away, but all of this is a reminder of why I left. We took the train without knowing where we were going, and then we got on a bus and took it to the last stop. I will be forever grateful that the last stop that bus made was Tahoe, right outside of Badger Creek.

“I love you,” I tell Max, holding him to me, never wanting to let go. “Thank you for loving Sammie and me. We will spend the rest of our lives making it up to you.”

“You never have to make anything up to me, Harper,” Max says, taking my face in his hands, he tips it up so I’m looking at him. “Having you and Sammie is all I will ever need.”

“Again, I love you, Max Holden,” I reply. “Badger Creek’s most eligible bachelor.”

“I think I like the title Badger Creek’s DILF,” he says, letting out a deep laugh that burrows deep inside me, something that I will always find comfort in.

“I think I could get onboard with that title too, since you’re my DILF,” I tease, giving his side a tickle. “Thank you for making me laugh. I needed it.”

“I’m here no matter what, Harper. Laughs, tears, anger, or just sitting next to you in silence.” He kisses me now, his lips pressing gently against mine. It’s a kiss that says this is the first day of the rest of our lives together.

As a family of three.

## CHAPTER 32

### MAX

It's been a week since Sammie's accident and to say the kid has been nothing short of amazing would be an understatement. She's been incredibly resilient after everything and has basically bounced right back to her normal happy-go-lucky self, as though the whole thing with Tyler kidnapping her never even happened.

We aren't taking any chances though, making sure she sees a child therapist for a bit just in case something comes up later, when it all finally hits her. Harper is going to start seeing someone too and although I'm not entirely sure I need it, I'll tag along for a few sessions too.

After the accident, they kept Sammie in the hospital overnight, just to make sure, but she was all fine in the end. Harper and I both stayed with her, and she thought that was the greatest thing ever, like some crazy sleepover. The nurses were fantastic, bringing her ice cream and pudding and just keeping her laughing all night.

She only asked once about Tyler, just as we were leaving the hospital to come home, as though it had suddenly dawned on her that this wasn't just about her. And while neither of us were sure how she was going to react when we told her that her dad was dead, she once again surprised us with a simple,

“Oh, okay,” before she asked for some more ice cream when we got home.

Like I said, the kid is amazing.

“Babe?” I hear Harper call out.

“In here,” I answer from the bathroom connected to our bedroom.

She wanders in, a relaxed smile on her face when she finds me standing with a towel wrapped around my waist. “Hey,” she says, wrapping her arms around me from behind as she rests her chin on my shoulder.

I look at her reflection in the mirror, smile at the beautiful woman looking back at me. But it’s more than just that, because she isn’t just beautiful, she’s happy and relaxed, and for the first time in as long as I’ve known her, there is no fear in her eyes.

“Hey, you,” I reply, turning to press a kiss to her temple.

“Your mom and dad are here,” she whispers. “They’re taking Sammie for tacos.”

I grin. “So pretty soon we’ll be all alone,” I say, turning to face her.

Harper smirks. “Pretty soon we have to go and meet all of our friends,” she says, looping her arms around my neck.

“Sure,” I say, lifting a shoulder in a casual shrug. “But we don’t have to rush off now, do we,” I say, slipping my arms around her waist and pulling her closer.

Harper smiles, pushing up on her toes as she brushes her lips against mine. “We do have all night, remember?”

“Do we?”

She laughs. “Uh huh, Sammie is staying at your parents’, so...”

“So, what you’re saying is we have *all* night.”

“We do,” she confirms, smiling.

With a grin, I slide my hands to her ass, pulling her against me so our bodies are flush and she can see exactly what the idea of a night alone together is doing to me. “We could always get started now,” I tease, nipping at her bottom lip. “Our daughter is occupied.”

Harper slides her hands down my chest, her fingers trailing over the line of hair on my stomach that disappears beneath the towel. When she reaches the knot, she hooks a finger inside and my grin widens.

“*Our* daughter,” she says, licking her lips. “Is out there with *your* parents. So you need to get this...” She pauses as she moves her hand lower and cups my hard dick over the towel. “Under control so you can get dressed and come out and say goodbye.” With a smile, she gives me one last hard kiss before turning and walking out of the bathroom.

“Tease!” I call out to her, smiling at the sound of her laughter. “You are so gonna get it tonight, babe.”

Harper sticks her head back into the bathroom. “Can’t wait,” she says with a wink. “Now get dressed!”

