



S H E L B Y C R E E K C O U N T Y

HOMETOWN

Redemption

J E A N M A R I E

Hometown Redemption
Shelby Creek County
Book 8

By: Jean Marie

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Chapter 1

A cool breeze brushed through my hair and I sighed, soaking in the picturesque image the park made. The town wasn't very big, so this was one of the few places to just sit and enjoy the scenery.

And I *would* be enjoying it...if it weren't for the seething mad voice that'd been hissing through the phone over the past half hour.

Looking down at it with a tired sigh, I tuned back in just to see if I'd missed anything important.

“The gall of him, to waltz back into town as if he didn't leave you broken-hearted! You two were together for *years*, and he just threw it away. Now he walks back in as if he owns the place.”

Stealing a glance at the clock on my phone, I groaned internally. I'd gone to the park today to try to clear my head and *not* think about him, but apparently, everyone else had other ideas. Cindy was the third person to call and either rant about Samuel or ask if I was okay.

I was, I was *totally* fine with this.

It'd been years since Sam left, and I'd had time to work through our breakup.

He'd made his choice—the big city he'd always yearned for—and while it'd ripped something apart inside me to watch his back as he walked away, I couldn't have followed him.

When Cindy didn't sound ready to stop anytime soon, I cut her off. “Cindy, I love that you're so protective, but he's allowed to come back. He hasn't tried to find me, so I sincerely doubt he's here to rekindle anything between us.”

To be honest, I wasn't sure if I wanted that or not. Was I disappointed he hadn't even tried to find me, if for no other reason than to catch up? Yes. But maybe it was for the better; his leaving had burned like nothing I'd experienced before, and if we got close and he left, it would hurt just like it had then.

I can't do that to myself, not again.

Cindy grumbled, pulling me back to the present. "He should at least apologize. I know some of the things he said to you, and they weren't deserved. It was well within your rights to not want to drop everything and move to the city, of all places."

Yes, and I'd exercised that right by telling him to go without me. I just hadn't expected his response afterward...

"You're seriously going to just tell me to go? What about our plans? We promised to stay together, and it isn't as if this town has anything for us!" Sam's eyes were pleading, but I held my ground. He knew from the start how I felt about bigger cities, and this whole plan of his was out of left field.

"It has both our families, isn't that enough!?" I asked, volume rising to meet his. He'd never made his disdain with our town and its gossips a secret, but he'd also seemed accepting of staying here before now.

He shook his head, lips pulling into a scowl. "No, it isn't. I love my family, but this place is a dead end. I got a job offer for something bigger and better. Wouldn't you want to jump on it too?"

Was he serious?! Crossing my arms, I raised a brow and laughed. "Sam, do you even hear yourself? You've known me for how long now, and you think I'd ever willingly choose to move to a city like that?"

He'd gotten a job offer in New York, New York of all places, not just a big city, the big city.

And he thought I was going to follow him. Even the thought of going to the noise and smog-infested place was enough to close a fist around my

lungs. I wouldn't be able to see the stars at night or breathe in the fresh air in the morning.

He didn't care about any of that, though. Tugging on his hair in frustration, he argued. "Yes, because I'd be there with you to help you adjust! Come on, Cecilia! I can't even take you on a date here without everyone and their mother knowing before we've even left the house. I want to take you out dancing and to the best restaurants the country has to offer, all without having to deal with everyone whispering behind their hands!"

The lack of privacy did bother me a bit, but not enough to move.

"I can appreciate that, but we can drive to a nearby city and stay for a few days if it bothers you that much. We don't have to move across the country for it!" I said, something deep in my chest aching as he shook his head again.

I adored Sam, but one thing I absolutely despised about the man? He was awful with compromise.

Now was no different, and it ripped my heart out to watch as his face shut down, all emotion disappearing behind an iron wall.

"So that's it then, you're not going no matter what?" He asked, something in his tone making my hair stand on end even as I nodded.

"That's right. You knew when we got together that I never wanted to leave here, and until now, any plans for the future we'd made were discussed with here as the backdrop. This shouldn't be a surprise to you."

His mask faltered for a second, and hurt blitzed to the surface. "You won't change your mind, even for me?"

Part of me wanted to agree, the idea of being without him after all this time together felt fundamentally wrong, but I couldn't do that to myself.

Despite the pain burning through me, I shook my head. "I won't. I would be miserable in a big city, and you know that. All the sound and lights

would make me sick, plus the excess of people.”

I could barely handle the arcade in town some days or the grocery store at the first of the month, and he wanted me to move to New York? It was as if he didn't know me at all.

Or that he didn't care.

Sam dragged a hand through his hair with a sigh. “You'd adjust, you did with the different stores. If you'd just try! Move with me, and I'll help you get used to it!”

The pleading was back, but I couldn't let myself give in. I couldn't, not even for him.

“No, Sam. If you're set on uprooting your life and moving to New York, it won't be with me.” I said, tone sharp with certainty. He stared at me for a long beat, a war waging behind his eyes, before finally he spoke.

“So that's it then, all the years we've been together mean nothing?”

I couldn't help it, I snapped. “Don't talk as if I'm the one who's doing this to us! You're the one insisting on moving, you're the one who's changing our plans.”

His face twisted into a snarl, “So it's wrong of me to want better for my life than what this town has to offer?!”

There was no talking to him. Giving up, I turned away and looked at the picture of us I kept on the fireplace. It'd been our first date, and I'd been so excited to wear the pretty purple dress I'd bought just for that.

He looked dashing in slacks and a nice button-up shirt, something he'd worn very rarely, thanks to his hatred of how they fit. We'd been kids with the world ahead of us, and now everything was disintegrating.

Biting back the tears, I shook my head. “No, but it is wrong to try to make me feel bad for not wanting to go with you. I love you Sam, but I'm not

destroying my life and happiness so you can be away from here.”

Picking up the picture frame, I steeled myself against the pain and turned to face him again. He looked hurt and lost and so many other things I didn't have words for, but I didn't let myself stop.

Hugging the picture close, I nodded to the door. “So make your choice, Sam. I said it at the start of our relationship, and I'll say it again: I have no interest in moving, and that isn't going to change. If this is going to be a reoccurring thing, then it's better you go after what you really want. Because it isn't me.”

His face shut down again, and he stared as if looking straight through me. After a long minute, he nodded. “Then that's it, years down the fucking drain.”

My heart twisted, but I didn't argue as he made for the door. “Fine, you know where to find me if you ever want out of this pit.”

Then he slammed the door, the sound ringing in my ears. I waited until the sound of his engine disappeared, finally letting the tears fall.

It was better this way.

“Cecilia, you there?” Cindy's voice snapped me to the present, and I swallowed past the lump that always came when I thought about back then.

“Yeah, I'm here, just thinking about the past.”

She sighed, her anger evaporating into a tired understanding. “You deserved so much better than him, you still do. Please, if he *does* try to start things again with you, refuse. Please?”

That was an easy promise to make since I had no intentions of getting back together with him.

“Cindy, I'm not about to forget how much his leaving hurt. Even if he were to apologize and want what we used to have, I doubt I could ever

trust him enough to actually start something.”

This time her sigh was of relief. “Thank you. I’ll let you go now, but I’m always here to talk to if you want or need to.”

Warmth bloomed in my chest, and I smiled. “Of course, and thank you for being here through everything.”

Cindy had been there for the breakup with Sam and had walked me through every step of the painful aftermath. She was more than my friend, she was my sister.

After giving our goodbyes we hung up, and I finally let myself take a breath of the cool fresh air. It’d rained earlier, and the smell still lingered, water soaking through my pants from the grass I sat on.

Brushing my long hair over my shoulder, momentarily wishing I’d put it up in a braid, I smiled. I’d made the right decision when I’d chosen to stay. I wouldn’t give this up for the world.

When the clouds shifted, darkening in a silent threat of more rain, I got up with a sigh. While I loved a good storm, I wasn’t about to get caught out in one without an umbrella.

Making my way to the path cut through the grass, I nearly tripped to a stop when a familiar face met my eyes.

He was older now, but I would never forget those eyes. I’d stared at them for hours once upon a time, getting lost in them.

They were locked on me and wide as plates now.

“Cecilia?” Sam asked, his short dark hair complimenting the light stubble across his jaw. But it was his eyes that really held me captive. They’d been what first pulled me in, the kindness I’d seen drawing me closer like a magnet, and apparently they still had that effect, because I instinctively drifted closer.

“Samuel?” I asked, too dumbstruck to do anything else. When I realized I was inching toward him, I forcibly stopped myself.

Next to Sam was Oliver and a woman I’d yet to meet but assumed was Jen, his girlfriend. The two exchanged a loaded glance, and I grimaced.

What a spectacle we’d made...

Ignoring the heat climbing my cheeks, I tried to play it off.

“I heard you were back in town. Your family is probably ecstatic.” It came out slightly forced, but all things considered, I think I did well to keep my tone level.

Sam grimaced, standing until he towered over me. “They are, but that’s not important right now. Can we talk?”

My heart tripped, then beat triple its usual pace. Warning sirens screamed through me, and I instinctively tensed. That’s a bad idea, without a doubt. I’d always been weak to him, and I needed time to prepare for this.

I needed to build my shields back up and remind myself of the hurt he’d caused.

“Now isn’t a great time. I need to head back before the storm.” I gestured up to the clouds pointedly and then turned away from him. Facing the couple, I addressed Jen first.

“I’m Cecilia, and you’re Jen, right?”

She nodded, and I continued. “It’s good to meet you. I’m glad Oliver found someone nice. While I’d love to stay and chat, I really do need to leave. Maybe we can talk more later?”

She hummed. “Sure thing, it’s not hard to find someone here.”

With that out of the way, I waved to Oliver, who offered an apologetic look, and I left.

Oliver was a good man, and it hadn't escaped my notice that he'd done his best not to crowd me over the years. It was much appreciated, especially after Sam first left. Even seeing Oliver had hurt, the constant reminder of Sam like needles under my skin, but now I could be around him without the pain.

I still needed to thank him for that, but it could come later.

When I was back at my car, I looked over my shoulder, half expecting Sam to have followed. He didn't and honestly, I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

It was good that he'd respected my wish for distance. Should I be happy he'd listened? Years ago, he would have insisted on following me until we'd talked everything out.

The sting stayed, and I forced it down with a frustrated sigh. He'd done as asked, I wouldn't be hurt by it.

Getting into my car, I started the engine and turned toward Cindy's house. I needed to clear my head, and there was no better place than there.

Chapter 2

“He’s probably going to grovel to try to get you back,” Cindy said, her eyes flinty and sharp as she ground her teeth. “As if he deserves a second chance.”

I rubbed between my eyes tiredly. “Cindy, he could have just wanted to clear the air, and even if he did want more, you know what my answer would be.”

She eased a bit at that. “I’m sorry for coming off like this, but I remember how hurt you were when he left, and I just...” She trailed off, taking one of my hands and frowning. “I don’t want to see you hurt again, and I know you say you won’t get with him, but I know you, Cecilia. Sam was always your biggest weakness, and the fact that he’s back worries me.”

She wasn’t wrong about the whole ‘weakness’ thing, but I only smiled. “He is and was my weakness, *but* I proved back then that if he steps over the line I would put him back in place. I remember how much it hurt when he left, too, and I’m not about to put myself through it again. Thank you, but you don’t have anything to worry about.”

The look she sent me was dubious at best, but she dropped the subject. “How’d your blind date go, by the way?” She asked, curiosity clear.

I shrugged. “It was alright. There were no sparks, but he wasn’t awful either.”

I’d had more than enough of *those* dates to last me a lifetime. “We’re better off as friends, though.” I finished, and Cindy groaned.

“That’s what you’ve said about all of them so far.”

I shrugged. “Because it’s the truth. I don’t feel anything for them, and I’m not going to try to force myself.”

She nodded. “That’s fair. I hope you find your one soon, though; you deserve to be happy.”

The warmth from before came back, and I pulled her into a one-armed hug. “I appreciate it, and so do you. Which reminds me, how did *your* date go?”

She raised an amused brow. “I like how you call it a date when you know full well it was a one-night stand; it makes it sound so much classier that way.”

I poked her side. “You’re two consenting adults who choose to... enjoy each other in an adult way. There’s nothing wrong with that.” I inched closer. “So, how’d it go?”

She grinned, an almost dreamy sigh pulling from her as she leaned back. “Amazing. Neither of us is looking for anything but this, and wow, does he know what he’s doing.”

Her finger wound around a lock of long blond hair, the same shade as mine, and she laughed. “I tried something new today, and he made sure to wrangle a promise out of me to do it again.”

She winked and I chuckled, not asking for details I knew I didn’t want. Cindy was the adventurous one of our duo and while I adored her, I knew what information to avoid.

It’d only taken one lengthy discussion with full details on her intimate life to realize I didn’t want to know any part of it.

“I’m glad you’re happy,” I said and she nodded.

“I am, and are you sure you don’t want to try one-night stands instead of dating? I could point you to a few good ones that were genuinely nice guys.”

This wasn’t the first time she’d asked that, and my answer stayed the same. “No, thank you. I get attached too easily, and you know that. Feelings

and one-night stands aren't a good combo."

I'd almost given in once or twice, just to feel someone next to me at night, but that would only lead to pain. Besides, sleeping with someone because you're lonely was a surefire way of nursing a broken heart later.

Better to plow through the loneliness than deal with regrets.

"Yeah, that's true. You deserve the happily ever after anyway." She said, waving a hand. "It's what you still want, right?"

I nodded. "I do, and I know you think it's childish, but love is real, and I want to find it."

She shrugged. "It's not childish. I've seen your parents so I know it's real, it's just not something I want for myself. That being said," she slung an arm around my shoulders, "I hope you find your happily ever after."

Then to punctuate that, she planted a loud smacking kiss on my cheek. I laughed, pushing her away. "You did that just to leave a lipstick mark didn't you?"

A beaming smile curled her lips. "Of course! Now I need to shower before work, and you need to unwind. It's been a stressful day, and a bath is great for that."

I nodded, taking the not at all subtle hint. "I'll talk to you later."

As I got into my car, she waved from the doorway, calling one last parting shot. "If that idiot harasses you, let me know and I'll kick his ass!"

I shook my head, waving back and pulling out of her driveway.

I loved that woman, but she was something else.

The tension and unease from earlier was gone now and I felt ten pounds lighter. A talk with Cindy usually did that to me, though.

Humming under my breath, I turned up the radio and ignored the

niggling feeling that things with Sam were far from over.

Chapter 3

The barking of dogs was the first thing to greet me when I walked into work, the shelter's walls making the noise echo in a way that used to make my head spin.

It'd taken months to fully acclimate to it, and sometimes I still got headaches, but when I walked in to be greeted by dozens of wagging tails, I knew it was well worth it.

We were the only shelter in town, and that meant we were kept busy with all the animals brought in. Just yesterday, a black Labrador arrived and she was the sweetest thing ever.

Unfortunately, she was a bit on the older side, so I doubted she'd get adopted. Thankfully this was a no-kill shelter, so that just meant I'd have a new friend to keep me company. Maybe I'd even order her a special bone, just for her, to keep her busy in her kennel.

Putting the train of thought to the side, I shook the treat bag and watched as all the dogs perked up, their tails going at the speed of light. Every week I made a batch of treats, and all the regulars knew what this bag meant.

"Sit," I said firmly, holding a treat up. Half of the dogs sat and I gave them their treats, shooing them away before working on the rest.

People were more likely to adopt a dog if they were well-behaved and trained, something I'd noticed early on, and so part of my shift was spent doing just that.

It'd led to many adoptions, and I always felt pride to see a bouncing ball of fur get their forever home because of my training.

When I was down to the last dog, our resident troublemaker himself,

I tapped the treat on my palm and stared him down. Scotty was a pitch-black Scottish Terrier, and he'd been here going on two months now. He had scars along his stomach that hinted of more than one fight and he resisted training the worst.

He wasn't the only dog we'd brought in with those scars, but he was one of the most stubborn. He jumped up, trying to take the treat, and I held it higher.

"Excuse you, you know better," I said; my tone was clear and unhappy.

He stopped jumping, finally sitting as he knew I wanted. When he stayed that way for a minute, I handed him the treat and stroked between his ears.

"Good boy."

With that done, I dusted off my hands and made for the front desk. We still had some time before anyone came in, which meant I needed to clean up anything that was left from yesterday's shift.

The absolute last thing I expected was the knock on the glass door, or the man standing behind it.

Sam looked as surprised as I did when I opened the door for him, and it was only when I looked at the blanket-wrapped form in his arms that it clicked why.

He hadn't come here for me.

The twinge from before hit but I shoved it down, instead focusing on the squirming puppy tightly bundled in what looked like a towel.

It was a blond color, probably a Labrador, and it was doing its best to get out of its confines. It didn't look hurt, thankfully, and when I raised a brow at him, he shrugged. "I found it on my property, crying because of the storm. I wasn't sure if it was chipped or not..."

Ah, so he brought it here to make sure it didn't have a home.

Gently taking the puppy from him, I nodded for him to follow me further into the shelter as I set the pup on the table in back. The chip reader was an easy enough machine to use, and I swiped it over the puppy. It tried to jump at my hands, thinking it was a game, and I held it down with ease.

When I finished with no notifications from the reader, I shook my head. "Looks like there's no chip. Have you checked the local lost and found pages on the internet?"

He nodded. "That was my first thought, but nothing. Has anyone mentioned having a litter of puppies?"

I thought back, only to shake my head again. "Not that I know of. It's weird; usually puppies are a hot topic around town because people want to get dibs on them immediately. I wonder who this one belongs to..."

I scratched behind the boy's ears, his tail beating the table happily as Sam shrugged. "My new place is out by Oliver's, so it's not near town. Is there anyone else out there?"

I grimaced. "Not that I know of. Its paws don't seem hurt or worn so I wouldn't say it's walked very far." The next town over was a good distance by vehicle. If the puppy had come from there, it would have definitely shown some signs of exhaustion.

He wiggled happily, seeming just fine and further confusing me. "I'll ask around. Do you plan to keep him if we can't find an owner?" I asked.

Sam blinked, clearly taken by surprise. "I don't know. Until now I've been too busy to have a dog, and I didn't have a yard for it. I do now, though..."

Consideration painted his features as he stroked a hand through the puppy's fur.

The peaceful silence didn't last long because the next time he looked

at me, something else lingered behind his eyes. His surprise over me being here had worn off and the puppy was as settled as he'd get, which left the topic he'd wanted to talk about before.

Unease soured my stomach, and I tried to keep the topic on the puppy. "We can keep him here until we're sure he has no family, if you want. If you have things lying around everywhere he'll chew them up."

I still remembered how much of a mess his room used to be, though he'd made a conscious attempt to keep it clean whenever I came over. He couldn't get angry with the puppy if it chewed on something he left on the ground.

Sam snorted. "I'll have you know, I've gotten much better about cleaning up after myself since you last knew me. There's nothing on the floor for him to chew on."

Tension crackled through the air now as he leaned on the table, still giving me plenty of space, as he asked. "This wasn't how I planned on discussing this, but..."

I braced, not sure where he was going with this.

"I'm sorry."

That...was not what I expected.

The Sam I knew didn't compromise, didn't apologize—unless he really messed up—and most of all, didn't admit when he was wrong.

Staring in dumbstruck wonder, I watched as he rubbed a hand over the back of his neck and continued.

"I'm sorry for how I ended things back then. It was wrong and childish. We could have tried long distance, or I could have just *not* moved. I knew you hated the big cities, and I didn't discuss anything with you beforehand. As an adult, I know it was wrong, and so I'm sorry."

He didn't look away once during his apology, which meant I could see it was genuine. He meant every word and that shifted something in my chest.

Swallowing around the lump in my throat, I nodded. "Thank you." I hadn't realized until now how much I *did* want that apology.

Cindy's words came back, and I hastily tacked on before he could get the wrong idea.

"Thank you for the apology, but if this is a precursor to you asking me out again, I'd like to say up front that I'm not interested." I tried to keep my tone gentle but he still flinched. Despite that, he smiled.

"I know, and that's more than fair. I didn't apologize because I was trying to jump into your pants or anything else. I just..." He trailed off, choosing his words carefully. "I missed you, as a friend. I know I've got a long way to go before I'm forgiven for back then, but if you'd be alright with it, I would like to be friends again."

He'd gone and grown up in the time he'd left. Giving me space when I clearly said I wanted it, apologizing not because he wanted something but because he *knew* he'd done wrong... This wasn't the same Sam I'd been infatuated with years ago.

And somehow, it sparked my curiosity like nothing else.

If this wasn't the same Sam, who was he?

What all had changed?

He wasn't lying about saying he wanted to be friends again, and there was no harm in that, right? I could see for myself what all changed about Sam. The thought sat right, seeping into my bones, and I made my decision.

"Alright, but fair warning, Cindy is still livid with you and will probably try to neuter you on sight. I'll try to calm her down, but..."

I didn't have to finish that, he snorted. "But she's a firecracker and always has been. That's fine. She's got reason to be angry, and I don't hold it against her. If someone hurt Oliver like-." He stopped, but I knew what he was going to say.

If someone hurt Oliver like I hurt you.

His face twisted into a grimace and he looked away, guilt there and gone in a blink. "Well, you know what I mean," he said.

The tension changed, shifting by a few degrees into something new. It was good to see he understood how much he hurt me back then, but I didn't want him drowning in it now.

Patting his arm, I soothed. "Yeah, I do, but come on. We need to get this one settled for now. I'll make a few posts about him on the shelter's page. You can play with some of the other dogs if you want?"

He nodded, following behind me as I brought the puppy to the rest of the cages.

They were spacious enough for the dogs to move around comfortably, each one connected back into the yard for them to come and go as they pleased. The second I put the puppy down though, he pounced on Sam's shoelaces, chewing at them.

Sam shook his head with a snort. "You're going to be a rascal, I can already tell. If no one takes you, I might just have to."

He crouched, scratching the puppy behind the ears, and I joined him. The puppy certainly didn't mind the attention, and it gave me a chance to take in Sam without feeling his eyes boring into me.

Even the air around him seemed different now. Back then he'd always had a devil may care attitude with a side of try me, but now he seemed laid back. To be honest, I approved of the change, but I'd never seen someone shift so dramatically in a few years.

Shaking aside the curiosity nipping at the corner of my mind, I cleared my throat and asked. “So, how long are you in town this time?”

That was one thing the rumors hadn’t been clear on. Some said he was only here for a week or two—the most likely option since I could never forget his seething hatred for this town—and others said he was here to stay.

I’d almost laughed in their faces when I’d heard that last rumor. Sam? Staying here willingly?

He’d sooner run naked down the main street.

I hadn’t been enough to keep him here, and they thought he’d come back to stay just because?

The thought was incomprehensible.

Then, as if the universe itself was laughing at me, he froze. His hand hovered over the puppy’s head as he faced me, eyes drilling deep with an intensity I remembered from years ago. “I plan to stay. Dad offered to let me run the hardware store years ago, and he said the invitation is still open. I’ll have to learn how, of course, but...”

I nearly choked on my tongue. So the rumors hadn’t been wrong, he was actually planning on *staying*. My stomach rolled uneasily, an old hurt rising to the surface even as I fought to keep it buried.

A poisonous little voice hissed at the back of my mind, *Oh, so now you want to stay.*

If he’d said all of this when we were still together, we’d probably still *be* together, maybe even with kids by this point. The thought drove a knife into my chest and twisted. Looking away, I nodded.

“That’s nice.” My tone was bland even to my own ears, but there was no fixing it.

He was here to stay, but that didn’t change anything, I reminded

myself. For all I knew, he'd change his mind in a few months. He'd said he was fine with staying before too, when we were discussing our plans for the future, and he'd changed then.

I refused to get hurt by this again.

I caught Sam's flinch from the corner of my eye and he sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Cecilia-."

I knew where this was going and I stood from my crouch, pointedly walking away before he could continue the conversation. He followed me, sparks of the old him coming back as he gently gripped my arm.

Once I stopped, he let the hand drop, his tongue flashing out to wet his lips. I didn't watch it, I *didn't*.

Then he spoke, and my attention swiveled to the words instead. "I know you don't believe me when I say I'm staying, and you have more than enough right to, all things considered. But I *am* going to stay. I-."

He grimaced, shaking his head. "I've changed since back then. Yes, the big city was thrilling and I loved it, but I always wound up looking back here. I missed the quiet and lying under the stars just because we could. I missed the fresh air and," he stopped to laugh, "I even missed those nosy busybody gossips in town."

Then his smile faded, and he continued in a softer tone. "I missed my family, and I missed you. The big city had a lot of stuff, but it didn't have the most important things."

He dipped his head, eyes open and genuine. "I'm sorry it took me this long to figure that out."

Somehow this apology sank deeper than his previous one. Maybe because it was acknowledging what could have been if he hadn't left?

I don't know, but it burned, and I had to look away before tears blurred my vision. "What's done is done, there's no need to feel sorry about

it,” I said, my tone closed off, and he sighed.

“There’s every reason to be sorry about it, but I can see you want me to drop this, so I will. But Cecilia?” He looked me in the eye before saying the rest. “I’m here to stay, and I’m going to prove that to you, no matter how long it takes.”

A faint humming hope wrapped around my heart, and the traitorous organ leaned into him as if reaching out. Before I could figure out what to say to all that, a throat cleared, and I spun to face it.

My heart hammered, adrenaline hitting in waves as I took in Cindy’s unimpressed look. She wasn’t angling it at me though; oh no, it was *all* for Sam.

He winced when he saw her, already bracing for what we both knew lay ahead as he nodded. “Hello, Cindy.” He said, and she scoffed.

“Not even in town a full week, and you’re already shooting your shot, I see. You lost your chance years ago, so you can damn well get that in your head now. I won’t let you hurt my friend again.” Her eyes were narrowed, venom all but oozing from her tone now as she watched him like a cat would a mouse.

He grimaced. “While you’re right to be protective, let’s get one thing clear. I don’t expect anything romantic from this. I fucked up before, and I get that. I’m not doing this in the hopes of things magically becoming how they used to be, because that’s stupid. I’m here because I want to be friends again. Nothing more and nothing less.”

Cindy’s eyes were steely as she stared him down, looking for even the slightest lie. Apparently, she was satisfied with what she saw because she nodded, losing the protective anger with a huff.

“Good. Did you apologize for being an ass yet? That’s usually a good start.”

I groaned, waving her off. “He has, multiple times, and while I love

that you're so protective, we really need to set healthy boundaries with this whole situation."

Because this could be decidedly unhealthy if it kept up. She was like the older sister I'd never had, which meant she occasionally crossed lines like one.

"I'm capable of deciding things for myself, and this is one of them. He's right that nothing more is going to come out of this, and it's my choice to be friends with him. Please, don't start threatening him again, okay? If we have a problem, then *we'll* handle it." I looked at her head on while I said this, needing her to see how serious I was.

She couldn't keep doing this.

After a minute, she nodded with a frown. "Alright, I'll butt out." She still shot Sam a particularly mutinous look, but thankfully didn't add a death threat on top of it.

Baby steps.

"Anyway, I only stopped by to see how you were doing. I heard there was an uptick in dogs?" She said, and I sighed, nodding.

"There has been. Sam actually just brought another one he found on his property."

Alarm flashed behind her eyes, and she raised a brow. "Oliver brought in the last few from *his* land. So all the most recent ones are coming from that area?"

Now she was looking at Sam again, confusion and the need for information clear. "Did he mention any of that to you?"

Sam tipped his head, scratching his cheek before nodding. "Yeah, once or twice. He said he and Jen found a litter of puppies, but they looked in rough condition. Covered in dirt and their own filth, skinny as all get out..."

