



A
SPARROW FALLS
NOVEL

Magnetic
MECHANICS

JAY FIELDS

Magnetic Mechanics

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Magnetic Mechanics

Jay Fields

Prologue

Emerson-6 Years Earlier

“**H**oly shit, Kat! I can’t believe we’re finally done!”

“Girl, I know. I hate that I’ll be moving away from you at the end of the summer, but I’m so excited to get out of here and start living as an adult on my own.”

I just roll my eyes at my best friend. “Kitty Kat, what the hell are you talking about? You basically get to live as an adult already. Sure, you’re under your Grandma’s roof, but it’s not like she’s super strict. Hell, she’s the one that drove us to this party and told us to call her if your boyfriend drinks too much and can’t take us home.”

“Yeah, I know. She’s the fucking best. And it’s not really her who is always hovering and trying to tell me what to do. You know how overprotective Axle is of me. I never thought any guy would be brave enough to date me. Thankfully, Torin wasn’t worried about him.”

I can’t help but snort out a laugh at my best friend, who’s got stars in her eyes as she thinks about her boyfriend. “Well, it

helps that he doesn't give a damn what anyone thinks about him. It definitely takes someone with balls to take on Axle, and it doesn't hurt that they're best friends." I'm glad that she's so wrapped up thinking about Torin that she doesn't hear how breathy my voice gets when I say Axle's name.

I know, I know... It's so cliché to have a crush on your best friend's older brother, but I do and it's getting harder to hide.

Axle is gorgeous. I know I really don't have a chance because he's five years older and views me more as a sister, but that doesn't stop my crush.

I've liked him since I was twelve and started noticing boys. I have always been a tomboy. My dad owns one of the best garages in the county, and since I was little, I've loved going there with him. I'm an official mechanic at the shop now that I have graduated, and one day I will own it.

But back to Axle. He's also a mechanic and has helped foster my love for cars over the years. He bought a 1969 Ford Mustang when he was in high school, and when I'd come over to visit Kat, he'd always let me come out and watch him or even help. He never talked much, but that was okay with me since I got to do one of my favorite things with him, which was working on cars.

Unluckily for me, he's always seen me as his kid sister's best friend. He doesn't live at home anymore since he's twenty-three, so I don't get to see him nearly as much as I would like. I know I should give up the crush and try to find someone my own age, but nobody lives up to him.

I'm lost in my head until I feel my best friend tugging on my hand. We're at a party one of Torin's friends is throwing in the next town over. Kat's boyfriend is twenty-two but cool, still hitting up house parties since neither of us can go drink with him at the bars.

"Torin isn't here yet. He said he was running late but to head around to the back of the house. Everyone should be outside."

"Okay, let's go. I could use a beer or two. It's time to celebrate the next steps together before I lose you to college." I mock-pout because I know it gets to Kat, but I really will miss having her around. I may be all sunshine and think everyone has some good in them, but I'm also an oddball because of my love of cars. I have way more guy than girl friends, and I'm absolutely going to miss Kat once she heads off to college.

We head around to the back of the house and are hit with music and laughter. We don't know a ton of people since this isn't our stomping grounds, so we grab beers and hang out on the outskirts of the party. It doesn't take long before Torin is here and stealing all of Kat's attention. I can't even be mad since it's love and all of that jazz.

I decide to let the two suck face in peace, so I make a circuit around the back yard. I'm pumped when I see a few guys that went to my tech school and were in the mechanics class with me. I head over and am immediately "one of the guys".

"Hey, Sunshine. I didn't know you were going to be here." Tanner, one of my friends, laughs as he wraps me in a bear hug

and lifts me off my feet.

I swat at him because they all know how much I hate when they do this. I may be pint sized, but I don't need to be treated like a child.

“Let me down, you ass.” I smack him, and he just laughs harder.

“Oh, you like my ass, you say? I knew it!”

“Ugh, Tanner. Put me down!”

“Okay, okay.” He slides me down his front, and I think I can feel him hard in his jeans. He sets me down as he takes a step back before placing a sweet kiss on my cheek. They all may tease me relentlessly, but they're good guys, and I love hanging out with them.

I say hi to everyone else before snagging one of the open seats by the fire. Tanner stays by my side and flirts the night away. He also keeps me in a steady supply of beer, so I don't even notice when someone else makes their way into our little circle.

I go to take another drink of my beer before it's tugged out of my hands by someone standing over me. I jump to my feet, ready to kick one of my guy friend's asses when I am met with the most gorgeous stormy-gray eyes making me stumble as I get lost in them.

Axle is here and he looks pissed, but that's nothing new. He grabs my arm to steady me, and I just about melt into his touch.

“Yeah, Sunshine. I think you’re done.” He starts to pull me away from the fire and my friends before I realize what he’s saying.

I hate how frazzled he makes me. Coming to my senses, I dig my feet in to stop him from hauling me across the lawn.

“Hey, stop it. What are you doing?” I yank my arm out of his grasp and take a step back as he turns around and invades my space.

He looks pissed, but I can’t figure out why. He knows Kat and I have gone to parties before, so I’m not sure why he’s so annoyed now.

“You’ve had enough, and I’m taking you home.”

“The hell you are. I’m fine, Axle. That’s only my third beer and we’ve been here for almost two hours.”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever you say. That’s why you were all over that tool and stumbled when you stood up.”

“Tanner? He’s not a tool. He’s a really nice guy. And I stumbled because I wasn’t expecting to have to crane my neck up and look at a giant.”

At my giant comment, he can’t help but smirk. He’s staring me down, and I know I’m going to have to get him off his high horse before he’ll let me enjoy the party.

“Here, I’ll prove I’m not drunk.”

I take a step back before balancing on one foot and then the other. Putting my hands out to the side like you see on the TV,

I take turns touching a finger to my nose. Even though he's trying to hide it, I can see the smile fighting to shine through.

Wanting to really break him out of his grumpy state, I decide to bust out some of my yoga moves. I stand on one leg before lifting the other in the air. Bending at the waist, I reach one hand towards my foot and the other towards the sky where my other foot is pointing.

I swear I hear him groan as I come out of the pose. When I look up, he's running a hand over his face.

“Fine, I get it. You're not drunk. I won't take you home, but I'm going to be watching you.”

Butterflies erupt in my stomach. Afraid that all my words will come out in a jumbled mess if I try to speak, I just smile before reaching up and pecking him on the cheek. I turn and go back to the fire, hanging out with my friends for the rest of the night, but I never actually relax. No matter where I go, I can feel his eyes on me, and the longer the night goes on, the more I want him. I mean, I always want him, but I feel like I'm burning up with his eyes following me all night.

There's only a few people left at the party now, and we're all sitting by the fire. Kat is in Torin's lap and has been dozing on and off for the past half hour.

“Hey, Em are you about ready to go home? I think that if we stay any longer, Kat is going to be completely passed out.”

I just laugh because Torin's not wrong.

Before I can respond, Axle speaks up. “Are you taking them back to the Falls, or were you planning on having Kat crash at your place tonight?”

Torin looks a little sheepish, but he doesn’t hesitate to answer Axle. “I was going to take Emerson home and then head back to my place with Kat.”

“Alright, I’ll take Sunshine home.”

I start to protest, but Axle silences me with one look.

“Thanks, man. I’m beat, but I didn’t want Emerson to feel put out or call your grandma and get her out of bed.”

“No problem. Take care of her.” They do that weird bro handshake-hug thing before Axle turns and tugs my hand, pulling me out of my chair.

It isn’t until I’m standing that I realize how tired I am. I spent all day working in the shop with my dad and his guys, so I’m whooped. I let out a big yawn and stretch before making my way to the front of the house. I stumble in a hole, and Axle chuckles before scooping me up in his arms.

“Hey, I can walk, you know.” I can’t help but nuzzle my head into his neck a little more before taking in a huge breath. I never thought I’d get this close to him, so I’m soaking up every minute I can.

I hear Axle chuckle, and the butterflies in my stomach go crazy.

“I know you can, Sunshine, but you look fucking dead on your feet. I can tell by the grease on your arms that you

worked today. It's almost 2 a.m. I know how long of a day that is."

I just hum in response because he's not wrong, and his sexy, deep voice is about to lull me to sleep.

Before I know it, I'm back in Axle's arms as he carries me inside. It takes me a minute to realize we're not at his grandma's, but his apartment. It's only a few blocks from my house, but I'm assuming he didn't want to wake my dad or his grandma, so he just brought me here. It isn't the first time I slept over, but Kat was with me every other time.

He carries me in before laying me in his bed. It smells like him, and I can't help but hum in appreciation.

I feel him tug my shoes off before tossing something beside me. It's one of his t-shirts. I hope he realizes he's not getting this back.

"You can wear that if you want. I'll let you get dressed. Take my bed, and I'll take the couch."

"No, I'll sleep on the couch. I'm half your size."

"I can't make you sleep on the couch. Just take the bed, Em."

"Fine, but only if you stay in here with me. Your bed is huge, and I don't take up much space."

He groans as he tilts his head back and grumbles something about me being a pain in his ass under his breath.

"Fine. Go get ready for bed."

I just smile as I slide past him to head to the bathroom. I change into his shirt and use the extra toothbrush he had laying out on the counter for me. I go back to his room to find him lying on the very edge of the bed. I can't help but laugh at his huge frame hugging the end.

He hears me and rolls onto his back, and I about pass out.

Axle is shirtless, with his arms behind his head.

I'm instantly wet and uncomfortable. I shift my legs to try and relieve some of the tension, but it doesn't help. He's just staring at me the whole time, which makes me even needier. I bite my lip before turning off the light and making my way to the bed.

"Thanks for always taking care of me, Ax."

I lean over and give him a kiss on the cheek. He tenses before wrapping an arm around me and pulling me into his side, placing a kiss in my hair. He's always been kind to me, but he's never been this affectionate. I'm so turned on, but I'm also in heaven being this close to him.

Despite not wanting to, I pass out within minutes. I feel so safe and content in his arms.

I wake up to darkness and feel like I'm overheating as I realize I'm completely wrapped up in Axle. Our legs are tangled, and he pulled me onto his chest at some point while we were sleeping. I try shifting off of him, but he just pulls me in closer. It's then that I feel his huge, thick hard-on pressing in between my legs.

I can't help myself as I grind down on him. I gasp and do it again. It feels so fucking good.

Axle groans before fully shifting me over his hard cock. He's got my hips grasped in his hand as he grinds up into me. I still have my head tucked under his chin, but I can't resist looking up at him.

When I do, I'm met with his piercing gray eyes that look on fire with how much desire is pouring out of them. He thrusts again, and I whimper. I'm waiting for him to stop, but he just does it again and again until I'm writhing on top of him. My orgasm comes out of nowhere, and I cry out with my release.

"Fuuuuck. That was the sexiest thing I've ever seen." Axle grinds out as he flips me over on my back.

"Axle, I need you. I need more."

"Fuck, Sunshine. I don't know if that's a good idea."

"Please, just one night. I need you so bad."

I think he's pulling away, but then I hear the drawer of his night stand open and see the condom wrapper shining in the moonlight coming through the window.

Axle rips my panties down my legs before pulling his shirt over my head. Swearing, he dives in and kisses me, all while tweaking my nipples. I pull away, moaning, and he takes that as his cue to work his way down my body. He dives in like he's starving while he licks and nips at my dripping pussy. He barely gets a finger inside me before I'm coming again.

“Fuck, Sunshine. You’re gripping my fingers so hard. Do you wish it was my cock instead?” Sitting up, he rolls the condom on before positioning himself at my entrance. He looks down at me, then he lines himself up and thrusts in, hard.

I let out a muffled scream. It hurts so fucking bad, but I’m not about to tell him that.

I may have been a virgin before this night started but, I’m sure as hell not anymore.

He shutters and pauses, trying to get himself under control, and I’m so fucking glad that I can get used to the sensation of being so full.

“Damn, Em you’re so fucking tight. I’m not going to last long.”

He starts thrusting, and it feels so amazing that my eyes roll back in my head. We find a rhythm together, and I could never have imagined sex would feel this good.

Before I even realize it, I’m exploding again. It feels so much better pulsing around his thick cock. I swear I pass out for a minute before I hear Axle cursing as he buries his dick impossibly further in me, letting out a roar as he comes undone.

We both lay there, wrapped up in each other and completely blissed out. Eventually, he pulls out before making his way to the bathroom. I see the light turn on as I roll on my back and stretch. I’m incredibly sore, but in the best possible way.

“What the actual fuck?” I hear Axle say.

I sit up in bed.

He comes storming back, looking absolutely livid. “Sunshine, please tell me you aren’t a virgin.”

I can’t look him in the eyes. “Um, well, not anymore.”

“Fuck!”

I can’t help but flinch. I have the blanket clutched around my body as I frantically look for my underwear. I see his t-shirt and pull it on. When I look up, he’s pacing. I go over and stop him.

“It’s okay, Axle. I’m okay, and I’m glad that you were the one I did this with. You made me feel so desirable. I knew you’d take care of me.” I stare up at him, needing him to say something.

He shakes his head before running his hands through his hair. Finally, he takes a step back, his face blank. “This was a mistake, Emerson. I should have never touched you.”

His words are like a knife to the heart. It was one of the best moments of my life, and he’s calling it a mistake. I’m pissed and can feel tears welling up in my eyes. I take a step back before I slap him across his face.

“Fuck you, Axle. I may have been a virgin, but what just happened was in no way a mistake. I came three fucking times tonight because it was *you* I had sex with.” I step back and tug my jeans on before grabbing my phone and heading to the front door.

Axle is standing there inside the room, still naked, with his jaw and fists clenched, refusing to look at me. I rip open the door and look back, desperate for him to say something else.

He doesn't.

I can no longer take it and storm out.

Somehow, the best night of my life turned into one of the worst, and I have no idea how I will move on from Axle Jenkins.

Chapter One

Emerson

“**H**ey, Em, can you come into the office, please?”

“Yeah. I’ll be there in a minute, Dad.”

I’m halfway inside the front of a lifted truck, with my feet dangling as I reach in and try to give it a thorough look-over before deciding what—if anything—needs to be addressed. I extract myself out and wipe my greasy hands on my coveralls. I’m sure there’s more covering the rest of me, but that’s just the hazards that come along with working my dream job. I gave up trying to keep my hands looking soft and feminine years ago. No matter how hard I try, there will always be grease in the lines and under my nails.

Even though I know I’ll just get dirty again as soon as I’m back out on the shop floor, I grab a rag from my back pocket and wipe the grease I can get off on it, before shoving it back in. I hop over Garret’s legs—he’s one of the mechanics who has been here for most of my life—as I make my way over to the office.

The garage isn't huge, but it works for us. We have five garage bays, a reception-slash-front office, a store room behind that, and then my dad's little office at the rear of the building. There's also an apartment behind the garage that my mom and dad lived in for a short time while they were getting the business off the ground. My sisters and I have all lived in it at one point after transitioning out of the house and before we all bought our own homes.

When I make my way to the back of the building, I find my dad in his office, squinting at the computer. I try to cover my giggles as I watch him strain to see the words on the screen. All of us girls have been telling him for months that he needs to either get a pair of readers, or bite the bullet and go to the eye doctor to get a prescription. Then maybe he won't be constantly squinting at everything when he tries to read.

God forbid Clint Wilson would ever admit that he's getting old. Actually, he doesn't mind getting older, but he's not ready to acknowledge that he doesn't have the working body of a twenty-five-year-old. Thankfully, he is realizing that the work we do daily isn't getting any easier for him, and the aches and pains are only getting worse, so he's finally considering retirement.

Don't get me wrong, I absolutely love working with my dad and sharing my passion with him, but I'm also excited to show him and the rest of the town that I am capable of running the business. Not only running it, but bringing in some new ideas and innovations to make everything run a little smoother.

I have a plan to increase our revenue so that I can possibly expand the garage to make a space where I can do what I really love, build custom bikes, or make upgrades to them. I love working on the tricked-out trucks and old muscle cars, but give me a bike to trick out, and I'll choose those every day.

I've rebuilt bikes for both of my sisters and several for myself over the years. Dad taught us to drive just about any vehicle you could imagine, but motorcycles have always been my favorite, especially because of where we live. There's nothing more thrilling than ripping through the windy roads of Sparrow Falls, listening to my Harley rumble through the valleys and mountains. The only downfall is that there are only a handful of months where it's safe to have our bikes out.

My sisters and I have always gone to the secret—well, mainly to any outsiders—falls when we need a break from the world, but I find just as much solace on my bike with or without my sisters. It's my therapy when I'm struggling to keep my sunny disposition in place.

In general, I really am that bubbly and happy. I've always been a glass half full girl, believing people are inherently good, so when I do have an off day or two, people are quick to point it out and fuss. When they do that, I feel the need to slip right back into my happy, sunshiney self to make them feel comfortable, when in reality, I just want to feel my feels and be left the hell alone.

I thought I was being quiet standing in the doorway, but leave it to my dad to know I've been there, finding much

amusement watching him chicken-peck the keys and squint with his face only inches from the screen.

“If you’re going to stand there and laugh at me, the least you could do is come in here and help me. I swear, this screen is smaller than it was before.” He glares at the computer while he gestures me to sit in the empty chair across from his desk.

“Um, yeah. I love you dad, but it’s not the computer’s fault you can’t accept the fact it might be time for you to get some glasses. If not a prescription, at least some readers.”

“Yeah, yeah. You’ll be happy to know, oh sweet daughter of mine, that I actually have an appointment with the optometrist this afternoon.”

“Wow, Dad. I’m shocked but pleasantly surprised. Is that what you needed? To let me know that you would be out this afternoon?”

“Well, I suppose I needed to tell you that, but that’s not why I called you into the office. I think it’s time I start stepping back and officially hand the garage over to your capable hands.”

I sit up in my seat and lean forward. I can’t help it. I’ve been waiting for this day since I was a teenager. I always knew I wanted this to be my future, and I can’t believe it’s finally happening.