After we say goodbye to my parents and Sammie, who is beyond excited at the idea of queso and a sleepover with her grandparents, Harper and I walk into town to The Matterhorn. Alex, Del, Elissa, Zoey and Ethan are all already there, sitting at a table waiting for us.



“Hi!” Elissa says, jumping up out of her chair as she walks over and pulls Harper into a tight embrace. They’ve grown really close over the time that Harper’s been here, and I love that the two of them are such good friends. Harper needs that and I kinda get the feeling Elissa does too.

“Hey, Elissa,” Harper says, returning the hug. “How are you?”

Elissa rolls her eyes, but she’s smiling as she says, “Oh you know, the seventh wheel tonight, but what’s new, huh?”

I sling an arm around Elissa’s shoulders and pull her close, pressing a kiss to her temple. “You know he misses you just as much as you miss him. Even if neither of you are willing to admit it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Elissa replies, elbowing me. “Anyway, don’t worry, I’m fine. Tonight is not about me.”

“Hmmm,” I say, letting my friend go as I make a mental note to call Nick and find out if maybe he can make it back here for a visit sometime soon. If maybe we can’t lock him and Elissa in a room until they just sort their shit out.

We say hello to everyone else, before taking a seat at the table. It feels great to hang out with everyone again, especially now the threat of Tyler is gone. I know Harper still struggles with the relief she feels over the fact that he’s dead, but I don’t.

And yeah, I can acknowledge that that probably makes me a bad person, but after everything he did to them, after all the years of abuse he put Harper through and then kidnapping Sammie and putting her life at risk. I can’t and won’t ever forgive the guy.

I’m fucking glad he’s dead.

“So, how’s Sammie?” Zoey asks from across the table. “She doing okay?”

I watch as Ethan’s arm around her shoulders tightens ever so slightly, probably because if anyone is going to understand what almost losing the ones you love is like, it’s him.

“Yeah, she’s doing really well,” I say to my sister. “She’s with mom and dad tonight.”

Zoey smiles, glancing quickly at Ethan before turning back to Harper. “And how are you doing?”

Harper takes a long deep breath, letting it out slowly before she says, “Actually, I’m doing great too,” she says with a smile. “I’m looking forward to coming back to work next week and...well, yeah, I’m really good.”

My sister smiles as I pull Harper close and kiss the top of her head, knowing that what she’s saying is true. She is doing great, and while there are still some things she doesn’t remember and some nights where she wakes up from a bad dream about what happened to Sammie, she knows now that I am here for her.

That I’m never fucking going anywhere.

“And you, Max?” Zoey now asks, turning to me with a huge smirk on her face. “When are you going back to work?”

Ethan lets out a loud laugh, grinning at me across the table because he knows exactly what Zoey is referring to. Rolling my eyes at my sister, I reach for my wallet, grabbing some notes before holding them out to her. “Yeah, yeah, ha fucking ha smartass,” I say.

Zoey snatches the money from my hand with a quick, “Thank you,” as she grins up at her fiancé.

“Of course you’d remember a bet we made when we were teenagers.”

“Like you wouldn’t,” Zoey says smiling as she tucks the money into her purse. “And thank you, I always knew I’d win this one,” she adds, leaning into Ethan, who’s still laughing.

“Whatever.”

We spend the night eating and drinking and laughing with our friends. It’s relaxed and fun and exactly what we both need. By the end of the night, we’re all a little drunk and as we head outside, Zoey, Ethan and Elissa all catching Ubers home, Harper and I fall in with Alex and Del to walk back to our condos.

It’s not far and when we reach ours first, we call out our goodbyes to them before heading inside.

The second the front door closes, I’ve got Harper backed up against it, my body pressed against her as my mouth finds hers in a hard kiss. She smiles against me as her hands find my hips, gripping them hard.

“Someone’s eager to make the most of a night alone.”

Smiling, I pull back as I say, “Why don’t we jump in the hot tub?”

“Sounds good,” Harper says, ducking under my arm as she pulls her top off and drops it on the floor before making her way toward the glass doors leading out to the deck. I follow her, the two of us leaving a trail of our clothes on the floor as we make our way outside.

“Did you have fun tonight?” I ask as we climb into the hot tub.

“I did,” she says, smiling as she takes a seat next to me.

With a grin, I hoist her onto my lap, wrapping my arms around her. “And you’re okay with leaving Sammie?” I ask, knowing it’s the first night since everything happened that either of us have been apart from her.

Harper leans back so her head is resting on my shoulder. “Yeah, I am. I know she’s in good hands with your parents and...”

I lean down and drop a kiss on the end of her nose. “And everything’s a lot better now,” I say, because I know this is what we’re both thinking.