He trailed off, his full attention on Cindy now. “Why? You think there’s a connection or something?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, I just think it’s weird that there are so many puppies being found near your guys’ properties. Usually we find one or two at most in a month, and they’re in town. But to find multiple litters in the same amount of time, and all *outside* of town?”

She didn’t clarify, and I didn’t need her to. I’d heard horror stories about things like this, and before I could think better of it, I asked. “You think there might be a puppy mill nearby?”

Sam jerked, but she just nodded. “Maybe, but I also might be overreaching. Coincidences *do* happen, after all, and if that were the case, wouldn’t we have found the adult dogs they cast off instead of the puppies they’d make money off of?”

That was true, and relief hit like a wave. We were probably overthinking on this one. Forcing the unease away, I smiled.

“That’s right, maybe someone from the city spread around that Oliver and Sam’s properties were a good place to leave puppies you didn’t want.”

It wouldn’t surprise me.

The air relaxed from the tension that’d been building, and Cindy hummed. “People are awful enough for that.” Shaking the entire topic to the side, she pulled me into a one-armed hug and smiled. “Let me know if you need any help with the dogs. You know I’m a sucker for them.”

With that she left, leaving Sam and I alone again. He stared out the window, amusement painting his features. “I guess I should keep puppy food on hand in case this becomes a common thing. Any suggestions?”

I automatically rattled off a few brand names, my attention tugging back to the puppy he’d brought in. It was in good condition, its coat clean, and nothing about it set off any radars, but something was digging under my skin.

Ever since Cindy mentioned her puppy mill suspicion, my hair had stood on end. It was nearly impossible, *definitely* improbable something like that was happening in a small town like this, but the possibility kept pulling at me.

Maybe I'd bring it up to Neal later. As acting sheriff, he'd probably know what signs to look for. It was probably nothing, but if it made me feel at least a bit better about this whole thing...

"Hey, you alright over there? You look lost in thought." Sam said, dragging me back to the present. I nodded, choosing my words carefully.

"I'm considering telling all of this to Neal. Cindy's right that it's probably nothing, but now I'm not going to be able to stop thinking about it until I mention it to him."

Puppy mills were awful; I'd seen enough articles and pictures on the internet. They usually had dozens of dogs in a tight space; the rooms they were held in—if they were inside at all—were trashed. They *lived* in their own feces, not to mention the poor mothers who had to constantly deal with the strain of being pregnant and giving birth.

My heart burned for them.

Sam didn't brush off my concern; instead, he straightened, pulling out his phone. "You want me to stop by, since I'm the one who found the puppy? I can put in a call to Oliver and tell him to do the same, too."

I blinked, taken aback by how serious he was despite this probably just being paranoia on my part. "You don't have to do that..." I said, and he shook his head.

"I don't, but you're not the only one who is unsettled by this. I've seen, though not firsthand, how awful those things are. If there's even the slightest chance I'm near one, I want the sick monsters behind it shut down."

His tone rang with righteous anger, and my heart tripped. Another thing I'd fallen for him over was his sense of justice. Like any other young

adult, it hadn't been fully formed yet, but when it came to things like this, he'd always had a set stance, and nothing in the world would move him from it.

Forcing down the old admiration, I nodded. "Then I'd appreciate it. Hopefully, we're both wrong, though."

He grunted his agreement and then typed out a message on his phone. Once done, he faced me. "Oliver's in the know, and I'll head to the sheriff's office now. Can you keep me updated on that puppy? If no one claims him by the end of the month, I will."

I bobbed my head, watching the hard line of his shoulders as he walked out. He stopped in the doorway, looking back over his shoulder and speaking. "It was good to see you again, Cecilia. Maybe we can go out to lunch soon?"

Hesitance and hope warred in his tone, and I bit my lip. It was a bad idea. I was already fighting not to fall for him again, but I couldn't very well say that. He wanted to be friends, that's all, and I would have to keep reminding myself of that every time we were together.

I pulled in a breath to refuse, but when I met his eyes, the same ones I'd stared into for hours on end, my willpower crumbled.

"Sure. There aren't many things different since you left, so we can go to one of our old favorites."

He smiled, nodding. "Of course." Then he left and I leaned back on the counter, massaging between my eyes.

I hoped I wasn't making a mistake with this, because the last thing I needed was another heartbreak.

Chapter 4

It'd been weeks since Sam stopped by the shelter, and no one had come to claim the puppy. I'd even checked the lost and found pages for the next few towns over just to be safe, but no.

For all intents and purposes, the puppy he'd found didn't belong to anyone.

Today he'd planned to stop by for a visit, but the last thing I'd expected when he walked through the door was the bundle of blankets that nearly filled his arms and the worried scowl curling his lips. I'd only needed to take one look at him before I was clearing off the table in the back for him to put his load down on.

The blankets parted, showing what looked to be a golden retriever; only unlike his puppy, this one was older.

I gently stroked a hand through her fur, grimacing at the stench and filth clinging to it. "Poor thing," I said under my breath as I gently checked her over for injuries. There were none, thankfully, but when I got to her lower half, my stomach dropped.

Her chest was swollen, all her breasts painfully inflamed, and when I gently traced one, the heat pouring off it sickened me. She probably had an infection or something.

My stomach rolled, and I shook my head. "We're going to need a vet for this one." He nodded, moving to pick up the dog again, only to pause when she gave a pitiful whine.

I could all but see his heart crack, and he looked my way with a frown. "Can we call them here?"

I stroked a hand through the dog's fur and nodded. "I know the vet and she won't mind." Beatrice always had the animal's best interest at heart, and now was no different. The call was quick and in what felt like a blink, Beatrice herself was walking through the doors, eyes soft when they landed on the dog.

Her short blond curls bounced as she walked and by the time she reached the table, her eyes were locked into professional mode.

"What happened?" She asked, and I gave her what little information I had, then turned to Sam.

He grimaced. "I found her on my property. She was limping pretty badly and whining up a storm. It's the only reason I even heard her."

Beatrice's lips pressed into a thin line, and she nodded. "Cecilia, call the sheriff."

My stomach plummeted even as I pulled out my phone. "You think she's part of a puppy mill, don't you?"

She blinked, surprised that I'd guessed, but I only shrugged.

"We've had our own suspicions, and even Neal said he wanted to look into it more. I actually meant to call him earlier and see if he'd found anything new."

Beatrice nodded again. "She was definitely a breeder, poor baby. By the looks of it, I'd say they started her too young, and it's now taken its toll on her. You're supposed to wait until a golden retriever's third heat before breeding her, so roughly when she's two years old. If I had to guess, they didn't even wait half that time."

And just like that, my heart tore itself to shreds.

Crouching at the dog's head, I stroked her ears, watching as her eyes slid shut with a sigh. "People have been awful to you, but no more. I'm bringing you home after this." I said, then I paused, remembering the puppy

Sam had brought in before.

Turning to him, I asked. “Do you think the puppy you brought in before was hers too?”

He frowned, shrugging. “He looked about a month or two old.”

Beatrice nodded. “Then he probably is, because that’s roughly how long ago this girl was pregnant.”

Sam straightened his face into a mask of lethal protectiveness. “Whoever did this better hope I never meet them. We’ll see how they fare against someone who can fight back.”

I almost wanted to see that, but I shook the blood thirst to the side. Instead, I focused on the dog. “Do you want to adopt the mother *and* the puppy?”

To be honest, I kind of wanted to take them in, but he’d found them and already had dibs on the male. I’d prefer the two were together if possible.

He looked my way, considering something, and then shook his head. “While I have plenty of land for them to roam around, you obviously want the mom. So how about this, we each take one, and we plan regular play dates for them?”

Well, that did sound nice.

I nodded, focusing back on Beatrice as she stepped away while wiping her hands. “I’ll need to bring her into the clinic to do a full examination, not to mention fix what I can. Do you want me to do that now while you guys talk to the sheriff?”

Sam and I shared a long look, an entire conversation passing in the span of a blink, and then he spoke. “Yeah, I’d appreciate that. Can you leave, or should I ask Neal to come here, Cecilia?”

I snuck a glance at the clock and sighed. “I still have half my shift, so

it'll have to be the latter.” He didn't bat an eye, moving out of the room to make the call. Once he was gone, Beatrice shot me a loaded look.

“So...you and Sam again?”

I bit back a groan. “Don't even start. We're friends, that's it.”

She snorted, giving me an incredulous look. “I saw the way you two stared at each other; that isn't just friends. Besides, didn't I hear a rumor that you two went on a date?”

Ah, the good old gossip mill, causing me problems as always.

“No, he asked me to go out with him as *friends*, but we haven't had time yet.” I stressed the word ‘friends’ and Beatrice hummed, clearly not believing me.

“The chemistry between you two has always been impressive, and you're telling me that you're going to go on a date and nothing is going to happen?”

Doubts poked at me, and I fought to push them away. “Beatrice, drop it. I don't want to be hurt like that again.”

Sympathy warmed her eyes even as she looked in the direction Sam had left with a shake of her head. “Honestly, I don't think he'd do it, Cecilia. I know it hurt you when he left before, that's more than understandable, but Sam has changed. Anyone can see it. While I'm not saying to force yourself into anything, if you have the feelings...”

She let it trail off, and I sighed. “If I agree to at least consider it, will you drop the subject?”

A nod and she spoke. “Yes, now let's focus on the dog before loverboy comes back.”

I shot her a sideways glare at the ‘loverboy’ comment, but said nothing as Sam breezed through the door.

“Neal should be here in no time. Apparently, he has more information on this whole mess, too.”

I could only imagine what he’d found, and nerves rattled through me. I nearly jumped out of my skin when Sam put a hand on my shoulder, his eyes soft with understanding as he soothed.

“I know, but it’ll be fine. If this is a puppy mill we’ll get it shut down and bring the person behind it to justice. You’re not alone in this, Cecilia.”

That helped ease the knot of tension building in my chest and I relaxed, if only a hair. “Thanks,” I said, looking away when his intense stare bore into me like a drill.

Beatrice’s words threw gasoline on the fire I’d been trying to douse until now, and I just knew it was going to be awful to smother it later.

Cursing her to myself, I changed the subject before Sam could realize something was off. He’d always been scary perceptive when it came to me—the day he left aside—and the last thing I needed was for him to see the turmoil screaming through me.

Thankfully, Neal pulled into the driveway not long after, his face set in a severe frown that wiped any thoughts of infatuations away.

He helped Sam lift the dog into Beatrice’s SUV, then faced us with a nod. “Alright, before we jump into this, I’ll tell you what I found out.”

I tensed, nerves stretching thin as he ran a hand through his hair. “Any doubts we had before are gone now. This is definitely a puppy mill.”

I deflated, wishing more than anything he was wrong. If there was a full mill nearby, more dogs like the golden retriever were in pain. I could only imagine the place they were probably housed...

Sam’s hand curled around mine, dragging me out of my spiral and to the present as he squeezed. I held on tighter, desperately needing the anchor as Neal continued.

“After I started having suspicions I did a few patrols out near Oliver and Sam’s places. It took a while, but I did find a cabin near them. It’s mostly tucked into the woods, hidden from nearly every angle, and if I hadn’t been trying to find it, I wouldn’t have.”

He shook his head. “I’ll be going back with a warrant just to be safe, but after we clear the property of potential threats, I’ll need your help, Cecilia. Those dogs will have to go somewhere.”

I nodded even as my stomach rolled. Did I even have enough food and beds for them all? What about room? The puppies would be adopted quickly, especially if we reached out to the community with what happened, but the adults were another story.

Apparently Sam was thinking much the same thing, because he cleared his throat. “We could also bring them to my place? I have enough room, and we can set up an area for them outside until they’re adopted.”

That would work.

My mind jumped into running numbers as Neal nodded. “I’ll ask around the community and see about donations of dog food and things like that. The warrant is already in process and once I have it, I’ll let you know.”

The last bit was to me.

I leaned into Sam a bit for support, even as I agreed. “I’ll try to be ready.”

It was going to be horrific, probably nightmare fuel, and I was *far* from ready. Sam’s gaze bore into me for a long minute, and then he asked.

“Neal, would you mind giving me a call, too, when you’re ready to clear out the dogs? I want to help.”

He tipped his head. “I was going to do that anyway. We’ll need all hands on deck when we handle that mess. I’ve seen puppy mills before, and it isn’t for the faint of heart.”

Yup, I was definitely going to have nightmares after this.

The rest of the conversation was quick, with Sam explaining how he found the golden retriever, and then Neal left again after promising to update us when it was safe to go into the cabin.

Once it was just us, I leaned back on the table and shuddered. “I have no idea how I’m going to hold it together when we get there. I hate seeing animals suffering, and if even half of them are in the condition *she* was...”

I’d be too busy crying my heart out to be of any use.

Sam hovered at my side, his arm lifted as if to offer a hug even as he awkwardly stood there, unsure what to do.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ll probably be right there with you.” He said and I eyed his arm, knowing deep down that I shouldn’t get closer even as I curled against him.

It was like coming home and I melted into it, desperately needing the comfort as he tucked me closer. His chin rested on my head, and he continued with a sigh.

“We’ll find who’s behind this, but first, we need to get those animals out of there. It’s fine to cry, I’ll curse enough for both of us. We’ll get them to safety, bring them to my house, and settle them in. Then we can focus on getting them adopted. The town will probably jump on them when what happened hits the news. We’re all a bunch of bleeding hearts here.”

I couldn’t very well comment; I was already bonding with the mother golden retriever...

Letting myself soak in the comfort of his touch for just a minute longer, I pushed away reluctantly. “If we’re going to be doing this, we should probably start planning everything we’ll need now. We have no idea how many dogs there’ll be, but I’m guessing a lot. We’ll need some kind of pen for them all?”

I stopped, looking at him now as he shrugged. “The hardware store gets crates in occasionally. I could probably use the wood from those to make a pen.”

Good, one thing down. “Neal said food would be handled through donations, which takes a load off. The shelter has an app where we post pictures of the dogs and their bios. We could put them there to try to get them adopted?”

He hummed. “That’s a good idea. I don’t think the adults are going to get adopted easily though, and we’ll also have to be sure none of them are aggressive.”

I didn’t even want to consider that, but I pulled out my phone and started making notes. Thankfully we had Beatrice to help check their physical conditions, so that was another weight off.

“We’ll need beds for them to sleep in, enough blankets to go around, toys...” I typed as I talked, and Sam added in.

“Toys aren’t a must-have right now since most of the puppies will get adopted quickly. After we get them settled, then we can focus on toys and treats.” Then he gently nudged my side teasingly. “I happen to remember the treats you used to bake for my parents’ dog and how much he loved them.”

Warmth trailed over my cheeks, and I huffed. “I love baking, whether it’s for humans or dogs, and teasing aside, I’ll definitely be making a bunch of treats for them all. They’ve been through enough; they deserve as much happiness as I can give them.”

He nodded, though an amused smile twisted his lips. “You’re going to spoil every last one of them rotten.”

I didn’t bother arguing that. Instead, I shrugged. “Yeah, probably. But I happen to know you’ll be right there with me, giving out belly rubs.”

He was just as likely to spoil them, just in different ways.

He grinned, pulling out his phone. “Of course, and with them living with me, I’m sure I’ll never get anything else done.” After a second, he put his phone away and spoke. “I just updated Oliver on all of this. He said he may be interested in at least one dog, though Jen may increase that number by a lot when he tells her.”

I didn’t really know Jen that well, since she’d only come to town less than a year ago, but I already knew we’d get along great. Making a note to try to talk to her more after this whole mess was handled, I put my phone away and sighed.

“There’s so much we’ll have to do.”

He didn’t dispute that; instead, he leaned on the table beside me with a nod. “Yeah, but it’ll be worth it. I can also ask around at work and see if anyone wants to adopt one. The town is pretty good about banding together for things like this, so it wouldn’t surprise me if even the adults found homes by the end of the month.”

That may be a bit optimistic on his part since there were still dogs in the shelter that hadn’t been adopted despite being here over a year, but who knows? We could hope, at least.

Sneaking a glance at the clock, I sighed. “It’s time to close.”

I still had a mountain of things to get done, and Sam must have sensed that because he offered. “Do you want help with anything? Beatrice told me it’d be at least tomorrow before we can pick up our new golden friend, so I’m free if you need an extra set of hands.”

He added on with a nod to where the puppy waited. “I’ll give it a bit longer before I claim him, just in case.”

Usually I’d refuse the help, but with all the excitement, I’d fallen behind on my daily tasks. Offering a tired smile, I nodded.

“If you’re sure, I’d appreciate the help. I’ll handle cleaning out the kennels if you can wipe down everything out here. Nothing fancy, just a rag

and some cleaning agent.”

He nodded, taking the items when I offered them and moving toward the front counter to start. With that handled, I made for the kennels and tried to focus on anything but what awaited.

Whatever we were going to see was sure to be branded into my nightmares for a long time to come. At least I'd have Sam, though...

Chapter 5

My nerves all but screamed as I shifted in my seat, the cramped truck almost making me claustrophobic the longer I was in it.

Sam sat beside me, his bulk pressed against the truck door in an attempt to give me more space. I appreciated it, but there wasn't really a lot of room to work with here.

Usually it wouldn't matter, but I was already on edge, thanks to where we were going. Neal had called earlier—thankfully it was my day off, so I'd been home—and told me the news. He'd gotten the warrant, and the cabin was cleared out of people.

It was time to go in and rescue the dogs.

My stomach knotted, sweat building along the back of my neck as icy dread gripped my heart. What condition would they be in?

If my new golden friend was any indication, the answer was *not good*.

I'd finally settled on a name for her, so at least there was that.

Honey seemed to like it, and Sam had shaken his head when he'd heard it.

Sounds just like you to name her that.

Heat crawled over my cheeks even now at the amused and fond look he'd shot me.

Forcing that to the side, I took a deep breath and steeled my nerves. We'd dropped off Honey with Beatrice for another check-up before Neal stopped by to bring us to the cabin. When I'd asked about the small truck and

how we were supposed to fit so many animals, he'd just said there were a few others waiting to help transport the dogs.

That was good, because if this truck was all we had to work with, it'd take us all day. It barely fit Sam and me in the back as it was...

His arm brushed mine again, and he grimaced. "Sorry, I'm trying..."

He trailed off and I smiled, patting his arm in what I hoped was a soothing way. "It's fine. It's not like there's a lot of space back here and you're big. It's normal."

Though being this close was hell on my restraint. Over the past week, we'd spent even more time together than before with all the planning and preparing for the dogs. It was fun, just being around him, but with every day that passed I slid that much deeper into what I swore I would never touch again.

The infatuation that I'd done my best to bury over the years stayed stubbornly alive, refusing to fade no matter how much I tried to force it away.

I'd replayed the pain of his leaving so many times now that I knew everything down to the tiniest shift in his expression, and yet I could *feel* myself slipping. Wasn't the first heartbreak enough?

Was I really determined to have round two with this man?

Frustration burned to the surface before I shuffled it away. Now wasn't the time to be thinking about this. There were dogs who needed saving, and this would still be here later to overthink.

Of course, when the car pulled to a stop outside of a cabin, Sam and my issues were the last things on my mind.

Climbing out, I took in the building, every inch of it adding to my unease.

There was a rickety fence around the outside with a freshly patched

hole on the bottom. If I had to guess, that was where all the puppies had been escaping out of before finding their way to Oliver and Sam's properties.

The house itself didn't look in too bad of a condition from the outside, but even from several yards back, the smell hit me like a truck. Urine and feces, the scent forming a cloud around the house until it was all I could do not to gag.

Sam grimaced, breathing through his mouth as Neal nodded. "Brace yourselves; it gets worse when we get inside."

I just bet it did.

Copying Sam and breathing through my mouth, I followed Neal in.

And what met my eyes shattered my heart on the spot.

It opened into a standard house with the living room front and center. It branched off into several other rooms, but I couldn't focus on anything but the horrifying sight in front of me.

There were half a dozen cages in this room alone, each of them holding at least one litter of puppies. Each cage had a threadbare blanket and bowls for food and water that I could see desperately needed cleaning.

The puppies scrambled all over each other when we got close, wiggling happily as if they weren't in some of the worst conditions possible. Tears were already burning my eyes, but when I saw the next room over, where the *adult* dogs were, I pressed a hand to my mouth to muffle any sound I might've made.

The monsters behind this had shoved the females into tiny cages with barely enough room to turn around. I could see injuries on them from more than just birth, a few smatterings of blood in their fur, and even from here, I could see how tired all of them were.

And some were still pregnant, their bellies heaving with every breath.

Whoever did this to these dogs had a special place in hell.

Kneeling next to the nearest cage, I blinked back the tears and gently pressed the back of my hand forward. A German shepherd sniffed it, licking weakly before whining. Sam appeared at my side, kneeling with sympathy and anger working over his features.

“Here, I got it.”

It only took him a second to finagle the cage open, and we each inched backward to give the shepherd room. She didn’t try to leave at first, eyeing each of us warily, and I reached inside my pack for the treats I’d made earlier.

Holding one out, I cooed. “It’s okay. I know you don’t have reason to trust people, but that’s over now. We’re going to bring you somewhere safe, I’m going to get you all clean, and then I’m going to spoil every last one of you rotten with treats.”

The shepherd lifted her head, inching out enough to take the treat. Moving backward until I was a few feet away from the cage, I held out another. “Come on,” I said, and she got up with a grunt, limping out of the cage to take it.

I stroked between her ears, cringing internally at the grime that wiped off on my hands. A bath was definitely in order, for all of us.

The shepherd relaxed after a minute, seemingly content to receive pets and treats while puppies were taken from their cages around us and brought out of this hell hole.

When it was only the adults left, Sam rose, waving for me to stay down.

“I’ve got some treats you gave me earlier, so I’ll work on getting the adults into the vehicles. You should stay here.”

I shook my head even as the urge to agree rose. What I’d seen so far

was awful, and we hadn't even found any bodies yet. I knew they were here, I could smell the lingering rot of death, and without a doubt when I saw *that* I would be a sobbing heap.

But I was here to help, not cower.

But when I went to stand up, he put a hand on my shoulder and frowned. "Cecilia, you're shaking. I know you want to help them, but don't you think you can do that more by comforting the ones we bring out instead of giving yourself nightmares?"

My will crumbled and I slumped, stroking the shepherd's head that had shifted into my lap. "It's not fair to dump it all on you. We both know what's waiting further in, and you're going to be just as affected as I am."

He loved dogs like I did and seeing them in such condition—those that were alive anyway—was going to be horrific.

Still, he only nodded. "I'm going to be angry, and sad, and ready to puke when I see what comes next. You're not wrong about that, but I'm also physically strong enough to carry the dogs out of there. Most of them probably won't be able to walk. I adore you, woman, but don't do this to yourself for no reason."

I hadn't thought about that.

Focusing on the head in my lap, I nodded. "Okay."

Remembering the sheer amount of work that waited ahead of us, I added on. "But when we get to your house, I'm cleaning every last one of these babies and making enough treats that they'll be full of them."

His lips curled into a smile, and he nodded. "That's fine. I'll help, too. Until then, can you lead that one outside?"

I hummed my agreement, watching as he squared his shoulders and visibly braced for what waited. Then he disappeared further into the house, Neal taking his place at my side with a disgusted shake of his head.

“It’s a good thing you’re not going in there, Cecilia. I’ve seen some bad things in my years, but this takes the cake. Let’s get you and this little lady out of here. If you want to help, you can bring the first round of dogs to Sam’s house while I work with him to clean this place out.”

Happy to have a goal and a job, I nodded, standing while gently coaxing the shepherd to follow me. “Come on, let’s get you home.”

She limped behind me, and when we finally got outside again, I took a deep lungful of air. He’d been right that it was worse inside. I’d be ecstatic to leave this place and never come back.

Just as I got the first batch of dogs loaded up and as comfortable as they’d be for now, Neal stopped me, his face a mask of wariness.

“Before things get hectic, you need to know this. The person this property originally belonged to died a long time ago, and there was no descendant to give it to. When we first showed up, there was only one person here, and they fled before we could catch them.”

My stomach rolled. “So the person behind this is still out there and can start it again.” I said, and Neal nodded.

“Yes, but now we know what signs to look for though. I’m telling you this because I want you to be careful.”

A new wave of dread hit as I realized what he meant.

“You think the person behind this might come after us?” I asked and Neal shrugged, running a tired hand through his hair.

“I don’t know, but I’m not willing to take any risks. You said you adopted a dog? Good, that’ll be another layer of protection.” He offered a sympathetic look, then stepped back, nodding to my car.

“You should get going. We’ll still be here when you’re done.”

Swallowing past the unease now clogging my throat, I nodded and

got into the car. I hadn't considered that we could be targeted when we started this whole thing. It didn't change the situation, of course; even if I'd known I still would have insisted on making sure it was handled, but it hit me all at once just how dangerous this was.

The puppy mill was already decently sized and for it to grow so quickly, the person behind it must have been making big money off of it.

God, it was such an awful thought to consider.

Shaking the entire thing to the side, I looked back in the rearview at the first round of dogs I'd be bringing to Sam's house. They all looked tired, but soon those looks would disappear. We'd make sure they had the lives they should have from the start.

Chapter 6

It took hours to get all the dogs safely tucked into the pen Sam and I made. It was large enough that they could all run around comfortably with a 'porch' area overhead to protect them from the rain and sun. The hope was that we'd get them all into loving homes sooner rather than later, so with any luck, they wouldn't be there too long.

Beds lined one side of the pen, and I watched as the dogs settled into them one at a time. The puppies had their own area to give the exhausted mothers a break, and as I stared out at the two separate pens, my heart twisted.

They were safe now, but there was still so much to do.

Sam ambled over, his hair wet from the shower he'd insisted on the second he'd come back. I couldn't blame him, because I'd be taking one after I finished cleaning the dogs.

He looked out over them, his mouth pulled into a tired frown. "Maybe I shouldn't have showered yet..." He mumbled and I shook my head, nudging his side toward the house.

"You did your part; let me do mine," I said, not wanting him to exhaust himself anymore. He'd insisted on me not going any further into the cabin, but now it was my turn to take care of him.

He looked ready to argue, but I pushed against his side pointedly. "Sam, you just finished dealing with hell on earth. If our positions were switched you'd be tying me to the bed and insisting I stayed out of it."

A beat passed, then he gave in with a sigh. "Alright, alright. There'll be no tying needed." Under his breath he added, "Unless you ask nicely, of course."

It took my tired brain a second to figure out what he meant, then heat slapped over my cheeks. He must have realized what he said, too, because he cursed, running a hand over his face.

“Damn it, I’m sorry. I’m tired and-.”

I waved him off, knowing he didn’t mean anything by it. We used to tease like that all the time, and even I had to remind myself sometimes that it wasn’t the same.

It didn’t make the ache in my chest go away, but I forced a smile through it. “I know, and I don’t hold it against you. Some habits are harder to break than others.” His hand lingered on my arm, the skin tingling in response as I soaked it in.

I’d missed his touch more than I cared to think about and having it again, even if it was only as a friend, was doing things to me that I couldn’t afford to feel.

My heart did a spin when his thumb rubbed small circles on my arm and I barely caught myself from leaning into it.

I needed to focus on something else *now*.

Gently pulling away, I nodded to the puppies and cleared my throat past the sudden tightness. “If you want you can clean them off? Puppies make everything better, though now that I think about it, they’ll probably be more tiring.”

He looked dead on his feet, but he shook his head. “That’s fine, I’ll get them clean so you can focus on the adults.”