“Are you sure, Dad? Not that I’m not ready. I totally am, and I have a ton of ideas that I want to try out—”

“Hold on, Sunshine.” He starts to chuckle and shake his head at me. I realize that I’m bouncing in my seat from excitement. “I’m thinking we’ll ease into it. I’m going to start with two days off a week. On those days, you’re in charge. And as far as implementing ideas goes, why don’t you figure out something that is smaller but would be easy to implement, and we’ll go from there. Sound good?”

“Yes, it sounds fucking awesome!”

He just sighs and shakes his head at me for swearing and bouncing out of my seat to rush behind his desk and give him a hug.

“Jeez, Em, way to shove a stake right through your old man’s heart. So excited to get rid of me.”

I slap his shoulder as I pull back. “You know that’s not true. I love that we share the same passion and that I get to work with you every day. I’m just also really excited to show you what I can do with the place.”

“I know you are, sweetheart. I couldn’t imagine retiring and handing my first baby over to anyone else. So, other than handing over the reigns to you, I think it might be a good idea to vet another mechanic.” I’m about to interject when he raises his hand to cut me off. “I know that might not be what you want to hear, but running the business side of things takes up way more time than you think. You already pick up the slack for me when I’m in here taking care of the paperwork, so if you have to cover for me already and do the paperwork, it’s going to be a lot on your shoulders.”

I hate to admit it, but he has a point. He's been taking on less work out in the shop while I've been taking on more so that we didn't lose any business. With everything I have planned for this place, I can't afford to lose any of the profit coming in. The only thing that worries me is which one of us is going to be the one to hire the new mechanic.

“Yeah, I understand where you're coming from, and it definitely makes sense. Do you think we can give it a few weeks before we make any decisions about hiring someone else? Do we even have room in the books to pay another salary? Or do you think it would make more sense to hire an office manager instead of a mechanic?”

“Sure, we can give our new routine a few weeks before we make any decisions. I wouldn't have suggested it if we couldn't afford it. And hiring an office manager isn't a bad idea, but I'd feel more comfortable knowing you can handle this aspect of the business before you hired someone else to do it. But if I'm being honest, we could probably easily afford a new mechanic and someone to help out part time in the office without causing any issues.”

“Hmm, well that's definitely good to know, and seeing as how I didn't even know we could afford both, I think you're right that it's time for me to get reacquainted with the business side of the shop.”

I can't help but laugh, which causes my dad to raise a brow at me.

“What's so funny?”

“Well, I was just thinking about how much our roles have reversed. Before I knew enough to do more than oil changes and other small repairs, I spent most of my time in here, learning the business side from Spencer and even you at times. But as I got older and gained more experience, I started to be the one out on the shop floor and you were the one in here. Now, we’re about to flip again, and I just found it a little funny.”

He’s smiling as he runs his hand through his graying hair and shakes his head. “Sometimes, I forget how much this shop is a part of all of you girls. I don’t think we’d be standing here today if Spencer hadn’t stepped up in more than one way.”

“Nah, you would’ve figured it out eventually, old man. But who can resist Spencer and her insane organizational skills?”

“Definitely not me. She obviously got that from her mother. Me, on the other hand, I thrive in chaos, just like Chayse.”

“I don’t think any truer words than those have been spoken within these walls.”

Dad busts up laughing at my rib.

Teasing back and forth with my dad all day long is going to be one of the things I miss the most when he’s not here. I get along great with the other mechanics in the shop, but nothing beats doing this with my dad.

Which makes hiring someone new here to work under me—a woman—even more stressful for me. We have the best dynamic here. Anyone who comes in has to be able to handle

following my lead and jive with all the guys, so we don't lose the amazing atmosphere that we have.



“Hey, girl!”

I'm standing on my tiptoes trying to find Kat when I hear her and see her hand waving in the air.

The Tavern is bumping tonight, but that doesn't surprise me with it being a Friday night and summer. Not only that, but the beer is super yummy and the food is fucking delicious. It doesn't hurt that the owner is hot as hell. Maverick is tall, covered in tattoos, and has a beard and the bad boy reputation. He alone brings in a good chunk of the women patrons.

Even though he's hot, he's also exactly my type, which is why I quickly put him in the friend zone. Even if I wanted to maybe take him for a spin, it never would've happened. We somehow fell into an easy relationship that is more along the lines of a brother and sister rather than wanting to tear each other's clothes off.

I'm able to weave my way through the thick crowd and plop myself on the bar stool beside Kat. I lean over and give her a huge squeeze before turning to the bar when I hear a drink set down in front of me.

“Hey, Half-Pint. How are you doing?” Maverick rubs his giant-ass hand all over my head, making my already unruly

waves even more of a mess.

I swat his hand away before trying to tame the lost cause.
“Watch it, you oaf!”

He just laughs before being pulled away to fill an order for another patron.

I snag my beer, take a healthy gulp, and let out a content sigh. I’ve always been a beer drinker. I didn’t have much of a choice in high school when the majority of my friends were dudes who refused to get me any “girly” drinks when we would go to parties. Maverick’s brews quickly became one of my favorites, along with The Tavern when I’d come to let off some steam with the guys after a long week.

“You better now?” My bestie teases as she sips what looks like a cider.

“Much. It was a long week.”

“You’re telling me. So, what’s going on with you? You are even more fidgety and bubbly than normal if that is even possible.”

“Well, that’s probably because my dad is officially ready to start transferring the shop over to me.”

“Wow, babe. That’s fucking awesome!” Kat squeals before launching at me to give me another hug.

I can’t hold in my giggle as I feel the excitement of this new chapter filling me up. “It is! I can’t wait to implement some of my plans I’ve been dreaming up for years. The garage is fairly

profitable, but I want to bring it into our era if you know what I mean.”

“I think I do. You’re going to do amazing, babe.”

“Thank you. He also suggested hiring another mechanic. I was against it at first because we have such an awesome dynamic right now and I’m afraid someone new may come in and throw off the vibe, but I also understand why he suggested it.

“He’s going to start by taking two days off a week, in which I would be in charge of the business side. I already pick up the work in the shop that he would normally do when he’s taking care of the paperwork, so it only makes sense to add another mechanic since I’ll be doing that but still want to maintain our current clientèle. Actually, I want to grow our business and our profitability so I can implement some of my ideas, but that’s going to have to wait for a little while.”

“Damn, girl. That’s a lot, but it’s all really exciting. You’re going to do amazing taking over, and I can’t wait to see how you grow your business.”

“Thanks, babe. Enough about me. What’s new with you?”

“Uuuugghh, are you sure you have enough time to hear about it? Actually, I don’t want to bring down your good vibes, so I’m not even going to get into it.”

“Hey, that’s not how this works, lady. Just because I had great news today doesn’t mean I don’t want to hear what’s new with you. Even if you think it might rain on my parade.

I'm a tough cookie. I think I can handle whatever it is that has your shoulders sagging and resulted in those bags under your eyes."

My best friend deflates into herself even more, which makes me really concerned about what is going on with her. I know she's a nurse at the hospital and that they've been having shortages, but this seems like more than just exhaustion from being overworked. It's as if she has the weight of the world on her shoulders.

"It's my Gram. I know I told you about her dementia. Well, it's getting worse and fast. She's becoming a danger to herself, but the more I try to help her, the more agitated she gets. I've had to essentially baby-proof her whole house after she placed a hand towel on the lit burner the other day when I went over to visit her. I was able to smother it and the smoke detector didn't even go off, but that whole situation could've been much worse."

I feel awful that she's been dealing with all of this on her own and hasn't mentioned anything to me before this. I'm also fucking pissed. As much as I don't like to think about her asshole big brother, he should be here helping her with this.

"What does Axle have to say about everything? You shouldn't be bearing this burden on your own."

"I finally broke down and told him how bad things are getting. He rearranged his schedule, and we're going to take Gram to the doctor next week so that Axle can hear it from him that something needs to change. He's never wanted to see

her move into a nursing or assisted living home, but we also never imagined having to deal with her having dementia. With him being two hours away, I didn't want to bring it up and have him running himself ragged driving back and forth to help."

"Awe, Kat. I wish you would've told me. You know I'm always willing to help you with whatever you need. Especially when it comes to Gram. She practically helped raise me, just as much as my dad. She saw all of us struggling because of my mom not being around. She made sure I always knew I was loved."

Kat now has tears running down her face, and it breaks my heart. One of the first things that bonded us was losing a parent. We both lost our mothers and found peace struggling through the emotions that were too big for small children to know how to handle and process properly.

It's my turn to give her a squeeze. I pull her in my arms and rub small circles on her back. "I'm proud of you for reaching out to Ax and for taking such good care of her up until this point. I'm so glad he's going to come to the appointment. I hope you all are able to come up with a care plan that will work for everyone."

"Thanks, Sunshine." Her lips tip up in the corners as she says my nickname.

It used to drive me crazy when Chayse called me that, but I started to love it when I realized she no longer got enjoyment out of teasing me with the nickname once I decided to

embrace it. After that, all of my friends and family started calling me Sunshine. Hell, even some of my customers do too.

I pull back from our embrace and swipe my thumbs across her cheeks, making her full-out laugh. She swats my hands away before finishing wiping her cheeks off.

“Alright, enough of this sappy shit. Let’s get another drink, maybe some food, and then go dance and flirt with those hot guys over there.” She tilts her head towards the other side of the bar, and I can’t help but smile. They are hot, and this night just got a hell of a lot more interesting.

I turn back to Kat, giving her my most devilish smile. “Sounds like it’s going to be a good night.”

I chug the rest of my beer before slamming the glass on the bar and motioning for Mav to fill it back up.

He shakes his head, knowing I’m about to let loose and cause the best kind of trouble.

Chapter Two

Axle

The past week since I talked to Kat has been absolutely crazy. Gram's doctor was able to meet us on Thursday, so I've been busting my ass to make sure everything was squared away at the shop before heading back to Sparrow Falls for a long weekend.

I don't love crashing in my twin bed from my childhood, but at least I'll get three full days to experience first-hand what Kat's been trying to tell me. As much as I hate to admit it, if things are really as bad as she said, then maybe we do need to start looking into an alternative living situation. I'm not sure how that all works since Gram's a grown woman, but I'm hoping the doctor will have some answers and helpful information about what our next steps should be.

I've been researching dementia and treatments. I'm not the smartest guy out there, but with most things, I can understand well enough what I'm reading. Unfortunately, medical journals and articles about dementia are like a foreign language to me.

I'm making the two-hour drive back to my Gram's and will hopefully have a much better understanding of what's going on this afternoon. The drive would be a hell of a lot better if I was on my bike instead of being in my truck, but I figured this would be more practical than trying to squeeze my big frame into my Grandma's tiny Corolla.

I get a call from Kat. I figure she's probably just checking in, but I'm instantly on high alert when I answer and realize she's crying.

"Axle ... Ar-are you almost here?"

"I'll be there in half an hour. Twenty minutes if I push it. What is it, Pip? Are you okay? Is Gram okay?"

"Yes, we're b-both okaaaay." She takes a shuddering breath and slowly blows it out.

"You're scaring me, Kat. What's going on?"

"I'm sorry, Axle. I'm okay and so is Gram. I promise. I'm just so fucking exhausted. I'm coming off a really long, shitty shift at the hospital, only to get a call from Emerson that Gram locked her keys in her car so she had it towed to her shop. She didn't lock her keys in her car—I fucking hid them because I came over the other day and she had run over half her rose bushes that are at least ten fucking feet away from the driveway.

"I'm sorry to be overly emotional. I just needed to know that you were close and, I guess, get a little reassurance that you would be here to help me handle this, even if it is only for the

weekend. I just need a day or two where I'm not working or absolutely terrified that she's seriously going to hurt herself or someone else. I know that if you're staying with her, at least she'll be safe."

"Shit, I'm so sorry, Kat. I wish you would've told me sooner how bad it was getting, but I will be there in about ten minutes now. Once we get the doctor's appointment out of the way, you're off duty for the next three days. I'll make sure Gram is taken care of so that you can get some rest. I know you've been working crazy shifts at the hospital since you're new. You need to take care of yourself too."

"Thanks, Axle. I'm hiding in my old room right now, but I should probably go check on Gram. I can hear her swearing and banging around in the kitchen, and that's never a good sign."

"Okay, sis. I'll see you soon."

"See you. Love you."

"Love you too."

I hang up the phone and toss it onto the passenger seat before running my hand through my hair. Thank God I know these roads well because I've been flying since the minute I heard the desperation in my sister's voice.

I'm just making it over the crest of a hill when the town starts to come into view. It's nestled in a valley, with a river running through it, and surrounded on all sides by mountains. Of course, the downtown has a handful of stores, shops, bars,

and restaurants. Oh, and you can't forget the churches. The houses are closer together but spread out as they climb up the mountains.

Sparrow Falls is a small town, but the views are breathtaking, and the people who live there are generally good people who look out for one another, which makes me wonder how much Kat has downplayed my Grandma's dementia to everyone.

Maybe it's because we were abandoned and then orphaned when Kat was so young, but her desire to not be a burden and to handle things on her own is most definitely helping this situation.

I slow down as I make it to main street but am glad that there aren't many people out on the roads even though it is summer. The town gets a decent amount of tourism during the summer and fall months, with all the waterfalls and the changing leaves.

I head out of downtown, and before I'm ready, I'm pulling up to the house I spent the better part of my childhood in. The first thing I notice is how run-down it looks. I know it's only been a few months since I've come to visit, but those months have not been kind to my Gram's house.

There's a shutter hanging off, the sidewalk has more cracks in it than solid blocks, and her yard is a mess. I can tell someone has been mowing it, but I can see where she took out the rose bushes with her car. If the bushes look that bad, I can't

even imagine what her car looks like. Maybe I can run it over to Wilson's Garage to give it a once over before I leave.

Although, Kat did say that Emerson always makes sure to keep her and Gram's cars in good working order. Not to mention, I've avoided the little ball of sunshine for this long, so I don't feel like breaking that streak now, especially since I'm not on her good side anymore.

That's one thing people don't talk about when it comes to Emerson. The girl really is sunshine most of the time, but she's also fiercely loyal and has no problem standing up for herself or those she cares about. She's smart and devious, and will make you pay if you piss her off. The worst part is that she may give you a verbal lashing the minute you deserve it, or she'll make you pay over time.

After the night that I've tried erasing from my mind, I'm strictly under the "pay over time" for the way I wronged Emerson Wilson. The only way I survive is by staying away, and it's worked out great for me this far.

Before I even put my truck in park, the front door bangs open and Kat races out to see me.

I jump out of the truck and plant my feet as my baby sister barrels into me. She starts sobbing, and I feel like the biggest tool and letdown there is. Of course, that's a feeling I'm all too acquainted with. I've been so busy living my own life—running a shop and hanging out with my friends—that I've neglected one of the most important people in my life.

I hug her closer and try to pour all of my love and support into our hug. She doesn't deserve this, and I vow that I will do better. I have no excuse why I can't make the drive home more often if I know ahead of time, to make sure I'm available for Gram's doctor appointments. Even if it's just Kat video-chatting me so that I'm in the loop, and we can make any tough decisions together going forward.

"Fuck, Kat. I'm so sorry I haven't been here for you or Gram. I've been a selfish ass, completely absorbed in my life and what I had going on instead of seeing how much you both have needed me here. I promise I'm going to do better."

Kat pulls back as she wipes her eyes and gets herself calmed down, only to haul off and punch me in the arm. I wince and rub it. At least I know she took all of my lessons on how to punch seriously, in case she ever found herself in a situation where I wasn't there to protect her.

"Yeah, I probably deserved that."

"Damn right, you did, but not for what you think. I love you, you big lug. You have nothing to apologize for. I'm the one who tried to handle everything on my own, without cluing you in, and burned myself out. And you haven't been a selfish ass. Just because you are pursuing your dream to run a shop and ended up two hours away doesn't mean you're selfish. I know if there was an opportunity at a good garage closer to us, you'd be working there if it were possible."

I pull on the back of my neck as her words make me uncomfortable. I'd love to think she's right and that I'd move

to be closer to her and Gram, but I'm not so sure I would. This town has way more demons for me than it does for Kat, and being back gives me all sorts of anxiety.

“So, what was she getting into when we were talking a few minutes ago?” I tuck Kat under my arm and head for the front door.

“Oh, she was pissed because she thought we were using her pots and pans to play with again, like we did when we were little kids when we were visiting and didn't put them back in the cupboards. Apparently, she tripped on one, which is why she was swearing up a storm. I didn't have the heart to tell her that she was the one who decided to rearrange her entire kitchen and just lay random shit wherever she could while she was 'organizing' it.”

I can't help but laugh a little as I picture Gram swearing as she tries weaving through her kitchen. The woman is tiny, especially compared to me, but she's always been able to handle herself. She says it's the Italian in her. And in me. That it gives me my temper, and that I've come by it honestly.

We make our way to the front door, and I'm a little shocked at my Gram's appearance, standing there, watching Kat and me while she waits for us to come in.

“Kat, I told you not to date that boy. I know that's why you're out there blubbering to your brother, but that boy has always been trouble. It was only a matter of time until he broke your heart.” She wags a finger at Kat as I look at her, confused as hell.

What the fuck is Gram talking about? I watch Kat take a deep breath and try to put on a smile as if everything is okay.

“You mean Torin, Gram?”

“Well, of course I do. Who the hell else would I be talking about? You’ve been smitten with him for years, and he’s all you’ve been talking about since the two of you got together a few months ago.”

Kat and Torin tried to do the long-distance thing when she went away to college, but between her studies, trying to make new friends, and the miles apart aspect, their relationship didn’t last much to both of their dismay.

I never doubted Torin’s intentions with my sister, but it was very much “right people, wrong timing” for the two of them. Kat hasn’t dated anyone seriously since for one reason or another, but I think it’s because she still has feelings for Torin.

“Gram, I haven’t dated Torin for years.”

“What do you mean? You two have been hot and heavy since you got him to agree on dating you. I think I’d know if the two of you broke up.”

“Gram, we did break up. Three years ago.”

My heart breaks as I watch confusion creep over Gram’s face. She’s always been so sure of herself. Almost as if she were larger than life and nobody could tell her any different. But in this moment, I am witnessing first-hand how debilitating this disease can be as my Gram tries to sift through and decide what is reality and what is a memory playing tricks

on her. I watch as she becomes more flustered before her face goes completely blank.