“It is,” she whispers, looking up at me as she hooks her hand around the back of my neck and pulls me closer. “So much better.”

I close the distance, pressing a soft kiss to her lips that quickly turns deep and intense, neither of us ever able to get enough of each other. I’m already hard and this kiss is doing nothing to change that.

“I love you, Harper,” I whisper when we pull back, both of us breathing a little harder. “Everything is going to be amazing from now on, I promise.”

“I know,” she says, smiling up at me, her hand moving to my cheek.

“And,” I say, spinning her so she’s now facing me, her thighs on either side of mine. Harper smirks when she takes in this new position and just how close we are to taking advantage of how fucking hard I am right now. Chuckling, I lean in, nuzzling my nose against hers. “Mind out of the gutter, miss.”

She lets out a loud laugh, her head falling back. “That’s rich coming from you.”

“Whatever,” I say, my hands gripping her ass. “I do want to say something though, something serious.”

“Okay,” Harper says, the smile falling from her face.

“Harper, babe,” I say, chuckling. “It’s nothing bad, I promise.”

“Okay,” she says again.

With my hands on her ass, I pull her closer so she’s practically flush against me. Smoothing my hands up her back, I slide them over her shoulders and cup her face. “I love you,” I whisper, leaning in to kiss her. “I love you and Sammie and this life we have together.”

“I do too,” she whispers, blinking back at me.

“And I know it hasn’t been long and I’m not asking for anything now or for you to even make a decision tonight or shit, even this year, but...” I trail off, swallowing hard as the nerves suddenly hit me.

I hadn’t expected to feel this nervous asking Harper this question, but I do, because I realize now it’s one of the most important questions I’m ever going to ask her. And I don’t want her to say no or dismiss it because she thinks I don’t mean it.

“But what?” she prompts, her words barely audible.

“But,” I repeat, my thumbs brushing her jaw, “one day, when you’re ready, I really hope you’d be open to the idea... um, the idea of us making this life permanent.”

Harper’s eyes widen, but she doesn’t say anything, her hands gripping my shoulders hard.

“I want to be here for you and for Sammie,” I continue. “And I want Sammie to know that, to know that no matter what, I will always be here for her.”

“Are you...”

I smile, leaning in to kiss her again as I whisper, “I want to be her dad, Harper. For real though.”

“Oh god, Max,” she says, a huge smile lighting up her whole face as she crushes her mouth against mine. “Yes, god yes!”

Laughing, I kiss her back, my arms wrapping around her as I hold her against me. “I mean obviously Sammie has to be okay with it too, but I’m just throwing it out there, okay. It’s what I want, more than anything. And I hope that you do too.”

Harper smiles, her hand moving to my cheek as she looks at me with nothing but love and happiness in her eyes. “Honestly, I know she already sees you as her real dad,” she whispers. “But yeah, I definitely think we should look into making it official.”

It feels like my heart fucking explodes in my chest as I crush her to me, kissing her again as I murmur, “Thank you, Harper. Fuck, thank you, this makes me so fucking happy.”

She nips at my bottom lip, grinding against my still hard dick as she whispers, “Think we should celebrate.”

With a grin, my grip on her ass tightens as I lift her slightly, shifting our bodies. “Fuck yes, baby, we definitely should,” I murmur, before lowering her onto me and doing exactly that.

## MORE OF MAX AND HARPER

Did you love Max and Harper's story and want to see what they're up to now? Jump ahead a bit with this exclusive extended epilogue and fall in love with them all over again!

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## WHAT'S NEXT

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But it's Elissa who reminds him that they were once in love and maybe returning home isn't such a bad thing after all. That is until they get some news that will change everything.



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Happy reading and thank you!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Not only is Claire Raye a really sweet pen name, it's actually a pen name for two sarcastic best friends who met through their mutual love of reading. After bonding over books (and wine and cheese), they decided to take the plunge and see if they could write a book together and ta dah... *The Rockport Beach Series* was born! In addition to their shared love of food and dropping an occasional (read, a lot of) f bombs, the writing duo that is Claire Raye like to write about strong, sassy females who aren't afraid to say what's on their mind and the overprotective men who fall in love with them.

Both halves of Claire Raye are married and both of their husbands have a cheeky side that gets plenty of airtime in their books. From their smart mouths to their witty one-liners, there's plenty of material to use for all those alpha males they love to write about.

Plans are already underway for the next series, which is sure to feature plenty of sass, steam and humor, and of course, a happily ever after!



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