Well, the adults that were here. We’d already dropped off the injured ones with Beatrice, and it’d be a few days before we heard back on all of them. The woman was a saint, and I’d be making her a gift basket of baked goods after this.

Putting that to the side for now, we each focused on our tasks, my

mind occasionally wandering to the skin of my arm that still tingled. If this was any indication, keeping things strictly friendly between us was going to be even harder than I imagined...

Washing the dogs took less time than I thought, since most of them too tired to do anything but cooperate, and when I stepped back from the last of them, I looked over to where Sam sat with the puppies.

Most of them were clean, but now he was wrestling with the last batch. One puppy in particular was worming its way out of his hold to run around, occasionally shaking to send suds everywhere.

Sam was patient though, gently pulling the puppy back to him each time it ran, an amused smile tugging his lips despite the exhaustion all but pouring off him.

When it escaped again, I scooped it up and settled on the ground next to Sam. "I'll hold him still if you clean him?" I offered, and he nodded.

"The rest of his siblings were content to behave, but he's a rascal."

I couldn't help it, I smiled. "Sounds like he'll get along great with your puppy." After we'd confirmed that the puppy and mother were in fact from the puppy mill and didn't belong to anyone, Sam had made it official that the golden puppy was his.

With everything happening lately, we hadn't had a chance to get the poor thing settled in his house, but hopefully after we finished this, we'd do that.

Sam hummed, "I'll have to pick him up from the shelter tomorrow. I got his bed and everything ready."

I raised a brow. "Do you have a name picked out yet?"

He shrugged. "I was thinking Jesse. What do you think?"

I couldn't help it, I teased. "I like it, though I'm surprised you gave

him a human name. I half expected you to go with something like Captain.”

He rolled his eyes. “That’d be your naming skills, not mine. I tend to prefer giving animals regular names instead of objects.”

I couldn’t very well comment since I’d named my dog Honey, though I’d meant it more as the nickname than the food.

When the puppy in my lap was finally clean I let him go, watching as he bounded over to his siblings and shook. Sam snorted, eyeing each of us with an amused smile.

“Looks like I’m going to need a second shower, but you can go first. I at least have the worst of that place washed off.”

I didn’t argue. After what we’d seen today, I desperately needed to wash away the disgusting feeling clinging to my skin. I stopped a few steps away when I realized an issue with the plan.

“I don’t have extra clothes,” I said, and he shrugged.

“You can use one of my shirts if you want?” Then he stopped, hesitation and uncertainty clear. “Or is that crossing a line?”

I bit my lip, considering that. *Was* it crossing a line? I used to steal his shirts even before we were together, so maybe it wasn’t?

But that was before we’d broken up.

The silence stretched for a minute, then he shook his head. “I’ll drive you home so you can shower and change in peace.” He grimaced when he stood, a series of pops sounding through his back as he rubbed below his eyes.

He was the picture of tiredness, and when he moved as if to grab his keys despite the slight slump to his shoulders, I made my decision.

“It’s fine. I used to wear your shirts before we were a couple, so it’s okay now, too.”

I didn't want him driving in this condition, and the only way to be sure he didn't was to just use one of his shirts for now. My car was at my house still since Neal had picked me up from there, and I didn't work tomorrow.

We could worry about dropping me off later.

He hesitated, eyeing me carefully now. "Are you sure? I don't want to make things tense between us."

Neither did I, but we were both adults, and we'd agreed things wouldn't go anywhere between us. It'd be *fine*.

"It's okay. Maybe we can even turn it into a movie night like we used to?" I asked, and he nodded, his smile coming back as he put his keys away again.

"That sounds good. I'll get everything set in the living room while you get your shower." He said and I walked past him, catching the faintest hint of his body wash as I did.

I'd have to see which brand he used because that scent was amazing.

Thankfully he'd given me a basic tour of the place while we were getting the pen set up, so I knew where to go. The bathroom was done in all neutral colors, the dull gray and white soothing as I stripped and started the hot water.

Eyeing his body wash, I shrugged internally and squeezed some onto my hand before scrubbing the worst of the day away. The hot water pulled at the tension in my muscles and by the time I stepped out of the shower, I felt ten pounds lighter.

It was only after I got out though that I realized something. In my tired state, I'd forgotten to ask for his shirt before showering.

Running a hand over my face with a groan, I cracked the door open and called down the hall. "Sam?"

It took a few seconds before he poked his head out, his eyes immediately averting when he noticed where I was calling from.

“You forgot the shirt?” He asked, and I sighed.

“Yeah.”

He walked to his room, rummaging around for a minute before coming back out and offering a shirt and a pair of pants, his eyes still stuck to the opposite wall.

“I grabbed some drawstring pants. They’ll still be pretty big, but it’s something.”

I took them and smiled, ignoring the heat and embarrassment climbing through my cheeks. “Thank you. I’ll be out in a minute.”

He nodded before walking back to the living room. Once I was alone again, I shut the door and changed, turning slowly in the mirror. The pants were comically large on me, but after I rolled up the legs, they stayed in place. The shirt fell to my thighs, making it a nightgown, and the sight hit like a sledgehammer.

This sight used to be normal.

I used to wear his clothes around the house for no other reason than to watch the way his eyes burned with arousal, and now, staring in the mirror while knowing things were different...it ached.

I wanted things to be how they used to be. Back then, I would have stepped out of here and thrived off the way he couldn’t look away, but now I couldn’t enjoy it.

That was if he even reacted at all. It’d been years since we were together, and while it was obvious he hadn’t gotten a new partner, that didn’t mean he liked me anymore.

The thought hit harder than I expected it to and I forced a long, slow

breath to steady myself.

Damn it, Cindy was right, being friends with him wasn't working. It just made me want more than I could have. Sitting down, I rubbed between my eyes with a sigh. I'd landed myself in hot water now, hadn't I?

There was no guarantee he still felt anything for me and even if he did, I'd sworn I wouldn't go there to Cindy. Even without that promise, could I really take the chance that he'd leave later?

He seemed to have changed since I knew him, but by how much?

I didn't want to feel the rejection his leaving had caused ever again; it'd take me years to fully recover from it ,and even now it still twinged at times.

He said he came back to town because he realized the big city didn't have what he needed, but who's to say he wouldn't change his mind further down the line and want to go back?

Staring at my phone, I sighed, typing out a message to Cindy.

I need to talk to you soon. It's not bad, but my thoughts are too tangled, and I need someone to help me make them manageable again.

The response came in barely two minutes.

I can talk now, if you want?

I loved this woman. Sneaking a look toward the door, I considered it. He was still in the living room, a decent distance from the bathroom. While I could ask her to call me tomorrow, I wanted this mess out of my head now.

That works.

I replied, hitting the call button and listening as Cindy picked up on the first ring.

"It's about Sam, isn't it?" She asked and I cringed..

Running a hand through my hair, I sighed. “It is, but before you start, I need to tell you what’s going on. None of it is his fault, and he’s been nothing but friendly to me.”

It was vital to get that out now before she started sharpening her pitchfork.

She hummed to show she was listening, and I powered on. “You were right that just being friends with him is impossible. The longer I spend with him, the more I want things to go back to how they were. I want that, even though I know it can never happen.”

Thinking back to the horrors we’d seen a few hours ago, I continued. “Today we worked with Neal to go and clear out a puppy mill.” She hissed a breath through her teeth, and I continued on before she could interrupt. “We’re keeping the dogs at Sam’s place until we can get them adopted, but now I’m back in his house, wearing his clothes after a shower, and it just hit me all at once.”

Cindy sighed. “This was what I was worried about.”

I winced. “I know, but I really thought I could just keep things friendly.”

A beat passed before she finally asked. “Are you planning on reviving what you guys used to be?”

That was the golden question, wasn’t it?

Leaning back on the toilet, I dug deep to give her an honest answer. “I’m not sure. I want him, I know that much. I want things to go back to how they used to be, but they can’t, and things are messed up now. Can I really trust him not to leave again later when he gets bored of this town?”

When he gets bored of me.

I didn’t say that bit, but she must have caught it because she sighed. “I won’t say that’s not a possibility, Cecilia. As much as I want to believe he

wouldn't do it again now that he's back and seemingly content, I didn't see it coming the first time he did it, either. I don't want to see you shattered again."

What a coincidence! I didn't want to feel like that again, either.

Rubbing a hand over my chest where the ache never seemed to go away, I chose my words carefully. "I don't know what to do, Cindy. I can't just stop being friends with him now, but if I keep it up, I'm going to get hurt. There's no real guarantee he even likes me anymore!"

My volume picked up toward the end and I quickly lowered my voice again, not wanting him to hear. Cindy hesitated, a tension to the line making my hair stand on end.

"Cindy, why does that quiet sound like you know differently than I do?" I asked, and after a second, she groaned.

"I overheard Oliver and Jen talking once about Sam. Supposedly he's tried to date in the past but they've never been right, and he said it was because the women weren't you."

The words hit like a hammer and I bit my lip, taking them in slowly.

If Sam had actually said that then it sure pointed to him still liking me...

But what do I *do* with that!?

Groaning, I scrubbed a hand over my face. "What should I do, Cindy?"

Because I was at war with myself with no end in sight.

This time her answer took longer, and I almost checked if we'd been disconnected. Just as I was going to though, she spoke.

"Do you think he'd leave again? Out of everyone here, you've spent the most time with him since he's come back, so you're the best equipped to

answer that.”

Yeah, except I hadn’t seen him leaving the first time. I’d been wrong then, and there was nothing stopping me from being wrong now.

Pushing aside the doubts for just a moment, I considered it. Sam had grown up in the time he was gone, lost some of the brash impatience that’d lingered around him. He was calmer now, steadier, and deep down something told me that when he said he was here to stay, he meant it.

I wanted to believe that more than anything.

“I don’t think so, but I was wrong before and the idea of getting close, only to have it happen again...” I trailed off, and she continued it.

“It’s terrifying, I get that, but you already said that you aren’t going to be able to just be friends with him. You can’t walk away either.” A sigh heaved from the other side of the line. “As much as I want to tell you to avoid him and find someone better, you’re already tangled in this. So the question is, do you think it’s worth another shot or not?”

I didn’t even have to consider it, the resounding yes all but screaming through me the second the question left her lips.

“I do...but if this goes sideways, I’m going to be right back at square one, crying on your shoulder.”

She snorted. “Hopefully it won’t come to that, but if it does, I’ll be here.” A beat of silence passed, then she said. “So...you’ve made your decision then?”

I stared at the closed door as my resolve solidified. “Yeah, but I want to wait a bit, see if he’s still interested before throwing the option out there.”

For all I knew he didn’t want me anymore, and this whole little talk was for nothing.

She hummed, “As if that man could be anything else, but you’ll

figure that out in your own time. Later, Cecilia.”

I mumbled my goodbye before standing, straightening his shirt in the mirror, and taking a deep breath. One easy way to test if he was interested was to watch his reaction to what I was wearing. He’d always been *very* reactive when I wore his clothes, and that wouldn’t have changed with any luck.

Raising my chin a notch, I walked out with my head held high. I found Sam sitting in the living room, his shoes off and eyes on the television. A sports game was on it, but he turned when he heard me approaching.

“I know you don’t care for sports, but we don’t have to watch this. I was just filling the time-.” He stopped, eyes glued to me now as I watched his attention snap away from the game.

His throat bobbed and his pupils flashed wider, both signs I knew meant he was fighting arousal. When he shifted, adjusting himself as well, I had my answer.

He was interested physically, if nothing else.

It took him a minute to recover, but when he did a hot flush worked over his cheeks and he looked away. “Sorry, that isn’t how a friend is supposed to look at you.” He coughed, clearing his throat. “I forgot how dangerous you were in my clothes.”

The last bit was said quieter, as if he didn’t mean for me to hear it, and old affection drifted through me. Moving to sit next to him, I considered my new decision. There was no real time frame here, but when should I bring it up?

Sneaking a look at the exhaustion still faintly wafting off him, I knew tonight wasn’t the right time for it. Tomorrow, maybe, but not tonight. We were both tired, and we’d seen downright awful things at that cabin. That wasn’t the right mood to be in for something like this.

So instead of commenting on what I heard, I leaned against his side

and snagged the remote. “Any preferences for what movie we watch?” I asked and he froze, uncertainty clear as he shook his head.

“Nope, that’s all on you. My taste hasn’t changed so...”

He trailed off and I nodded, making myself comfortable against his side before flipping through the streaming services. Once I settled on a movie, I let the day’s events hit, the ache in my everything threatening to drag me into sleep.

At some point I felt something warm and soft being tucked around my shoulders, but I was already too out of it to question it. The last thing I remembered was warmth encasing me; then I knew nothing.

Chapter 7

Sunlight warmed my eyelids the next morning, the brightness dragging me back to consciousness as I stretched. When a weight around me stopped the stretch midway, I dragged an eye open to take in the situation.

Apparently, at some point in the night, Sam had pulled me against him and wrapped both of us into a blanket. His arms were like steel around me, and his chin pressed against the top of my head. His breath brushed softly against my hair and as I took it all in, peace swept through me in waves.

I hadn't realized how much I'd missed this until now.

Leaning my cheek against his chest, I listened to the soothing rhythm of his heartbeat. If he agreed to start something between us again, we'd have to do this more often. When we first got together we'd been busy all the time, and things like this had been few and far in between.

If it were up to me, that'd be changing.

All good things must end though, and I mourned the loss of the moment when Sam started shifting. When he turned partially to the side and rubbed something stiff against my leg, all thoughts of mourning evaporated.

That'd been another thing I'd missed...

Pulling back, I listened as he rumbled out a groan, hips giving tiny twitches forward in a way I knew all too well. Apparently he was having a *good* dream. If it were years ago, I would wake him up just to continue it, but we still had a very important conversation to have before I could do that.

No better time than now, I guess.

Trailing a hand up his chest, I poked him lightly and spoke. "Sam."

His nose wrinkled, but he didn't wake up, his hips picking up their light rocking. This was going to be harder than I thought. "Sam, while I'm enjoying this, we have to talk first before it can go anywhere," I said, not at all surprised when he didn't react.

Alright, let's try volume then.

"Sam!" The third time truly was the charm because when I spoke, this time a good bit louder, it got his eyes open. He stopped moving his hips as he slowly took us in. I saw the second he realized what he was doing, the sleep haze evaporated from him, and pure panic took its place.

All but launching himself away from me—the blankets not letting him get far before he was clamped to my side again—he cursed.

"Sorry! I didn't mean to do that, which I'm sure sounds like a load of bullshit, but-."

He didn't look ready to stop anytime soon so I put my finger to his lips. He tried talking through it for a few seconds, then went quiet. Guilt and embarrassment painted his expression, and I shook my head with a smile.

"I didn't have a problem with it, aside from the fact we needed to have a talk before it went anywhere."

He blinked, digesting the words slowly, then his eyes widened to the size of dinner plates as he choked. "But wait, I thought you didn't want anything with me?"

Before I could explain the mess that was my emotions, he raced on. "Which is more than fair, given what happened."

When he looked ready to jump into another babble, I cut him off. "I'm going to try to explain this, but I'm going to need you to stop talking and let me," I said, watching as he snapped his mouth shut and nodded, a dumbstruck expression taking over as he did.

With him now quiet, I chose my words carefully.

“When you first came back, I told myself that I wouldn’t let anything happen between us because I didn’t want a repeat to happen.”

He winced, guilt coming back, but before he could say anything, I raced on. “But no matter how hard I tried to keep things friendly, there’s always a part of me that wants more. I know what being with you is like, and I miss it.”

More than I had words for.

His eyes softened and he nodded, muttering under his breath. “I miss it too, but I thought you wouldn’t be interested, so I wanted to have you in any way I could.”

Which was friendship.

I nodded, “I’m not going to lie and say I’m not still wary, because I am. I don’t think you’d leave again, but that’s the problem, I didn’t see it coming the first time either.”

He grimaced, taking one of my hands and squeezing lightly. “I won’t make excuses. What I did was wrong. I shouldn’t have tried that with you, and you did deserve better. I’m sorry.”

No excuses, no trying to justify why he left, just a heartfelt apology. He’d definitely grown up, and I wasn’t afraid to say I liked this side of him.

Leaning into him, I smiled. “Thank you. Though while we’re on the topic, what changed back then? I’m not trying to guilt you,” I added, “but it’s bothered me for years. Your need to leave town came from nowhere...”

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. “It was always there. It built slowly over the years and the longer it sat, the worse it got.” He looked out the window as he continued. “I love my family, and I would do anything for them, but between their constant hovering, the town’s gossips always whispering behind their hands about us, and not seeing a future for myself here, it peaked into...that.”

Twining our fingers, I used the touch as an anchor and asked. “What were the gossips saying that bothered you so much?” I hadn’t heard anything out of the ordinary that I could remember.

He scowled, brow dipping with old anger. “A bunch of small things, to be honest. You know that my parents weren’t married when they had me, and the busybodies *loved* comparing us to them, saying it was only a matter of time. I hated how they talked about you, how they talked about *us*. As if the only thing we had between us was carnal.”

His frown dropped into a self-deprecating smile. “Of course, then I went and blew up instead of just talking to you. I was an idiot, and we could have been together this entire time if I’d just-.”

I stopped him again, this time by kissing his cheek. When he didn’t seem ready to pick up the sentence again, I shook my head.

“There’s no use in blaming yourself or wondering about what ifs, what’s done is done. We’re here now and can make the best out of it.”

His eyes softened, and he nodded. “We can, but we should probably go over boundaries.” He flicked a glance down at his lap pointedly. “I’m still every bit as wrapped into you as I was back then, more so now if that’s possible, and having you pressed to me like this is destroying my restraint.”

Considering he still hadn’t softened, I believed it.

Forcing aside the hormones for now, I considered what he said. Boundaries: where should we put them to start?

“I don’t know about physical ones, but Sam?” I waited, making sure I had his full attention before continuing. “Please, if something bothers you in the future, tell me. Don’t let it fester like back then. I can’t help if I don’t know what’s going on.”

He nodded, his arm tightening around my waist as he did. “I will. I didn’t think I’d get the chance to feel this again, so I’m not going to screw it up twice.”

A knot eased in my chest at the certainty ringing through his tone. I'd probably still doubt and worry, but hearing it from him went a long way in soothing it. With that out of the way, I considered the tent in his pants.

"As for this..." I said, letting my hand linger near his groin. Before I could inch closer, his hand wrapped around mine, and he shook his head.

"We don't have to do anything about that."

How like him, trying to spare me from something I wanted. Wiggling my hand around to link our fingers, I teased him.

"Oh I know we don't have to, but I'll freely admit to wanting to." Letting my fingers linger just at the waistband of his sleep pants, I hummed. "Unless you'd prefer your own hand?"

He laughed, the noise choked as he shook his head. "You know I'll always choose yours over mine, but we only just started this thing between us. I don't want to rush it."

I raised a brow, curiosity prodding its way to the surface as I asked. "You're worried that if we jump into the physical things, it will fall apart again?"

He grimaced. "Yes, I know when we first tried all of this, you wanted more of the innocent touches. We never seemed to have a spare minute for them, but I want to do better this time around."

I could see where he was coming from, but I doubted it'd be an issue. Still, I left his groin alone for now, instead cuddling into him.

"We can have both innocent and intimate touches. I happen to remember your insistence to never leave early after sex because it made you feel bad." I said, smiling at the memory. He'd always made absolutely sure that no matter what was going on, if we slept together, he'd be at my side afterward.

We didn't do quickies. If there wasn't enough time for the cuddles

afterward, it didn't happen. I never told him how much I appreciated it before, but now...

Shifting to sit in his lap, ignoring the stiffness prodding me from below for now, I continued. "We can have this, Sam. If you want me, I'm still yours."

He groaned, hand drifting to rest under the hem of his shirt, his thumb brushing against my stomach.

"There's never been a time I've *not* wanted you, not once in the time we've been separate."

Warmth shot through my veins and I rolled my hips against him, relishing in the groan that rumbled through his chest. When he didn't move to reciprocate, I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed his throat.

The skin was warm, the subtle scent of his body wash drifting off him as I hummed. "Then have me."

This time his groan was twinged in defeat, and his will crumbled. His hands slid under my shirt, one trailing up to palm my breast while the other went down. Fingers pressed my underwear to the side, teasing with just the barest touch before sliding one knuckle deep.

My back arched, a moan vibrating low in me as he started a slow thrusting rhythm. Scissoring his fingers out, the stretch just on the edge of painful, he sighed into my skin.

"Feeling this is like coming home."

My arms tightened around his neck, and I leaned forward until our heads rested together. He opened his eyes and I smiled. "It feels the same to me." Sliding down to kiss his throat, I soaked in the warmth and salt of his skin, savoring the taste that was uniquely him.

His pace picked up and he twisted, rubbing against the nub at my entrance in time with his next slide. White sparked over my vision and I

leaned against him, already closer than I'd like. When he almost tipped me from his next thrust, I shook my head and lifted off his hand.

“I want to feel all of you.” I said, voice coming out wispy with need.

He stopped, pulling back to look me in the eye with hope and something I couldn't name. “Cecilia, you're strung tighter than a bow and already close. Did you not have anyone after me?”

Heat scorched my cheeks, but I nodded. “I tried dating, but it never turned out well. They...weren't you.”

His eyes softened and he kissed me, his tongue sliding out to twine with mine. When he pulled back again, he smiled. “It was the same for me.”

I'd hoped that was the case but had been too scared to ask. I wouldn't have held it against him if he'd slept with someone else, but relief washed over me that he hadn't.

We'd been each other's firsts and maybe, if we were lucky, we'd be the last as well.

Nestling further into his neck, I soaked in the moment before giving him enough room to tug at my pants. Stripping took hardly any time and in what felt like a blink, we were both nude. He looked about the same as he used to, with a few more muscles.

I trailed my hand over them, loving the way they twitched under my palm. His hands explored too, not going back southward. Instead they settled on my hips, pulling me over him until his tip brushed between my thighs.

Just before he lowered me, I stopped him with a laugh. “Forgetting something, Sam?”

He blinked, the lust fog over his eyes taking a minute to clear enough for him to groan. “Condom.” This wasn't the first time he'd almost forgotten and while I didn't mind usually—that's what the pill was for—I hadn't been taking it lately.

This time the condom was necessary.

What I didn't expect was for him to curse and pull away completely.

"Where are you going?" I asked, watching in stunned disbelief as he dragged on his pants despite the painfully obvious tent he sported.

He shot me a longing look, then shook his head. "To the store. I haven't slept with anyone since you, I don't have condoms."

Oh, well. I had a solution to that.

Snagging his arm, I pulled him back onto the couch and soothed. "Then we'll both go to the store later. For now, we can make do without."

He sucked in a deep breath, hands fisting against his side as he groaned. "Cecilia, we're playing with fire here."

I cut him off, tugging at his jeans pointedly. "No, we won't be because you're going to sit back against that couch, and I'm going to enjoy watching you unravel in my mouth."

He let me prod his pants back off even as he shook his head. "You wanted more-."

My heart squeezed that he cared so much, but it could wait. "I want you, but more can wait until we've been to the store. I'm not waiting that long."

He didn't fight, letting me press him back against the couch. Once he was situated, I wrapped a hand around his length, watching as a shudder traveled through his frame.

"Cecilia, I'm already on edge." He warned, and the pulse under my hand backed that up. Clear liquid beaded at his tip and I swiped a thumb over it, rolling it down over him languidly. Once he was covered, I gripped the base and slowly massaged upward.

His hands settled on my hips and he hissed, rolling upward into my

hand. Shifting to have better access, I hovered my mouth over him, watching as he opened an eye just in time to see me lick the tip.

His eyes all but rolled back at that, the skin under my fingers twitching in warning as I wrapped my lips around him and sucked. A hand wound into my hair, pressing lightly as I bobbed over him, tasting the faint twinge of salt.

The fingers woven into my hair tugged softly and I hummed, sinking another inch onto him.

He groaned, hips jerking upward in tiny thrusts that he couldn't hold back. I didn't want him to. It'd been a long time, and apparently he'd forgotten how much I liked this. I'd be reminding him in just a second.

Sinking all the way to the base, I swallowed, feeling my throat contract around him as he thrashed, wordless shouts strangling out of him as he let go of my hair and scrambled for something to hold onto. He settled after a minute, rolling deeper into my mouth on each thrust until I felt the familiar pulse that meant it was almost over.

Pulling back until just the tip stayed inside, I massaged the rest with my hands until he threw his head back and moaned a final time. Waves of him hit my tongue and I waited until he was finished before separating, dropping a kiss to his chest before cuddling against his side.

He was still upright, his length now soft in his lap as he recovered with heaving breaths. His head leaned on mine, the weight comforting as he cracked an eye open and chuckled.

“Good to know you still do that like you're trying to kill me.”

I shrugged, kissing his shoulder now. “You've never complained.”

This time he barked a laugh. “And I never will.” He opened his eyes, taking in my sharp nipples and flushed skin as he shook off the last waves of his climax. Heat rolled back into his eyes, and he dragged me down to lay flat on the couch.

Once done he hovered over me and paused, something softer sliding into place beside the molten heat in his gaze. “Every bit as gorgeous as I remember.”

Pleasure bloomed at the compliment and I leaned into him when he brushed a hand over my stomach. The angle was odd with us being on the cramped couch, and he must have come to the same conclusion because he grunted, picking me up and walking toward his room with a shake of his head.

“I’m not doing this by half, and that couch doesn’t have nearly enough room for what I’m going to do.” He said, and I didn’t comment, content to let him carry me wherever he planned. I almost mourned the lost moment when he set me down, but the soft sheets and smoldering look he leveled on me quickly shooed that away.

He loomed over me, already drifting downward with that wicked little grin that meant good things for me. When he hovered over my stomach, dropping a kiss teasingly, I shivered. The scratch of his stubble contrasted the dry skin of his lips and, when combined with the heat sluggishly pumping through my veins, it made for a lethal combo.

Every nerve ending sang as he left a trail of kisses down until he stopped at my inner thigh. The skin tingled in response to his proximity, and he smiled as if he knew that. He didn’t say anything though, instead sinking two fingers to the knuckle as his lips wrapped around the nub in sync.

I choked off a moan, both hands flying to his hair as he threw himself into it with gusto. Hot warmth twisted and rolled the bundle of nerves and his fingers crooked in time with it, stroking something swollen that shot sparks over my skin.

I rocked into him, chasing the feeling as he rubbed small circles into the bundle until it swelled, too. Everything south of my ribs was strung tight and ready to shatter, and when he gave one more suck, I couldn’t stop it.

Clamping my thighs around him, I rode out the pleasure as sound and

sight whited out to nothing but a dull buzz.

When I could think again, I opened my eyes to Sam's satisfied smile as he pulled me flush to him. "I'll be sure to repeat that a few times later. I can't go and lose my touch now, can I?" He purred next to my ear, and I shuddered.

"I doubt you could if you tried."

Considering the shiver still freely trailing through my legs? Yeah, unlikely.

He shrugged. "There's no such thing as too much practice." Then he tugged the blanket around both of us, cutting off the chill that inevitably followed. With the heat locked in and the content lethargy still swimming through me, I yawned.

"We'll need to go to the store later," I said, and he nodded.

"I'll make a list, but it can wait. Let's sleep for now. We can worry about everything else after we get some cuddles in."

To back that up he tucked me into his neck and wrapped his arms tight around me. Safety followed, sinking into my skin until I all but glowed with it.

Just like years ago, this was my safe place. Nothing could hurt me here, and feeling it again was like a dream.

Doubts threatened to chew to the surface, reminders that I'd felt this safe before he left, but I slapped them down. I wasn't going to hold that against him forever. He told me his reasoning, and while I wish things had been different, we couldn't change that.