“Gram?”

At my voice, she startles out of the daze before turning towards me with the biggest smile growing on her face. She looks me over from head to toe, then wraps her slight frame fiercely around me, giving me the best hug I’ve had in months.

“Axle, what a great surprise! Did I know you were coming for a visit? How long do you plan on staying?”

Kat and I didn’t tell her I would be coming so that we could all go to the doctor together. Gram’s in complete denial that anything’s wrong and that she might need some help, even though we know that’s mostly because of the disease.

“Nope. I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to get caught up at work, so I didn’t want to ruin the surprise if I couldn’t make it.” I squeeze her a little tighter as I reach out and pull Kat into our embrace. “I missed my two favorite girls way too much, so I busted my ass to take a long weekend and come spend time with you all.”

“Oh, Axle, how wonderful! It has been way too long since we’ve seen you. Are you staying here with me or with your sister?” She takes a step back, as does Kat, so that we can talk more comfortably.

“Nah, I’m staying here. Kat works way too many weird shifts. I don’t want to be in her way or keep her up if she needs to sleep because she worked that night. Besides, it’s been a

while since I've been here. I'm sure you have a honey-do list waiting around for me.”

She laughs as she shuffles towards the kitchen. I follow behind as I discreetly check the rooms we are passing through. For the most part, the house doesn't look too bad, but I'm sure I owe that to Kat keeping up on things. It could use some updating, though. That might have to be something we look into if Gram ends up moving out. Of course, Kat may want the house, so I'll let her make the decisions as far as any renovating goes.

We arrive in the kitchen, and I can't help but notice all the measures Kat has taken to keep Gram safe. The entire kitchen is completely child-proof. From what I can tell, Gram knows how to get the cupboards open and the stove on even with the child-proof knobs, making me wonder how effective they are.

Seeing me frowning, Kat shuffles closer, so she can whisper, “She knows how to work everything now because she's lucid, but when she's confused or not in her right mind, they are more of a frustration for her. At which point, she eventually gives up and moves on to something else.”

I nod my head once to let her know I understand.

“I'm going to have a cup of tea. Do either of you want one?”

“I'm good, Gram,” I mutter, still too caught up in my own head.

“I'll take any form of caffeine you're willing to provide.”

I laugh but realize Kat's not kidding. My baby sister has been burning the candle at both ends, and it's finally starting to catch up to her.

"So, what's on the agenda today?" Gram asks as she lowers herself into the seat across from me.

Instead of the house having a formal dining room, it has a spacious kitchen with a cute little breakfast nook that we've shared many meals at.

"Well, you have a doctor's appointment in about half an hour, but other than that, no plans for either of us for the rest of the day. I have to go home and nap at some point or I might crash where I'm standing, but I'm off until Saturday."

"Oh, that's wonderful, Kat. But what doctor's appointment do I have now? I feel like all I do anymore is go to the doctor." She grumbles as she gets up once the kettle sounds, to make her and my sister some tea.

"Oh, Dr. Baker said he had some test results or something to go over with you. I honestly don't remember since my brain is so fried, with all of the medical terms and whatnot that I deal with on a daily basis."

"Well, alright. I suppose we just go and listen to what the good doctor has to say."

"I'll go with you, ladies. It will be easier if I'm there than having to come home and catch me up."

"Oh, well, if you insist. Although, that doesn't sound like a fun way to start your visit."

“Eh, maybe not fun, but I like knowing how my girls are doing.” I wink at her to take off the sting of embarrassment I can tell she’s feeling.

She laughs as she sits back down to enjoy her drink.

The next half an hour goes by before I realize it, and I find myself pulling into the hospital parking lot. We get in the building and are immediately led to a room. It’s not long before a nurse comes in and asks Gram to come with her to do a few more tests.

After a minute, a doctor not much older than myself comes walking in. “Hey, Kat. And you must be Axle? It’s nice to meet you.” He gives Kat’s shoulder a little squeeze as he passes her on his way to shake my hand.

“It’s nice to meet you, too. Although, I wish the circumstances were different.”

“Me too. We only have a few minutes until your gram comes back, so we should probably dive right in.” I nod my head to continue for him to keep going. “I’m pretty worried about how rapidly your grandmother is declining. The PET scan we had done confirmed the presence of amyloid and tau proteins, which is indicative of Alzheimer’s disease. Her neurological evaluations have also decreased significantly.”

“Okay, what does all that mean? Kat’s a medical professional, but I need you to dumb it down for me.”

“It means she’s losing her cognitive skills, along with some of her ability to balance and her reflexes. Basically, she is

starting to struggle with problem-solving, rational thinking, and she's very much a fall risk. I think it's imperative to either have someone who is available to live with her and provide in-home care, or for her to move to an assisted living center."

"I hate those places. People go there to die."

"An assisted living center is a little different. It's like an apartment complex, where each person can live independently, but they also have someone there 24/7 to assist them and monitor their health."

I take a minute to think about what he's saying. I know Kat is already running herself ragged trying to be everything for Gram. I can't ask her to move back in with her. Maybe the assisted living wouldn't be too bad. Gram would still be able to care for herself, but there would also be someone around at all times to check on her or help her if she had any issues.

"I think the assisted living center sounds like the best option at this point. But how do we go about this? There's no way she's going to want to leave her house. Is there a way we can make that decision for her?"

"Someone will need to be appointed her power of attorney. While she's lucid, your grandmother seems to understand what is happening and tends to take my advice. We can talk to her today if she's in the right state of mind, to see if she's willing to get one of you set up as her power of attorney. We can also get you into contact with a social worker, who can help you navigate all of the legalese of everything. We want your gram

to be safe and happy, and we will help in any way that we can.”

“Thank you so much, Dr. Baker.” Kat says before sticking out her hand to shake his as he stands.

“Yes, thanks a lot. We’ve got a lot to figure out.”

“It’s my pleasure to help. I actually think we have one of the social workers here today. If your gram is up to it, I can send her in.”

“Yes, that would be wonderful.”

We hear a knock on the door. A nurse is leading Gram back in, but before she can go, Dr. Baker asks if we can have the social worker join us.

Gram is very lucid at this point, so Dr. Baker and the social worker explain everything we talked about and go over the next steps. I wish I could say I pay attention, but I mentally check out. Thankfully, Kat is taking notes and seems to get a lot accomplished. It helps that as subdued as she is, Gram is cooperative and stays lucid for most of the appointment.

Once we are home, both Gram and Kat crash on the couches as they watch a show. Needing some space and a way to burn off all of my anxious energy, I head out to check out Gram’s car.

I immediately notice damage to the front and the driver’s side, probably from running over the bushes. There are even some twigs sticking out from the bottom. I need to get it up on

a lift to get a better look at it. Dreading what I have to do next, I dig out my phone and call Clint Wilson.

“Well, I’ll be... Axle Jenkins, how the hell are you, son?”

Hearing how happy he is to hear from me makes my anxiety even worse. This man was the first adult, other than my Gram, to take a chance on my punk ass. I owe him so much more than I’ve ever given him in return.

“Hey, Mr. Wilson. I’ve been better but also worse.”

He chuckles because he knows the trouble I used to raise. “Call me Clint, Axle. You’re an adult and only making me feel more like an old man with that ‘Mr. Wilson’ bullshit. I’m sorry you’re not doing great. What can I do to help change that?”

“I was wondering if I could borrow a bay in the shop. I’m home visiting Kat and Gram, and I noticed she banged her car up pretty good taking out the rose bushes in front of the house.”

He lets out a slow whistle but gives me a minute to collect myself. “I heard she’s been having some issues with dementia. It’s such a shame. As far as the garage, you know you never have to ask to use anything here you need. Come on over.”

“Thank you so much, Clint. I’ll see you in a few.”

I hang up and take a deep breath before releasing it. Hopefully, I can get in and out without having to run into Little Miss Sunshine.

I make the quick five-minute drive over to the shop and pull the car into one of the open bays. It’s almost five, so I figure

they aren't going to be using that one anymore. I'm just opening the door to the office when I'm hit square in the chest by a flailing Emerson.

She starts to push herself back into a standing position "Sorry—" She stops mid apology, going completely rigid, before squaring her shoulders and tilting her head defiantly at me.

I raise one brow as she crosses her arms and glares.

"Sunshine." I can't help but call her that nickname, which only seems to anger her more.

"Axhole. So nice of you to grant us with your presence," she grits out.

I grin. As much as I know I'm powerless to this woman and egging her on is the last thing I should be doing, I've sure as hell missed the fuck out of her.

Chapter Three

Emerson

When I heard a car pulling into one of the garage bays, the last person I expected to walk into my shop was Axle Jenkins. Well, I guess I knew he was coming, but not today, and certainly not to my shop. He caught me so off guard that my sunny disposition went straight out the door as soon as his fine ass entered it.

It's been hard over the years, hiding my animosity for this man around my best friend and his sister, Kat, but it was a lot easier knowing I was able to avoid him. Even though I want to let all of the bad feelings towards him go, it's hard when the person you give yourself to for the very first time deems the very act as a mistake.

Taking a minute to calm myself, I put on my best smile before going any further. I am not going to let this man bring out the worst in me, no matter how good he is at pushing my buttons.

“Sunshine.” He tilts his head at me as he growls out my name, and my thighs instantly rub together at how his voice

grits out.

“Don’t call me Sunshine, Axhole. That’s only reserved for my friends.”

Before either of us can really get each other going, the office door opens as my dad storms out like he’s greeting his metaphorical prodigal son who has finally decided to show his face.

“Axle, it’s damn good to see you, son.”

My dad wraps him in a fierce embrace, and even though I don’t want to, my anger towards Axle melts when I see him lean into the hug with a genuine smile gracing his handsome face. If I thought a scowling Axle was sexy, the joy lighting up his face is about to cause a four-alarm fire in my pants. It, honest to God, takes all of my will power not to fan my face while looking at these two.

Axle and my dad both take a step back as Axle scans the shop. “It’s really good to see you too, Clint. Damn, I’ve missed this place.”

“We’ve missed you. Why don’t you take a look around and see some of the improvements Emerson has been implementing.”

I try not to blush as Axle turns his gaze on me, as if to appraise not only the work I’ve done here but also me as a person.

“I’d love to see what you’ve done. Maybe I can use it to improve the shop I’m at. Although, I’m not exactly sure when

I'll be heading back after the appointment for my Gram today."

"Oh, I almost forgot that was today. I'm so glad you were able to make it. I could tell something has been seriously off with Kat for a while now, but she just kept insisting she was trying to get used to the crazy schedule and hours she worked. Once she told me more about what has been going on, I felt awful that I didn't realize and wasn't there to help her."

His brows are so furrowed, they're almost hiding his eyes as he listens to me go on about the hell Kat has been putting herself through. I'm not trying to make him feel bad about not being here, but just let out some of my frustration and sadness over Kat not feeling like she could ask me or my dad for help.

"You and me both, Sunshine. Sorry, I mean... Emerson." He nods his head to acknowledge my comment about my nickname only being for friends, and I feel like a piece of shit. "But that's why I came. Hopefully by tomorrow, we'll have a plan."

"The appointment with the doctor and observing her firsthand was eye-opening for me. Kat and I decided we're going to try and get her to move into an assisted living center. With a social worker, we were able to talk to her a little today while she was lucid, so we're hoping we can get her squared away.

"The social worker is going to come over tomorrow to help us do whatever we need to to make decisions for Gram that will help keep her safe."

I almost forget my dad is standing there until he wraps his arm around Axle and pulls him into a side hug, startling us both.

“That’s a tough break there, kid. Getting old is enough of a bitch without having to deal with your mind turning against you. I want you to know that if there is anything either of you need, do not hesitate to call us. You kids have always been family to me, and so has your gram.”

“Thanks, Clint. That means so much to me.” I can see Axle fight the overwhelming anxiety I’m sure has to be crushing him as he tries to pull himself together. “Anyway, do you all mind lending me some tools so I can see how much damage Gram did to the car?”

“Damn. I’ve been keeping up the maintenance on the car, but Kat didn’t mention any damage from hitting the bushes.”

“I’m sure Gram’s car wasn’t as much of an issue for Kat as it was keeping her safe in the house and off the road. She took Gram’s keys to try and keep her from driving, but I heard you already knew that?”

“Yeah, she had it towed to the shop so I could get the keys she thought she’d locked in the car, but they were never in there in the first place. I didn’t notice any damage to the car at that point, but then again, I wasn’t really looking. I’m not sure if she did that before or after the keys incident.”

As we are talking, we make our way over to the car. For the most part, a lot of the damage looks superficial, but there’s no

telling what the car looks like underneath without getting it up on the lift and taking a good look at it.

“All of the guys are gone for the night, but I can stick around and help you out if you want.”

“Nah, you don’t need to hang out here with me. I’m pretty sure I can handle any issues on my own just fine.” He crosses his arms as he smirks at me.

I know he’s being a gruff ass on purpose, but instead of taking his bait, I smile my sweetest smile at him, channeling my inner sunny disposition.

“Okay, suit yourself.” I shrug like I don’t have a care in the world as he glares back at me. I flounce—yes, flounce—away as I tug my coveralls down and tie the arms around my waist.

Even though he tried dismissing me from my own shop, I have inventory and paperwork I need to get done before I can head out tonight.

I can hear the lift running and then my dad whistling as I head into the office. I might as well get the paperwork done without having the old man hovering over my shoulder like I’m a newbie. I used to help out with this stuff all the time until I started taking on more responsibility in the shop. I just needed a little bit of a refresher, but it’s been smooth sailing for a week or so now.

I’m just finishing up our inventory order for the week when the door opens and my dad steps in. When he doesn’t say

anything, I turn my chair around to see him hovering by the door and looking guilty as hell.

“What’s up, Pops? Why do you look like when you ate half the cupcakes Spence and I slaved over for that bake sale I had to do in high school?”

He rubs the back of his neck before he spits out what he’s been holding back. “Um, I told Axle, depending how things go with his gram, that he has a job waiting for him here if he needs or wants it.”

I just stare at him, blinking, as I try to process what the hell he just said. Of course my dad has no idea what happened between the two of us all those years ago, but he does know that I wanted to be the one who hired any new mechanics we were bringing into the shop.

“Sunshine, I can tell you’re upset, but please don’t be. I know I told you you could hire whomever you wanted, but I didn’t think you’d mind if it were Axle. He’s practically family, and you know he’s a fucking kickass mechanic.”

I take in a deep breath before slowly exhaling. My dad is a good man, and I know he’s just looking out for Axle and thinks he found a solution for the shop at the same time, but nobody is ever going to respect me if he keeps undermining me.

“I know you’re right, Dad, but this was my decision to make. If I am going to be taken seriously as a woman who not only owns but runs this shop, then I need to make the decisions on who works here and who doesn’t.”

“You’re right, Peanut, and I am sorry. I should have come talk to you before I made that offer, but please don’t be mad at me. He’s a great mechanic, who already knows how we run our shop, and he’s familiar with the community. Plus, we don’t even know if he’s going to stay in Sparrow Falls.”

I scoff because there’s no way Axle is going to leave Kat to deal with their gram on her own. He’s fiercely protective of both women, and I can tell he’s been beating himself up for not being here sooner.

Whether I like it or not, it looks like I’m going to be stuck with him for the foreseeable future. The only silver lining is that I am going to be the boss. I can’t help the glee I feel at having that man have to bend to my will. It would be even better if he did it while on his knees, but there’s no way I will ever cross that line with him again.

“Alright, Dad. I won’t put up a huge fight on this, but if he wants to work here, he’s got to come and talk to me about it. And he has to understand that I am in charge. I know he’s used to running his own shop, but if he’s working here, he’s working under me.”

“That all seems pretty reasonable to me. But maybe keep an open mind if he has any suggestions for you that could be beneficial to the shop. Different places do things differently, and if he has a way to help out the shop, don’t shoot it down just for your pride’s sake.”

I roll my eyes at my dad because he could have most definitely taken his own advice when I made suggestions for

our own place over the years. But there's no point in arguing with him now. The past is in the past, and I've been able to make enough changes in the short time since he told me he was transitioning to retirement.

"I'll try to keep an open mind. Are you heading out for the night? I take it Axle is still out there?" I can hear tools and the radio playing softly in the background, and a shiver runs up my back at the thought of being the only one here with Axle.

"Yep, I was on my way out before Ax stopped by, but it was nice being able to catch up a little bit in person instead of over the phone for once."

That's news to me. I knew my dad and he were close, but I didn't realize they kept in touch and called each other. I'm glad Axle has had him in his corner. He and Kat deserve the world after everything they've gone through in their lives.

"I'll walk you out. I need to start shutting everything down for the night anyways."

The guys are great at keeping their work spaces clean and organized for the most part, but I always take a loop through before I head out for the night. I also need to close up the garage doors. With it being summer, it's impossible to keep it cool in there with the doors opening and closing all day, so instead of having a high electric bill from running air non-stop, we just leave the bay doors open.

I give my dad a hug before he heads out for the night. I can see Axle under the car, so instead of going over and bothering him, I decide to start shutting the shop down. The country

station is playing on the radio, and I can't help but sing and dance along while I do my nightly routine. I'm lost in my own little world until I hear a tool clatter to the ground.

Spinning around, I see Axle with his jaw clenched and his hands in fists at his side. He's trailing his eyes from my head to my toes as heat flares in his eyes. It sends shivers through my body as I realize the effect I still have on him. My outfit isn't anything out of the ordinary, but I see the glint in his eyes as he gazes at my bare stomach that's showing from my crop top. I'm also rocking itty bitty cut-off jeans because it's just too damn hot to wear much else with my coveralls.

I make my way over to him, not daring to break the staredown we seem to be locked in. I tug the ponytail from my hair and shake out my mess of waves. I watch as he opens his hands and immediately clenches them shut again, almost as if they wanted to grab me without his mind making that decision.

“So, what's the damage?”

He furrows his brows as if he's confused and doesn't really know what I'm talking about. I nod my head to the car, which seems to snap him out of his haze.