We could make the present better, though.

Nestling into his throat, I soaked in the post-climax cuddles with relish. This right here was why I'd been hesitant to sleep with anyone else.

This quiet connection wasn't something I wanted with anyone but him, and it would have been a betrayal on my part to my hypothetical partner to sleep with them, then think of Sam during this.

Emotional cheating is still cheating, and I refuse to do that to anyone.

Now I could only be happy I hadn't. Yes, because I wasn't the type to hurt someone like that, but also because then I might not be feeling this again. If I'd found someone else, it wouldn't have been as scarily deep as what I feel for Sam. I would have stayed with the other person, but I always would have measured them against him.

No, it was better this way.

His calloused fingers trailed circles over my back, but just as I was about to slip into the best sleep I'd had in years, I dragged an eye open and asked. "Do you still like whipped cream?"

He hummed curiously, pulling back far enough to meet my eyes when he answered. "Yeah, why?"

I shrugged, giving a mischievous little smile. "I have plans involving it that you'll like." Then I shut my eyes, feeling more than hearing his guffaw.

"You can't just leave me on that, Cecilia! What are you thinking about?"

I shook my head, burrowing into his chest to hide my grin. "You'll see after we get home from the store."

He groaned. "Evil woman, you know I won't cut this short for it. Now I'll be curious all day."

I shrugged, kissing his chest with a smug smile. "It'll be worth it though."

He gave a fake grumble before settling over me again. "It better be.

I'm dragging you out of bed to go to the store in ten minutes.”

I snorted, knowing very well it would be at least thirty before we moved. He knew that too, because after a minute, he amended. “Fine, an hour. Then we'll go.”

That sounded more like it. “An hour it is.” I said.

It was three hours before we actually left the bed, and neither of us could bring ourselves to care.

Chapter 8

The store was thankfully calm today as Sam and I walked through it. We'd already grabbed the whipped cream in a spray can, his curious eyes following me every step of the way, and now we were just browsing.

The condoms were in the cart as well—we'd gotten those first so we couldn't forget—and now that just left whatever snacks we felt like grabbing while we were here.

Before I could ask if the dogs would need anything, another cart crashed into ours, and I winced. "Sorry, I wasn't looking where I was going," I said, looking at who I crashed into, only to do a double take when I saw Cindy.

She rolled her eyes affectionately, "You live in la la land, woman." Then her smile fell a hair as she looked at Sam behind me, her eyes trailing to the condoms before making their way back to us.

I hadn't had a chance yet to update her, and I felt Sam tense behind me. His arm around my waist turned to stone even as he pulled me closer, bracing for whatever Cindy had to say.

It was nothing I expected.

She scoffed. "Take it easy lover boy, I'm not going to maim you. She already mentioned she was considering getting back together with you, and I figured this was where this was going."

That was actually really tame from her.

Then her eyes narrowed and she added on, "If you hurt her again, I'm going to bury you in my backyard, though. That's a promise."

I should've seen that coming.

Thankfully, Sam didn't take offense. Instead, he nodded. "I'm not doing anything that might make her leave me, but in the hypothetical situation, I'll show up at your door for my ass kicking like a man."

Cindy nodded in approval, then faced me with that Cheshire grin. "You going to try my trick with whipped cream on him?"

Heat danced over my cheeks, but I nodded. "Yeah, that's the plan."

Sam groaned. "Now there are two women who know what's ahead of me while I don't."

Cindy just laughed at his playful whine. "Trust me, you're in for a *fun* night. Turn off your phone while you're at it. You won't be focusing on it anyway."

He raised a brow at her. "Do I at least get a hint?"

She snorted, "I'm sure you can figure it out if you try hard enough." Shifting her focus back to me, she smiled. "Good on you for remembering the condoms, though. I almost mentioned them before we hung up, but I got distracted. I've gotten caught up in the moment before and forgotten them, and the freakouts after just aren't worth it."

No, which is why I've always been insanely careful about such things. While Sam and I had talked about kids a few times, we'd wanted to wait. A good thing, given what'd happened before.

Shaking the topic to the side before it could sour my mood, I leaned back into Sam and smiled. "You're right on that one, but we should probably head out. We only just got the dogs settled at his place, and we still need to buy collars for them, not to mention set up profiles on the shelter website for each of them."

That would take a hefty chunk of time, but it'd be worth it. Some of the puppies had already been claimed, as I figured they would, and the rest would probably find loving homes by the end of the month. That still left the adults, and most of them hadn't been adopted yet.

Unfortunately, that was also as I figured. Most people passed by the older dogs, and it made my heart ache to see it.

Cindy nodded, waving us on. “Sure, sure. If you need help, you know where to find me.”

With that she walked away, leaving Sam and I to continue the shopping. Tugging him toward the collars, we grabbed a bunch of cheap ones and a few toys. Once we were done with that, he led the way back to the registers.

Thankfully it didn’t take an hour to get through that mess—the joy of shopping early before most people woke up—and we were on our merry way. Just as we got to the parking lot though, a familiar voice called and stopped us in our tracks.

“Cecilia?”

I turned, taking in the one who’d spoken.

It was Matt, one of the few attempts at dating I’d had after Sam, and thankfully not one of the catastrophic ones. He had medium brushed-back hair that was a near-perfect match for Sam’s, and his lips were pulled into a friendly smile.

Sam’s arm stiffened around my waist as he approached, something I noticed but didn’t have time to comment on as Matt stopped a few feet away from us and tipped his head.

“I heard rumors that you two were back together, but seeing it for myself is something else. So, you forgave him, huh?” He said, and I felt Sam shift uncomfortably, the topic still tender.

I didn’t know why Matt thought it was necessary to bring that up so easily, but I wasn’t having it. When he looked ready to open his mouth again, I leaned further into Sam’s side and glared Matt down.

“Yes, I did forgive him, and I’d appreciate you not bringing it up. It’s

not something either of us like talking about.” Especially considering I hadn’t even been that close to Matt, and for it to be the first thing he said...

His smile fell, confusion taking its place as he stepped back. “No need to come out with the claws, I was just curious if the rumors were actually true. You know I don’t usually listen to them without verifying the information for myself.”

That was true, and it was one of the things I’d liked about Matt. He never accepted something at face value until he’d had a chance to actually investigate it. The fact he did that all the time made any chance at a relationship between us minimal.

Now that I had Sam back, those odds dropped to zero.

Taking Sam’s hand—something I noticed helped with the tension all but screaming from his shoulders—I nodded. “You shouldn’t bring up a potentially sensitive subject, though.”

Matt rubbed the back of his head and shrugged. “Sorry.”

He wasn’t, not in the slightest, and that was another reason it never worked out between us. He had the subtlety of a bullhorn and his apologies were formalities, not genuine.

“We should be heading out. It was nice talking to you.” I said, not particularly feeling like it was nice, but knowing it was the polite thing to say.

He nodded, walking back toward his truck. “Right back at you. If things don’t work out, let me know, and we can try the whole date thing again.”

He got into his truck before I could tell him how much that wasn’t going to happen. Shaking aside the new irritation lingering under my skin, I faced Sam and noted the tension that was back in his frame.

His eyes were averted, his jaw set in stone, but he didn’t say anything

as he went to get into the truck. Without a doubt, there was something bothering him, and I wasn't about to let him bury it.

Catching his arm, I spoke. "What is it? I can see that something he said got under your skin."

He shook his head, trying to gently dislodge himself from my hold. "It's nothing important."

Moving between him and his truck door, I crossed my arms and raised a brow. "Sam, we agreed not to hide stuff anymore. If something is bothering you, then it *is* important. At least it is to me. So please, what did he say that's bothering you?"

He deflated, will crumbling with laughable ease. "It's stupid, but... you dated him?"

Ah, so that's what this was about. Leaning back on the car, I nodded. "I did, but it didn't go anywhere because he rubbed me the wrong way."

I added the last bit before he could jump to the wrong conclusion, then I continued. "He questioned everything I did to the point it drove me insane, and when I asked him to stop he would apologize, then go back to doing it. You know how much I hate that."

He relaxed a bit, though most of the dark cloud lingering around him stayed. "I figured it was something like that. Like I said, it's stupid. I wish I could go back and change things, make it so you weren't single in the first place."

So did I, but it was useless to think about what-ifs.

Taking his hand, I twined our fingers and smiled. "I get that, and while I can't do anything about it, we *can* go home and break in this whipped cream." Remembering a specific dog that we still had to pick up, I added on. "After swinging by the shelter and grabbing your new puppy."

It was finally time. No one had claimed him, and that meant he was

Sam's. Honey was resting well at my house—and enjoying being spoiled within an inch of her life.

Now that I thought about it, I should go home after helping Sam get his puppy settled. I hadn't seen how well Honey handled extended separation yet and while I'd left food for her, she might not have been too happy with my overnight trip.

Taking his hand, I squeezed, pulling his focus to me as we got into the car. "As much as I'd love to spend the night again, I should probably head home. Honey might not like being alone for so long."

He nodded, reluctance clear as he drove toward the shelter. "I was thinking the same, though I don't care much for it either. Once I'm sure the rest of the dogs will handle me being gone overnight, we can always switch off and bring our respective furry brat with us?"

That might work, though it'd be easier in the long run for me to bring Honey. Shelving that for later consideration, I hummed. "We can plan out the details later. For now, let's get Jesse."

Thankfully the puppy was waiting right where I left him the day before, curled up in the corner of his kennel. When he saw us he jumped up and raced for Sam's shoes, immediately attacking his laces with vigor.

Shaking my head at the sheer energy the puppy had, I handed him the adoption paperwork while I watched in amusement.

"I hope you're ready to have anything and everything you love chewed on," I said and Sam shrugged, finishing the paperwork before bending to scoop up Jesse before he could chew through his laces.

"I already have anything important out of his reach and when I'm at work, he'll be in the pen with the rest of the puppies. We have a bunch of appointments stacked and are ready to introduce people to the dogs. Afterward, hopefully, most of them will have homes."

Word traveled fast in town, and I'm sure it wouldn't be long before

we had people beating the proverbial door down to adopt them.

With any luck there'd be just as many adults as puppies that would get adopted.

Jesse barked, pulling my attention to him as he tried to wrestle out of Sam's grip. I shook my head, scratching the puppy behind his ear. "You've got a handful here, I can already tell."

He shrugged, holding the dog more securely. "I've got two hands, I'll be fine."

Then he snuck a glance at the clock and sighed. "We should get you dropped off, though."

Some of my happiness faded, and I nodded despite the urge to go back to his house and hide in our little bubble. It'd been broken far too soon for my liking.

But I had Honey waiting for me, and I needed to see how she handled being left alone overnight before I could selfishly disappear all the time on her.

The drive to my house felt entirely too short, and we sat outside it in no time. His hand rested under mine on the gearshift, and I reluctantly pulled away. Before I could make it far, he asked.

"Can I stay a bit? I'm sure Honey would like to see her puppy for a minute."

I hadn't considered that, but I nodded, feeling a bit happier now. "Sure, though you *do* know we'll have to spend some nights separately, right? As much as I'd love to hoard all your time to myself, you have quite a few dogs to see to."

He hummed, "I know, but that doesn't mean I can't enjoy it now, right?"

There was that.

The second we walked inside, Honey was there, tail wagging a mile a minute and trying to jump on Sam to get to Jesse. I hadn't seen her this energetic yet, and it warmed me from the inside out as she sniffed her puppy from nose to tail.

The two played, bouncing around with all the energy of a toddler, and with them entertained, I moved around the house to check if she'd destroyed anything in my absence.

She hadn't, thankfully. Her food was gone and her water was halfway, so I refilled both before sitting on the couch. Sam took the spot next to me, each of us watching the dogs play. After a minute, he leaned back with a content sigh.

"I'm glad I chose to adopt him. I didn't see any other golden retriever puppies in the ones we saved, so I'm guessing he's the last of the litter she had."

A heart-wrenching thought, but at least he was safely with her now. "Yeah, I'm glad we got them too. Have you heard anything more from Oliver and Jen about them potentially adopting one?"

He nodded. "They're planning on coming over soon to meet the pack and see if they bond to any of them. I expect at least one if not two will be going home with them." Then he grimaced. "Some of the puppies won't be adoptable for a few weeks, thanks to how young they are. Thankfully, I managed to figure out which ones belonged to which mother, and they're feeding from her, so there is no need for bottle feeding."

Yeah I'd done that before, and it was exhausting. Worth it in the long run, but still exhausting.

When the rapidly darkening sky outside the window caught my attention, I sighed. "You should probably head back soon."

He looked where I did and got up reluctantly. "Don't suppose I could

convince you to bring Honey for a sleepover?” He said, and I considered it.

I had work tomorrow, which was the only real complaint I had on the matter, and driving from his place into town would add some time onto my usual commute, but I’d get to wake up next to him.

Looking him over for a long minute, I made my decision.

“It won’t take much convincing,” I said and he grinned.

“Perfect, because I’m going to get spoiled off this without a doubt.”

Forcing myself up off the couch, I spoke while moving toward my room to gather some things. “I’ll bring my car so I can leave early for work.”

He gave a nod of agreement and as I was packing clothes, a flash of black lace caught my eye. It was balled up and shoved into the far corner of my dresser, unsurprisingly. It was a gift from Cindy years ago in one of her attempts to encourage me to ‘get out there’ again.

I’d never used it and now, with whipped cream at the ready, I was *sorely* tempted.

I hadn’t planned on ever using the lingerie, but I could still vividly remember the look on Sam’s face the last time I wore some.

Would it cause the same reaction now?

After a second of consideration, I snagged the lingerie and threw it in. If I decided not to use it when we got there, that was fine, but at least I’d have it now.

Zippering up the bag, I grabbed Honey’s leash and moved for the living room again, excitement buzzing lowly in my veins for what waited.

Chapter 9

Unfortunately my plans for a romantic night were paused when we pulled up to Sam's house to find the dogs raising a fuss.

Sam's brow furrowed and he got out. "What has them up in arms?" He muttered, and I followed behind him, not opening the door for Honey or Jesse. They could wait inside for a bit longer while we calmed the others.

Something about this wasn't right, though. Not once had the dogs went off like this since we'd brought them back. They barked, but never as sharp and loudly as now. I couldn't see their pen from the front, but the sounds seemed to echo back to me, making the hair on my neck stand to attention.

Sam's shoulders were tight as if he could sense something was off, too. Instinctively I grabbed his hand and squeezed. "Sam?"

He nodded, "Yeah, I have a bad feeling about this. Cecilia, go inside and get the gun. It's in the bedroom nightstand's drawer-." He didn't get to finish the sentence.

Something grabbed the back of my shirt and ripped me away, my hand sliding out from his in shock as a choked noise dragged up from my throat.

As I turned to face the person, they barreled out of the darkness and collided with me. The collision threw me back, the hard slam of dirt under me stunning me for just a second. All the air pushed out of my lungs as a man towered over me. He was well built, but I couldn't make out anything else in the dark.

Every hair on my body stood to attention when his eyes locked on me, but before I could do more than suck in a breath to scream, Sam was there and dragging him back. The fight was impossible to follow, shadows

cloaking both of them and my heart hammering with adrenaline as it dragged on.

Occasionally I'd see an arm or leg cut into clarity from the moonlight overhead, the sound of punches landing turning my stomach the longer it went on.

I couldn't tell who was who, their movements were too fast for me to even begin trying to tell them apart, but then Sam spoke.

“Get the gun from inside.”

The words cut through the tension all but sparking through the air and I nodded, forcing my freeze response away long enough to follow his order. I hated taking my eyes off him—some instinct screaming that he would disappear if I did—but standing there wasn't doing anything.

Scrambling past the door, I ran through the house until I made it to his room. Thankfully there wasn't a lock on his nightstand, so getting the gun was easy. It shook in my hands as I moved back out, pointing it at the ground as I went.

The two forms were in the same spot I left them, the dogs' barking skyrocketing my nerves as I tried to figure out who was who again. I couldn't just slide the gun over, not without knowing which was Sam.

Flashes of the other man getting it and hurting him painted behind my eyelids, and my stomach soured in response.

I was a decent shot, but I doubted I could hit him without running a high risk of clipping Sam in the process. It was too risky, and I watched as the fight dragged on. One of them was slowing down and I could only hope it wasn't Sam.

The pen shook from the dogs jumping against it and the sound rattled my nerves even as I inched closer to them. If the guy got away from Sam, he might try to grab me next. I wasn't a fighter, not by any stretch of the means, and I'd take any advantage I could get in my corner.

A distant, logical part of me said to call the sheriff, but I was frozen again, eyes locked on the two.

Just as I thought it would never end, a sickening *crunch* sounded throughout the air and one of them went down. I lurched to my feet, blood pounding in my ears as I spoke. “Sam?”

Thankfully, the one still standing waved. “I’m fine, though this shmuck sure won’t be by the time I’m done with him.”

Then he pulled out his phone and opened the flashlight on it, shining the beam down on the man now curled into a ball on the ground.

“You want to tell me why you’re skulking around my property this late, or do I need to call the sheriff?” He said and the man jerked, hazel hair a mess as blood leaked from his nose where Sam had punched him. His hands were wrapped around his knee—the source of the crunch I’d heard earlier—and the odd angle it was at made my stomach roll.

There were various scratches littering his face and when he met Sam’s eyes, he grimaced. “Call him all you want, I’m dead anyway for getting caught.”

A chill worked down my spine at that, and I shared a loaded look with Sam. That didn’t sound good...

Sam focused on the attacker, raising a brow. “Not if you work with us. If you’re worried about getting killed in prison then you can always work a deal with the sheriff. I don’t know what all he can do for you, but it’s your best bet at having a good outcome with this mess.”

The man’s scowl stayed in place even as I saw the thoughts flying behind his eyes. After a long minute, he nodded. “Fine, but I ain’t telling anyone anything until I got a lawyer and some kind of deal in place.”

Sam shrugged. “Fine by me.” Then he focused on his phone and dialed. “Hey Neal, I hate to bother you this late, but we’ve got an issue at my place...”

He waited for a beat and snorted. “No, Cecilia is fine. We’ve got a prowler though. He’s down, said he won’t tell me why he was here until he has a lawyer and some kind of deal worked. If you could come out here, I’d appreciate it.”

Another minute, then he nodded and hung up.

“He’s on his way. While I know you said you won’t say anything, there’s just *one* question I want answered.”

The man eyed him, but nodded, and Sam spoke.

“Was it me or her you were after?”

My head snapped around at that, surprise cleaving through me. It was his house the guy was going around; why would he think he was after me?

The last thing I expected was for the man to shrug. “Both.” Then he went back to being quiet. Sam scowled but shook his head. Gently taking the gun from my shaking hands, he waved me back toward the truck.

“Cecilia, get the dogs inside, would you? He’s not going to give us anything else for now, and Neal will update us later. I don’t want you out here any longer than necessary. For all we know, he has a partner.”

The guy scoffed but didn’t say anything. I guess that meant he didn’t, but honestly, I didn’t want to be here right now anyway. Turning for the truck, I picked up Jesse from the front seat and opened the door for Honey, sliding the slip leash over her neck as she jumped out and then took them both inside.

Once they were both safely indoors, I rejoined Sam just as the sheriff’s car pulled up. Neal shook his head as he walked over, a tired smile curving his lips.

“You two can’t catch a break, can you?” He asked, and Sam shrugged.

“Apparently not.”

Stepping away to give Neal room to cuff the guy, Sam helped Neal move him into the back of the car. When he was tucked away, Neal faced us with a scowl.

“I don’t like the timing on this. We didn’t find anything on the person behind the puppy mill, and now you’re getting attacked?” He shook his head. “I doubt that’s a coincidence. You might want to check the dogs too, make sure this schmuck didn’t throw anything into their pen.”

Adrenaline hit like a wave and before the last word was out of his mouth, I was moving toward the pen. Using the flashlight on my phone, I looked around, taking careful stock of anything that could have been tampered with.

There was nothing that I could see, and I sighed in relief. “It looks fine. If he was here to tamper with something he hadn’t had a chance to yet.”

We probably took him by surprise.

Neal nodded. “I figured this wouldn’t be over when we didn’t catch the person behind it. I didn’t think he’d strike so quickly, though. I’ll bring him to the hospital, then the station. Once I have more information, I’ll let you know.”

Then he got into his car and drove off, leaving Sam and me alone. He inched closer, form barely visible in the dark as he leaned on the pen next to me.

“You okay?” He asked, and only then did I realize I was shaking. Clasping my hands in front of me, I nodded.

“I’m fine, I should be asking you that. You’re the one who just fought someone.”

He shrugged, lifting an arm in an invitation that I took instantly. Comfort rolled through me, suffocating the unease as he spoke.

“He only got a few scrapes in, nothing major. I’m going to check over the pen one last time, but afterward we should get some rest.”

I moved on autopilot for the house, feeling the weight of his stare every step of the way. Apparently my plan for the lingerie and whipped cream was going to have to wait a bit longer than I’d originally planned. I couldn’t bring myself to be disappointed, though, all my focus was on the new threat we’d be dealing with.

What if that man was sent to hurt Sam or the dogs as a message? Or what if he was here to take them back?

I doubted that last one since it didn’t look like there were any others involved, and he would need an army to get all the dogs back, but still...

The possibilities were endless and my stomach rolled at all the reasons he could have been sent here.

I’d hoped that Neal would catch the person behind this without us having to get further involved, but maybe that was naive of me. We’d helped shut down what was—to someone—a lucrative business. It didn’t matter that he made so many dogs’ lives awful; people like that only saw the mighty dollar sign.

Fury burned to the surface alongside my nerves. People like that deserved to feel every ounce of the pain they caused. Honey nosed my hand, pulling me back to the present, and I stroked through her fur with a shaky sigh.

“You won’t be going back to him,” I said, despite the fact she couldn’t understand. Her tail wagged and she cuddled closer, nudging my pocket where she knew I kept the treats.

I chuckled and pulled two out. “Alright, you can have *one*. I don’t want to make you overweight, after all.”

Lifting it high, I ordered. “Sit.”

Immediately she did, Jesse hopping excitedly around for the treat while his mother wiggled in place. I gave her the treat, then sat to be at his level.

“You’re probably too young for this training, but it doesn’t hurt to start.” I said, then lifted the treat and repeated the command. He didn’t understand, so I gently pressed his butt down to copy his mother and then gave him the treat.

“Good boy.”

I scratched both their heads, soaking in the calm I desperately needed right now as Sam walked back inside.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, feeling the tension threatening to come back. He nodded, sliding to sit next to me on the ground.

“Yeah, it’s all good. Nothing is out of place, and none of the dogs were injured.” Reaching over, he snagged a nearby rope toy and flicked it at Jesse, smiling when the puppy pounced on it.

“I’m glad we came home when we did. I dread to think of what he would have done. It’s one thing to tamper with a pen, but he could have easily hurt them...or worse.” He said, eyes far off and distant. Worry oozed off him in waves, and I couldn’t blame him since I was still trying to corral mine.

Twining our fingers, I leaned against his side and nodded.

“Hopefully Neal will have more information by tomorrow.”

If we were really lucky, the guy would know who hired him, and then maybe we could put this whole mess to rest. I doubted it’d be that easy since things seldom were, but hope was free, and we needed as much of it as we could get.

Sam hummed his agreement, then scooped up Jesse. “Alright, it’s bed time for all of us. We have work tomorrow, and we should be well rested for

whatever Neal has to say.”

Unease wormed its way up my spine, but I didn't say anything. Instead I followed Sam as he set Jesse in his room, the puppy wasting no time in trying to jump onto the bed. Honey picked him up by the scruff and leaped up, contently claiming the foot as she set to cleaning her puppy.

With them sidetracked, I sat on one side of the bed and rubbed my eyes. Today had turned into a giant mess, and somehow I doubted it would be better tomorrow.

Sam sat next to me, his body heat a comfort through the fear as he soothed. “Everything will be okay, Cecilia. It doesn't feel like it now, but it will be.”

Leaning back on the bed, he lifted an arm in invitation and I took it, too exhausted to care about changing. Snuggling into the hollow of his neck and shoulder, I let the familiar scent and warmth ease me into a fitful sleep.

Hopefully tomorrow will be better.

Chapter 10

The next day was, unfortunately, *not* easier.

Work was hectic; people all but elbow to elbow with each other as they asked about this dog or that. After news spread about the puppy mill, what felt like the entire town had shown up to show their support by adopting a dog, bringing donations, or even signing up to volunteer at the shelter. All the support was appreciated but also exhausting.

Most of the ones claimed were puppies, as I expected, *but* there were a fair few adults as well. Sam and I were talking back and forth almost all day to set appointments for everyone who wanted to see the dogs at his house.

By the time I finished with work I was dead on my feet, and Sam looked no better when I met him at his house. Kissing his cheek, I asked.

“Did you get swarmed at work too?”

He nodded, chuckling tiredly. “Yup, but on the bright side, the busybodies usually bought something to pretend they weren’t there just for gossip or to ask about the dogs. Sales for today will look great.”

At least there was that.

Leaning against his side, I let myself relax for the first time since I left him this morning. But the day wasn’t done yet, and when a car pulled up, I forced myself to separate from him. He smiled in complete understanding before nodding toward the house.

“We don’t have to both be out here. You can go in and rest a bit.”

I only had to consider it for a second before shaking my head. “It’ll go faster if we both show people the dogs, and then we can rest together.”

He smiled his approval, facing the approaching couple with a smile. In what felt like a blink dozens of more cars pulled up, and we were both busy again.

Most of the people were families hoping to get a guard dog or just a friend for their kids. Halfway through the day though, a familiar voice called out.

“Hey, Cecilia!”

I turned in time to see Oliver making his way through the crowd, Jen clamped to his hand as they stopped in front of me.

I’d forgotten that they planned on stopping by too.

Smiling back, I said. “It’s good to see you guys. Did you see any dogs you want to adopt?”

Oliver barked a laugh. “Oh trust me, if it were up to Jen and I we’d adopt *all* of them, but for the sake of keeping things manageable, we chose two.”

He gestured to one of the mother dogs—a German shepherd— and her puppy. I nodded, noting that down on the paper Sam and I were using to keep track of them. I could think of no better home for them than with Oliver, and this way they’d even be kept together.

I loved it when that happened and if Jen’s smile was any indication, so did she.

“I couldn’t resist getting the puppy, too. Separating them after everything they’ve been through is just too cruel.” She said and I nodded.

“I completely understand. If I had the room and the means to care for all of them I would have adopted all the elderly ones. Poor things.”

Though I was pleasantly surprised by how many of them had been claimed as well. I’d half expected only a handful to find homes, but so far a

third of the adults were adopted.

Of course, almost all the puppies were claimed, but I'd expected that. Puppies were cute, after all.

Before I could say anything else, a man walked over to us and pointed at the two Oliver had claimed.

"Can I possibly take these two?" He asked, and I shook my head.

"Sorry, they're already claimed."

He deflated a bit, then looked around. "It seems that most of them have been taken already..."

Something heavy lingered in his tone and it made the hair on my neck stand to attention. Nothing about the man stood out as dangerous though. He had short black hair cut neatly in a flat top, he wore a crisp white shirt, and yet something about him made my skin crawl.

Inching back to put more space between us, I nodded. "Most of them are."

Usually I'd ask if there was any in particular he'd be interested in looking at, trying to help him find a pup of his liking, but my gut urged me not to. Whoever this guy was, instinct said I shouldn't give him *any* of the dogs and while I had no logical reasoning to not, I would follow it.

Apparently I wasn't the only one feeling off about the guy because Oliver nodded, his smile a tad forced. "Heck, it wouldn't surprise me if there's none left. Can I see that list of yours, Cecilia?"

I handed it over and, after giving it a quick sweep, he looked the man dead in the eye and lied with an apologetic shrug. "Looks like they're all taken, sorry."

The man sighed. "Oh well, I'll just have to try the shelter."

I grimaced, waving him off and watching as he got into a truck.

The second he was out of eyesight, I turned to the others and said. “Tell me I’m not the only one getting creepy vibes from him.”

Oliver’s scowl turned darker, and Jen nodded. “He made my skin crawl...”

He tucked an arm around her as if to ward away the feeling. “I’ve met some pieces of work in my time, but something about him in particular set my instincts off. I don’t recognize him either. If there was someone new moving to town it’d be hot gossip.”

Looking after the man’s back, I frowned. If he wasn’t new to town, then why was he here? I doubted the news had reached the bigger cities, and even if it had, why would someone bother coming from there to adopt a dog?

When I thought back to the skin-crawling sensation of his presence though, an uncomfortable hypothesis began to form.

Could he have had something to do with the puppy mill?

Aside from a bad feeling we had around him, there was no evidence of it, but Mom always told me to trust my gut.

Right now, it said to avoid that guy, and I was happy to do just that.

When I focused back into the present, Jen and Oliver were sharing a worried look. Before either of them could say anything, I asked.

“Do you think we should mention him to the sheriff?”

Neal had said I should keep an eye out for new people in town, though it hadn’t even crossed my mind thanks to how busy Sam and I’d been from this whole mess.

Oliver nodded, mouth set in a hard line. “Definitely. While it could be nothing, the odds of it having to do with the puppy mill are high, and I’d prefer he’s kept informed of even the most basic *potential* issues.”

Pulling out my phone, I hummed. “I’ll make the call now, then.”

Sweeping a glance outward over the yard, I took in the remaining dogs. Today had been a huge success when it came to that. Hardly a handful were left.

Meeting Sam's eyes across the yard, I held up my phone to show I was stepping away. He nodded, focusing entirely on the person he was talking to. With that out of the way, I said my goodbyes to Jen and Oliver.

"I'll get that call put in to the sheriff. I'll be sure to give you a ring when your dogs are ready to be picked up."

They nodded, then walked toward Sam. They'd probably tell him about our suspicions, which just left calling Neal for me.

Taking a breath, I dialed his number and waited. He picked up on the second ring, voice scratchy but alert.

"Everything alright out there, Cecilia?"

I hated that I never called him with good news, but I couldn't change that now. Maybe some other time I'd give him a ring just to say hi, but today wasn't it. "I'm not sure. Sam and I are working on getting the dogs adopted, so a bunch of people are out here looking at them. A man I've never seen before was inquiring about 2 of the dogs. Fortunately they were already spoken for, but the guy just seemed off. Jen and Oliver were there too for the conversation, and they said he made their skin crawl."

It was impressive, though worrying.

Neal sucked in a breath and I heard shuffling from across the line. "Can you give a description of him?"

I rattled it off without hesitation, something about the guy cementing into my memory as if a part of me knew he was someone to watch for. The soft scratch of pen on paper broke the silence, then he spoke.

"Alright, I'll keep an eye out for him and tell others to do the same. Anything else?"

“No, it was just that,” I said and he hummed.

“Give me a call if you see him or anyone else suspicious. We haven’t gotten a deal worked out with the guy we brought in before, so no news on that front yet.”

I bit back a disappointed sigh. “Please keep us updated when you do.” We each gave our goodbyes, then hung up.

I guess it would have been too good to be true if he’d had more information already.

Turning around, I nearly ran face-first into a broad chest, and instinct was the only thing that made me jump back before I did.

Sam stepped away too, surprised by my sudden about-face, and I took a deep breath to calm my racing heart.

Worry pinched his brow. “I’m sorry, I didn’t think you’d turn right that second. You looked a bit pale, and I wanted to check on you.”

Forcing what I hoped at least somewhat resembled a smile, I nodded. “I’m fine. Oliver told you about our potential problem, right?”

His features darkened, and he scowled. “Yeah, I take it that call was to Neal?”

I hummed an affirmative. “No new information on the guy you fought before, by the way. A deal hasn’t been ironed out, so he isn’t saying anything.”

It wasn’t surprising, but an impatient part of me wanted this whole thing over with. Sam’s arm slid around my shoulders and he tucked me into his side, soothing the frustration.

“It’s alright, we’ll have his information soon and as for the other guy...” He grimaced as if hating what he had to say next. “I don’t think I should stay away from the dogs overnight. First we had the hired idiot, and

now a guy shows up that makes everyone uncomfortable wanting to adopt the dogs?” He shook his head.

“I don’t like the picture it’s painting. The odds of there being an ‘accident’ and the dogs magically getting out is too high if I’m not here.”

He was right and I knew it, no matter how much I didn’t want to acknowledge the fact. Leaning into him, I nodded reluctantly before offering.

“Makes sense. I could always come here with Honey?”

The idea of being home alone with a potential psychopath after us definitely wasn’t comforting to me...

Sam smiled, the edges heavy with the day’s exhaustion. “I certainly won’t complain, and I’m sure Jesse won’t either. Do you want company heading back to your house?”

I almost said yes, but another look at the forming bags under his eyes changed my mind. “I’ve got it. You should get showered and changed once the last person here leaves. I’ll bring some leftovers for us to eat so we don’t have to cook, then it’s time for some well-deserved rest.”

He hummed, dipping to kiss my cheek. “Sounds perfect.” Stepping away despite the urge to curl into him and ignore the passing of time, I moved for my car.

Nothing would get done if I didn’t start now and while cuddling with him for hours sounded like a good use of my time, it would bite me later.

No, it was better to finish my to-do list and then fall asleep in his arms.

Plan set, I pushed all other thoughts away and focused. With any luck, I’d be back with Honey in no time.

Sure enough, it took a little over half an hour before I was pulling back into Sam’s driveway and shutting off the engine.

Honey bounded out of the car, tail wagging a mile a minute as she zipped through Sam's open door to where she knew Jesse would be waiting. I shook my head at her enthusiasm, then shut the car door.

Sam himself leaned against the doorway, an amused tilt to his head as I made my way up the steps. Once I was within a few feet, he pulled me into a hug and chuckled.

"She's like a toddler with her favorite person. Everyone else doesn't exist."

I'd made the same comparison more than once since she'd come to live with me, and it'd yet to be inaccurate.

Sinking into his arms with relish, I let him guide me inside before shutting the door. There were still worries on the other side of it, but having this enclosed *safe* area silenced them. They were by no means handled, and soon we'd have to actually deal with those issues, but for now, everything was perfect.

He led me further into the house, past where the dogs played, and to his room. Pulling back the sheets, he settled into them with me contently curled on his chest like a cat. Once we were hidden in our own little cocoon, I sighed.

"This is my idea of a date."

A beat passed, and then he snapped his eyes open and cursed, breaking the serene moment.

"For fuck's sake, I never even brought you on a date!"

The jarring shift out of our bubble was decidedly unwanted, but I patted his chest soothingly. "Things have been a bit insane lately, Sam."

He shook his head, jaw set in a determined line. "That's no excuse. I said I was going to do things the right way this time around and I'm just repeating what we did before."

Well I wouldn't say that, since he'd made time for physical affection aside from sex. Before I could say as such though, he shook his head and locked sharp eyes on me.

"Where do you want to go? I don't care what it is, we're doing it."

That was a dangerous offer. Dozens of options flashed behind my eyes and I asked. "Are you sure going anywhere is a good idea with a potential threat active?"

He frowned, considering that. "I think we'll be fine as long as we don't do any overnight trips. I can also ask Oliver to check on my house since he's the closest thing I have to a neighbor."

Then he prodded, "So what do you want to do?"

Honestly, having so many options was overwhelming. I didn't want to go anywhere loud or crazy, that much I *did* know, but that still left so many things to choose from.

Obviously he wasn't talking about staying in town since there was near nothing to do here and we needed to be back before nighttime, which helped whittle down the options as well.

After a long minute, I asked. "Is there an aquarium in the next town over?"

He pulled out his phone, typed on it for a minute, then nodded. "Yeah, it's off of the main street. Is that what you want to do?"

I only had to consider it for a second, then I nodded. "I've never been to one, and they sound like fun."

He checked over something, tapping on the screen, then hummed. "Alright, I don't have work tomorrow if you want to go?"

I did have work, but it was later in the day. If we left early enough, we could squeeze it in.

“That sounds fine, as long as you don’t mind going early. I have work in the afternoon.”

He didn’t argue, shutting off his phone before putting it away. “Sounds fine, though you’ll need to set an alarm. You know how I am.”

I bit back a laugh at the disgruntled face he made. Sam had always slept like a rock, and I’d found out early on that an alarm was a must if I needed him awake early for something.

Though I *had* found an easier way of waking him up, it generally made us late for whatever I’d needed him awake for.

Shaking that to the side, I curled into him and yawned. “Then it’s settled.” I set an alarm on my phone and dragged the blankets over us.

Hopefully tomorrow will be a nice break from all the drama recently.

Chapter 11

The alarm was loud, grinding into my ears and dragging me out of my peaceful sleep. Sam grumbled at my side, his arm tightening around my waist as he tried to burrow deeper into the blankets to escape the noise.

Blindly shutting off the sound, I sat up and took in Sam. His hair was a mess, standing up every which way, and I could just see a faint line from where he'd shoved his face into the seam of a pillow. His eyes were still screwed shut, and it was painfully obvious he was fighting waking up.

It was cute and the sight brought me back to years ago.

Fighting through the amusement fluttering through me, I combed a hand into his hair and hummed. "Time to get up, sleepy head."

His scowl eased into a loose frown, then into a smile when he forced his eyes open and met mine. The sleep had done him good; the forming bags from yesterday under his eyes were nearly gone now, and a wide smile curved his lips as his arms snaked around my waist.

When he pulled me down, his chin resting on my head, I chuckled. "We're not going to be going anywhere if you keep me hostage."

He shrugged, sleep already hovering at the edge of his consciousness again. "Just five more minutes."

I didn't bother biting back my laugh at that, my fingers digging into his scalp and massaging it. "You mean five more hours, knowing us. We don't *have* to go to the aquarium, you know? We could put that on another day and just sleep in."

I wasn't a stranger to last-minute changes in plan just for that reason. Not that I would complain, we always wound up doing the original thing eventually, and I thrived off the quiet touches in between.

Just as I was preparing to settle down for more sleep, he dragged his eyes all the way open and he sat up with a groan. “Nope, you want to go to the aquarium, and I’m not changing the plan. We can continue this before you have to go to work *or* afterward, since you sounded like you and Honey would be staying again tonight?”

It was worded like a question so I answered. “As long as you don’t mind, I wouldn’t mind coming back again. I hate the empty house and while having Honey helps, it’s not the same as being here with you.”

He nodded, sitting up with a grunt. “I’ll never complain about having good company. I’ve had more than my fill of being alone, and I’ll be happy to not go back to that.” Shifting out of bed, he stretched high, corded muscles pulling upward as he groaned.

“Give me fifteen minutes, and I’ll be ready to head out.”

I followed his lead, snagging a nice blouse and jeans from my bag. Thankfully I took about the same time to get ready so after we each were dressed and ready, we stopped long enough to feed the dogs, and then we were on our way.

The drive out of town was lengthy, but with music playing through the speakers and our hands twined over the gear shift I didn’t mind in the slightest. I almost felt disappointed when we pulled up at the aquarium, *almost* being the keyword.

The sign out front was light blue with wave designs and it read *Shelby Creek County Aquarium*.

There were little fish painted around the words, and the building itself was massive. Designs of waves and swirls led us further in until we stepped into the main area. The carpet was a mix between gray and blue, the soft light from the tanks and overhead fixtures giving it a calm vibe.

I loved it.

The aquarium looked to be broken into different sections, one for

each kind of aquatic animal, and immediately, I moved to the map on the wall. I didn't realize I was all but dragging Sam behind me until we stopped, and he chuckled.

Heat burned through my cheeks and I huffed. "I've been wanting to visit one of these since we were kids."

He nodded, his arm trailing around my waist as he smiled. "I know, you used to talk about it a lot. Honestly, I'm surprised you didn't go in the time I was gone."

My stomach pitched low and he winced, realizing his mistake. Neither of us brought up that time, for the sake of avoiding the guilt, but with it freely floating between us now there was no going back. When he looked ready to apologize again, I tugged him down into a kiss.

"Don't. We agreed to not dwell on it and you already said you were sorry. There's no point in harping on the subject."

He grimaced but nodded, biting his lip after a long minute. "Why didn't you go?" He asked, and I sighed, knowing the topic wouldn't be dropped until I told him.

Looking at the wall instead of him, I answered. "Because I wanted to see it with you, specifically. They have online shows I could have watched if I wanted to, but I know that you love sharks just like I love tropical fish."

I shrugged. "It wouldn't have been the same, and I knew it."

If I'd gone, I would have constantly been thinking about him, how he'd react to certain types of fish, or even his commentary of how pretty some of the fish were. It would have ruined it, so I didn't go.

His arm tightened, and for a second, I thought he was going to apologize again, but he shook his head and said. "Well, better late than never right?"

I smiled, nodding. "Right."

We stopped long enough to pay for our tickets, then we set off. The first tank we came across was the dolphins, the water stretching on seemingly forever as they zipped around their enclosure. There was a ball in there with them, and I watched, fascinated, as they hit it back and forth.

Glancing down at the information plate in front of their tank, I read.

“Dolphins are one of the few animals that are reported to recognize themselves in the mirror. This is just one of many ways they showcase their intelligence.”

Sam eyed them with interest. “That’s kind of cool. I know dogs don’t recognize themselves, but I didn’t realize it was such a wide scale.”

Neither had I. It seemed like such a small thing, to look in the mirror and know your reflection was *you*, but I guess it made sense that most animals wouldn’t know that. It wasn’t geared toward survival, so it wasn’t important.

Shaking that to the side, we moved on to the next tank. This one had stingray in it, and I watched as they glided gracefully through the water. While they weren’t my favorite aquatic animal, I had to admit they were at least in the top five.

Glancing at the information plate, this time it was Sam who read it out loud.

“Stingrays are unique for the fact they have no bones whatsoever in their bodies. Instead, they have cartilage—the flexible material in your ears—throughout their skeleton.”

I watched as they seemed to cut through the water like a bird would through air. “I guess that explains how graceful they are.”

We stopped at every tank, reading the facts for each one, but when we got to the shark enclosure, I hesitated. I knew that sharks were demonized and—in real life—weren’t that bad, but the irrational fear of them still lingered.

Sam glanced my way when he realized I wasn't following, and then understanding hit, he stepped back. "Do you want to skip this one?" He asked and I shook my head, nudging him toward it.

"It's the part you were most excited to see, I can wait out here while you go look."

Years ago he would have agreed before taking off, now he shook his head. "I'm here to be with you. I can come back later to see the sharks if I want, but I'm not leaving you when we're here on a date."

Warmth fluttered through me and I sighed internally. Hooking our arms together, I braced for what lay ahead and nodded. "Then I guess there's only one thing to do."

I pulled him toward the sharks, and this time, he stopped us, his brows high almost to the point of being hidden in his hair.

"Cecilia, you're afraid of sharks." He said as if the information was new to me.

Still, I nodded. "I am, but I want you to see them, and if the only way to do that is by going with you then...okay." He looked ready to argue, so I continued. "Besides, if I get scared, I can always cling to your arm, right? It's like being in high school again when you used to pick scary movies just to get me into your lap."

Pink dusted his cheeks and he cleared his throat. "You knew why I was doing it?"

I laughed at the growing flush on his cheeks. "Sam, I adore you, but you aren't subtle."

It'd been the oldest trick in the book, and I'd allowed it. Though for the gore-heavy movies I'd learned to just curl into his chest to start with. It saved time and nightmares that way.

He rubbed a hand over the back of his head and shrugged. "Why'd

you allow it if you knew I had an ulterior motive?”

Taking his hand, I linked our fingers and pulled us into the sharks' enclosure. “Because scary movie or no, I liked being in your lap so it wasn't all that much of a downside to me.”

Back then we'd been new to the whole relationship thing, and neither of us had gotten the hang of asking for things we wanted. The scary movies worked for cuddle time, though the nightmares they occasionally gave me weren't welcome.

Thankfully now I could just *tell* him I wanted a hug, no scary movie necessary.

Of course, I'd just landed myself into a situation similar to back then only this time I wasn't doing it for the cuddles.

All but gluing myself to his side, I watched the water warily as distant forms swam through it. Sam's arm tightened when one broke off to come closer, and I tensed instinctively.

Sharks are a misunderstood and beautiful species. They aren't generally vicious unless provoked.

I repeated the thought like a mantra as a pure white one swam near the glass. Even from here I could see the rows and rows of teeth. Leaning further into Sam, I forced myself to take long, deep breaths as it moved past us.

There, see? Not so bad.

Then of course the universe at large had to laugh at me.

A giant shark—at least it felt that way to me—swam by, and every hair on my body stood to attention. Sam pulled me closer, offering comfort even as he eyed the exit. “Are you sure you don't want to leave? I'm serious, I can watch a video on them later if I want.”

I was just about to tell him I'd be fine, and I would be, but when I opened my mouth to say as such, a loud *smack* nearly sent me out of my skin. One of the sharks decided it was a great idea to crash nose-first into the glass and just like that, I was done.

"Maybe we should call it a day..." I said, feeling as my heart tried to break out of my chest and run away. Sam nodded, dropping a kiss on my head. The second we were outside, I took a deep breath and centered my nerves.

Note to self, next time don't go into the shark enclosure.

Sam sighed with a mix of exasperation and affection. "Please don't push yourself like that in the future. I'm not enjoying myself if you're afraid."

I knew that, but it felt like such a waste to drive all the way here without him getting to see the sharks how he'd wanted to. Heck, he'd only gotten maybe five minutes of looking at them before I'd had to leave.

Looking back toward the enclosure, I decided. "I think I need to sit for a few minutes if you want to go back and check it out?"

He frowned, already gearing up to argue, but I cut him off with a smile. "Sam, I appreciate that you want to stay with me, but I'm going to be right here. Besides, I'll feel bad if you don't get to see the sharks." Then, to tip the scales more in my favor, I pointed to the nearby tank where a bunch of fish swam, their scales coming in nearly every color I could name.

"I have something to keep me occupied here, go check out the sharks."

He deflated with a sigh, but went after dropping a kiss to my head. Once he was out of sight, I relaxed on the bench and watched the fish swim by.

I'm glad I waited to come here until now, it wouldn't have been half as enjoyable otherwise.

My phone vibrated, breaking me out of my thoughts. Sneaking a look at it, I smiled at the message from Cindy.

Hey, I heard from the busybodies that you were seen driving out of town with Sam. Did he kidnap you?

Good to know the gossip mill was up and running as usual...

Shaking that to the side, I answered.

It was entirely willing on my part, don't send the cavalry. He insisted on bringing me on a date, so I decided the aquarium was the perfect place. We're having fun, though I almost peed myself when a shark bumped into the glass.

I could just imagine Cindy laughing at the mental image while shaking her head at my antics. Her message took a minute this time, but it didn't disappoint.

Cecilia, honey, you can't even watch shark movies without crawling out of your skin afterward. Why did you go into the shark enclosure?

Before I had a chance to answer, she continued.

Did Sam make you?

Oh no, we weren't starting this up again. Cindy was *finally* being nice to Sam, I wasn't about to let that go away because of a misunderstanding.

Not at all! He actually tried to convince me not to go in. It just felt like a waste for him not to see the sharks since he likes them and we drove all the way here. I went in when he refused to leave my side on our date.

I heaved a sigh of relief when her response came and it was calm.

Sounds like you. I'm assuming you're out now, or are you using me as a distraction?

Looking up to be sure Sam wasn't back yet, I answered.

I'm out, but I insisted he go back in to watch them for more than the five minutes he got before I needed to leave. How are things with you?

This time her reply took some time and when it came, I nearly choked in surprise.

Things are decent here. I'm considering asking one of my friends with benefits on a date, which I'm sure you'll be delighted to hear.

Cindy was thinking of going on an actual date? Not a one-night stand or a hotel room to meet the guy at, but a *date*.

I nearly dropped my phone in my rush to respond.

That's definitely a surprise to hear, but not a bad one. He must be something else if he got you to consider it. What's he like?

The little bubbles appeared and disappeared several times before, finally, the message came through.

I don't even know where to start, Cecilia. He's smoking hot, for one. Hair that stops between his shoulders and is pitch black like ink. He's got a few tattoos, and wow, do I love tracing them. That's not even getting into his personality. Because holy shit, does he have a good one. He opens doors and shit, Cecilia! For me!

I smiled, pressing the palm of my hand to my mouth as I read the mini rant. Cindy had never shown interest in romance before, so I hoped this worked out for her.

He has manners, that's definitely a good sign. What else do you know about him? I asked and again, the bubbles came and went.

Another paragraph popped up shortly.

He helped raise his siblings from an early age—I've seen them, they adore him—and don't even get me started on what this man can do with his hands. I have a few new tricks to tell you about the next time we have a girl's

day.

Shaking my head at the typical Cindy comment, I responded.

I'll look forward to it. Keep me updated on how it goes?

Her answer came just as Sam walked out of the enclosure.

Of course! Wish me luck and have fun with your loverboy.

I typed my goodbyes and put my phone away just as Sam sat next to me, curiosity warming his eyes.

“You look particularly happy. May I ask why?” He lightly nudged my shoulder, and I did it back teasingly.

“Cindy texted and said she's found a guy she's interested in. We'll see where it goes, but I hope it works out.”

He raised a brow. “She's never wanted anything like that before. It must be one hell of a guy.”

I laughed. “Oh trust me, reading how she described him tells me all I need to know. She's already halfway gone for the man.”

My smile faded a bit. “I hope he's open to more. I'd hate to see her hurt over this.”

She'd *never* shown interest like this in anyone before and while I knew it wouldn't be his fault if he didn't return her feelings, I also knew it would crush her to be rejected.

Sam hummed, “Honestly, if she's getting those kinds of vibes from him then I think he's already on board.” He shrugged.

Putting the subject to the side, I focused on him. “So, how were the sharks?” I asked and he shrugged, offering a hand up, which I took.

“They were nice, but I was right that without you I didn't really have

as much interest in staying there. I think they have a pond out back if you want to check that out next?”

I nodded, linking our arms as we walked.

While laying in bed all morning would have been nice, I had to admit I was glad we'd come here instead. It was gorgeous and after all the drama lately, we could use some tranquility.

Flashes of the lingerie still neatly tucked into my bag hit, and I eyed the clock on my phone. There was no way we'd have time for any of that before I had to work, unfortunately.

By the time I got home, I'd probably be too tired.

Cursing the fact I had to be an adult, I shelved the train of thought for later. There would always be later, but the urge to climb him was getting more demanding by the day...

Chapter 12

The next few days passed in a blur, and in that time, I'd tried to instigate something more intimate with Sam no less than four times.

Every last one of them was interrupted.

My work called me in to cover a shift on the first one, the hardware store had a problem customer that he'd had to go in to deal with, and the last two were phone calls that by the time I finished with them, he or I was asleep.

Suffice to say, I was beyond done with it.

All I wanted was some private time with my boyfriend; was that so much to ask for?

Sam plopped down next to me on the couch, Honey and Jesse napping happily in their beds as he looked around dramatically.

"Am I mistaken, or do we actually have a minute to ourselves?" He asked and I smiled, leaning against his side.

"I'd say we do." Trailing a hand to his shirt, I played with one of the buttons. "I have hours before I have to work..."

So much more lingered under those words, and his eyes lit up.

"What a coincidence, I was just thinking of something I wanted to do with you that took roughly that amount of time."

His voice dropped into a low purr and just as he dipped to kiss my neck, a knock sounded on the front door.

He pulled back, heat long gone from his eyes as he hissed. "You have *got* to be kidding me."

The starting twinges of arousal died a quick death and I sighed. “Apparently not.”

Even from my place on the couch, I could hear Oliver’s voice. “Hey, Sam! We’re heading out to go hiking. Do you and your lady want to join?”

He rubbed a hand over his face and groaned. “His timing is the worst.”

I patted his arm, soothing on habit. “If you want to go, we can.”

He pulled away from his palm and stared at me, a war waging behind his eyes before finally he shook his head. “No, I’m *done* with walking around with a hard-on while the world does its best to interrupt. I’m going to go talk to Oliver, and afterward I’m going to plow you into the damn bed. Does that sound good to you?”

A hot zing of arousal snapped up my spine and I nodded, speaking through my suddenly dry throat.

“Yeah, that sounds good. More than good.”

He smiled, a hint of male pride there and gone as he got up and walked for the door. Before he made it three steps he called over his shoulder. “You may want to get a move on. As soon as I’m done with that knucklehead, I’m headed right for you and not a damn thing is going to stop me.”

I clenched at the promise lingering under his tone and nodded despite the fact he couldn’t see it. Jumping off the couch, I made for his room, pausing to eye the fridge where I *knew* the whipped cream still sat.

It sounded like there wouldn’t be any time for that, not with the growl he’d had, so I shook myself and kept walking.

I could at least use the lingerie, as long as I changed fast enough. With that in mind, I closed the door to his room and stripped faster than I probably ever had before. Pulling my bag out, I snagged the lace and hastily

put it on.

Doing a slow turn in the mirror, I considered it. The lace wasn't itchy, thankfully, and it accented my curves like it'd been tailored with me in mind. The bottom portion was thin, and I trailed a finger along the fabric absentmindedly.

It'd be easy to shift it to the side when he got back, which I'm sure he'd appreciate.

The thud of footsteps down the hallway sounded and I moved for the bed, excitement firing through my veins as I stretched out. I'd never been very good at this part, the whole posing thing wasn't my forte, but he'd never complained in the past so he must not have cared that much.

He walked through the doorway, eyes trailing to my clothes on the floor first before locking on to me with laser-like intensity. The heat from before came pouring back into his eyes, and he groaned.

“You're going to be the death of me.”

Walking closer, he slid a finger along the top part of the lingerie, the skin underneath tingling with awareness as he tugged the bra strap lightly.

“How long have you had this planned?” He asked and I shrugged, squirming when his hand trailed down. The heat pulsing through my veins followed the touch until he hovered at the underwear, the pad of his thumb resting just over where I wanted him most.

Fighting for words, I choked out an answer. “The lingerie has been in my dresser for years, unused. I've been trying to use it with you for weeks.”

A smile curved his lips and he hummed, fingers trailing to the edge of the underwear and sliding in. “Good thing I didn't know about it. I would have told the store to figure their shit out for themselves otherwise and while I wouldn't regret it later, it would have caused complications.”

He pressed into the bundle of nerves right at my entrance and I

shivered, every inch of skin keyed up and focused on him as he started rubbing slow circles over it.

“We have hours now and I fully intend to use them...after I bend you over the bed until neither of us can think.” He removed his hand and I barely bit back a whine of complaint. Then his words registered, and anticipation burned through me.

This would be the first time since we’d been back together that we’d been connected like this, and I ached for it. Stretching my legs wider for him, I watched as his pupils flashed a hair wider and he sucked in a breath.

“Shit, I had a plan for this before. I was going to take you out to a nice dinner, bring you home and do this slowly.” He glanced down to the tent pushing against his pants with a grimace. “But that isn’t going to happen this time.”

Good thing I liked where this was headed.

Inching closer to the edge of the bed, I hooked my leg around his hip and dragged him against me. When his hands rested under my thighs on habit, holding me there, I spoke.