“Eh, it's going to need some parts, but it's drivable. Not that Gram needs to be driving anywhere.”

“If you leave me a list of parts, I can get them ordered and fix it up once they're in.”

“Don't worry about it. I'll fix it up.”

I arch an eyebrow at him before putting on my most dazzling smile. “Suit yourself. Although, I can assure you I get a much better discount than you will at any parts stores around here.”

He grumbles, and I turn away to hide my smile.

“Emerson, wait,” he huffs before squaring his shoulders. “I’ll put a list in your office. But you don’t need to worry about fixing it. I’ll be around for a while and will take care of it if you don’t mind me stealing a bay again.”

“Great. I will get those parts ordered, and you can come any evening to work on the car once we’re done for the day. Have a good night, Axle.” I wave my fingers before turning to go back to the office when he stops me by grabbing my arm. I immediately get goosebumps as his strong, rough hand engulfs my tiny limb.

“I need a job.”

Now, it’s my turn to be stunned silent. “Huh?”

“I would like to work here if that’s alright with you. Your dad said it wouldn’t be an issue but that you’re taking over and, ultimately, you had the final decision.”

I stare at him as if I’m considering whether or not I want him working here, but I already know he’s going to be here whether I like it or not.

“Fine, but there are a few conditions.”

“Of course there are.”

He grumbles under his breath, but I'm still able to hear him. I cross my arms before I stare him down to make him sweat a little, although I highly doubt he's intimidated by me at all.

“When we are at the shop, I am in charge. Do not think your bossy, caveman ass can come out and try to tell me what to do. Do not question me in front of my guys, and don't forget that I am your boss, not the other way around. If you can handle that, then we'll be good and I'd be glad to have you here.” That last part is a stretch, but I'm proud of myself for keeping my composure when this man turns me into a pile of jelly.

“Fine. Whatever you say, Sunshine.” He turns, giving me his back, and all I want to do is smack the back of his head or climb him like a tree. Either option is absolutely a possibility at this time.

“Don't call me Sunshine, Axhole.”

He waves his hand, dismissing me.

“I'm leaving. Lock the door on your way out.” I don't even wait to see if he responds or acknowledges me. I just spin on my heel and head for the front office before I give into my body's desire to throw myself at him and fuck the ever-loving shit out of that man for driving me completely nuts.

How either of us is going to survive working together is beyond me, but for Kat and Gram, I'm willing to try to make it work.

Chapter Four

Axle

I am so unequivocally fucked when it comes to Emerson Rose Wilson. I hadn't been planning on moving back here, let alone working at Wilson's garage again, but when Clint hinted that it would be a possibility, I had to think about it seriously.

Sure, I love my job and the group of guys I work with, but other than that, there wasn't really much tempting me to stay away from the most important people in my life. Gram went above and beyond for my sister and me after our mom died. It's only right that I should do the same for her. And for Kat, for that matter.

Even though I cannot afford the temptation that comes in the form of my new pint-sized, sunshiny boss, coming back to Wilson's Garage is more like coming back home than I ever imagined it to be. Sure, my asshole sperm donor originally fostered my love for all things mechanics, but it was Clint Wilson who showed me that I could actually provide for myself and use working on cars as a way to channel some of

my anger that seemed to be in an endless supply when I was younger.

Clint and Gram were the only two people who could see past my wild, fighting ways. That I was hurting and needed an outlet. Gram tried but I was so angry, and she was also grieving the loss of her daughter. Clint steered me in the right direction and, finally, I was able to step up and help Gram and Kat like I wanted to but had no idea how to do it up until that point.

I know I shouldn't have pushed Emerson's buttons tonight when she was doing me a huge fucking favor, but I just couldn't help it. Emerson's sunshiny disposition pulls everyone in, but seeing her fired up and feisty turned me on more than anything, which was such a fucking stupid move on my part.

I need this job. I don't love that I will have to take orders from Em, but that's not because she's a woman, but more so because I like to be the one in charge and don't like being told what to do. I worked hard to prove my management capabilities, and it fucking sucks to have to step away from something I worked so hard for. I also like being the one to call the shots and for my guys to come to me when they have a question or need help.

But without knowing how everything is going to play out with Gram, I know the place I need to be is Sparrow Falls. While I finish looking over Gram's car, I try and plan how I'm going to tell the owners that I need to bail on the garage I'm

currently manager at. Even though I'm not looking forward to that conversation, at least the damage isn't too bad on Gram's car and it will be a pretty easy fix.

On my way back to the house, I try wrapping my head around how the next few months are going to go. I figure I can just move back in with Gram until we can get her situated at the assisted living center, which will give Kat a little break. Not that she won't be over to the house all the time, but at least the responsibility won't solely fall on her.

When I get back in the house, I'm greeted with the laughter of my sister and Gram. I peek my head in the living room and see them curled up on the couch together, watching a show. It takes me back to high school, and I finally find some peace for the first time in days. I know this is just a fleeting moment, but I'm glad Kat is getting this moment with Gram.

Not wanting to disturb them, I head up to my old room to make a phone call that I've been dreading but need to just get it over with. I hate feeling like I am disappointing someone, but my family is more important than that. Flopping down on my twin-size bed I didn't even fit in at fifteen, I pull up the contact for the owner of the shop and hit call before I can talk myself out of it.

"Hey, Axle. I didn't expect to hear from you tonight. I figured you'd be busy with your family. Is everything okay?" It doesn't surprise me that Collin asked. He's a great guy and had no issues with me taking a few days off to come see Gram

and Kat. But I didn't tell him why the sudden trip was because I needed to come home and figure some shit out first.

I blow out a breath as I scrub my hand through my scruff. "Actually, not really. Gram has Alzheimer's disease. I talked to my sister earlier this week, and she told me it was getting a lot worse and fast. I had to see it with my own eyes, and unfortunately, she wasn't exaggerating or wrong about my Gram's condition."

"Ah, man. I'm really sorry to hear that. That's a nasty disease. I lost my grandpa to it." Not that I'd ever want someone to deal with what Kat and I are, but it eases my nerves about telling him my plans for going forward.

"Yeah, it's pretty bad. We met with her doctor and a social worker earlier today to try and figure out the next steps. Thankfully, she was having a good day while we were there and agreed that an assisting living center would be a good next step for her. I'm glad she agreed, but I can't just come back and let Kat do this all by herself. I stopped at the shop I used to work at in high school, before I moved, and the owner told me that if I needed to come back, they'd always have a spot for me." I pause and wait for Collin's response. He's a good guy, but he also took a chance on me as a manager, and leaving now feels like such a dick move.

"Well, fuck. I'm not going to pretend losing you won't be hard, but I completely understand. You're going to take him up on his offer, aren't you?"

“Yeah, man. I think I am. I can’t let Kat go through this on her own. And Gram deserves the best care out there. I want to make sure that happens.”

“I completely understand, Axle, and it just reaffirms that putting my trust in you to run my shop wasn’t misplaced. You’re a good man, and you take your responsibilities seriously. It’s going to be hard to replace you, but I’m glad you’re going to be there for your gram and sister.”

Hearing Collin, someone who I respect and look up to, say those things about me has me choking up a bit. The situation with Gram is hard as is, but always feeling like I wasn’t enough and would never amount to anything as a kid will always be a part of who I am.

“Thanks for understanding, Collin. I’m going to spend the rest of the weekend here, but I will be back on Monday. I’d like to get back to my girls as quickly as possible. I know that doesn’t give you much time to find a replacement or for me to train them, but this is where I need to be.”

“How about you finish out next week and let me worry about finding a replacement and training them? I know I’m retired, but I also miss being at the shop. It will be nice to be back for a little bit.”

“Fuck, thank you. I was honestly dreading coming back and having Kat deal with all of this on her own. I’m going to fucking miss working for you and the guys at the shop. We have a great crew.”

“We’ll miss you too, Axle. You’ve stepped up and done wonders for my business. It’s going to be hard replacing you, but you are going to be exactly where you need to be and that’s what matters the most. Enjoy the rest of the weekend with your family. I’ll see you on Monday.”

“Thanks, Collin.” I let out a relieved breath.

Collin took a chance on me when he hired me as the manager. I’d been working for him for a while before I took on that role, but hearing the praise from Collin leaves a warm ache in my chest. No matter how old I get or what position I hold, I’m always afraid it’s going to be taken from me, leaving me as broken on the outside as I feel inside all the time.

Not wanting to sit in my room all night, I decide to text Torin. He’s still living in the next town over, and it’s been forever since we hung out. We’ve stayed in touch even after he and Kat broke up. It absolutely gutted him, but I tried to make sure he knew that our friendship was still good even though things didn’t work out with my sister. It wasn’t like they ended on bad terms.

Axle: Hey, man. I’m in town for the weekend. How do you feel about catching up and grabbing some beers?

Torin: Fuck yeah, man! It’s been forever. You want to come here or me to come to you?

Axle: How about we head to The Tavern?

Torin: Sounds good. Their food is almost as good as their beer. Meet you there in a half an hour?

Torin: Um, Kat won't be there, right?

Axle: Nah, man. I wouldn't spring that on you like that.

Torin: Fuck. Sorry about that. I just haven't seen her in years, and I know she's moved back ...

Axle: It's fine, dude. She's hanging out with Gram. I'll see ya in a little bit.

Torin: See ya soon.

I shake my head and smile to myself. I know I gave Torin a ton of shit for dating my baby sister, but he's seriously a good dude and I was bummed when they split. I understand why, but it sucked for me seeing both of them so heartbroken.

I stand up, grab a fresh T-shirt out of my bag, and throw it on before heading downstairs to check in with Kat.

When I make it to the living room, I see Gram snoozing and Kat curled up beside her, about to fall asleep too.

“Hey, Kat. I'm going to head out for a little bit.”

She sits up and stretches. “Okay. Where are you heading?”

“I'm going to go meet Torin at The Tavern.”

Kat immediately stiffens at the mention of Torin. I feel bad, but I'm not going to hide it from her. She knows we're still friends.

“Oh, okay. I think I’m going to go crash in my old room. I’m fucking exhausted. Do you have your key or should I leave the door unlocked?”

“I’ve got my key. I won’t be late. Just need to get out for a minute.”

Kat walks over and gives me a hug before pulling back. “Thanks for coming this weekend, Axle. Love you.”

I give her another quick squeeze and a kiss on her forehead. “Love you too, Kitty Kat. You need help with Gram before I head out?”

“Nah, I’m good. Have fun with Torin. Tell him I said hi.”

I lift an eyebrow at her. “Why don’t you tell him yourself? He has the same number, you know.”

She sighs before dropping her head back to her shoulders. “You have no idea how many times I’ve thought about doing just that but then chickened out. I’m still not really feeling settled in my new position, and then with everything else with Gram ...”

She trails off as her shoulders sink forward, and I see the tears brimming in her eyes. I feel like a complete dick.

I take a step closer and pull her back into my arms before giving her the biggest bear hug imaginable. “I’m sorry, Kat. I wasn’t trying to be a dick. I just think he wouldn’t mind hearing from you, is all.”

“It’s okay, Ax. I know you aren’t. I think I’m just completely fucking burnt out. I’m going to head to bed.”

“Will you be around tomorrow? I have some stuff to talk to you about.”

“Yep, but you know I can’t stand it when people leave me hanging. What’s up?”

“Shit, I didn’t think about that. It’s nothing bad, so you don’t need to worry. I talked to Clint and Emerson when I was at the shop tonight, and they told me I could work there again if I needed to. I accepted their offer and will be moving home.”

“Oh my God, Axle! Are you serious? You know you don’t have to do that, but I’d love to have you home.”

“I know I don’t. But this is where I need to be, and I’m good with that. I miss you both when I’m gone. But I need to go, so we can talk about this more tomorrow. Get some sleep. I’ll be on Gram watch once I get home, so you don’t have to worry about it tonight.”

“Thanks, Axle.” She turns back to the living room to get Gram up and to her room.

I watch but head out once Kat catches me and waves me away.

When I get to The Tavern, I’m surprised at how busy it is for a Thursday night. I guess it is still relatively early, only being 9:00 p.m., but I’m still shocked since Sparrow Falls is definitely a small town. When I make my way inside, I spot Torin right away at the bar, talking to a guy built like me, with tattoos covering every inch of visible skin minus his face

which is covered with a full beard, making it hard to read his facial expressions.

I walk up to the bar and snag the seat beside Torin. I clap him on the back, startling him, and can't help but laugh as he punches my shoulder.

"I see you're still a dick. It's good to see you." Torin wraps me in a hug and slaps my back like guys do to each other.

"Yeah. It's been way too long. What beer is good here?"

At my question, the bartender scoffs before crossing his arms. "They're all fucking good. I should know since I brewed them." He raises an eyebrow at me as if he's daring me to question or go against.

"That's fucking awesome. I'm Axle. What's your favorite one, then?" I reach across the bar to shake his hand and wait for his response.

"Maverick. My favorite right now would probably be my summer special. I made it for my little sister, who isn't much of a beer drinker. It's a pale ale with a hint of lemon in it. It's super refreshing after a hot day."

"Hmm, can't say I've ever had fruit in my beer, but I'm down to try it."

His face twitches and I think he smiles, but it's hard to tell. He slides me a beer, and I know I must look comical as my eyes widen at how delicious and light this beer is.

Maverick lets out a chuckle before heading to the other end of the bar to wait on some other people.

“So, any particular reason you’re in town today? It’s not like you to take off in the middle of the week.” We’ve been friends long enough for Torin to know that I’m a workaholic.

I take another sip of my beer, trying to bring myself to tell him about Gram. “I came so that I could go to a doctor appointment for Gram with Kat. She has Alzheimer’s, and it’s progressing quickly. Kat tried handling it on her own but finally broke down and clued me in on what’s been going on. Gram is starting to become a hazard to herself and others, so we have to make some big decisions.”

Torin’s face crumples as I tell him this. He has a great relationship with Gram, and it isn’t uncommon to come home and find him there with her even if Kat and I aren’t home. Gram seemed to collect us like strays, knowing exactly what each of us needed without us knowing.

“Fuck, man. I’m really sorry. You know how much I love Gram. It doesn’t surprise me that Kat tried to take this on herself. She never did want to inconvenience anyone, even if that’s the last thing she ever did. Is there anything I can do to help? I know I’m not in town anymore, but it’s not an issue to drive here.”

“Um, not that I can think of.” I pause and scrub my face, trying to have the balls to tell him this next part. Torin is the only person who knows what happened between Emerson and me that night. I was so fucked up and in my head that he wouldn’t leave me alone until I spilled my guts. “Gram ran over her rose bushes, so I took her car over to Wilson’s Garage

today to check it out. I knew Clint wouldn't mind. When I was there, he basically offered me a job. I wasn't sure if I was going to take it, but there's no way I can leave Kat to deal with this shit on her own. I talked to the owner at my shop, and he said to work next week and then we're good, and to get my ass back to my family."

I wait for his response, but when nothing comes, I turn and see him stunned silent.

"You know Emerson owns the shop now, right? Well, I guess she doesn't technically own it, but Clint has been slowly transitioning over to her running everything. Are you sure you're going to be welcomed back there?"

I blow out a deep breath before finishing off my beer. Avoiding the question long enough, I turn towards him and square my shoulders. "We talked it out. Clint told me I had to ask her, so I did and she said okay. I have to follow her lead and not try and act like I run the place, and then we'll be good."

"Dude, you're so fucked. You know that, right?"

I grit my teeth and try to calm down before I answer. Torin's not being a dick, especially since he's right. "Eh, it will be fine. I don't want or need a relationship, and there's no way she would ever look at me like that again after what happened. Sure, she's hot, but so are a ton of other women. Besides, I have too much other shit going on to worry about or get involved with anyone right now. I can't add her to that list by thinking with my dick instead of my head."

He holds his hands up, and I know I sounded like an asshole spitting that out at him, but that's probably because I'm trying to convince myself just as much as I am trying to convince him.

“I didn't mean to poke the bear. I just don't want to see either of you get into more shit than you've already caused the other. I'm pumped to have you back in town and to be able to hang out, but I also still chill with Em, so it will be great to not have to worry about you two breaking each other.”

While I'm trying to think of how to respond to that, Maverick plops a fresh beer down in front of me. This must be a different one since it's more of an amber than the pale ale from before. I take a sip, and the flavor explodes in my mouth. I quickly take a large swig and smile when I see Maverick chuckling at me.

Torin and I fall into easy conversation over the next hour. I try a few more beers, and we get a sample appetizer platter. The food really is as good as the beer, and I find that Maverick is pretty cool too. He has a Harley and said he brings it to Wilson's, so I'd probably get a chance to work on it. Torin mentioned going on a ride once I got moved back and settled, and I have to admit that I'm looking forward to it.

Sure, my world is turning upside down, but unlike when I was a child, I'm able to handle it better and am glad to have good friends to lean on when I need them. Moving back home looks better the longer I think about it. That is until a ball of

sunshine comes barreling up to the bar, before launching herself on top of it, and starts dancing.

I turn to see Maverick shaking his head and laughing at Emerson's shenanigans. From his reaction, I'm assuming this has happened before. It's impossible to take my eyes off her in those cut-off jeans as she shakes her ass to a Hozier song. I glance around and see every guy with their eyes glued to her, and it takes everything in me not to throw her over my shoulder and haul her out of this bar. I'm about to stand up and do just that when I feel a slap on my back.

"Yeah, I totally believe you that things are good with you and Sunshine, and all that bullshit that there's tons of other hot girls out there." Torin bursts out laughing, and now it's my turn to punch him in the shoulder.

When I look back up at Emerson, she's staring straight at me with a smirk on her face before she drops down low, with her ass right in my face, moving along to the beat of the song. Knowing I'm barely keeping myself from going all caveman on her in front of half the town, I stand and grab my wallet from my pocket before throwing some money down on the bar.

I don't even say bye to Torin. I just spin on my heel and leave before I do something I know I'll regret.

Chapter Five

Emerson

“Ugh.” I’m at work on Friday and regretting going out with some of the guys from the shop.

Everything was fine until I saw him walk in. Torin was already sitting at the bar, and I was going to go say hi until Axle came strolling in like he owned the place.

When one of the guys asked who I was glaring at, I couldn’t admit it was my new employee and their new co-worker, so I proposed a drinking game. We usually save those kinds of shenanigans for nights we don’t have to get up and go in early, but I needed to forget about Axle, and that was the first thing I came up with.

We started out playing Truth or Drink. For some reason, the guys were extra intrusive, so I ended up drinking more than I’d planned. They all know I love to let loose and dance, so when one of the guys went to the jukebox and played Hozier’s *Work Song*, I wasn’t going to be in my chair for much longer.

I know it's not really a "dropping it low" song, but I feel it in my bones and have a hard time sitting still when it comes on. So naturally, when they dared me to jump on the bar and dance—knowing full well I would—I was up there as soon as the words left his mouth. Did I have to sensually drop it low in front of Axle? No. But was playing with fire something I loved to do? Damn straight. And nothing and no one lights me on fire like Axle Jenkins.

I have to admit I was a little disappointed when I stood back up and watched his back as he left, but it was probably for the best. Once the song finished, I curtsied at the applause from everyone in the bar before Maverick threw me over his shoulder, shoving me back around to the other side of the bar, laughing and shaking his head at me the whole time. Thankfully, he's used to my crazy ass and loves me, even though I'd just done an impromptu *Coyote Ugly* dance on his bar.

I went back to the table, where the guys were carrying on. I probably should've called it a night then and there, but I didn't. Maverick gave me a ride home and had to carry my passed-out ass up to my house because once I'm out, I sleep like the dead.

Which leads me to this glorious Friday morning, where I feel like complete death and would much rather be in bed than here. I'm currently face-down on the desk and have no plans to move for at least a half an hour if I can help it.

A text comes through and, whether I want to or not, I know I need to get my butt moving for the day.

Axle: Hey, Emerson. I talked to the owner at my shop. I'm heading back there Sunday and working the week there, but Friday will be my last day. I'll be at the shop the following Monday if that works for you.

I let out a groan because I figured I'd have at least a few weeks to wrap my head around being near Axle five days a week, but apparently I'm not that lucky.

Emerson: Sounds good. We start at 7:30. I'll see you then.

Axle: See you then.

Needing to work this anxious energy Axle always causes out of my system, I head to the coffee pot and make my way out to the bay. Our schedule is full for the day, so hungover or not, it's time to get to work.



I never thought the day would come when Axle Jenkins would work back at the shop and I would be the boss, but he's been

here for a few weeks and everything's been okay. Sure, we bicker non-stop and I've had to remind him that he is not in charge, but he gets along with the guys and is a fucking awesome mechanic, so I'm trying to be civil.

For the most part, having him here has actually been pretty helpful. I hate doing the admin stuff and being stuck behind the computer, but at least I don't have to turn business away since I have someone to fill in for me now that he's here.

Axle never had the best reputation growing up, but that was because he was a hellion who needed an outlet and for someone to take a chance on him. When my dad did just that, people started to have a change of heart and treat him like a respected member of the community. I have to say, I've always loved watching him squirm when someone is praising his job well done, especially when it's the older biddies who were the first to condemn him. Since he's been back, they've picked right back up, and I have loved watching him try to avoid those conversations.

It's been a hot, long week, but it's finally Friday afternoon, and I'm dying to get out of this coverall and into some cut-offs and a tank top. The shop is hot as hell, but I hate ruining my everyday clothes.

I'm out front, saying goodbye to one of the customers, when the doorbell goes off. Glancing over, I see the douchebag doctor who has been pushy as hell about taking me out on a date come in. I try to hide my disgust with a smile, but the

minute his eyes land on my chest and don't turn away, my smile drops.

“Hello, is there something I can help you with?”

“Emerson.” He doesn't answer my question but instead takes a step closer to me.

I want to step back, but the counter is directly behind me, and I will not let him make me feel uncomfortable in my own shop. He raises his hand and toys with a strand of hair that fell out of my braid hours ago. I move my head and glare at him as my hair slides through his fingers.

“I asked you if there's anything I can help you with. If not, please leave, so I can finish up my work for the day.”

“Is that any way to talk to a paying customer? I need to get an oil change and a tire rotation done on my car.” He trails his fingers down my arm, and that's when my control snaps.

I grab his hand and rip it away from my arm. “I don't think we're going to be able to help you here. We're all booked up for the foreseeable future.”

His eyes flair with rage before he gets himself under control. “Well, that's a shame. But since you're so busy here, maybe you could go out with me and give me a recommendation of where I can get my car in instead.”

“I'm sorry, but what gave you the impression that I'd want to go out with you?” I cock my eyebrow and stare him down.

Before I can react, he snaps and grabs me by my arms. “Listen, you little bitch—”

Before he can say another word, he's jerked backwards and slammed against the wall.

A furious Axle has him pinned by his neck and looks seconds away from slamming his fist through this guy's face. "Don't you ever fucking lay a hand on her again. Do you hear me?"

The dick's face is beat-red, and I can tell he's only a minute away from passing out. I rush over and grab Axle's arm, which snaps his attention to me.

"Let him go, Ax. He's not worth it."

He stares at me for a second before glancing up and down my body to make sure I'm okay. He releases the asshole who had the nerve to touch me. The guy slides down the wall, gasping as he tries to catch his breath.

"Fuck you both. You're hot but not worth this shit."

Axle steps towards him, but the guy senses his misstep and scurries out the door.

Even though it was hot as fuck, I don't need Axle or any of the guys stepping in to fight my battles. "What the fuck, Axle? I had it handled."

He lets out an agitated laugh before squaring his shoulders and glaring at me. "You sure about that, Sunshine? From where I was standing, it didn't look like you were going to be able to do much."

"Oh, fuck off. Maybe because you stepped in trying to play the hero before I had a chance."

“You’re out of your fucking mind if you think I will stand by for a second and let someone touch you or talk to you that way.”

We’re nose to nose, and I can see his pulse hammering in his neck. I know I should say something, but instead, I reach up on my toes and slam my mouth on his and kiss him as if my life depends on it.

Axle doesn’t back down but rather scoops me up by my ass and places me on top of the counter where we take care of our customers. We’re all teeth and tongue as we both fight for dominance.

My legs are already wrapped around his waist, but I tighten them to pull him closer to me, where I immediately start grinding on his hard dick. He thrusts in me as he pulls my hair hard to give him better access to bite and suck my neck. His other hand is shoved down my shirt as he pinches and pulls my hard nipple.

A loud noise comes from the shop, and it’s like we’re shocked back to reality. He releases me before taking a step back. I try to contain my whimper at the loss of him as I bite my lip and try to steady my breathing.

Axle runs his hands through his hair, looking anywhere but at me. “Fuck!”

He startles me before turning and heading straight for the door. He slams it as he leaves, and I’m left there, wanting and confused as fuck.

Why the hell did I kiss him? Of course he's still hot as fuck, but the last time we were together he flat out told me I was a mistake. He broke my heart, and there was nobody I could tell. If I let him close and he does it again, I have no idea how I will handle being around him so much.

I take a deep breath and try to calm myself. I lock the front door since all of the customers who were coming for their car today have already been here. I head back out to the shop. Most of the guys are either cleaning up their space or already gone for the day. As per our Friday tradition, the ones who left are probably already at The Tavern, working on their first drink.

I can't help but glance towards Axle's space. It looks like he's already cleaned up and he's gone for the day. I wonder if he'll show up at the bar, but I also won't be shocked if he doesn't. He has yet to come out on a Friday night with us.

I check my area before locking up for the weekend and head to the bar.

I'm pleasantly surprised when I get there and see Kat sitting at the bar. She hasn't seen me yet, so I walk up and smack her ass. She jumps before spinning around, ready to cuss the culprit out until she realizes it's me.

"You little bitch. I thought some skeezeball did that, and I was about to throw them down."

I can't help but laugh as she tries to act mad at me.

“I’m sorry, but it was too good of an opportunity, and you know you would’ve done the same to me.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

We both giggle before calming down.

“Are you here by yourself or meeting someone?” I ask her as she takes a sip of her beer. I plop down on the chair beside her and wait for Mav to make it back to me before ordering a drink.

“Once he got back to Gram’s, Axle said you and the guys planned on coming for beers tonight. I asked if he was coming, but he said it looked like I could use a break and all but shoved me out the door.”

“Oh really? And was he right?” I know Kat has the tendency to take on more than she should, especially when it comes to Gram.

“Yeah, I really do need a break. Axle has been so wonderful since he’s moved back, but I still forget that I can lean on him when it comes to looking out for Gram. I have been able to worry less, knowing he’s at the house with her every night.”

“Awe, babe. I’m glad he’s helping and reminding you that you don’t have to do it all on your own. When will your gram get into the assisted living center?”

“I’m thinking in two weeks. Thank God, she’s been a little more lucid since Axle has been home. We’ve been able to get all of the legal stuff taken care of, and after touring the facility, she seems pretty settled with the idea.”

“That’s really great. I’ll have to try and make it over for dinner before she moves. It’s been too long.”

“She’d love that, Sunshine.”

We both pause to take a drink of our beers. Mav slid me one without me even realizing and winked once I saw it and caught his eye. He is really going to make a woman happy some day if he ever decides to bail on his whorish ways. I mean that in the most loving way.

“So, now that you’re going to have some free time, does that mean you’re going to hit up the dating scene again? Maybe give Torin a call?”

“Oh, not you too.” She rolls her eyes.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Axle said the same thing to me when he went out with Torin for drinks during that first trip when he came back.”

“Oh, well that’s honestly a little surprising. Not that you two wouldn’t be great together again, just that Axle was always trying to deter your dating attempts.”

We both laugh, thinking about some of the funnier ways Axle scared off guys in the past.

“I know, but Torin was one of his friends, and it’s not like we ended on a bad note. It was just a lot to try and maintain when our lives were heading in opposite directions.”

“Yes, I know all of this. Which makes me wonder why you haven’t reached out to him now that Axle is home and you

don't have to take on everything by yourself.”

She sighs while playing with her beer and avoids making eye contact. “Because ...” She pauses, taking a deep breath before continuing, “If I open that door with Torin again, I'd want it to be the forever kind of love, but that's terrifying as fuck to admit. Especially since I don't know how he feels about me or if he would even consider it.”

I can't help but smile because I know exactly how he would feel about it. I've stayed friends with Torin over the years and, sure, he's had a girl here or there, but nothing like what he and Kat had. Hell, he even admitted after one too many drinks that none of them even come close to her. I don't say anything, though, because as much as I love them both, they need to decide on their own to take that risk again.

“I get it, babe. But would you be okay living with regret if you let the fear win and never take that chance?”

“Fuck, I don't know. But enough about me. What about you, Miss “single and always ready to mingle”? Don't you think it's about time you let one of these guys stick longer than a few weeks?”

“Eh, none of them have been worth the time or effort. Besides, I love my carefree ways. Why would I want someone trying to lock me down? And even if I wanted to, I'm just getting my feet at the shop. I have so much that I want to do there and accomplish. I don't want to settle in any aspect of my life, and if I took on a relationship now, I feel like I'd have to go one way or the other.”

“Fine. I’ll let your logic settle this for now, but don’t think I’m going to stop hoping someone sticks one of these days. You’re amazing, and you deserve to be adored.”

“Ha! I can be adored without being wifed up!”

Before we can really start to get into it, Jasper—one of my mechanics—is there, wrapping me in a headlock and giving me a noogie. By the time I break free, I see the little chickenshit scampering back to our table. I laugh, grab my beer, and stand.

“Come on, Kat. Let’s go make Jasper pay for acting like a five-year-old.”

She laughs as I tug her along.

“Oh, and how are we going to make him pay this time?” She knows I never back down from the guys and am always trying to one-up them, but I think I have a better idea this time.

“Oh, we’re going to let his lucky ass to treat not only me but also you to drinks and dinner tonight.”

“I love that idea! Maybe we can tell him he also has to be our DD for the night.”

“Now you’re thinking!”

We plop down at the tables with the guys. When the waitress comes to check on drinks and take our food order, I inform her that not only is Jasper lucky enough to treat one lady tonight but two. She laughs, being used to our shenanigans, and Jasper pouts as I inform him that he also is the lucky winner to drive us home tonight.

Being out with them and Kat is enough to distract me from the hot-as-fuck interaction with Axle earlier today. Well, at least, that's what I try to convince myself of as the night goes on.

Chapter Six

Axle

It's been a week and a half since I lost my damn mind and tried devouring Emerson in the waiting room of the shop. I'd like to say I've been able to ignore the pull she has on me, but that would be an absolute lie. Avoidance has been the only way I haven't pinned her to the nearest wall and picked up where we left off.

Thankfully, it seems as if she has been trying to keep her distance from me as much as possible too. I don't know why she makes me lose my mind the way she does, but I can't afford to let it happen again.

This week is the last week Gram will be home before she moves into the assisted living center, and I couldn't be more relieved. I love her, but constantly worrying about her hurting herself when I'm gone for the day and coming home and finding little disasters is wearing on my last nerve.

Kat has to work the next two days, so we decided to do a family dinner tonight. We didn't want to make a big deal of it in case we upset Gram, but we felt it was important to do. And

honestly, it's not like she won't be able to come over for dinner every now and then.

Kat and I fought hard about what to do with the house, but I finally convinced her to move in. She has a few months before her lease is up, which will give me plenty of time to get the place fixed up for her. The house has been paid off for years, so this will be nice for Kat since she's paying off her school loans.

Of course, not ever wanting to be a burden, she tried insisting I keep the house since I wouldn't have a place to live. But after arguing back and forth, I told her that although I love her and Gram, the house doesn't have as nearly as many happy memories for me as it does for her. I was older and angry when we moved here, and had a hard time accepting it as my home.

I'm not the most knowledgeable when it comes to house renovations, but I figured I could ask the guys to help me out with the stuff I didn't feel comfortable doing on my own. The bones were good, but it was all just very outdated.

Thankfully, work went quickly today, and I was able to get home and check on Gram before Kat made it over. We decided to not fuss over making food but order from The Tavern instead.

I have just gotten out of the shower when I hear a motorcycle coming down the road. My pulse instantly kicks up, knowing Emerson loves riding her bike whenever she can, but I shut that shit down. There are plenty of people who have

bikes in Sparrow Falls. The likelihood of it being her are slim to none.

I finish getting dressed before heading down to check on Gram. I notice the front door is open and panic a bit that she got out of the house. I go flying out the door and startle Gram and Emerson, who are rocking on the porch swing looking thick as thieves together.

I just stand there, shocked for a minute, not knowing what to do.

“Well, don’t just stand there, Axle. Shut the damn door and come out and chat with us. It’s been forever since Sunshine came to see me. It was such a wonderful surprise when she told me she would be here for dinner. She even brought us a dessert.”

I glance to the driveway and see her bike parked beside my truck. I wonder what she brought for a dessert that she’d be able to transport on her bike. Not wanting to engage with her, I ignore her before turning to face Gram.

“Do you want something to drink, Gram?”

“Oh, that would be wonderful, dear. Why don’t you bring me a lemonade and grab a few of those dreadful beers for you and Emerson.”

I grind my teeth as Emerson tries to cover her giggles with her hand.

While I’m in the kitchen getting our drinks, I hear a car door slam, followed by squeals of delight. I can’t help but smile at

my sister and her best friend. No matter how little time it has been since they've seen each other, the next time they do is always loud, as if they are reuniting with their long lost friend. I've always acted like it annoyed me, but I actually love that Kat had someone like Emerson in her life.

I snag another beer for my sister before heading out to the front porch. I can't help but laugh as I see the three of them squeezed together on the porch swing, giggling at who the hell knows what. I pass out our drinks before plopping down in one of the rocking chairs beside the swing.

"So, how's it working for this one? I hear she can be quite the slave driver." Kat tilts her head towards Emerson, who in turn pokes my sister in the ribs.

I roll my eyes at them since they've acted like this since they were kids. "It's fine."

"Wow, way to let us know how you actually feel, Ax." Emerson rolls her eyes at me before turning to Kat. "If you're asking if we've murdered each other yet, you can obviously see we haven't. Sure, we bicker more than not, but he's also been extremely helpful and great with the guys."

I'm a little stunned at Emerson's answer. She's not wrong about the bickering, but that's also nothing new for us. There has never been anyone whose buttons I enjoy pushing more than Emerson Rose Wilson's. She's so feisty, but not many people get to see that side of her. But to admit that I've been helpful is a surprise.

“Oh, don’t look so shocked. You’re a fucking awesome mechanic, and you know it. Taking on more of the admin duty and business end has been an adjustment for me, but it’s been made easier knowing I don’t have to turn business away since I’m not in the shop as often. And I know how capable you are, so it’s not like I have to babysit the newbie.”

I rub my hand on the back of my neck as I try to absorb what she just said. She’s always been fair and kind, but our relationship isn’t one where we generally compliment the other, so I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around it.

“Well, I’m glad to see you both doing well. I was a little worried since you two have always fought and picked and poked at each other for as long as I can remember. Enough about work. I put the food over there by the front door. Let’s go in and eat before it gets cold.”

The girls jump up to grab the food and head into the house. I hang back to help Gram to make sure she gets in okay. When I bend down to get my arm under hers, she pats my cheek like she used to do when I was a little boy.

“I’m glad to have you home, Axle, even if it’s because I’m an old biddy and needed you to come in and save the day.” I go to talk, but she puts a finger over my mouth. “I don’t know what happened between you and Sunshine that had you running away years ago, but I’m glad you’re home and back in her life. I know you don’t feel like you’d be good in a relationship, but that girl might need you even more than you need her.”

I'm fucking stunned when my Gram finishes with a slight chuckle. How the hell does she know something happened between us? Kat doesn't even know that. And what the hell is she talking about Emerson needing me? Emerson doesn't need anyone, let alone the guy who crushed her knowing exactly what he was doing when he did. Gram's opinion of me is far better than I deserve.

I stand to my full height, pulling her with me, and head inside.

The rest of the night is a bit of a blur. I have no idea why she brought up what she did. The only thing that's normal is that I can't help but snipe back and forth with Emerson and tease Kat, but I'm pretty sure they can all tell my mind is somewhere else.