“I want you, the slow and caring can come later.”

He groaned but nodded, gently setting me back on the bed before stripping. I sat up, starting on his belt as he shucked his shirt. Once he was in nothing but his underwear, I trailed a finger over the tented fabric just to watch a shiver pass through his frame.

He caught my hand, giving me a warning look. “Don’t. I’m right on the edge, and it’s taking everything I have not to flip you over and go to town.”

I clenched on nothing, arousal pulsing like a heartbeat between my thighs as I kept eye contact before sliding off the bed. Turning to face away from him, stretching languidly to push my behind up an inch, I said.

“You’re only holding back for yourself then because that sounds like a perfect idea.”

I heard his harsh suck of air, then the tear of a condom wrapper. His hands settled on my hips, his tip just barely pressing against my thighs as he ran it up and down along my folds. I could feel the arousal pooling in the lingerie and I rocked back, needing more like I needed air.

He leaned back too, denying me it as he bent to kiss my neck. “You’re gorgeous like this.” His knee nudged mine wider, a hand wiggling under my stomach to press me upward into him as he tugged the underwear to the side for better access.

Then he was there, pressing in past the first ring of muscle.

Everything dulled to the stretch, the borderline painful press of him as he slid in the first inch. I squirmed with a breathy moan, only his hand on my hips stopping me from bucking back onto him. When he didn’t do as promised and rut me into the mattress, I cracked an eye open and groaned.

“I thought you couldn’t do it slow this time?”

He leaned over me, bracing on the bed as he thrust, the air cleaving from my lungs as he buried himself halfway. Instinct arched my back, trying to pull more of him in, but he held firm despite the lust I could hear in his tone.

“I can feel you struggling to adjust. I didn’t hurt you our first time and I’m damn well not about to do that now either.” Even as he said it, I felt him twitch, his hips shuddering with the urge to go all out.

I loved that he cared, but right now I didn’t care if it hurt a little bit. I wanted him *now*.

Forcing myself to relax as much as I could, I reached back and grabbed the hand on my hip. Twining our fingers, I said. “You won’t hurt me, now please, stop holding back and *fuck* me.” It was more of a breathy groan than anything, but I felt his restraint shatter.

His hold on my hand tightened and he pulled back until just the tip stayed inside. I didn't have time to complain about it before he'd slammed forward, using his hold on my hips to pull me back onto him as he thrust all the way to the hilt.

I arched, a string of noises that might or might not have been words tumbling from my lips as he finally started moving in earnest. He bore down, pinning me in place as he sawed in and out, the rub against my walls nearly driving me insane as I writhed under him.

The hand twined with mine moved to my entrance, rolling that bundle of nerves as he slammed home, each new thrust sliding me up the bed and shooting sparks through my nerve endings. My legs shook, the tightness in my lower stomach a warning as I choked on moans.

Then he hefted me upward, hitting something deeper, and I shattered with a cry. Clamping around him, I rode out the waves as he kept going, his weight pressing me down as his thrusts lost their rhythm. I barely recovered enough to think a sentence before he froze over me with a groan.

He slumped, panting against my neck as he shuddered through his climax. I turned to face him, feeling as he slipped out.

A hot flush worked over his cheeks and his eyes were shut, his chest sweaty and heaving as he slowly came back down. Inching up onto the bed, I dragged him over me, tugging until he collapsed like a weighted blanket.

His head burrowed into my throat and he sighed, an arm working its way around my waist as we all but melted into the blankets.

"I didn't know how much I missed that until now." He said, eyes still hazy and unfocused. I hummed, running my fingers through his hair as I lazily chose my words.

"Me neither, though I definitely missed this." I said, pulling him closer to me until we were plastered against each other. The bliss of afterglow hit and I sighed, watching as he tugged the blanket over both of us.

Now tucked into our little cocoon, he hummed. “I knew exactly how much I missed this, though.” He yawned, tucking his head on top of mine. “I used to wake up soaked in sweat thinking the fight was a nightmare, but when I reached out to an empty bed, it hit me again.”

My heart tugged and I looked up at him. He was staring at the wall now, a jaded smile curving his lips. “To add insult to injury, once I got to the big city I didn’t even like it that much. It was nice to get away from the gossip and be somewhere new, a place where no one knew who I was, but not having you?” He shook his head. “That made it hell.”

I hadn’t realized I still worried about him leaving until the fear left, the tight knot of unease that’d sat in my chest this whole time finally relaxing. He’d walked away before, but without a doubt, there wasn’t a thing in the world that would make him do it again.

He was here to stay this time, and I wrapped my arms around him, basking in the feeling of being together again. “It wasn’t easy here without you either. A few times I wondered if I’d made the right choice or not.”

There’d been dozens of nights I’d stared at the ceiling of my room, feeling that empty spot beside me like an open wound. I would have been miserable in a bigger city, I *knew* that, but wasn’t I miserable without him anyway?

I was still glad I hadn’t gone with him. There’d been times over the years my being here has helped my family or Cindy. If I’d been in the city, that would have been impossible.

But he was right that not having him had been hell.

Curling into his throat, I sighed. “I think you leaving hurt because it looked like you did it so easily. One second we were discussing our future and how many kids we’d want to have, and then the next you changed everything.”

He nodded, arms tightening as he pulled back to look at me with remorseful eyes. “I know. I was just so tired of everyone in town. We

couldn't go anywhere without someone commenting, whether it was positive or negative. I hated that everyone knew our business and thought it was their place to interject."

Honestly, that was the only thing about the town that bothered me, but it still wasn't enough to make me leave.

Thankfully he was here to stay, so I didn't have to worry about it anymore.

"Ignore them. Their opinion doesn't matter and it never will. When something new comes along they'll gossip about that instead. It's just how things are here." I said and he lost the pained frown, an amused smile taking its place.

"I don't know, I think there's still a bet going around if we're going to elope or not."

My head jerked up and I choked. "There's a bet for *what?!?*"

He laughed wholeheartedly now. "Whether or not we're going to elope. Don't ask me where it came from because I have no idea. There's that one and apparently one for if I'm leaving or not." He rolled his eyes. "I'm irritated by how many people bet against me on it. Oh well, I'm sure Ma will be more than happy to take all their money when I stay. She's one of the few in my corner."

I couldn't help it, I chuckled. "That sounds like your Mom. How is she doing?"

He shrugged. "I called her last week and she said things are going well. Dad is still as cantankerous as always and now with me running the hardware store he has less to do with his hands. He's driving Ma crazy, but she does it right back to him so I guess it's fair."

I hadn't talked to his parents much since he left, but they were definitely characters. Maybe soon we'd have to invite them over for dinner.

He shook his head, bringing me back to the present. “They’re definitely something else. Do you think we’ll be like them when we get to that age?” He asked, and I considered it.

His parents were the definition of ‘painfully in love,’ and not a day went by that they weren’t seen in town teasing each other. They had their fights like anyone else, but there wasn’t a doubt in anyone’s mind that they would work it out by the end.

When we’d been teens just dating, I’d seen them dancing around their kitchen, his father singing off-key just to make his mother smile.

Looking at Sam, I tried to picture it. He didn’t really like to sing, but there’d been a few times I’d caught him humming a few notes in the shower. His voice was nice and deep, though when I tried to imagine him singing, I couldn’t do it.

Dancing around the kitchen, though? That was easy to imagine since we already did that.

I shrugged, answering honestly. “In some ways, I think we already are like them. I can’t see you willingly singing to me like your Dad does to your Mom, but we do dance around without music. We do our own things that are like them but different, and I prefer it that way.”

He nodded, “Yeah, I hate singing. I would if you asked me to, but I don’t enjoy it like Dad does.” His nose wrinkled, and I resisted the urge to kiss it. After a beat, he offered. “Though I could start reading out loud again. You used to love it when I did that.”

He wasn’t wrong. We’d used to lie down while he read from whatever fantasy book he’d been engrossed in that week. While I generally wasn’t a raving fan of that genre, listening to the low rumble of his voice made me like it a good bit more.

“That would be nice,” I said, already imagining the comfort of laying in his lap, his fingers combing through my hair as he read.

Before I could ask to do that now, a yawn cut me off and Sam snorted. “We don’t have to rush it. There’s all the time in the world for that later, but now I say we get some rest.”

I wanted to argue, but my muscles were still cooked spaghetti and when I tried to move them, they barely twitched. Knowing a losing battle when I saw one, I curled into him and gave in.

It wasn’t like being pressed against him was a bad consolation prize...

Chapter 13

I danced around the kitchen, my work uniform and bra shucked into the laundry basket as Honey bounced around my legs. Music blared from my phone as I set to cleaning.

It'd originally been planned for weeks ago, but with all the time I spent with Sam lately, my responsibilities were piling up. Not that I particularly minded. If the trade-off for being this happy was occasionally getting behind on household chores, then so be it.

Sam should be on his way already from work, which meant I needed to get as much done now as I could. While he'd help me if I asked, there were plenty of other things that I'd prefer to be doing with him, like using that whipped cream.

Delving into thoughts of just how I'd be using it as I moved to the garden beds out back, I almost missed the shift in the air. The previous lighthearted happiness disappeared, replaced with a nameless tension. The hair on my neck stood to attention and I frowned, confused by the sudden alertness.

Looking at Honey, I watched as a line of hair raised along her spine. Her lips pulled back into a snarl, and her eyes were locked on something over my shoulder.

The feeling that I was in a horror movie and things were moving at slow motion hit as I turned to where she was looking and froze.

It was the man from before, the one that'd given Oliver, Jen, and me bad vibes. He didn't have a weapon that I could see and his body language was relaxed, but the fact he was here at all put me on edge. He'd come inside the chain link fencing in the property, and even now he inched forward.

Backing up until I had a hold of Honey's collar, I spoke. "You're trespassing, and if you don't leave, I'll call the sheriff." My tone was a few degrees off steady, but considering the current situation, I couldn't bring myself to care. His smile tugged higher, as if he could sense my discomfort and enjoyed it, and he said.

"There's no need for that, I'm only here to take back what's *mine*."

With that, our suspicions were proven correct and my grip turned painful, the fabric of the collar biting into my palm. "You're the one behind that awful puppy mill," I said, and despite the fact it wasn't a question, he nodded.

"You say 'awful,' I say 'lucrative.' Do you have any idea how much people will pay for a puppy? Even one that isn't purebred."

His eyes trailed to Honey, a sick greed twisting his features as he continued. "That one in particular brought in a pretty penny from all her litters, and since it was *you* that ripped apart my business, it'll be your dog that makes it right."

He took another step forward and Honey snapped, trying to lunge out of my grip at him. I held firm, the muscles in my arm burning as I fought to drag her back toward the house.

Flashes of the condition Honey had been in hit like a brick, and icy determination rose through my fear. I'd promised her she wouldn't feel that again and she *won't*. This disgusting excuse for a man wouldn't have her again, I wouldn't allow it.

Grabbing the nearest thing—a hand shovel—I pointed it at him while still fighting to get Honey inside. "You stay back! I won't let you hurt her again."

He eyed the shovel with amusement, his lips curling into a mocking smile. "What are you going to do? Garden me to death?"

He was moving forward again, and instinct screamed to get as far

away from him as possible. He wasn't afraid of Honey despite her trying to jump at him, and something told me that was for a reason. It didn't look like he had a weapon, but I wasn't willing to risk it.

Keeping my hold on her collar, I forced her back another few feet. The door was maybe a yard away now, I just had to get to it and I could lock us inside. Unfortunately, *he* was the same distance away and closing in quickly.

When he was almost in grabbing distance, I made a snap decision and threw the shovel. He froze, shock painting his features, but I didn't stop to see if it hit him or not. Claspng both hands to her collar, I heaved her inside and slammed the door.

Flipping both locks on it, I watched through the glass as the man staggered back, a hand on his head. Even from here I could see the blood trailing through his fingers, and my stomach rolled.

I didn't regret hurting him, not with what he was trying to do to Honey, but I'd always been a bit squeamish...

His face twisted into a thundercloud, the previous fake smile disappearing like mist in the breeze as he stormed toward the door and pounded on it.

"Do you really think that'll be enough to stop me? I won't quit until I have that stupid mutt and every last one of the others at your little boyfriend's house!"

He punctuated his statement by beating on the door, Honey's snarls picking up and skyrocketing my nerves as she finally managed to get free. My hands burned from holding her for so long, but that was the last thing on my mind as she attacked the door.

She was a sight as she made the door shake from the sheer force as she jumped against it. Not once had I seen her so dangerous, and I hesitated to grab her again.

Instinct was a powerful thing, and the last thing I wanted was her turning on me before she realized it *was* me.

When the man pulled something—a taser?—out of his pocket, I didn't let myself think about it. I couldn't risk him hurting her, so I snatched her collar again, ignoring the burn to my hands, and dragged her back.

She didn't blink in my direction thankfully, her focus entirely on him as she struggled against me. My hands ached and while I wished she'd just stop, I forced myself to focus. I needed to call for help.

Wrestling out my phone, I kept my eyes firmly on him as I dialed Neal. Every ring felt like it lasted an eternity as the slams against the door increased in pace until I worried it would break off its hinges.

Just as I prepared to hang up and call again, he answered, and relief hit like a wave.

“Cecilia, what's wrong?” He asked, tone alert and wary.

Forcing air through my burning lungs, I answered. “He's here, the man we called you about. I managed to get inside, but Honey is here with me, and he's trying to take her.”

A shudder rolled through me, fear and determination warring as I continued. “He said he's going to try to take back as many dogs as he can.”

The door creaked in warning, and my stomach dropped. It should hold, right?

When it gave another creak, I looked for a weapon, *any* weapon. Neal's voice came, pulling me back to the present.

“I'm on my way with a few officers. You did good to get inside. Now you need to get ready to fight. It'll take us a few minutes to make it to your house. Do you have a gun?”

The calm rumble helped anchor me and I shook my head, then

remembered that he couldn't see it. "No, I'm at my house, not Oliver's."

Although after this I'd be getting one...

He hummed, "Alright, let's try knives. Are you near the kitchen?"

Swallowing around the knot in my throat, I answered. "Yes." Forcing Honey to follow me, I set the phone into my shirt pocket and grabbed one of the long, jagged ones. I'd used this yesterday for making dinner, and not once had I ever looked at it and considered if it'd make a good weapon.

If I wound up using it, I'd replace the entire set because there was *no* way I was using a knife that's touched human blood for making food.

The banging on the door didn't stop and Neal must have been able to hear it because he growled. "Persistent one, isn't he? Hold on, we should be turning onto your street soon."

Sirens cut through the air, and I fought the urge to collapse from relief. This wasn't over yet, and I wouldn't relax until he was *gone* and Sam was here.

Forcing my legs to stay under me, I gripped the knife until it bit into my palm. The man must have heard the sirens, too, because he looked at the street with pure loathing.

"You think you're safe because you called them? You're wrong. I know where you and your little boyfriend live. One way or another, I'm taking that dog and the others too."

Then, he ran for the gate, leaving the same way he'd come in as the screech of tires broke the silence. Neal burst through the front door, gun up and ready. When he saw me with no one else, he nodded to the other officers.

"You both go check outside. I have her."

They nodded, leaving Neal with me as he gently took the knife from my shaking hands and soothed me. "Good job, Cecilia. Now, let's get you on

the couch. You look pale as death.”

It was only after he'd pressed me onto the edge of the couch that I realized how quiet it was now. Honey had stopped snarling and when I looked at her, she sat next to me, ears and eyes intent on the back door.

Neal noticed it also. “Smart girl.”

He left her alone, focusing entirely on me now. “I need you to tell me what you can.”

Everything felt like it was hitting at once, and tears burned my eyes. The adrenaline was wearing off, and my hands ached fiercely. When I tried to talk, hiccups interrupted me, and Neal's eyes softened.

Reaching into his pocket, he offered a handkerchief. “Here, take a minute to breathe. Let the rush pass and focus on calming your heart rate.”

I did, hearing it thunder in my ears as slowly it evened out. I didn't know how long it took, but when I finally felt almost in control again, I wiped my cheeks and sniffed.

“Sorry,” I said, and he snorted.

“Cecilia, there isn't a civilian in the world that would handle what you just went through any better than you are now. That man is dangerous, and you had a close brush with him. There's no shame in being afraid.” Then he smiled. “Besides, you did well. You got that dog of yours and yourself inside to safety.”

Some of the shame eased and I nodded, shifting the subject. “But what about him? Do we even know who he is yet?”

Neal tipped his head. “We do, though not as much as I'd like. His name is Doug Vargas. He's been in this business for a while, but apparently he got sloppy. The guy he hired is still giving us more, but it at least offers a starting point for now. We'll bring him in later.”

“Do you have enough evidence to put him away, though?” I asked, remembering the dozens of stories I’d heard over the years where corrupt people got away with things they shouldn’t have.

Neal nodded, patting my arm. “With your witness account saying he attacked you in your own home, plus his interest in the dogs before it gives us enough to investigate him in depth. From there, I’ll handle it. Your job is to keep yourself safe.” Then he picked up his pad of paper and slid into his sheriff role.

“I do still need you to give me a rundown on what happened.”

Even remembering it twisted my stomach, and the adrenaline and fear were so sharp I could practically taste it, but I shoved all that down and focused. This was important to putting Doug away, so I’d do it.

It took almost ten minutes to get through the entire thing despite there not being much to tell. Neal was patient, asking questions while giving me time to deal with the emotions wreaking havoc on me. Hardly a minute after I told him the last of it, the sound of tires came, and he snorted.

“I believe that’d be Sam.”

He got up, shaking his head as Sam himself came running into the room. His eyes flashed over everything before landing on me. Palpable relief washed over him as he dropped next to me on the couch.

“Did he hurt you?” It was the first thing out of his mouth, and I shook my head before gesturing down to Honey.

“She warned me he was there, and I got us inside. He didn’t manage to break the door...” Looking over at it, I remembered the haunting creaks the hinges gave and shuddered. “Barely.”

Sam’s mouth twisted into a scowl, and he eyed it. “I’ll check it over later to make sure it doesn’t need to be replaced.” Then his focus was back on me, his arm sliding around my shoulders. He didn’t say anything, but the worry and protectiveness all but glowing in his eyes said everything for him.

Neal cleared his throat, pulling the attention of the room to him. “She’s physically fine, but until Doug is caught, you two should be careful. He already said he’s after not just you, but the dogs too.”

Sam scowled, “Let him try to come on my property again, and the police will be the least of his problems.”

Approval warmed Neal’s eyes alongside amusement and he nodded. “I take it Cecilia will be staying with you then?”

Sam shot me a questioning look, and I shrugged. “I definitely don’t want to stay here after this. Not until that maniac is caught.”

His eyes softened and he nodded. “Then my place it is. Now, if we could just get the rest of the dogs into good homes so he can’t target them, we’ll be set.”

We didn’t have that many left over now. Maybe we could do another adoption day with pictures on the shelter’s websites?

Shaking the thought to the side for now, I hummed. “We can brainstorm that later. I’m *exhausted*. Do you need anything else, Neal?”

He put his pad of paper away and shook his head. “Nope, I got what I need. I’ll start putting together a case against Doug. You two keep your heads down and coast through the mess.”

Then he left, gesturing for the others to follow him. Once it was just Honey, Sam, and I, my head thunked onto his shoulder. All my energy disappeared in a blink and his hold on me tightened, offering an anchor to the present I desperately needed right now.

“You want to get a nap or head to my house?” He asked, more questions that he didn’t voice hovering just past his eyes. I considered it, looking at Honey for a long minute, then decided.

“Your house. I don’t like that he threatened the dogs. Most of them aren’t in the pen anymore but the ones that are he could easily hurt. We can

plan an adoption day for them later, but right now, I just want to get out of here and sleep.”

He nodded, but when I moved to get up, he slid an arm under my legs and lifted until I was safely clasped to his chest. “Unless you want to walk, I’m just going to carry you. The duffle bag you used last time still has your clothes in it, so the necessities are at my house already, and you look ready to pass out the second I put you down.”

Under other circumstances, I’d argue that I could handle walking, but with the heavy weight of exhaustion tugging at me I gave in without a fight. Curling into him, I hummed.

“I’m going to fall asleep.”

He shrugged, moving for his truck with clipped strides. “That’s fine, you definitely deserve it after this mess. I’ll set you in the truck and get Honey. Then we’ll head home.”

It was only after he sat me down that I noticed the vibrant splash of color against his truck’s interior. Flowers sat on his dash and when he noticed where I was looking he sighed.

“They’re the reason I was late coming here. I stopped to get them.”

I picked them up, inhaling the subtle, sweet scent with a smile. “Thank you,” I said, and he waved it off, dipping to kiss my head.

“Nothing to thank me for. I’ve actually been meaning to pick them up for a while now.” Then he was off, and I watched as a minute later he walked out of the house with Honey happily trotting at his side.

She jumped into the truck without prodding, all but climbing into my lap in the front seat until Sam gently pulled her into the back again.

“I know you’re excited to see her, but you can wait until she’s curled in bed.” He muttered, patting Honey’s head before shutting the door.

He got into the driver's side, reaching out to squeeze my hand with a smile. "Go to sleep, Cecilia. I'm more than strong enough to carry you inside."

Even if he hadn't said that, I doubt I could hold on for much longer. The adrenaline from before was gone and without it, I was barely keeping my eyes open. Letting them shut, I relaxed into the seat as much as I could and let sleep take me.

Maybe I'd even wake up and this would all be just a nightmare.

Chapter 14

Through a haze, I felt arms around me and a steady heartbeat sounded under my ear. The world swayed back and forth, nearly rocking me to sleep again, but before I could surrender to it, Sam's voice rumbled down at me.

“You should probably change into pajamas.”

Yeah, the jeans weren't going to be comfy later, were they?

Fighting my way back to wakefulness, I looked around at the interior of his house. Apparently I'd slept through the whole ride here. Honey was nowhere to be seen, which meant she was probably curled up with Jesse in their corner of the house, and with my miniature power nap out of the way, some of the dragging tiredness from before evaporated.

I was far from being bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, but I'd take what I could get.

Moving on autopilot when he put me down, I shucked my clothes until I was in only my underwear before falling face first onto the bed. Sam settled next to me, the mattress dipping under his weight as he stroked circles over my back.

I almost didn't catch it when he whispered, “This scared the living shit out of me.”

Partially turning to face him, I hummed. “It wasn't just you, trust me. Though, now that I think about it, how'd you know something was wrong?”

He'd already been running by the time he'd gotten into the house.

His hand paused on my back, pressing his palm flat over my heart as he sighed. “I was at the flower shop when the owner's radio went off. You

know how much he likes to listen to the police scanner. I heard there was a call from your place, an attempted breaking and entering. I figured it was him.”

He looked away, biting his lip. “For a minute, I thought my choice to stop for flowers would cost me you.”

The fear he’d held back until now bubbled under his tone and I cuddled against his side, hooking an arm around him and squeezing.

“I love the flowers, and you couldn’t have known he was going to try something. We can’t be by each other’s sides all the time, it’s not healthy.”

He nodded reluctantly. “I understand that, I do, but every instinct in me screams to find somewhere deserted and hide with you until this whole mess blows over. I wouldn’t do that to you,” he quickly added before I could interject, “but the urge is something else.”

If things were switched and it was him who’d had this kind of scare, I can’t say I wouldn’t feel the same. When he looked ready to continue into a full blown babble, I leaned against his side and soothed.

“Breathe, Sam. I’m not about to get angry over how you feel. You’re stopping yourself from acting on it and that’s what matters.”

He relaxed, heaving a sigh. “I hope Doug is caught soon because this is bad for my heart.”

I didn’t comment, content to soak in the peace of the present. Exhaustion still hovered just on the edge of my consciousness, but at least now I could think through it.

There was nothing to be done about Doug. Neal was on that, and thinking about it would only worry me into a frenzy. As if the universe itself agreed with me, my phone dinged with a text, and when I looked, Cindy’s name flashed over the screen.

I read it, needing the distraction.

Hey, the rumor mill is going insane. Are you okay?

How was I supposed to answer that honestly without worrying her?

Sam hummed, eyes politely averted from my phone as he asked.
“Everything alright?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I’m just trying to figure out how to word this. Cindy asked if I was okay.”

He grunted. “Honesty is usually the best option.”

Rubbing a hand over my face, I responded to her while choosing each word carefully.

I’m physically fine. The man who we suspect is behind the puppy mill came to my house and tried to force his way in. He ran away when Neal showed up, but it definitely shook me. I’m with Sam now.

There, knowing Cindy, she’d still worry, but there was nothing for that. She was like me, if someone we cared about was in danger or even uncomfortable, it threw us headfirst into mother mode.

Ironic, since neither of us were mothers.

Though that did bring about a new train of thought I hadn’t considered for years. When Sam and I first got together, we’d already known where we stood with the whole ‘parenthood’ topic. We wanted to wait until we were stable, but kids were definitely in the plans.

Had things changed on that front?

Looking at Sam, I said. “We haven’t really discussed kids since we’ve gotten back together...”

He blinked, taken by surprise for a second before rolling to better face me with a nod. “We haven’t. While this is a bit out of the blue, I take it you’d like to discuss it?”

I nodded, resting my head on my arms. “I was just thinking about my and Cindy’s mother-henning habit, and how ironic it was that we aren’t even mothers yet, but the instinct is still there.”

A low hum of understanding rolled from him, and he closed his eyes in thought. “Well, part of my answer is based on yours. If you changed your mind and don’t want kids, then I’m fine with that.” He shrugged. “I’ll be a bit disappointed, but nothing too bad. You’re the one I want.”

Warmth flashed through my veins and I shook my head. “I do want them, actually. Not anytime soon, to be clear, but my stance on having a family of our own hasn’t changed. In a few years, when we’re stable, I’d like to try.”

Which didn’t necessarily mean anything since some couples tried for years with no luck, but we’d cross that hurdle when we came to it.

He smiled, bringing me back to the present with a nod. “Then our plans haven’t changed. We’ll talk about it more when we’re closer to that.”

Settling into him again, I pulled my phone closer as it vibrated.

Please tell me you’re staying with him. If not, I’m camping on your couch until this mess is over.

That was exactly what I’d expected from her, and I shook my head fondly.

I am, in fact, staying with him so that won’t be necessary. How is everything with your potential boyfriend?

I was never good with subject changes, but thankfully she went with it.

Great! I talked to him about being more, and he agreed. We’re taking the whole relationship thing slow, but so far it’s nice. I can see why you like it so much.

A smile curled my lips, and I nudged Sam happily. “Cindy is dating someone now.”

His brows flew up and he asked, “The same Cindy that jokes about marriage being a trap?”

I winced, but nodded. “Yeah, I don’t know if *that* view has changed, but she seems happy with the guy so I’m glad for her.”

Ever since she’d brought him up, I’d worried how that would turn out. She was tough and she’d recover if he *did* reject her, but it still would have hurt.

Shaking that to the side, I responded to her.

Yeah, having more was a necessity for me, but we both know I’m a romantic at heart. Oh, Sam bought me flowers today. They’re gorgeous.

Looking around for them, I asked when they weren’t in sight. “Where did you put the flowers you bought me? I want to send her a picture.”

He yawned, pointing lazily to the door. “Kitchen table.”

I could feel his eyes on me every step of the way and I winked over my shoulder at him. I didn’t bother putting anything on, comfortable in my underwear. The flowers sat right where he said they would, and I snapped a photo before sending it.

Just as I was headed back to the room, the front door opened, and Oliver’s voice called out. “Sam, we just heard the news. Are you and Cecilia alright?!”