The next few days fly by, trying to prepare Gram to move out. When the day actually comes, I take off so that I can be there the whole day to help her get settled in. The facility is really nice, and her little apartment is perfect for her. She's able to get around on her own, and the people that work there to help her and the other residents all seem really nice.

Gram was really excited when she found out about all the different activities available for her and hit it off with her neighbor right away. I figured I'd be here all day, but after settling in, she shoos me out the door so she can go get a lay of the place with her neighbor.

I head back to the house and figure I'd get started on one of the many things that need fixing or updating before Kat moves

in. The next few weeks go pretty much the same for me. I work all day and try to avoid the sassy little shit that is my boss, and then come home and work on the house. On the weekends I go visit Gram or Kat if she isn't working.

It's September and I am getting to the part where the more intense projects of the house updates and renovations can't be put off anymore. I'm talking to one of the guys at the shop about it when Clint interrupts us.

“Hey, son, how are things going? Is being back here as bad as you thought it would be, back in the day when you were doing everything in your power to go?”

The glint in his eyes lets me know he's teasing me, and I can't seem to hold my chuckle and grin in. Jasper gives me a questioning look since I'm pretty much a grumpy asshole at the shop and don't joke around with the other guys much, but I just shake my head.

“Hey, Clint. Things are going pretty well, and it's definitely not nearly as bad as I made it seem when I was a punk-ass kid.”

“Glad to hear it. How are things going with our Sunshine?” Clint always referred to Emerson as “ours” when he talked to me about her, and I've always wondered why he included me as he claimed his daughter—as if I, too, had a claim on her.

“Eh, she's a stubborn little shit, just like she's always been. But she's also a fair boss, so it hasn't been horrible.”

Jasper laughs beside me, and we both turn to him and give him a questioning look.

He raises his hands as if he's innocent. "Don't look at me like that. You calling her a fair boss just took me by surprise since all you two seem to do is fight like an old married couple."

I glare at Jasper as Clint laughs his ass off. He slaps me on the back as he tries to calm down.

"Glad to see some things haven't changed. How's your gram doing? And how's the work on the house?"

"Gram is doing really well. The structure the facility provides, along with the activities and socialization, has been really good for her. As far as the house goes, it's coming along, but I think I'm finally at the point where I might need to hire some help."

"I might not be able to do as much as I used to, but I could probably help you out with some of it. But if I'm being honest, Chayse would do way better than me. She's currently working on her own house, though. I don't know how much time she'd have."

"Eh, don't worry about it. I'll figure it out."

"Alright, but don't hesitate to call me if you need help."

"I won't."

Clint leaves, and Jasper is already under the car he was working on before we started talking and Clint interrupted us. I turn to head out to the front office to put the keys back for

the car I just finished working on when I almost run Emerson over. She bounces off my chest, and I reach out to grab her arms before she can fall on her ass.

She glares up at me, tugging her arms out of my grasp. “Walk much?”

“I’m pretty sure you’re the one who just bounced off of my chest. Maybe you should pay more attention to where you’re going.” I stare down at her.

“I heard you talking to my dad. What renovations are you doing that you need help with?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I want to update both bathrooms and maybe knock out the one wall upstairs to make the two small bedrooms into one larger room.”

“Hmm, I don’t know about knocking down the wall, but I could definitely help you with the bathroom remodels.”

“Oh, and you’d do this out of the kindness of your heart?”

“Well, yes, because I know you’re doing all of this for Kat, and that girl deserves the best. But I don’t know that I’d do it for free.”

“So, what would your price be?”

“Come to the cookout at my dad’s this weekend with me. Chayse is bringing her new guy, and I know my dad would love it if you were there.”

She’s got to be out of her fucking mind if she thinks I would take her up on that. Being stuck with her five days a week—

where she's mostly covered with her bibs—is hard enough, but seeing her carefree and in cut-offs or her casual clothes would be fucking torture.

“Before you dismiss me, why don't you take a look at these.” She shoves her phone in my face, and I'm looking at a gorgeous master bathroom. The tile work is impeccable, and the whole space looks exactly like a bathroom I want to use after a long day of work.

“You did this?”

“With help from Chayse, but yeah, I did most of the work in there. I love laying tiles, and I'm pretty fucking good at it if I do say so.”

I don't want to admit it, but these pictures are gorgeous. If I could have Emerson help me, I'd be able to save on labor, buy better materials, and go all out for Kat. She wasn't wrong when she said Kat deserves the best.

“Fine, I'll go. But I'm not going to spend the whole fucking day there. I've got shit I need to do.”

“Fine. Works for me. It's this Saturday, and you can bring some beer. You know what dad likes, I'm sure.”

I nod my head and stare as a proud smirk graces her face before she spins on her heel and saunters away. I scrub my hands down my face because I know that was probably the biggest mistake I could've made. It's hard enough denying my attraction to her when I see her at work, but having her alone at my house is going to be fucking torture.



I'm dreading going to this party at Clint's house. I'm sure it will be fine because I've gone to them when I was younger, but I never got close with Chayse or Spencer. I always felt like an outsider the few times I came to one of their family functions.

I swung by The Tavern and grabbed two twelve-packs of beer and tucked them away in my saddlebags before heading out. Maverick was there and gave me a head nod before I left. Now that I'm a permanent resident in Sparrow Falls again, it probably wouldn't hurt to try and make a few friends. Maverick seems cool, and I know he rides. I've missed going out with the guys. Maybe if I ever come out of hiding at Gram's, I can see if he'd be interested in going sometime.

My bike roars down the street, and I'm pulling up to Clint's before I'd like to. There's a few vehicles out front, so it looks like I might be the last one to the party. I grab the beer out of the bags and walk around the side of the house. Emerson said it was a cookout, so I figured nobody would hear the doorbell.

I've just made it to the back gate when the laughter reaches me. I try not to scowl as I swing the gate open and head towards the group of people gathered on the back deck. I instantly recognize the Wilson sisters and Clint, but I'm not sure who the guys or the kids are.

Emerson catches me hovering before she runs over and grabs my arm to drag me into the fray. I shouldn't be surprised by her pushiness, but feeding me to the wolves is not how I wanted to start out this day. Thankfully, Clint is standing with the guys, so at least I have one friendly face.

“Hey, son! I'm glad Emerson talked you into coming. I wanted to ask, but I know you're working hard on the house for Kat and I didn't want you to feel obligated to come.”

“Glad to be here.” I try and smile.

Clint laughs because he knows that's far from the truth. What can I say? Socializing has not been my strong point throughout the years, and Clint knows it.

“Hey, not trying to interrupt, but did you say he was working on a house?”

I look at the guy, trying to figure out how he fits in. Noticing me eying him, he thrusts out his arm to shake my hand.

“Shit. Sorry, man. I'm Cash. I'm dating Chayse, and that whirlwind of blond curls is my daughter, Penny. I'm being a nosy fuck because I'm a contractor and my favorite projects are renovations.” He pauses to take a sip of beer before pointing to a beefy guy playing with his daughter while a tall, lean guy stands beside him laughing. “That's my partner and best friend, Reid. The other guy is Chayse's best friend, Landon. We're actually helping her fix up her house right now.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Axle. Clint was telling me Chayse was fixing up her house. I actually just accepted some help from Emerson to get the bathrooms squared away.”

Clint’s smile grows when he hears this, and Cash lets out a whistle.

“You won’t be mad about that. The things she can do with tile are amazing. Well, I suppose her and Spencer, since she is usually the mastermind behind the design. But I’ve honestly never seen anyone lay tile so perfectly or as efficiently as she does.”

I nod . “She showed me some pictures. I’d be an idiot not to accept her help.”

The guys start talking about projects they are working on, and I’m glad to not be the center of the attention.

Emerson leaves me be for the most part, but I can’t help but track her every move. I’m surprised when Maverick turns up a little later and scoops Spencer up in his arms. Apparently, they’re newly dating, but they look like they fit together perfectly.

I’m a little uncomfortable as everyone is paired off, and I don’t want them to think that’s how things are with Emerson and me. I try to be civil since I am spending the day with her family, but that little shit loves to poke and prod at me.

It isn’t until we start playing a friendly game of football that my control almost snaps. Of course, she talks shit the whole

time, but when she tries to steal the ball from me and our feet tangle, we go down hard.

I wrap her up in my arms so I don't squish her on our way down. We're both breathing heavy, and her squirming underneath me instantly has me hard. It takes all of my strength not to grind down into her.

Her eyes widen when she feels my throbbing cock notched right between her sweet thighs. She gasps as she presses up into me, and I have to drop my head to avoid her lust-filled eyes. If I look at her a second longer, there's no way I will be able to stop from devouring her.

I get up and pull her with me as I go. It's then that I notice her arm is bleeding. I grab it so that I can get a closer look, and that's when she goes pale. I forgot that Emerson is a wimp when it comes to blood. Not thinking, I scoop her up and run up the back steps to head to the bathroom.

I set her on the counter and tell her not to look. I don't expect her to bury her face in my chest, but if it helps her from passing out, I'm not going to say a word. As if they have their own mind, my hands glide up and down her back as I try to calm her down. I feel her shutter, and I can't help placing a kiss on her forehead. It's been years since I've done that, but I want to do it every chance I can get.

“Are you good if I step away to get stuff to clean you up?”

She nods.

I rummage through the cabinet until I find everything I need. I take my time cleaning her up and try to be as gentle as I can. Once I have the mess covered, I give her hand a squeeze before throwing out the supplies so she doesn't see any more blood.

“You're all set, Sunshine.” She sucks in a breath, and I realize what I said. “Sorry. I mean, Emerson.” I try to take a step back, but she wraps her legs around me.

“Thanks for taking such good care of me, Axle.” She's looking up at me with lust-filled eyes, and I snap.

I lean in and brush a gentle kiss on her lips. It's like a flip is switched, and we both dive in as if we can't get enough.

Our kiss is rough as we both try to fight for control. She finally relents, and I tilt her head to just where I want it. Before I even realize it, I have her cut-offs popped open and my hand is down her pants. I slide my finger through her wet slit and begin circling her clit. She moans as she thrusts her pussy into my hand.

Losing all control, I thrust two fingers into her hot heat as I continue circling her clit. She starts to meet my thrusts, and it's the sexiest fucking thing I've ever seen.

“That's right, Sunshine. Keep fucking my fingers until you soak my hand. I can feel you squeezing them so tight.” She moans as she thrusts harder. “I can feel how close you are. You want to come?”

“Yes, Axle. Yes!”

That's all I need to hear. With my other hand, I pull her top down, exposing one of her gorgeous breasts. I suck her nipple into my mouth hard as she arches into me. She's a whimpering mess. I feel her start to contract around my fingers.

I pull my lips from her nipple so I can look at her. She's flush from her chest to her cheeks, with her eyes shut and face contorted in pleasure.

"You ready to come, Sunshine?"

"God, yes!"

I bend down again as I flick her clit faster and bite her nipple hard. She arches into me as she starts to scream. I cover her mouth with my hand as I watch wave after wave of pleasure consume her. I bring her down slowly, and when she's finally looking at me, I suck my fingers into my mouth and groan as her flavor floods my mouth.

My cock is ready to bust out of my jeans, and I wish for nothing more than to slam into Emerson and take what I've been thinking about since the last time she was in my bed. But I realize that this was enough of a line that I crossed already.

"Fuck. I can't believe we just did that." She's starting to come down from her orgasmic bliss, and I can see the panic set in.

I can't handle her rejection, so I do what I do best and leave.

I don't say anything to anyone. I already have my keys and am conveniently inside, so I can go out the front door rather than face everyone in the backyard. I get on my bike and fly

out of the driveway, heading anywhere that will take me away from the spitfire who will always steal my control.

Chapter Seven

Emerson

“**W**hat the fuck just happened?”

I’m still sitting on the counter in the bathroom, legs spread and cut-offs unbuttoned, trying to wrap my head around how I went from almost passing out from the sight of blood to almost passing out from one of the best orgasms I’ve ever had in my life. I honestly can’t even figure out what the fuck just happened or where the hell Axle went.

I look down at my arm and see that it’s perfectly bandaged. Not only that, but he went over the top to take care of the scrape on my arm. He was so gentle and knew exactly what I needed so that I didn’t freak the fuck out—or even worse, pass out. It was sweet and so caring, and I could see the worry on his face. That’s the only reason I can think of why I let things get so out of hand.

I jump off the counter and zip up my shorts before turning to look in the mirror. My lips are swollen, and my neck is red from his beard running along it as he kissed and bit his way down to my chest. It looks like I have one or two light bite

marks on my neck. I run my finger along them, getting turned on all over again. I'm still soaking wet from the orgasm his fingers pulled from my body as I shift my legs to try and relieve some of the pressure from seeing the marks he left on my skin.

I'm startled as I hear a knock on the bathroom door. I take a look in the mirror, and I'm obviously flustered, but I'm hoping I can chalk that up to the football game we were just playing and my injury. Thankfully, everyone in my family knows how much of a wimp I can be when it comes to blood. Give me creepy crawlies, snakes, or even a bat, and I'm fine. But the sight of blood can do me in every time.

"Em, are you okay in there?" Thank God it's Spencer at the door and not Chayse. She might not believe me when I say I look wrecked from the football game, but she at least won't push me like Chayse would.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'll be out in a minute."

I pull my hair out of the messy ponytail and run my fingers through it. I can just braid my hair to the side, and it should cover the marks left by Axle. But before I braid it, I snag my phone off the counter and snap a quick picture. I'm not sure what I'm going to do with it, but I'm sure I'll find a way to torture him with it at some point. I braid my hair and then swing the door open.

Spencer is leaning against the wall just outside the door, with a look of concern on her face. "Are you sure you're okay? You guys were in here for a while, and then we all heard Axle's

bike fire up and him tear down the street. I know you guys have always had a love-hate relationship. I hope you weren't giving him too much grief in here."

She's smiling so I know she's serious, but she's also teasing me. I can't help but laugh as I cross my arms over my chest and try to put on an innocent face.

"Me? You seriously think I'd give him a hard time when it was clearly an accident? I'm the nice one!"

"Ha! Yes, I think you'd give him grief. Yes, you are our little sunshine and always nice, but there's always been something about Axle that brings your brat side out. But all kidding aside, is everything okay between you two?"

"Yeah, we're good. He swooped in like the super hero nobody sees him as and made sure I didn't pass out, puke, or freak out because of the blood." I hold up my arm to show Spencer the bandage, and she immediately grabs it to take a look at it.

"Oh, Em. Are you sure you're okay? This looks like a pretty big bandage."

"Quit worrying! I'm fine. I may need to have Chayse change the bandage for me for a few days so that I don't have to worry about the blood, but it's really not as big as this makes it look. I think Axle just knows how much of a pansy I am with blood, so he made sure there wasn't any part of the scrape showing."

"Okay, good. I was a little worried when I heard him leave and you hadn't come out of the house yet."

I wave her off as I head out of the bathroom and toward the kitchen. “You know how Axle is. He didn’t even want to come to the cookout, but I knew Dad would love it if he were here. I bribed him by showing him the tile work I’ve done for Chayse in the past and told him if he came, I’d help him with the bathroom renovations at Gram’s place. He’s fixing it up for Kat, so I want to make sure the master bathroom is fit for the queen she is.”

Spencer laughs and shakes her head at me. I am most definitely the happy-go-lucky out of the three of us, but Chayse is my big sister. I’ve learned a trick or two from her over the years. As if she’s thinking the same thing, Spencer tries to stifle her giggle but fails.

“Good to see Chayse has been a positive influence on you.” I laugh before heading back out to the cookout.

Thankfully, after assuring everyone I’m fine and that Axle left because he had other things to do, the rest of the night is filled with laughter and love.

I’m exhausted and a little sore from my fall once I get home later that night. I decide a nice soak in my tub is exactly what my tired body needs. Filling the tub with hot water and pouring in some bath oils, I can’t wait to sink in and let my tired body relax.

I strip out of my clothes and reach up to undo my braid. Once my hair is free, I run my fingers through and rub my scalp. It’s then that I catch the bite marks on my neck. I face the mirror to get a closer look and gasp at the dark red hickey

on my breast. I don't even remember him doing that, but it can't ignore it if I tried.

Seeing his marks on my skin has me instantly turned on as I remember how he brought me to orgasm with nothing but his fingers, lips, and teeth. Remembering I took a picture of my neck earlier, I grab my phone and pull it up to take a look at it. The bite marks are faint, but looking back in the mirror, they are more obvious now.

I pull my hair to the other shoulder and stretch my neck so the marks are more visible. I pop one knee and turn to the side so that all you can see is my bare skin from my neck to my toes. I use one arm to cover my chest, but make sure the bite mark is visible. I snap a few pictures from the neck down before choosing the best one.

I pull up Axle's contact and attach the picture. But now ... What the fuck do I say to him? I've always been confident of my body and appearance, but I'm never usually this bold. I don't send guys pictures, but I know that this one will get Axle going, and there's no way I don't want to push his buttons a little more.

I know we crossed the line today and we're playing with fire. But I'm not that sweet, innocent girl who lost her virginity to her crush. I'm a grown-ass woman. I don't think I can trust Axle with my heart—not after what he did to me so many years ago—but I'd love to have him devour my body.

Emerson: Thanks for the reminder of what could've been a very shitty afternoon but turned out to be a very satisfying ending.

I wait for a response, but after a minute, there isn't one. I'm not really surprised about it, but at least I can tell he's seen it and he'll be thinking about me and that orgasm as much as I am.

I sink into the tub and let out a content sigh. It's annoying having to keep my bandaged arm out of the water, but it feels so good that I don't mind that much. I let my mind drift to Axle and wonder how Monday morning will play out. I'm sure he'll try to act like nothing happened, but now that my body remembers what his touch can do to me, there's no way I'm going to be able to not try to tempt him for something more to happen.



As expected, Monday rolls around and Axle goes back to avoidance and ignoring me unless I specifically go out of my way to talk to him. That doesn't mean he's doing a very good job at it, though.

More than once, I feel his eyes on me as I lean over to work inside a car or as I move around the shop. When I turn and catch him, he diverts his eyes as if he wasn't just checking me

out. I try to hide the pleasure it brings me, but I know he's seen me smirking at him a time or two.

It doesn't hurt that the warm summer temperatures are hanging on. Everyone in the shop has long-sleeved, full-body coveralls, but it's too damn hot to wear them. Most of the guys wear work pants and a tank top to try and combat the heat. I have some canvas work pants for the summer that I've been pairing with crop tops or cut-off shirts that show off more skin than I probably should as a respectable business owner.

The rest of the week goes pretty much the same way, but instead of pushing Axle to his breaking point, I just end up making myself more and more sexually frustrated. Whenever I can manage it, I brush past him or bump him with my ass—anything that could be deemed innocent but would tempt him to break his mile-high walls and react to me. But each attempt is a failure. When I try to pin down a day to come help with the bathroom renovations, he finds any reason to not be available.

When Thursday rolls around, not only am I sexually frustrated but I'm starting to get pissed at his one-word, caveman responses.

Somehow, both of us end up at the shop at the end of the day. We are both out at the waiting room after finishing up with our customers when I finally realize we are alone together.

Do I really need to brush my ass up against his crotch to get past him at the front counter? No. But do I finally get a

response out of him that I have been dying for? Absolutely.

I don't realize he is following me around the counter to the front door when I go to lock it up for the night, until he whips me around and slams me against the door as soon as the lock clicks into place. He pins me to the door, with his hips as his hand slid around my throat, tilting my chin back to make sure I am looking at him.

"You need to cut this shit out, Emerson." He all but growls at me as he licks his lips.

I can't help the moan that slips from my lips as I thrust my hips forward, needing more friction on my aching pussy.

"I don't know what you mean, Axle." As soon as the lie leaves my lips, heat flares behind his eyes as he tightens his hand around my throat.

He bends down and nips my bottom lip, which causes me to whimper as I close my eyes and a shutter runs down my body.

"You know *exactly* what you're doing, Sunshine. That picture, every time you brush this delectable body against mine, the sway of your ass as you walk by knowing that I can't help but look. It ends tonight."

I let out a breath as I brace myself to look him in the eyes. With a defiant smirk, I give him the only response that will work for me. "No."

He quirks his brow at me as if he's trying to figure out if I'm serious or not. "What do you mean, no? I didn't ask you a question."

“N.O. No. That doesn’t work for me, Axhole.” I put as much sass in my voice as I possibly can as I grind my soaking center along his throbbing cock. “As much as I hate to admit it, last weekend was one of the hottest orgasms of my life. We’re obviously attracted to each other. Why can’t we scratch the itch ... together?”

The whole time I’m talking to him, I’m moving my hips faster against his. I don’t even know if he realizes he started thrusting back into me. He obviously wants me as much as I want him, even if he’s not ready to admit it.

His grip around my throat loosens just for a minute as he lets out a moan, and I take advantage of it. I pull my head back out of his grasp and swipe my tongue up his neck to his ear. I latch on to his lobe before sucking it in my mouth.

“Fuck, Sunshine.” He’s thrusting into me with just the right pressure that if he keeps it up, I know I will be coming. Abruptly, he steps back. He’s breathing heavily as he tries to gain control. I’m waiting for him to bolt out of the room, but I’m shocked when his hand goes to his belt and unbuckles it. “If orgasms are what you want, get on your knees.”

I’m frozen in place as my brain tries to process what the fuck just happened. Is he really going to go along with this? And am I okay with this domineering side of him? From the wetness soaking my panties, I’m pretty sure the answer to that is yes. I’m snapped out of my fog when he unzips his pants and pulls his cock out, stroking it. I take a step forward and fall to my knees.

“Open your pretty little mouth for me, Sunshine.”

I do what he says and am rewarded with the tip of his dick sliding into my mouth. I’m expecting him to thrust in but am surprised when he doesn’t.

“You want my cock to fuck your throat? Want me to pour myself down it until you’re choking on me?”

I nod because my mouth is a little busy right now. I’m aching so much that I go to slide my hand down the front of my work pants, but Axle grabs it.

“Not yet, Sunshine. You can come when I tell you to.”

I want to protest because I’m aching so badly, but then Axle starts to thrust into my mouth. He’s slow at first, letting me adjust to his size, but he picks up the pace as he guides me with his hands shoved through my hair. “But this right now, this is just for me. This is for all the times you’ve teased me this past week, for that picture you sent me after the cookout, for tempting me with that sassy mouth. I figure it’s time I filled it with something more than your taunting words.”

I moan as he hits the back of my throat. I try to relax, letting him go further than any man has gone when I’ve sucked them off. His rhythm falters, and I know he’s close. I run my hands up his thighs and gently pull on his balls.

With a loud groan, Axle starts spilling his release down my throat. I try to swallow it all, but it’s too much and starts spilling out of the side of my mouth. Finally pulling out, he tucks his spent dick away before swiping his thumb across my

lower lip. He pushes it into my mouth, and I suck his release off it.

“Fuck, Sunshine. You look so good on your knees like that.” He tucks a loose strand of hair behind my head before grabbing me by my arms and pulling me to my feet. I wince at the ache from kneeling on the hardwood floors. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just not the most comfortable place to kneel if you know what I mean.”

He smirks now that he knows I’m not actually hurt. “I’m going to visit Gram Saturday morning, but the rest of the day, I plan on getting supplies and working on the bathroom. If you still want to help, come over around noon.”

He starts walking for the door, and I’m dumbfounded. I am so unbelievably wound up right now, and that asshole is about to waltz out the door like we have been standing here shooting the shit instead of him thoroughly fucking my face.

“What the fuck, Axle?”

He turns back towards me, and I want to hit the smirk off his cocky face. “What’s wrong, Sunshine?”

“You know exactly what’s wrong. When I suggested more orgasms, I figured they would be mutually beneficial. You can’t seriously be leaving right now.”

“Did you not hear me earlier? That was for me, Sunshine. You’ve been tempting and pushing me all fucking week, so I took exactly what you’ve been asking for.” I scoff, but before I can say anything, he goes on. “Besides, if you want to be

mutually beneficial, I already gave you ‘one of the best orgasms of your life’. It seems only fair that you should return the favor.”

I didn’t realize he was walking closer to me the entire time we were talking until he slams his lips on mine, forcing his tongue between my teeth to take what he wants from me. The kiss isn’t as frantic as our previous ones, but it is hot as hell as he manipulates me where he wants me and fucks my mouth with his tongue.

Just as quickly as the kiss started, he pulls away, leaving me a panting, hot mess standing all alone in the customer waiting room. I am still standing there when I hear his bike roar to life and Axle tears out of the apartment.

Dying for some relief, I do something I never thought I would. I head out into the shop to make sure all of the doors are closed and locked before I make my way back to the office. Thankfully, my dad’s office has a private bathroom with a small walk-in shower. My mom hated when he’d track all the grime from the shop home.

I strip out of my clothes and hop into the shower. It doesn’t take long to bring myself release with my fingers and help from the shower head. I take another few minutes to calm down before getting out and dressed again. The ache between my legs is a lot better, but the orgasm wasn’t anything compared to the one Axle gave me the other day.

I’m exhausted from busting my ass at the shop and the back and forth with Axle. All I want to do is go home and relax, but

I told Chayse I'd go to trivia tonight. We've all been so busy with our own lives that I feel like I rarely see my sisters anymore. Too tired to drive home and drop off my bike for my jeep, I decide to text Chayse and see if she can pick me up instead.

The entire time I wait for her, I play back what happened with Axle. I never thought he would give in, and even though he left me wanting, I've never had a hotter interaction in my life. I know I should avoid him and skip out on renovations on Saturday, but I made him a deal, and I have no intentions of breaking my word.

Chapter Eight

Axle

On my way home, I desperately try to figure out how Emerson pushed me enough to make me lose complete control. I mean, if I'm being honest with myself, I'm surprised I was able to hold out as long as I did with the way the little minx has been teasing me all week. At least this time around was on my terms, and holy fuck was it hot.

Having Emerson submit to me and drop to her knees will live rent free in my mind for the rest of my life. I know I'm playing with fire every time I cross the line when it comes to her, but I just can't stop.

And she's the one who made it seem like she was just in it for the orgasms. If that's the case, I don't see why I should fight my attraction to her.

When I get home, I pull in and see Torin sitting on my front porch. It's been awhile since we've hung out, so I'm glad he stopped by. Especially since I could use some help with moving some stuff in the house to keep moving on the

updates. Kat could help, but she looks so damn exhausted every time I see her that I don't even mention it.

“Hey, man. What the hell are you doing here?”

Torin stands as I make my way up the porch. He pulls me in for a bro hug and slaps my back, and I can't help but chuckle. He's always been affectionate and used to force me to give him hugs on a regular basis. I never thought I'd hear the end of it when I decided to quit fighting him on them because he wasn't wrong when he teased me about needing them.

“Hey, Ax. I haven't seen your ugly mug in a while, so I wanted to come check on you. Make sure you weren't working your life away between the garage and the house. Although, you're a little late coming home, so my fears are only being confirmed.”

I try not to squirm or break eye contact so Torin doesn't know something's up, but I don't do a very good job. Maybe I can try distracting him from my squirming. “How do you know I'm late? Have you been keeping tabs on me?” I shove his shoulder playfully, but he just studies me harder.

“I know you're late because Emerson and I are still friends, and I know she closes the shop at 5:00 p.m. It's almost 6:00, and it only takes five minutes to get to your house from the shop.”

Not ready to get into this with him, I open the front door and hold it for him to follow. I head to the kitchen to grab a beer. I get one for Torin and hand it to him before sinking down at the table in the kitchen.

“Fuck. What did you do? Did you and Emerson get into a fight? Is that why you’re late? Your silence is making my imagination run here, so you might as well spit it out and put me out of my spiral.”

I chuckle because I’ve forgotten how worked up Torin can get. But he’s also very perceptive, so there’s no way I’m going to be able to hide this from him. Hell, he’s the only one who knows what happened between me and Em so many years ago.

“No, we didn’t get into a fight. Well, no more than our constant bickering and push and pull at least.”

“Okay, then what happened because you’re avoiding eye contact, and I can tell you’re trying to avoid the topic or not tell me something.” I tilt my head back and take a deep breath, but before I can say anything, Torin starts in again. “Oh, fuck. You fucked her again, didn’t you?” He has a look of disbelief on his face because he knows how messed up I was after it happened the first time.

“No, I didn’t fuck her.”

“But you did do something, didn’t you?”

He crosses his arms and looks a little pissed at me, and I can’t even blame him. He always did have a great relationship with Emerson, and I think he sees her almost as if she is his little sister.

“Fuck it. Yes, some things have happened. I had every intention of keeping my hands off her, but she’s even more impossible to resist than she was back then. And she is even

less afraid to taunt and tease me until I fucking snap, which is exactly what happened tonight.”

Torin blows out a breath as his eyes get wider the more I talk. He’s the only one who has ever known the spell Emerson Rose Wilson had—and, apparently, still has—on me. Not being able to sit still any longer, I jump from my chair, almost knocking it over in my anxious attempt to walk out all of this energy buzzing in me.

I start pacing in the kitchen as my anxiety rises. As much as I desire Emerson, I can’t afford to catch feelings or for her to have them for me. I’m not good for her. Hell, I’m no good for anyone, but especially her. She deserves to be worshiped, and even though I know I would be able to do that, I’ve never seen a happy, functional relationship in my life.

I don’t even realize Torin has stood up from the table until I feel his hand grab my shoulder. I don’t want to know what he is thinking, so I avoid eye contact. It’s one thing to know I’m a fuck-up and not worth a minute of her time but another to see it in my best friend’s eyes.

“Hey, let’s get out of here.”

I look up a little startled. That’s the last thing I expected to hear, but it shouldn’t surprise me. Torin has always been with me when my world gets to be too much I need to escape. I’ve always hopped on my bike to clear my head, and it’s actually a pretty good idea. If I stay here, I’m just going to keep spiraling.

“I rode my bike over. Let’s go. It’s still warm out, and there hasn’t been any rain in a while. The roads will be perfect for a ride tonight.”

I nod and we head to the door.

I open the garage and take the first full breath in what feels like forever. My bike is sitting by Gram’s car, just waiting for me to rip out of this town and find some peace on the winding roads of Sparrow Falls.

I hear Torin fire up his bike, and I climb onto mine. I strap on my helmet, even though I don’t love wearing them and technically don’t have to. But if something ever happened to me while I was on my bike, I don’t want Kat to have to deal with any issues that not wearing a helmet might cause.

I fire up my bike and back it down the driveway before tearing out of it, following Torin as he weaves through the town.

As we drive past The Tavern, my mind strays to the last time I was there and witnessed

Emerson’s sexy-as-hell dance on top of the bar. I should’ve realized then how fucked I am. But desire isn’t enough to ease my fears of what a relationship with her could do to me, or how I could end up hurting one of the most important people in my sister’s life.

I’ve never really wanted the happily ever after, but if there ever was someone who could make me want to believe and try, it’s Emerson. But I can’t give into those desires. I have too

much going on with Gram, the house, and needing to find my own place since I know I'm not going anywhere anytime soon. Besides, I'm tainted goods. Who in their right mind would look at me and think I was a good bet?

We make it to the edge of town, and Torin takes off. We both are riding Harleys, so it's not like we're flying through the curves on a crotch rocket, but it still feels amazing to open the throttle and lean into the curvy mountain roads. We ride for about an hour. I don't even pay attention to where we are. I just let the wind, the thrum of my bike, and the gorgeous weather melt away my anxiety and fear of what could be happening between Emerson and me.

Torin pulls over to a little lookout area, and we both hop off our bikes. I stretch and take a deep breath. The clean air fills my lungs, and I can breathe again.

"Alright, are you ready to talk about all the shit that was freaking you out earlier?"

"No, but I will. Hit me with whatever words of wisdom or threats you have in regards to Sunshine."

"No threats. I think you know how much is on the line if you fuck up again with her. You can't run off this time like you did last time. Well, I guess you could, but I know you would never do that to Kat. Especially since she just got you back."

"You're right. I'm here for good and don't plan on going anywhere."

“So you want to finally try and make something work with Emerson?”

“I can’t do a relationship. I’ve got too much shit going on to do that. Plus, she deserves so much better than my broken ass. And before you even try to talk me up, we both know I’ve always been a fuck-up with a bad attitude. I wouldn’t know what a happy, loving relationship was if it hit me in the face.”

Torin shakes his head at me, looking completely exasperated. “Fine, I won’t try to convince you that you aren’t this huge piece of shit you think you are. But what are you going to do about Sunshine if you can’t seem to keep your hands off her? From what you said earlier, you haven’t slept with her, but you have crossed the line on more than one occasion?”

“Fuck. Yes, other than tonight, there’s been a couple other times I’ve crossed the line. I just can’t help it. Her sass and smart mouth drive me insane, and sometimes the only way I can get her to stop is if I make her.”

Torin raises his hand, signaling me to stop. “I do not need any mental images of how you get Sunshine to be quiet. I know she’s super bubbly and fun most of the time, but I also know how stubborn and hard-headed she can be, and I know how much back and forth you two do.”

I laugh because he’s not wrong. Not only is he my best friend, but he dated my little sister. The four of us hung out together more than I hung out with anyone else. Torin got to

witness our antagonistic, back-and-forth verbal sparring for years.

“Okay, so where does this leave you two?”

“Fuck if I know. All I know is that no matter how hard I resist her, I can’t seem to prevent myself from failing and consuming her. I made the mistake of agreeing to let her help me fix up the bathrooms in the house. I don’t know how to make sure nothing happens when we’re all alone there.”

Torin starts laughing, and I flip him off. “I’m sorry, man, but you are so fucked. If Emerson has set her sights on you again, there’s nothing you’re going to be able to do to resist her. Maybe you just need to come to terms with it and try and set some ground rules, so you both have the same expectations.”

“But wouldn’t that be like waving a green flag at her to torment me relentlessly until I give in?”

“Maybe, but at least she would know that it was just physical and not to expect a relationship from you. If either of you start catching feelings, then call it.”

“But that’s the fucking problem. I already *have* feelings. I always have when it comes to her. Nobody has ever tied me up the way she does. But I can’t do a relationship.”

Torin looks sympathetically at me while he mulls over what I said. I realize it’s the first time I ever acknowledged I’ve had feelings for Emerson for years. I just have never known what to do with them.

“Fuck, man. That’s a tough spot. I really don’t know what to tell you to do if you’re hellbent on not having a relationship with her. I guess just try avoiding putting yourself in a situation where you’re alone with her.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’ve been trying to do, and look how well that’s worked out for me.”

He laughs and shakes his head. “Come on. Let’s head back. I want to try and avoid deer if at all possible, and it’s getting to be about that time that they start moving.”

We both climb on our bike and head back towards Sparrow Falls. I’m no clearer on what to do about Emerson than I was when I got home, but at least the crippling fear and anxiety are gone for now.



I was successful in avoiding Emerson for the most part on Friday. If I couldn’t avoid her, I at least made sure one of the other guys from the shop was around when I needed to talk to her or saw her coming my way. She pinned me down in the break room at lunch to ask about Saturday. I was reluctant to invite her over, but I knew she would just show up if I didn’t give her a time.

I went to visit my Gram this morning and was pleasantly surprised to see that she was having a good day. After talking to one of the administrators earlier in the week and being told

she had been having a tough week, seeing her act like her normal self was a huge surprise.

Since she was in such a good mood, I ended up spending more time there than I'd originally planned. Since I'm running late, I didn't get a chance to run to the store to get some of the supplies we would need to get started on the bathrooms.

When I get home, Emerson is sitting on the front porch steps. She has cut-offs and one of those damn crop tops on again, and it takes all of my will power not to linger on the strip of exposed skin on her toned stomach. Once I park the truck, she hops up and bounds towards me. I'll never understand how someone can have as much energy as her.

“Hey, Axle. Are you ready to get started?”

I level her with a look, and she starts blushing.

Hmm, that's interesting. Usually, she's the one that has me flustered, not the other way around. At least, not since she was about fifteen.