His footsteps were coming toward me at a fast clip and I choked, looking down at my underwear-clad form with a groan. Sam himself appeared as I scrambled to his room. He stepped in front of me just as Oliver turned the corner, thankfully blocking me from sight as he sighed.

“Oliver, we’ve been over this. Now that I’m together with Cecilia

again, you need to *knock*.”

I didn't hear the other's response, I was already in Sam's room and hastily pulling on my clothes again.

Note to self, *always* wear pajamas when not in bed with him.

Looking in the mirror, I nodded in satisfaction. I was ruffled but acceptable by society's standards. Walking out, I caught the affectionate head shake Jen gave her boyfriend as he huffed.

“I said I'm sorry, and it isn't like I walked in on anything. You're fully dressed.” He pouted, and Sam rolled his eyes.

“You better be happy I like you.”

Then he saw me and his arm lifted instinctively. I slid under it, smiling at the other two as heat crawled up my cheeks.

“If you're here because of what happened, I'm fine.”

Jen nodded to that, linking her arm with Oliver's. “The exact details were hazy, so we figured we'd swing by since we live close. I'm glad you're okay.”

Oliver relaxed a hair, then looked to Sam with a frown. “Should I be keeping an eye out for him around my property?”

Sam considered it for a long minute, then shook his head. “I don't think so. From what I understand, it doesn't sound like he intends to go after the dogs that were already adopted. It's probably too much trouble and it'd bring too much attention to him while he's trying to lie low. That said, he's definitely after Honey and the ones at my place.”

Tension rose, and Jen turned to me. “Do you think we can put on some kind of event to get the rest of the dogs adopted?” She asked and I nodded.

“I was already thinking about something along those lines. The

shelter's website hasn't been updated either, so maybe we can take new pictures of the dogs as well..."

Now that I had *some* sleep, the ideas rolled around in my head. Sam stretched, offering without missing a beat. "My phone has one of the best cameras on the market if you want to use it. Oliver and I can wash the dogs beforehand so they look their best."

Oliver didn't seem to mind being volunteered, his lips stretching into a smile as he nodded. "I'm down for that."

Exchanging a look with Jen, I smiled. "Well, it looks like we know what we'll be doing for the rest of the day." Now I could only be happy I'd gotten that little power nap.

Sam handed over his phone before moving toward the backyard with Oliver. Jen and I followed, watching as they hooked up the hose and stripped their shirts. My eyes were glued to the newly bared skin and I could just hear Jen's hum of appreciation next to me.

"They're really something else, aren't they?" I asked, and she nodded.

"And they're ours."

I'd never get tired of hearing that.

Oliver glanced over at us, catching Jen's eyes before a mischievous grin curved his lips. He nudged Sam, who then looked at me and chuckled.

"You two enjoying the show?" He asked, and Jen let out an embarrassed noise. I shrugged, not giving in to the teasing.

"Very much so! You'd be liking it just as much if the roles were switched."

His eyes flashed with heat, then he nodded. "You're not wrong." Then he focused on the task at hand, waving to us as he did. "Can you bring

the first few out so we can get started? And maybe some towels, now that I think about it...”

Jen and I set to work, her getting the dogs ready while I gathered the towels. The next few hours were spent in a whirl of dirt, suds and trying to wrestle dogs still long enough to dry them, but by the end of it every one of them had shiny coats.

All four of us sat on the porch, regaining our energy as Jen hummed. “The sunset will make a killer backdrop for those pictures.” She gestured to it, and I looked. The reds and oranges were gorgeous, and without a doubt, she was right.

I dragged myself back onto my feet, snagged Sam’s phone and made for the clean dogs. There were a good number of them but we made quick work of taking the photos between us. Flicking through them, I smiled in satisfaction.

“These are perfect; with any luck we can get these ones adopted too.”

Jen yawned, and Oliver nodded. “We’ll leave that to you then. I think it’s about time we head out. Give us a call if you need any help.”

He clapped Sam on the shoulder nearly hard enough to send him forward-Sam rolling his eyes at the familiar goodbye-and left.

Once it was just us and the dogs, I slumped against him. He pulled me into another princess’ carry with a shake of his head. “We didn’t *have* to do this today. You’ve been through a lot, and it’s normal to need to rest a bit after stressful things.”

I didn’t fight him, content in my place against his chest as I shrugged. “I know we didn’t have to, but my mind keeps trying to think of Doug and it does no good. I don’t want to work myself up and the best way to avoid that is by keeping busy.”

He nodded, giving me that. “True, but try not to stress yourself out either. You’re not dealing with it alone and I’ll do my best to help where I

can.”

That was one thing I loved about him being in town again; I wasn't alone.

I hadn't *really* been before—my family was just a call away at all times after all—but Sam's help was different. Just being around him made everything okay and right now I needed that.

“Thanks. Cindy tells me that a lot, but I'm still working on remembering when it comes to things like this.”

He carried me back into his room, shutting the door firmly behind him before the dogs could follow, and once we were situated on the bed, I looked back toward the door curiously.

“I've only seen Oliver around. Are you still friends with the other guys from your old game nights?”

It'd been a mandatory thing for all of them; once a month, they'd get together and have a guys' night, but since he'd come back, he hadn't mentioned going to one at all.

He shrugged, shucking his wet clothes before dropping onto the bed with me. “To be honest, I lost contact with all of them but Dennis and Oliver. Finding time to talk was awful, but thankfully they know how I am and didn't take it personally.”

Then he frowned, considering twisting his features. “I haven't seen Dennis around, but I could probably get his number from Oliver. With the whole puppy mill thing lately I haven't tried talking to anyone from back then.”

His eyes were distant, as if focusing on something in the past, and I offered, “You could always plan another guys' night? Invite all your old buddies and see who attends? If you want it to be just guys, I could even go to Cindy's.”

He snorted at the last bit. “The guys know I’m never chasing you out for anything. They had the standing invitation to bring their girlfriends or wives. If you want to stay and meet them, then feel free.”

It’d be a lie to say I wasn’t curious. I’d heard him talk about them a few times, and they seemed like a funny bunch.

With that in mind, I answered. “I do want to stay and get to know them. If they’re important to you, then they’re important to me.”

In the past, I always left them to their guys’ nights since it felt like I was intruding, but no more. As long as Sam didn’t mind, I’d be meeting his friends.

Those that showed up, at least.

His arm tightened around me, pulling me back to the present as he smiled. “Then I’ll let Oliver know, and he’ll spread the word. Does next Saturday work for you?”

I mentally flipped through my schedule and nodded. “That should be fine.”

He typed out a message on his phone and sent it off, then curled around me again with a sigh. “We can talk more about that later. For now, let’s get some sleep.”

Well, I certainly wouldn’t complain...

Chapter 15

The week passed in what felt like the blink of an eye. Neal was still getting everything together to go after Doug, but he hadn't shown up again so far.

Sam had made a point of installing a camera that now pointed directly over the dog's pen, and so far it hadn't caught anything. We didn't let our guard down, though. Doug wasn't going to give up that easily, and we both knew it.

Thankfully, there'd been a lot of interest in the leftover dogs so far, but something concerning I noticed were the handful of people who were downright insistent about adopting one. Some people were naturally pushy, but instinct poked and prodded at me like needles, urging me to be *very* careful with whom I gave the dogs.

Doug had the money to hire people, and it wasn't impossible that he'd send *them* to get more dogs from the shelter's website. So far, I'd only allowed adoptions by people from town, and the ones from outside it were getting more and more demanding by the day.

I'd brought up my concerns to Neal and he'd shared my suspicions, urging me not to let any adoptions go through from outside of town. When the people started getting rude, I simply asked them to take their concerns to the sheriff.

Unsurprisingly, they went quiet after that.

It'd only added to the overall stress pressing down on me, but today would hopefully be a break from it all.

Today was Sam's game night, and the others should be here any time now. Oliver had arrived not fifteen minutes ago with Jen, the two in their own little world, which left me and Sam to ourselves.

He didn't say it, but I could tell he was nervous. His leg bounced whenever he sat, and his fists would curl when he wasn't actively doing anything. Waiting until he went to the kitchen for something, I wrapped him in a hug and asked.

“Are you okay? You seem jumpy.”

He grimaced but nodded. “I'm fine, just worried about how this will go. For all I know, Oliver will be the only one to show up.”

I shrugged, soothing to the best of my ability. “At least you know who your real friends are, then. If their prides are too stung by you dropping communication, then so be it. Besides, by the way you talked, I'd say Dennis should be here. You two were close, right?”

He nodded, some of his tension easing. “Yeah, we were. He, Oliver, and I were thick as thieves back then. His family's ranch kept him busy most of the time and more than once we wound up helping them out when they were down ranch hands. That was actually where I used to go when the town gossips was driving me crazy. It was quiet out there.”

I'd always wondered where he disappeared off to, but this didn't surprise me. Having work to do with his hands always calmed him down, and ranches had an excess of things to do.

Before I could ask more about that, a knock sounded on the door and he straightened, nerves coming back. I gave his hand a squeeze and he smiled before walking forward. I watched as he opened the door to greet a man just as tall as him.

He had long, blond hair that reached his shoulders and a light dusting of stubble over a sharp jaw. Tension sparked when he first looked over Sam, Oliver hovering nearby as the two watched each other warily.

After a long minute, the man I assumed was Dennis snorted. “It's about time you resurfaced. I know you've been wrapped up in your girlfriend, but I was starting to worry I'd never hear from you again.”

And just like that, the ice was broken.

Sam coughed, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly. “Yeah, that’s my bad. You know how I am with keeping in touch.”

The blond clapped him on the back and rolled his eyes. “Awful, you’re awful with that. Always have been and probably always will be.”

Then he looked over Sam’s shoulder and met my eyes, his gaze softening as he nodded politely.

“You must be Cecilia. This idiot never used to shut up about you.”

I caught the light flush working over Sam’s cheeks and smiled, muffling a laugh. Good to know he used to talk about me.

Linking my arm with his, I waved. “Well, Cindy, my best friend, can tell you how much I talked her ear off about Sam, so I guess we’re even. For the sake of having a formal introduction though, hi, I’m Cecilia.”

I offered a hand and he took it, his palm engulfing mine as he carefully shook.

“I’m Dennis, it’s nice to meet you.”

Stepping back, he looked around before locking his gaze on Oliver and rolling his eyes. “I haven’t felt this much like the odd man out since we were in high school.”

I didn’t understand what he meant at first, but when he gestured to Jen and I, understanding hit. Oliver didn’t miss a beat, walking forward to drag him into a hug that made me wince in sympathy for Dennis’s back.

“If you want a woman, you’re more than capable of getting one. I’ve seen the way they fawn over you, so you don’t get to complain about being alone.”

Dennis shot him a look. “As if I have the time for that. Dad’s health has been going downhill lately, nothing to worry about,” he quickly added

when both men shot him concerned looks, “but it’s enough that the doctors want him to slow down on the ranch.”

Oliver relaxed, barking a laugh. “Oh, I’m sure he absolutely loved hearing that.”

Dennis nodded. “Yeah, last I heard, Mom was threatening to tie him to a chair if he didn’t listen. It’s about what I expect from them, though.”

Shaking his head, Dennis moved for the table and dug into his pocket. Dropping a deck of cards, he raised his brow at me and asked. “Do you know how to play poker?”

I shrugged. “No, but I’m willing to learn.”

Jen said the same and he gestured for all of us to sit. “Since we’re waiting on the others, we may as well get this done now.”

I went to take a seat, but Sam tugged me into his lap instead. When I looked up at him, he only grinned, winking teasingly. From the corner of my eye, I caught Oliver doing the same as well as Dennis’s eye roll.

“Can we start with the game, or are you guys just going to stare for the rest of the night?”

There was no real bite to his question but heat still inched up my cheeks. Sam scoffed, wrapping both his arms around me, and faced Dennis with a raised brow. “By all means, go for it.”

The rules were pretty simple, and I slowly caught on as he explained them. It was only after an hour passed with several practice rounds that Sam sighed, pulling my attention upward.

“We may as well start. I think it’s obvious by this point that the others are more than a little miffed with me.”

A twinge of hurt lingered under his tone and I took his hand, squeezing it lightly. He smiled, appreciating that though he didn’t say it out

loud. I caught the look Oliver and Dennis exchanged, but neither of them commented. Instead, Dennis reached over to lightly smack his shoulder.

“Some people never grew up past high school. If they got their panties twisted by you not chatting with them, then that’s their problem. Hell, I’ve only talked to them a handful of times and I live in the same town.”

Sam’s shoulders eased as some of the tension disappeared, a tired but thankful smile curling his lips as he nodded.

“Well, I’m glad you two are here at least. Do we want to make this an official regular game night?” They hummed their agreement and he added on. “Monthly or weekly?”

Oliver shrugged. “I say we put a monthly necessary one and a weekly ‘if you can make it.’ I remember what happened the last time we didn’t have a ‘you have to show up’ one.” He rolled his eyes playfully at Dennis, who snorted.

“I’m busy on the ranch most of the time. If we don’t make it necessary, I’m not coming. At least, not most times. You know this.”

He must take his job really seriously.

A hint of admiration flashed through me and I asked. “What all do you do on your ranch?”

Dennis blinked, as if surprised I’d been interested enough to ask, then he straightened and cleared his throat. “I’ve done pretty much everything from fixing the fences to helping deliver animals. The things I do regularly are mostly management related; making sure the other ranch hands are on track with their duties and stuff like that.”

That explained the air he gave off. He seemed the ‘no funny business or else’ sort, and he was definitely used to having his orders followed.

Cindy would probably torture him within an inch of his life...I’d have to remember not to introduce them.

Shaking that to the side, I leaned back on Sam and hummed. “Sounds like you’ve got your hands full.”

He shrugged. “Usually, yes, though we’ve been working on hiring a new round of people to ease the load. I still have to find a cook.”

Then he eyed Jen and I. “I don’t suppose either of you are good at cooking and looking for a job?”

I shook my head, smiling with a touch of apology. “Nope, sorry. I love working at the shelter.” Jen hummed her agreement.

“And I’m happy with my job now that I’m not being actively harassed by my coworkers.”

Dennis and I both turned, our brows flying into our hair, and she snorted. “You two didn’t hear that story through the gossip grapevine? Well, the gist is Emily was a friend of Diana, an ex of Oliver,” she stopped to explain that to me at my confused look, “and she took it as her sworn duty to butt into Oliver and my relationship. It escalated until she threw hot coffee on me and tried to trip me when I had an armload of dishes.”

I couldn’t help it, I snorted. “Is she still in high school? That sounds like something she saw in a teen drama.”

Dennis tipped his head in agreement and Jen laughed. “I know, right? After I brought it to the boss she was harshly reprimanded and hasn’t bothered me since.”

I raised my glass of water in a salute. “At least there’s that. Thankfully, all my crazy is away from work.” Though one could argue it was connected since it was a puppy mill that’d gotten me tangled into it. If I hadn’t worked at the shelter, I wouldn’t have even realized something was going on.

Dennis straightened, pulling my attention to him as he scowled. “I heard about that. What does he look like? I doubt he’ll show himself around the ranch, but I can still keep an eye out.”

Gratitude warmed me as I listed off the characteristics I could remember. Afterward, I added. “Neal has a sketch of him done if you actually want it accurate.”

He nodded, something flinty and sharp behind his eyes. “I’ll ask him for a picture of it later.” Then he glanced out the window with a grimace. “We should probably pack it in soon. As nice as this has been, I have work tomorrow.”

Oliver reached over to playfully smack his shoulder. “You have work *every* day, how is tomorrow different?”

He shrugged, not disputing that as he stood up. Sam gently nudged me out of his lap and got up as well, seeing his friends to the door. Before they left, Dennis tipped his head to me.

“It was nice meeting you. Thanks for taking care of the idiot here.”

Then, before I could say anything, he was gone, and Oliver shook his head fondly. “That’s the Dennis we know and love, says something nice and immediately bolts before you can respond.” Giving me a wave, he smiled. “Have a nice night, Cecilia.”

Once they were gone, I looked at Sam and smiled. “I like Dennis, he seems nice.”

He nodded, picking up our dishes and bringing them to the kitchen. “He is, don’t let that gruff outer exterior fool you. He may huff and puff sometimes, but he’s the sort who’ll always be there if you need it.”

A flash of disappointment speared him as he set the dishes in the sink and leaned back on it. “I wish some of the others had come around, but I’m not surprised. We hadn’t been as close as Dennis, Oliver and I.”

Leaning against his side to offer silent comfort, my eyes trailed to the fridge and immediately an idea hit. Fighting past the grin curling my lips, I asked. “That’s their loss then, but Sam, do you have any plans for the rest of the night?”

He looked down at me, one brow raised in curiosity. “No, and even if I did, they’d be canceled for whatever put that smile on your face. Do you want to go out and get ice cream or something?”

Warmth fluttered through me that the first thing he thought of was ice cream, then I shook my head and opened the fridge. Pulling out the whipped cream, I waved it, watching as his eyes expanded and lit up with heat.

“Well, it *involves* a dairy product,” I said, and he grinned, nodding.

“I’m in, I’ve been dying to know just what you planned to do with that since you first brought it up.”

The spark in his eyes told me he had a good idea and he’d be right. His hand curled around mine, and he tugged us toward his room, pausing long enough to make sure both Honey and Jesse were settled for the night.

Once that was done, he shut the door behind us and moved to the bed. Plopping down on it, he leaned back and tucked his arms up behind his head. “I’m completely at your mercy; do with me what you will.”

The way his arms stretched above his head pulled at his shirt, tightening it over his muscles and bearing a strip of stomach that I traced on habit. He shivered at the feather light touch, eyes locked on me as I stroked over his clothed groin.

“This needs to come off,” I said, and the second after the words were out of my mouth, he was stripping. In a blink he was reclined again, now without clothes and smiling at me with a wickedness that I loved on him.

“Anything else?” He asked and I shook my head, pressing my palm flat to his chest and lightly nudging him into the center of the bed.

“Nope, now relax and let me have my fun.”

He didn’t argue, molten eyes following my every move as I shimmed up to sit on his thighs. His length stood to full attention, the tip twitching toward me, and I wrapped a hand around him on instinct. It jerked,

his stomach tightening as he bit his lip and shuddered.

I had a plan, but there was nothing saying I couldn't have a bit of extra fun before we got to that. Bending down to kiss the tip, I kept my eyes on his as I sucked at the base before licking from bottom to top.

He sucked in a breath, his pupils flashing wider as he groaned. "Cecilia, ease back on the teasing..."

I considered it for a second, then grinned. "Nope, you'll just have to hold yourself back." Then, to mess with him, I swallowed half of him in one go. His eyes snapped shut and he hissed, one hand tangling into my hair as his hips all but vibrated with the urge to buck.

Long, drawn-out groans rang from him as he rocked in place, face twisted into a mask of concentration as he fought to keep himself in line. When sweat started building along his brow, I took pity on him and pulled off.

Reaching for the whipped cream, I kissed over his heart and hummed. "You have no idea how long I've wanted this."

Since the day Cindy told me about it, to be honest. He'd already left for the city, but that hadn't stopped me from aching for things I couldn't have.

"You're right, I don't, but something tells me I'm going to be wanting this often after today..." He said, breaking me out of my thoughts. Flipping the can and spraying a small drop of it directly over a nipple, I licked over it and smiled when he groaned again.

"Odds are, you're not wrong." I said, then got to work in earnest. I kept the pressure on the can light so it didn't spray all of its contents in one spot, a thin line painting across his skin as I drew circles and lines over him.

When his chest was almost completely covered, I put one last swirl leading down with a small patch of it at his base. He was breathing heavily now, anticipation clear as I kissed his neck and flicked my tongue out.

Sweetness hit my taste buds first, then the salt of his skin registered. The combo was odd, but not completely off-putting as I followed the trail I'd left before.

It started at his throat, winding lower and making swirls over the plain of his chest. When I slowly slid to a stop at his groin, I took him in. His face was flushed, both hands now buried into the sheets, and his eyes were hazy from arousal.

Good, I liked that look on him.

Licking off the last of it, I briefly considered repeating the process, but one look at his length told me it wouldn't be happening. He'd held on admirably well given my teasing, but he was going to hit his limit soon.

Putting the whipped cream to the side, I slid up his frame until my arms were securely wrapped around his neck. His length pressed between us, the friction nice but still not enough as I kissed him.

He didn't hesitate, tongue winding with mine and sucking until all I could taste was him. When the pulse between my thighs matched the twitches he gave, I pulled away and shucked my shirt. His hands joined the fray, helping to strip me until I was just as bare as he was.

His tip pressed against me and he shivered, eyes rolling back with a moan. "Condom." He gritted out and I smiled, shaking my head.

"Pill," I said in response, and he shuddered. One of the biggest things that used to turn him on was this, feeling skin to skin, and without a doubt, I loved it too. His hands settled on my hips, but instead of driving up into me like I expected, he took a deep breath and spoke.

"Do you still want hard and fast, or are you keeping control?"

I hadn't set out with any kind of plan other than the whipped cream, but now that he said it, that did sound fantastic.

Nipping his lip, I sucked on it and answered. "I'm completely at your

mercy.”

He didn't hesitate, rolling us until he hovered over me. His movements were hurried as he gripped my thighs and yanked me closer, locking my legs around his waist.

His length pressed against me, sliding up and down until the friction and heat had me rolling into him for more. Tingles swept out in waves, tightening my lower muscles as I bucked on him. He sucked in a breath through his teeth, then bent to nip my shoulder in warning.

“Easy, I'll get you there, but you can't rush this. I'm already on the edge as it is.”

Taking the warning for what it was, I stayed still as he adjusted his grip on my behind, squeezing lightly. Then, with a slight lift of my hips, he thrust down and sheathed himself. Heat dove deep, scraping against every wall as I arched and threw myself into it.

He held me still, controlling the pace as he dragged me into him on each new slide. The slick slap of skin echoed through the room and I moaned, little noises choking off as he inched lower with every thrust. Pulling out all the way, he took one of my hands and linked our fingers before slamming to the base.

Fully buried now, he stopped, sucking in a long breath as he twitched and bucked inside me. He clenched his eyes shut, fighting his climax tooth and nail as he gave little swivels of his hips.

“I forgot how good this felt.” He groaned, just keeping a shaky rhythm as he drilled harder into me, barely pulling out before repeating the process. The stunted thrusts ground into all the right places, and my free hand wound into his hair.

Words were beyond me so I responded by rolling into him, needing more of that friction. Apparently he understood the wordless demand because he picked up his pace, rocking into me until the bed shook. The headboard thumped against the wall, faster by the minute as he latched onto my neck

and sucked until a bruise was sure to form tomorrow.

The band in my stomach tightened, just on the edge of snapping, and when his hand wiggled between us to pinch and roll the nub at my entrance, I couldn't hold it anymore. I shattered, rutting against him as the waves hit and waned.

White eclipsed my vision and sparks shot across my nerves until I slowed, lazily clenching around him. He shuddered, hips losing their rhythm as his thrusts became sharper. Then with one last thrust, he buried himself as deep as he could and groaned.

Sticky warmth shot from him and I wrapped my arms around his neck, stroking sweaty hair as we both floated back down from our respective highs.

He pulled out with a sigh, head resting against my throat as he slowly recovered. "I'll bring us to the shower in a minute." He mumbled, contentment wafting off each of us in turn.

I shrugged. "There's no rush, the shower will be there later."

A soft snort brushed my skin, and he pulled back to meet my eyes. "Last I remember, you hated the feeling of all that drying on you. Has that changed?"

I bit my lip, "Well, no, but we're both comfy, and it seems a shame to interrupt that for a shower." It wasn't as if I *had* to wash it off before it dried, I just didn't prefer how it felt after the fact.

He shook his head, dragging himself out of bed while I weakly tugged at him to get back in. "It's not that big of a thing," I said but he ignored me, moving to the bathroom while not bothering to put on clothes. When he came back a second later he had a wet rag, and he sat next to me, eyes warm and amused.

"It may not be now, but it will be later. Now hush and let me take care of you."

I didn't fight him, reveling in the afterglow as he washed off the worst of it before tossing the rag onto the nightstand. Curling back around me like a living blanket, he buried his nose into my neck and hummed.

“Better?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

Pulling the blankets around us, I soaked in the peace. His arm wiggled under my head and I cuddled closer, dropping a kiss against his chest on habit.

“Thank you.”

He shrugged, kissing my hair and lingering for a beat. “I promised to take care of you, and that's part of it. Besides, I like this.”

His grip tightened to emphasize that and I hummed my agreement, fighting off the lethargy that always came afterward. He chuckled, the air brushing my forehead as he spoke.

“Quit fighting sleep, it'll get you either way, and we can have more of this later.”

I ignored that, trying to stay present for just a few more minutes to enjoy this, but just like he said, the lethargy won out. The last thing I heard before I slipped off was his low rumble.

“Stubborn woman, but it's just one of the things I like about you.” I huffed, making a mental note to remind him tomorrow how stubborn *he* was. Then sleep claimed me and I knew nothing.

Chapter 16

The next morning passed in a blur of happiness. His house had become our own little bubble, and nothing would break it. The dogs were already fed, Honey and Jesse had been let out to use the bathroom, and now we were lounging in bed.

Sam had to go to work today and I had half a mind to join him, just for something to do. I didn't have anything I needed to do, work or otherwise, and while lounging in bed sounded tempting, it was less so without him.

Running my fingers through his hair, I asked. "Would you mind if I helped at the hardware store today? I don't have work, and I don't really have anything else I need or want to do."

He shrugged, yawning into his palm as he stretched. "I don't mind, though it's pretty boring. Mostly, I just stock shelves and greet people as they come in. I think it'd just be us and the morning crew today."

"Sounds fine to me," I said and he nodded.

"Alright, then we should probably get ready to go." Just as he reluctantly dragged himself out of bed his phone rang, and he grimaced. "That'd be one of my employee's ringtones. I hope there weren't any call-ins."

I got up with him, stroking a hand over his back as he stared down at his phone with dread.

"Even if there are, you'll just have to show me how to help, and we'll make it work."

He turned, catching my hand and kissing the back before focusing on his phone. "Fair enough." Then he answered. "This is Sam."

A beat passed, then his eyes snapped wider and he straightened sharply. “Is everyone alright?”

The previous happy buzz under my skin disappeared in a snap, and alarm replaced it. That didn’t sound good...

Sure enough, after a minute he rubbed between his eyes and sighed. “I’ll be right there. Call the sheriff.” Then he hung up and shook his head. “You might not want to come in today after all. Some stupid kid chucked a rock through the front glass window. It’s going to take all day to clean that up and make sure nothing else was busted.”

I hated to see the happiness all but drain out of him, but there was only one thing I could do to help. Wrapping my arms around him, I soothed.

“I’m still coming. It sounds like you need all the help you can get with that so we can work together and get it cleaned up even faster.”

He didn’t argue, offering a tired but grateful smile before pulling away reluctantly. “Alright, but I’m buying dinner afterward.”

I shrugged, not minding that as we each got dressed. After one final pat on Jesse and Honey’s heads, we were off. Sam was tense the entire drive over, his shoulders in a hard line and his knuckles white on the wheel.

When he hadn’t relaxed by the time we pulled into town, I asked. “Sam, this seems like you’re worried about more than just a kid’s prank. What’s going on?”

He grimaced, rubbing a hand over his jaw before sighing. “My gut says this wasn’t a kid and the closer we get to the hardware store, the worse that feeling gets.”

Alarm hit again, sharper this time, and I sat up straight. “You think it was Doug?”

It didn’t make sense though; why would he bother attacking the hardware store? The dogs weren’t there.

He nodded, pulling me back to the present. “Yeah, or someone hired by him. We made sure the dogs were secured and the cameras were on before we left so that doesn’t worry me, but something about this is making my skin crawl.”

I took his hand, offering what little comfort I could. “Why would he do this?”

A long minute of silence passed, then he spoke. “My best guess is he’s trying to scare us, or it’s a warning. He’s already beyond angry with us for tearing apart his operation, and it’s not just the dogs he’s after. He wants to hit us where it hurts, too.”

He grimaced. “I’m going to call my family later and tell them to keep an eye out. You should do the same.”

I hadn’t talked to them recently. Keeping them from storming the house in worry was going to be interesting, but I’d make it work.

We pulled into the hardware store’s parking lot in the next minute and he got out, moving around to get my door on autopilot as we both took in the mess.

He’d been right that this was going to take forever to clean up. Shattered glass was everywhere, stretching both outward into the parking area and inward to the store. It looked like a display was knocked over, its contents among the glass on the floor, and a pale teenager stood at the counter looking two seconds from passing out.

Sam and I moved inside, making a line straight for the teen as he spoke. “It was like this when I came. No one else is here yet, and I wasn’t sure what to do.”

Poor guy looked ready to puke or pass out. Sam must have realized that also because he brought him to the counter and pressed him into the seat behind it.

“Take a breath, you’re not in trouble. I’ll give the sheriff the security

footage from out front and order a new window.”

The boy nodded, still looking shaky but a little less so now as Sam grabbed a broom and turned to me. “Do you want to sweep or pick up?”

I held out a hand wordlessly, and he gave me the broom. It felt like forever before the floor was clear of the glittering shards, but once it was, I nodded in satisfaction. We still had to deal with the missing window, but at least now it was clean.

Sam sidled up to me, the display upright again with the key chains, postcards, and other knickknacks replaced on its shelves. He had his phone out and he nudged me to do the same. “I’m calling my family.” He said and I nodded, stepping away.

I’d tried to think of how to word this the entire time I’d been cleaning but nothing came to me, and now I’d just have to wing it. There was nothing I could say that would make my parents freak out less, but maybe I could control the worst of it.

Mom picked up on the second ring, her voice worried. “Cecilia, is everything alright?”

I chose my words carefully while answering honestly. “I’m fine, though I have a lot to update you on. Is Dad there too?”

She hummed an affirmative and I continued. “To start, you already know about the puppy mill Sam and I found, right?”

This time her answer was drenched in wariness. “Yes, your father and I heard all about it from the gossip grapevine. What are you tangled in, dear?”

That was the million dollar question, wasn’t it?

Rubbing my forehead tiredly, I explained. “The guy behind it got away, and he showed up at my house to try to take one of the dogs back, the one I adopted.” Dad hissed in a breath, but before they could start, I jumped

back in.

“I’m safe! I’ve been staying with Sam and plan to continue doing that at least until this mess has blown over.” And maybe further, if the looks he was sending me were any indication.

This time Dad’s voice was tinged with protectiveness. “Is he treating you right?”

I should have seen this coming.

Rubbing between my eyes, I answered. “Yes, he’s treating me very well. We already talked about why he left and I believe him when he says he isn’t going to again. But back to the present issue, Doug. That’s the name of the man behind it all. Today Sam’s hardware shop was vandalized.”

Mom sucked in a breath. “Is everyone okay?”

I sighed. “Yeah, everybody is fine, it happened before anyone was here. The front window has been busted and we’ll go get another one soon, but I wanted to give you two a heads-up in case he tries something. Sam thinks the guy is trying to scare us, or use this as a threat.”

Which I wouldn’t put past him.

Dad growled, “Let him try to come here. He’ll see real quick that my aim is just as good now as it was years ago.”

Considering he’d won a decent amount of marksman competitions, I didn’t doubt that one bit. Shaking it to the side for now, I continued.

“I’d almost like to see that, but be careful.”

Dad huffed, grumbling under his breath. “I’m always careful.”

I could hear Mom’s snort. “Sure you are, Honey.”

My lips twitched upward at the clear amusement to her tone and the indignation in his response.

“I *am!*”

“Dear, it was only last night that you went outside in nothing but your underwear to check a noise.” The amusement was getting heavier by the second, and I could all but see the flush that’d be working over Dad’s face right now.

“Of course I did, that’s my job. I wasn’t about to wait the time it’d take to get dressed when there could’ve been a threat!”

Mom soothed. “And I love you for it, but the noise was a raccoon.”

When they sounded ready to drop into one of their play fights, I intervened. “I don’t really have anything else to input, so I’ll leave you guys to it. I just wanted to update you.”

I could *feel* Mom’s stare through the phone now. “Cecilia, maybe we should come and visit until this whole thing has blown over.”

I barely bit back a groan. “That’s not necessary, Mom. I’m perfectly safe with Sam and-.”

Dad grumbled, “He’d *better* be keeping you safe, or I’ll have to make time for a little chat with him.”

Ugh, I loved these two but if they could just focus for a minute...

“He’s keeping me warm, well-fed, loved, and safe. If he wasn’t, I wouldn’t still be with him. You raised me to know my worth, Dad. Now trust me to put that into action when necessary.”

A long minute passed, then he sighed. “Alright, alright. I don’t like that he hurt you before, but you know him better than anyone. If you say he’s good, then he’s good.” Then he added under his breath. “But if he hurts you again, all bets are off.”

That was the best I’d be getting out of this so it’d have to do.

Sam waved, his phone on the counter now, and I nodded.

“I need to go for now, I’ll call you again soon if anything changes. Be careful. I love you.”

They each said it back and I hung up, facing Sam with a tired smile. “I managed to stop them from storming the place, but only barely. How did things go on your end?”

He snorted, “About the same. Mom is ready with a mountain of food we won’t be able to eat even if we had weeks to do so, and Dad is keeping her from descending with it by the skin of his teeth.” He shook his head, amusement clear. “I love them, but sometimes they’re something else.”

I leaned against him with a slight nod.

He paused, wariness inching into his expression. “I never asked before, but should I be watching my back?”

I blinked, taken off guard, and when I raised a brow up at him, he continued. “Your Dad. I got the shovel talk like any other teenage boy. I haven’t talked to him since I’ve been back, and I just realized some of his threats were...creative.”

Why didn’t it surprise me to learn Dad pulled him aside like that?

Shaking off my amused exasperation, I answered. “He sounded mildly displeased but not ready to remove anything from your person, so I think you’re in the clear.”

He relaxed a bit, then rubbed a tired hand over his face. “It’s my own fault, of course, but I have the feeling he and I are going to have a rocky time starting off again.”

I didn’t deny that. Dad had been hellacious protective of me the first time around, and it’d taken Sam months to prove he was a good man. Now he was back to square one and at a disadvantage. Mom wasn’t exactly his best fan, either.

Memories of her coming over the day he left with her mountain of

food hit and I sighed. “Honestly, you should probably be more worried about Mom. Dad grumbles but, for the most part, Mom holds him back. If you get on her bad side she’ll stop doing that.”

I’d seen it before, and the last thing I wanted was that carnage pointed at Sam.

He paled a hair and grimaced. “How would I go about starting to get back on their good sides again?”

I shrugged, knowing it was less than helpful even as I didn’t have an answer. “Your guess is as good as mine, though in Dad’s case anything you offer is probably going to be seen as a bribe. It’s better to just wait, let them see that you’re treating me right, and we’ll work through the rest later.”

He didn’t seem happy with that, but he accepted it with a nod.

“We’ll come back to that later. I have to go out and get the glass for the window, if you feel like coming with?”

I nodded, linking my arm with his on habit. “Of course, the sooner we get this done, the faster we can continue on with our day.”

Not that I’d had anything in particular planned, but anything was better than dealing with the stress caused by Doug. Sam dipped his head, pulling us toward the door while throwing a comment over his shoulder.

“We’ll be back soon with the glass; hold down the fort until then.”

We didn’t wait to hear a response before walking out.

Chapter 17

Thankfully, getting the glass was easy, and installing it took less than an hour. What wasn't easy? Warding off all the nosy people trying to get gossip on what happened.

The shop was full to the brim and even from my place at the front, I could see the irritation leaking off Sam. There were several women around him, and he'd never looked closer to combusting. When he met my eyes, he relaxed a hair and his eyes expanded in an almost comical 'help me' look.

I bit back a laugh, easing out from behind the counter and moving toward him. The second I was in grabbing distance, he hooked his arm around my waist and pulled me flush to his side. Kissing my head, he announced loudly.

"Cecilia, I was just talking about you. This is my *girlfriend*, Cecilia." The emphasis he put on girlfriend told me why he'd looked so irritated. Apparently we were dealing with more than just gossips today. Leaning back on him, I took his hand and smiled at them, beating back the possessiveness slowly chewing its way to the surface.

It's fine, he obviously isn't interested in them, and soon we'll be back home where it's just us.

Repeating that like a mantra, I spoke. "It's nice to meet you all. Are you from out of town?" The question was redundant since I knew nearly everyone in town by face, if not name, and I didn't recognize any of these women.

There were two blondes and one brunette. It was the brunette who stepped forward with a sparkling smile that reminded me of a shark. All teeth.

"We're just traveling through and we saw a commotion here, so we

were curious.” She looked Sam over as if he were a piece of meat. “Then of course we had to see the sights.”

He grimaced, tugging me further in front of him like a shield. Dipping down to whisper into my ear, he spoke. “I told them multiple times that I was taken but that only encouraged them.” Distaste lingered in his tone, and I didn’t blame him.

These three were gossips *and* home wreckers, the two things he despised most. Not that I was any better.

Leveling them with an icy glare, I said. “May I offer some friendly advice to you?”

The brunette finally stopped eyeing Sam to nod, eyes wide and curious. I kept my smile firmly in place while speaking in the sharpest tone I was capable of.

“When someone is clearly uncomfortable with your staring, you should *stop*. It makes you just as bad as any other pervert who hits on you at the bar when you clearly don’t want him to.”

Her mouth dropped open but I kept going, not letting her get a word in edgewise. “And if someone says they’re taken, that isn’t an invitation for you to keep flirting. Now please, buy something or *get out*.”

I pointed to the door for emphasis and she sputtered, cheeks flushing as all eyes turned in our direction. “There’s no need to start a scene, I was just-.”

I cut her off. “Just staring at my boyfriend like he’s a slab of meat *after* he told you several times that he was taken. Stop pushing yourself where you’re not wanted. It isn’t classy.”

There were so many more words I could use aside from ‘not classy,’ but they were the closest I could manage while being polite with her.

I heard a few chuckles from the crowd as Sam’s grip tightened, his

mouth pressing to my head to hide his smile as the brunette's face turned cherry red.

She didn't say a word, though; instead, she turned on heel and marched out of the shop with her little friends racing behind her. Once it was just us, I squeezed his hand and asked.

“Are you alright?”

He nodded, sighing in relief when they were completely off the property. “I'm fine, just irritated. I couldn't be any clearer than ‘I'm not interested and I have a girlfriend.’”

I kissed his cheek, the stubble scratchy but not terribly so. “Some women—and men—enjoy that. To them, if they ‘take’ someone from their partner, then they've won something.” I shook my head. “I've thankfully never personally known anyone like that.”

I wouldn't tolerate it well.

He huffed, his distaste clear as he moved back toward stocking shelves. “Neither have I, and hopefully that'll be the only time I bump into that kind of person.”

Then he visibly shook himself off and smiled. “Thanks for coming to the rescue. I should be done here soon, if you want to head home?”

My feet pulsed, casting their vote, and I nodded. “That sounds perfect.”

Thankfully the crowd was starting to dissipate, and by the time we'd finished the last of the day's to-do list, there were only a few milling around the shop. We waved at the cashier before we left, the drive home a much needed break from all the noise of the day.

His hand rested over mine on the gear shift, the calloused palm comforting as we pulled into his driveway. Before we'd even fully come to a stop though, I noticed it.

The quiet.

Usually when we pulled up, the dogs would bark at least a few times before settling down, but now there was nothing. Even Honey and Jesse were silent...

The hair on my arms stood to attention, and Sam scowled. "You getting a bad feeling too?"

I nodded and he sighed. "I guess it was too much to hope that the glass was just a prank." He pulled out his phone, but before he could dial, a voice cut through the air.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Doug stepped out from the nearby trees, a gun clasped in his hand and pointed at Sam. The image froze my heart in my chest and dropped it to shatter on the floor.

I'd had nightmares like this with Doug hurting or killing Sam in front of me, but I'd always written them off as just that, nightmares. Now, I pinched my arm as hard as I could, wishing more than anything it would wake me up like it did before.

Nothing changed, our surroundings staying solid as I took in Doug.

There wasn't even the slightest shake to his grip and his eyes were steady, a lethal glint flashing in them. His hair was brushed back, not a strand out of place, and he scoffed arrogantly.

"Did you really think I would stoop so low as juvenile tricks?"

This wasn't a nightmare, and I'd never wished more that it was.

Sam's jaw ground and he put the phone down on my thigh, out of sight of Doug. "No, I just didn't consider that it was...what, a diversion to get us away from the house?"

Doug nodded, opening the door and gesturing for Sam to get out first.

He did, moving to block me from Doug's sight for the most part. I couldn't see him, but I heard the derision in his tone when he spoke.

"I have you at gunpoint, and you're still worried about her?"

Sam shrugged. "It's part of being in a relationship, not that I expect you to get it." He was also blocking me so I could call someone, but Doug didn't need to know that... Forcing aside the terror making its rounds through me, I looked down at the phone. He was giving me a chance, and I'd take it.

Doug scoffed, "You can be as protective as you want; it won't matter in the end. I'm going to kill you two and take back all the mutts here. You won't ruin me so easily."

My hands shook as I typed in Neal's number, making sure the volume on the phone was all the way off so Doug couldn't hear anything. I saw when Neal picked up, but I said nothing, instead shifting the phone so he could hear what was happening.

Focusing back on the present, I clutched the seats under me and fought past the fear screaming through my veins. Panicking did nothing, I needed to *think*. Doug had a weapon, we didn't. Sam's gun was inside in the nightstand, and unless I could somehow get to it, we were at a disadvantage.

That only left taking *his* gun, but that...was risky.

Neal was probably already on his way, but we couldn't just sit here and hope he made it in time. Besides, if Doug heard the sirens, he may shoot us and take off.

This wasn't going to be easy, but if there was even the slightest chance we were making it out of this, I'd take it.

Forcing slow, deep breaths through my lungs until the worst of the panic haze disappeared, I spoke.

"So that's your plan; kill us and take the dogs?"

Sam tensed and Doug moved around him to look at me, those cold eyes drilling into me with an unnerving intensity.

“It is, and it’ll work, too.”

Then he clicked the safety off and pointed the gun at Sam again. “Since you’re so determined to protect her, I’ll do you the mercy of killing you first so you don’t have to see her die.”

His finger squeezed the trigger, and my stomach dropped. I couldn’t let him do this, but how do I stop him?!

Then I saw it, something metal in the trees. The sun glinted off it and without a doubt, it was a gun barrel.

But who was it aimed at?

From that angle, it could be either Sam *or* Doug.

He didn’t act like he had a partner, but Neal shouldn’t have been able to make it here that quickly either. When Doug went to pull the trigger, I set the phone to the side, opened the door, and watched as he stopped, eyes on me now as he snapped.

“Don’t move.”

Sam tensed. “Cecilia-.” His tone oozed with warning and I ignored both of them, raising my chin as a stupid plan began to form. It wasn’t great, it wasn’t even good, but it would at least get Sam out of the way of whoever was in the trees waiting to strike.

We’d see in just a minute if they were on our side or not.

“If you’re going to kill us then I’m going to be at his side when you do, not cowering in the truck.” I glared, clenching my hands hard until my nails bit into my palms.

Sam hissed, “Damn it, Cecilia, get back in the truck.”

I glared him down. “No.”

Before he could argue more, Doug snorted. “I’ve seen that look on many a woman, don’t bother arguing with her.” He gestured for me to come closer. “You want to die with your boyfriend? How romantic.” Mocking dripped from every word, but he nodded. “Go ahead.”

I inched closer, not looking toward the trees now in case I accidentally alerted Doug to our hopeful friend. Tucking into Sam’s side, I relaxed a hair when his arm wrapped around me. He dipped his head, whispering just for my ears.

“What the hell are you playing at here?”

I answered just as quietly. “Don’t look, but there’s someone in the trees.”

His eyes flashed wider for a split second, hope burning to life in them, then he shut his expression down into a mask of anger. “You couldn’t have listened to me this once?” He said it loud enough for Doug to hear, the man chuckling at our fake quarrel.

“She’s a *woman*, of course she doesn’t listen.”

Then he leveled the gun on us and my heart picked up until I could all but feel it trying to beat out of my chest. The shine from the trees shifted when Doug moved, and this time when he went to pull the trigger, Sam gripped me closer and dropped.

The world blurred into a haze of color as he rolled us under the truck, the sound of two gunshots ringing in my ears as I tried to get my bearings back.

Sam curled around me, using himself as a human shield, and I couldn’t tell if it was him shaking or me. Seconds dragged by like hours as he pressed me into the ground, not daring to even breathe loudly as we waited for the other shoe to fall.

It did when a familiar voice rang out.

“You can come out, you two. He won’t be an issue anymore.”

Dennis.

Sam blinked, taken aback, before gently pulling us out from under the truck. Dennis himself stood over Doug, a rifle pointed down at him as he lay on his back. The gun didn’t even twitch and he shook his head, throwing his hair over his shoulder as he did.

“I never thought Dad’s habit of listening to the police radio would come in handy. I heard you two were having some issues and since I was nearby, I figured I’d stop by and lend a hand.”

Sam gave a shaky chuckle, his arm still tight around me as if afraid to let go. “And I’ve never been happier to see you. You’re still the sharpest shot in town, I take it?”

Dennis rolled his eyes. “Yes, my title is still intact, or it was the last time we had a marksman competition. Any idea when the next one of those will be?”

It took me a second to realize he was talking to me, not Sam, and I shook my head. “I-. Don’t know.” I stammered, stress crashing over me in a wave. Dennis’s eyes softened, and he nodded.

“That’s fine, I’ll look it up later. You okay?”

I barely bit back the urge to laugh hysterically at the question. Physically I was fine, thanks to him, but I felt ready to shake apart any second now.

Sam must have noticed that because he leaned back on the car and tucked me into him, his head resting over mine as he took a deep breath. His heart hammered under my ear, the only sign he’d been as afraid as I was, and he kissed my head.

“We’re shaken, but otherwise okay. What about him?” He nodded to Doug, and Dennis rolled his eyes.

“Not dead, if that’s what you mean. I got his shoulder.” Doug didn’t move, not even a twitch, and I gripped Sam tighter on instinct. That was the man who’d caused so much trouble for us lately, the one who’d tried and almost succeeded in taking Sam from me.

A hard ball of anger welled that he’d so easily disrupted our lives and after a deep breath, I asked. “Dennis, do me a favor?”

He raised a brow, curiosity clear.

“Kick him.”

Understanding dawned and he chuckled, doing as asked. Doug didn’t stir, proving that he was definitely unconscious, as Dennis smiled at Sam.

“You’ve got yourself a smart and gutsy one there.”

Sam shrugged, gently pulling me to sit in the truck, the door open this time. It was only then I realized how badly I was shaking. His hand curled around mine as Neal’s patrol car came speeding into the driveway. The weight was comforting, offering me something to focus on as Neal himself came racing toward us.

When he saw Dennis perched on Doug’s back, he snorted.

“While I’m glad to see you, we have it from here.”

Dennis shrugged, moving away and giving the others room to grab the limp body on the ground. He walked to us, rifle resting on his shoulder now as he sighed.

“At least that’s over with.”

I nodded, half hiding in Sam’s shoulder now as he rubbed soothing circles over my back. Tears burned the backs of my eyes, but Sam only smiled.

“It’s alright, just cry.”

Dennis dipped his head, though I could see how he shifted between his feet uncomfortably. I offered a shaky smile.

“You don’t handle crying women well, do you?”

He shook his head with a grimace. “No, I never have. It doesn’t matter if it’s Ma or anyone else.”

Then he looked at Sam and grumbled. “Why aren’t you freaking out? It’s your girlfriend that’s crying.”

Sam tightened his arm around me in answer. “Because I know it’s normal, and if it makes her feel better to cry then I’ll bear with it.”

Then a teasing glint came to his eyes, and he nudged Dennis. “And I happen to remember a specific woman you couldn’t stand to see crying. A certain dark-haired girl named Kimberley?”

Dennis’s cheeks flushed and he looked away. “We were kids, of course I wasn’t comfortable with her crying.”

Sam didn’t let up. “Whenever she visited her grandma’s in the summer you couldn’t be pried away from her. You even let her braid your hair once because she was sad she was leaving.”

The flush darkened and when Dennis looked ready to throttle Sam, I nudged him. “Ease up, Sam.”

Neal, who’d been busy getting Doug into an ambulance, walked over with an amused head shake. “I haven’t heard that name in a while. Have you heard from Kimberley, Dennis?”

Dennis’s face shut down. “I haven’t heard from her but again, we were *kids* when we last talked. We didn’t have a way of keeping in contact, and she probably doesn’t even remember me now.”

His tone had a hint of sadness to it and I reached out on instinct,

patting his arm. “Maybe she’ll come back someday.”

He blinked, taken aback, before offering a wry smile. “We’ll see. For now,” he turned to Neal, “I take it I have a witness account to give?”

Neal nodded. “You got it.” Before they walked off, he looked at Sam and me. “You two look dead on your feet. I’ll get yours later. You should check on the dogs and-.”

Adrenaline hit like a brick and Sam tensed, each of us remembering one very important thing.

The dogs.

They’d been quiet since we pulled up.

We shared a look and took off, my legs once again holding my weight as we rounded the house. Several sets of footsteps followed us, but I paid them no mind. It was only after we got back to the pen that I stopped, my heart nearly freezing along with me.

The dogs were all on the ground, even Honey who we’d let out into the pen to play with the others before we left. Before I could start to panic though, Sam spoke.

“They’re alive, just tranquilized by the look of it.” He gestured to the darts I could only now faintly see sticking out of one of them.

I let the air rush out of my lungs, my legs finally giving out as I sat on the ground against the pen. “I’ll call Beatrice to check them over.” I said, hands shaking as I reached for my phone. Sam gently stopped me, taking it and kissing my head.

“I’ve got this, you should rest. I don’t like how pale you’ve gone.”

Even the idea of going inside right now was intolerable and that must have shown because he sighed, shucking his jacket before wrapping it around me.

“Fine, fine. You can stay out here with me, but please stay sitting.”

Considering I didn't think I could get up if I wanted to...

Slumping back against the pen, I listened as sounds buzzed into one another and exhaustion hit like a brick.

I fought it at first, but then gave in with a sigh. There was no real point to fighting it, was there? Everything was fine, we were safe, and things would be better by the time I woke up.

I could rest.

Letting my eyes slide shut, I felt the stress and tension ease out until peace slid into its place. We'd still have plenty to deal with, but at least it was over now.

Epilogue

Honey raced around, Jesse nipping at her heels as they took in the sheer amount of space around us. Not that I could blame them; Dennis's ranch was *huge* and beautiful.

Long stretches of land covered in tall grass were only broken up by the barn in the distance and the fencing that bordered the property.

It was so nice to see them running around, playing after the hell they had been put through. All the dogs were fine after they came out of their haze from the drugs Doug gave them. No lasting effects, thankfully.

Plus there was another influx of adoptions after the news got out, so there were only 3 unclaimed adult dogs left. I'm so thankful they're all being taken such good care of after all the trauma they went through.

Dennis himself shook his head at the dogs playing, amusement clear as he and Sam worked on the fences. "You didn't have to help with this, you know?" He asked, swiping a hand across his sweaty forehead.

Sam shrugged. "I do, but I *also* know that you would've spent all day without breaks doing this if I didn't help."

Seeing how worn down they were each looking, I grabbed the bottles of water I'd originally left to get and offered them.

"Here, you guys don't want to get dehydrated."

They took them, downing half in one go. Dennis nodded his head in thanks, then teased. "You sure you don't want a position at the ranch?"

I rolled my eyes. "My answer is the same as it's been the other time you asked: no." An idea popped in my head, "I think I heard news that someone new just moved into town though; maybe you can ask them?"

Sam put his water to the side and raised a brow. “I didn’t hear that. Who is it?”

I shrugged. “Cindy just called while I was grabbing the waters. A woman and her sister. The gossips were especially loud about them for some reason. They also seemed surprised that she planned to move into some house close to here? I don’t know, they said it was in bad condition-.”

Dennis’s head snapped up at that, eyes locked on me as he spoke. “Wait, was the house they were talking about across from Deer Creek?”

Having his undivided attention on me was uncomfortable, but I nodded. “Yeah, I think so. Why?”

I didn’t know what the significance of it was, but it seemed Sam did because he shook his head with a grin. “Apparently, she *did* come back, but you should go to her place. She’s probably shocked by the condition it’s in.”

Dennis lurched upward as if about to run for his truck, only to stop. “That’d be rude, since I called you two here to help.” A war waged behind his eyes ,and Sam clapped him on the shoulder.

“Just *go*. We’ll be here when you get back to tell us all about it.”

He hesitated another second, then nodded, taking off like someone lit a fire under him. Once he was in his truck and racing off, I faced Sam and asked.

“What was that about?”

He beamed, pulling me to rest in the shade as he explained .”That rundown place was Kimberley’s grandma’s house. The woman the gossips were talking about was probably her.”

Oh!

Well, that did explain why he took off like that.

Sam chuckled, shaking his head. “He always insists that he didn’t

care what happened to her, but we know better. Who knows, maybe we won't be the only new couple around soon."

Leaning back on him, ignoring the sweat coating his chest, I nodded. "Maybe not."

Then I tugged him down into a kiss. "Come on, we still have work to do, and I'm sure he'll tell us everything when he gets back."

Dennis seemed nice; whatever happens, I hope it works out for him in the end.

THE END OF BOOK 8

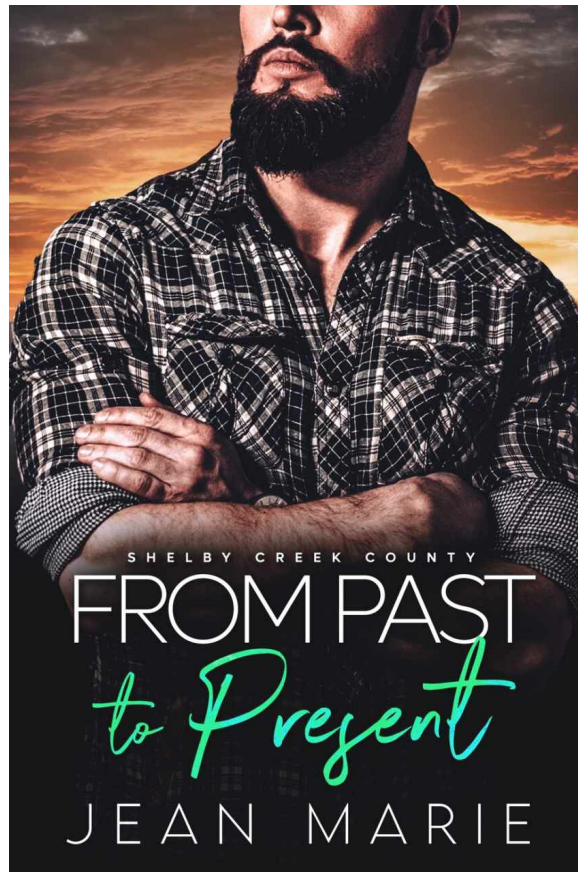
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