“Sorry I'm early. I was at home and getting a little restless, so I figured I'd just come early so we could get started. I love doing bathroom updates, so I might be just a little bit excited.” She lifts her hand, showing her thumb and finger just millimeters apart to show her excitement. She giggles as I quirk my brow at her, all the while bouncing on her toes.

I shake my head at her and chuckle. This is the Emerson that everyone gets to see. She shows her fun and silly side to me, sure, but we also can't help but poke and prod at each other.

“Come on, Sunshine.” I tug one of her braids as I head to the house.

I’m surprised when she slaps my ass as she lets out a peel of laughter before sprinting up the stairs. I try to glare at her, but her smile breaks mine free as I join in on her laughter.

I’m shocked when she pulls her keys out of her pocket and unlocks the front door before walking right in. I’m standing in the door, and she doesn’t even realize I’m not following her.

When she turns to talk to me, she looks confused when I’m not right behind her but am framed in the door with my arms crossed. She looks sheepish as she tucks a stray hair behind her ear.

“Um, so Kat may have given me a key to come visit Gram when she was at college a few years ago. It was also more convenient if I came over late and didn’t want to wake her up by knocking. I just never thought to give it back.”

I let out a breath and try to temper my annoyance. Of course she would have a key so she could help check on Gram when my selfish ass was hours away and too busy to be bothered. It’s just another reason why Emerson is way too good for me.

“It’s fine, Em. I’m glad you were able to check on Gram and be here for her while we were gone. I’m sure she loved having one-on-one time with you.”

A sad smile crosses her face before she catches herself and pastes on her bubbly persona. “I think she did. But I benefited just as much if not more from being able to come and go as I

pleased and spend time with her. Especially after Spencer moved out. I can bake pretty much anything, but I'm not the best at cooking actual meals. And neither is my dad unless he can throw it on the grill."

I smile because I remember hearing stories of Clint's failed attempts at making edible meals for Emerson once her sister moved out. She would tease the heck out of him in front of his customers at the shop after he'd try to make the two of them dinner. But I think that was all part of her master plan. Those women couldn't help but feel sorry for the single dad and blue-eyed girl trailing behind him. On more than one occasion, those women would show up the next day with a ready-made meal for the two of them. Emerson ate it up while Clint would bashfully thank them.

"So, anyways, what are we working on today?" She claps her hands in front of her as she bounces on her toes again. Maybe she can use all of that excess energy, and we can knock out the bathrooms quicker than I planned.

"Um, I need to strip the wallpaper, take up the old broken tile floor, and also see if the whole tub needs to be replaced or just re-caulked."

"That doesn't sound awful. I can work on either the tile or the wallpaper. I know both are tedious."

"How about I do the wallpaper? I can reach it without a ladder." She pouts back at me, but I can't help but tease her. "You can handle the tile and then let me know if we need anything to patch the floor since you're the master tilelayer."

“Sounds good to me.” She turns to head towards the stairs, but I know I need to say something about what happened the other night while we are still in this weird truce.

“Hey, Sunshine.” She slowly turns back to me. I take a deep breath before diving in. “As hot as what happened the other night at the shop was, I don’t know if it’s the best idea to cross that line again. We’re playing with fire, and I don’t know about you, but I can’t afford to get burned. I don’t think you can either, and now that I’m staying here and working with you, I don’t want to make things hard on us or between you and Kat.”

She stares at me as she thinks over what I just said. I’m dying to see how she’ll react, but I’m doing everything I can to not provoke her right now. I need her to see that I’m serious about this. I have too much to lose when I inevitably fuck this up.

“I understand where you’re coming from, Axle. I really do. But I don’t think I want to stop whatever this is.” She points between us, and I can feel the frown on my face. “Wait, I didn’t mean it like that. Or maybe I did. I don’t really know. All I know is that not a single person can light me up the way you do.”

“I don’t want a relationship right now. I have too much going on in my life to want to dedicate that much time and effort to someone. But I do love orgasms, especially ones as toe-curling as you give me.”

A teasing smile graces her face, and my breathing picks up. This version of Emerson drives me crazy.

“But I do respect what you’re saying. I’ll try not to push you as much to get you to react the way I hope you will, but that’s about the only thing I can promise you at this point. I know the difference between an orgasm and catching feelings. I won’t if that’s what you’re worried about.”

I haven’t realized she’s been moving closer to me until she slides her hands up my chest and links them around my neck. She gives me a quick kiss before stepping back and smiling. My dick is as hard as my pounding heart, and I want nothing more than to pin her against the wall, but before I can do anything else, she takes a step back and darts up the stairs.

“Come on, slowpoke. This bathroom isn’t going to update itself.” I can hear her laughter as she tears down the hall to the master bath, and all I can do is shake my head and hope like hell she meant what she said.

If I have to be the one who tries to keep things strictly platonic, we’re most definitely fucked. And I mean that both figuratively and literally.

Chapter Nine

Emerson

I raced up the stairs away from Axle, needing a minute to process the conversation we just had. Never in my life did I think I'd have a talk like that with Axle or see him so serious. I know I probably should've agreed with him wholeheartedly that having any kind of sexual relationship with him would be a bad idea, but I also knew that there was no way I could stop myself from crossing that line.

If anyone would've asked me a few months ago if I would ever give Axle the chance to touch me again, I would've laughed in their face. Thank God I have a healthy dose of self-confidence because being told having sex with me was a mistake really fucking hurt. I had to fight off so much self-doubt, but eventually, I was able to move on.

I also felt relief, which was a little weird. Axle taking the time to talk rationally about what was going on between us was kind of a big deal. Whether he realized it or not, he showed how much he cared about me and our relationship, but

also about the relationship I have with Kat. Up until now, I didn't actually know that he cared.

All I knew was that we loved to push each other's buttons. Sparring with him lit me up and frustrated me to no end, but I started to realize a lot of our sparring was him challenging me. Taking a step back and looking at what most of our arguments were about, I realized he would push me to see how I would react and made me think about a situation in a different light.

I did mean what I said about not teasing him. Obviously, I'm attracted to Axle and the idea of him bending me over a workbench is hot as hell, but he is right about us being stuck together for the foreseeable future. Getting a rise out of him just so I can get off when he specifically asked me not to would definitely be a dick move. Hopefully, I can temper my need for him without pushing him away.

I make it to the bathroom and am bent down looking at the toolbox to see what I have to work with when I can feel his eyes on me. I turn my head over my shoulder and see Axle standing in the door, each hand braced on the frame as his eyes stare at my ass. It takes everything in me not to pop it out and slowly rise to my feet, making sure he can't look away even if he wants to.

Instead, I turn back to the toolbox and grab out a pry bar and a hammer. I waddle over to the corner, still crouched down, and smile when I hear Axle laughing behind me. I'm sure I look absolutely ridiculous, which was exactly my goal by doing that. It's my way of trying to show him that I will not

deliberately do something overtly sexy when I absolutely could, but instead act like a fool to hear that gravely laugh of his.

I snag my phone out of my back pocket and turn on some music. I need something to distract me from the sexy-as-hell man behind me, who is painstakingly peeling wallpaper off the walls.

I drop the pry bar and whip my head around when I hear Axle singing along to a Jordan Davis song. How the hell did I not know the man can sing? His voice is smooth but smoking, and it sets my lady bits aflame the longer he sings.

When he realizes I'm not working anymore and turns around to see what I'm doing, I fan my face dramatically before pointing the hammer at him. He looks at me, confused, as I stare at him wide-eyed.

“Listen, buddy, if I'm not allowed to tease and tempt you, then you absofuckinglutely are not allowed to sing.”

He raises an eyebrow as his arms cross his chest, and he starts to smirk. I'm dumbstruck until he starts singing again as he walks closer to me. I swallow hard, and it takes all of my strength to not drop my tools and launch at him.

He pauses in front of me before taking the tools out of my hands and resting them on the counter behind me. He uses his finger to close my mouth, which snaps me out of my haze. I don't expect him to grab my hands and wrap them around his neck as he starts singing and swaying to the music. I'm completely enchanted. When the song ends, he kisses my

forehead and then places another chaste kiss on my mouth before stepping back. I can see his hard dick straining behind his jeans, and I want nothing more than to reach out and take care of him.

He chuckles as he goes back over to the wall he's working on as if nothing happened. I stammer, trying to formulate a coherent thought as he goes back to peeling the wallpaper.

“Holy shit, Axle!”

He turns around and takes in that I am slumped back against the sink, trying to catch my breath. He chuckles as his eyes light up, taking in my frazzled self.

“Not so fun being on the other end of the teasing, is it?”

“Um, knowing that you don't intend to follow through after you got me all hot and bothered? No, it's not.” He laughs again before I start to get annoyed with him. “Hey, Axhole.” I put my hands on my hips and glare at him. “At least when I was teasing you, I had every intent and purpose to let you ravage me after. Hell, that was the goal. I *wanted* you to cross that line whereas you're just being mean.”

He sobers a minute before crossing the small space to come back and stand in front of me. I glare up at him and wait to see what he is going to do next.

“You're right, Sunshine. That was a dick move. It's just ... You always have me spinning out, and when I saw the chance to flip the script and do it to you, I couldn't resist. I'm sorry, and I will be on my best behavior going forward.”

He tilts my chin before placing another kiss on my forehead and then my lips.

Does the man not realize all of the mixed signals he is sending my way?

I'm still pouting, so he picks me up in a bear hug and starts tickling. I am sooo ticklish, and he knows it. Within seconds, we are both laughing our asses off.

He slowly lowers me back to the floor before looking me straight in the eyes. "I really am sorry. That was absolutely a dick move after just asking you not to do the same thing to me. I'll be on my best behavior going forward."

And much to my dismay, he is. We get a lot of work done that afternoon, and we actually have a lot of fun. When I'm not purposely pushing his buttons and he isn't using all the walls he built up over the years to keep me at bay, we actually get along really well.

We still have a ton of work to do to get the bathroom fit for a queen, but I know now we'll be able to do it, and we both might actually have a lot of fun together throughout the process.



The next few weeks go by faster than expected. I have one of my favorite biker guys bring in one of his bikes, wanting me to trick it out for him. I'm pumped to work on it, but the shop's

schedule is full, so I end up working on it after everyone leaves for the night. Add in the weekends I spend with Axle working on the bathroom remodels, and I'm fucking exhausted every night when I fall into bed.

One of the good things about our little chat is that things are actually pretty good between Axle and me. Of course, we still bicker and fight with each other, but we also have *fun* with each other, which isn't really something we did in the past. Not only do we work on his house, but we also take our bikes out a few times and grab food with the guys from the shop at The Tavern.

Of course, the attraction is still there, but neither of us have crossed the line yet.

Before I know it, it's October, and I told Maverick I'd help run his booth with my sister at the festival. It's the week of the festival, and the shop is even busier than normal since we shut down that Friday to enjoy all of the festivities. It's a tradition my dad started years ago since my mother loved going and taking me and my sisters. It only felt right to keep that tradition alive even after she passed.

It's the Thursday before the festival, and I can't wait to go home and relax before a busy weekend. I should probably stay late and work on the bike, but I just don't have the energy in me. All of the guys have already left for the day, minus Axle, but there is one customer who needs to come and get their car, so I'm still stuck here. I tried calling to see if we could put the

keys in the lock box and send the code to get in so I could leave, but the guy never answered.

It's almost 5:00 when the douchebag doctor comes strutting in the front door. I roll my eyes at him and make a mental note to tell the guys that if he ever calls back, we're booked and can't fit him in. I don't have enough energy or patience to deal with his self-important, pretentious ass.

"Well, if it isn't my lucky day. How are you doing, beautiful?"

I cringe as he eyes me from my head to my toes. I'm covered in grease and grab, my hair's a mess, and I know I have anything but a smile on my face as he creeps me the hell out, leering at me.

"I'd be a lot better if I were at home. The shop closed almost a half an hour ago." I cross my arms and glare at him.

He just smirks. "Sorry, babe. But I can't rush perfection when I have someone on my operating table."

"Um, is that supposed to impress me? Your total is \$105. Will you be paying with cash or card?"

He clenches his jaw as he pulls out his wallet. "Open heart surgery is hard as hell and extremely impressive, but I know now that would probably be hard for you to comprehend."

Even though I have my hand held out, he tosses his card beside me on the counter. I grab it and jam it into the machine. The faster this is done, the faster I can get him the hell out of my shop. The receipt prints, and I hand him back his card.

“Thanks, doll.”

I roll my eyes as I paste on a fake smile but don't say anything. He must take the hint because he turns to the door and starts heading that direction. I come out around the front counter to follow him and lock the door on his way out.

Before I realize it, he turns and pins me against the wall. “I think we got off on the wrong foot.” He brushes a loose strand of hair out of my face, and I flinch away. “How about you let me take you out for dinner so that I can make it up to you?”

“In what world do you think I want to spend any time with you? Get the fuck off me, asshole.”

Anger flares in his eyes as he clenches his jaw. “You're lucky I even gave you a second glance, especially with that mouth. Maybe I should fuck that sass right out of you.” His hand trails up my leg, and I squirm to get out of his grasp.

Just when I start feeling desperate, I hear the door from the shop bang open.

A furious Axle comes storming in the front office. “Get your fucking hands off her.”

Momentarily distracted, the dickhead steps back, and I seize the opportunity. I draw my knee up hard and fast, and crush it into his balls. He doubles over, hollowing in pain, but hasn't really moved out of my personal space.

“You bitch!”

Before he can do anything else or Axle gets any closer, I haul back and punch him right in his smarmy face. I shake out

my hand before I push his shoulder. He falls over backwards, one hand grabbing his junk and the other trying to stem the blood coming out of his nose, and that's when it hits me.

Thankfully, Axle is right there to grab my arm and steer me away from the blood and the bag of dicks laying on the floor. He takes me around the counter and sets me in the seat, turning it so it's facing the opposite wall.

"You crazy fucking bitch. You broke my nose! I'm calling the cops."

I hear Axle growl behind me, but I'm too light-headed from seeing the blood to risk turning around and looking.

"Maybe you'll remember that the next time you touch a woman without her permission. And as for the cops, go ahead and call. I'm sure they'll love seeing the camera footage of you trying to take advantage of a woman that's half your size."

"Camera?" I hear the fear in his voice, and I am so relieved that one of the first improvements I did out front was hide a camera near the fake tree in the corner.

"Yep, it's right over there. Why don't you wave and say hi. That will make the police officers' jobs a little easier."

"Um, I think I'm just going to go."

"Yeah, that's probably the only good idea you've had since you stepped in. Don't even think about talking bad about her or the shop, either. If you do, I promise you will regret it."

He groans as he gets on his feet, and I hear shuffling. I take a glance over my shoulder and see Axle has the good doctor by

the scruff of his neck, dragging him towards the door. He slams it open and throws the asshole out of it before slamming it shut again and locking it.

It only takes him a minute to get back across the room and pull me into his arms. I bury my face in his chest and let out the first full breath in what seems like forever. He's talking to me sweetly as his hands run up and down my back.

Finally feeling semi-normal, I pull my head back to look at him. His hands grasp the side of my face as he stares into my eyes, trying to make sure I'm okay. The anguished look on his face breaks the little bit of strength I have left, and tears start rolling down my face.

"Baby, please don't cry." He croons as he wipes the tears away. I close my eyes and let out a slow, steady breath. "You're okay, Sunshine. I've got you."

"Thank you, Axle. I'm okay, I swear." I square my shoulders and straighten my spine.

I won't let that little weasel-dick make me cower in fear. I handled him just fine, and I know that even if that weren't the case, he was terrified of Axle.

I give him a shy smile and see the stress leave his face.

"Fucking right, you're okay. You kicked that fuckhead's ass. That was a pretty impressive right hook."

"Yeah, I was lucky to have a best friend with an older brother, who was tough as nails insisting we both know how to throw a proper punch."

That pulls a laugh out of him, and I relax even more. He steps close again before squeezing me to him. He leans down and kisses the top of my head, giving me one last squeeze before stepping back.

“Come on. It’s been a long day. Let’s get out of here.”

“Sounds good to me. I need a shower to get all of the yuck from that asshole off me.”

“Are you sure you’re good? Do you want me to follow you home?”

“I’m fine, Axle. I’m going to go shower, get some food, and curl up with one of my smutty romance books. I think I’m feeling a ‘best friend’s older brother’ one will be best tonight.” I give him my innocent face as I bat my eyes at him.

He laughs as he guides me back through the shop and out the side door.

“Have a good long weekend, Axle. Let me know if you need any help at the house.”

“I will. Have fun with your book boyfriend.”

I’m shocked that he knows what that is, but I guess I shouldn’t be surprised since Kat reads romance too. Before I can say anything else, he kicks his bike to life and tears off down the road. It won’t be long before we need to store them away for the winter.

I make it home and do exactly what I told Axle I was going to do. I need to unwind and relax as much as I can since I know tomorrow will be crazy at the festival. I’m so glad

Maverick and Spencer got together, even if it all started out as fake dating. They're so good for each other, and I love having another "big brother" around.

I meet Spencer at the festival the next day, and like I expected, Maverick's booth is crazy busy the whole time I'm there. I don't mind helping out, but I'm glad when I'm able to head out for the day.

Regretting not working on the bike last night, I decide to head into the shop since I have it all to myself and will be able to get a good chunk done.

I pulled the bike to the middle bay with the best lighting and closest to the speakers for the stereo. I love listening to music as I work. It distracts my stray thoughts and lets my hands focus on what they need to do.

I've just finished putting the tape on the bike for the design I'm going to do using the air brush when I sense someone staring at me. I look up and see a pissed-off Axle standing right inside the door. I frown because I have no idea what I did to piss him off this time.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

I raise a brow at his question, but he's not backing down. I stand and walk closer to him, stopping in front of the jacked-up truck that belongs to one of my mechanics. He's been fixing it up on the weekends.

"Working in my shop like I do all the fucking time. What's got your panties in a twist?"

He stalks towards me, and I feel a tingle run up and down my spine. “Hmm, I don’t know. Maybe the fact that some dickhead attacked you in here yesterday and who knows what would’ve happened if I hadn’t been here.” I go to talk but he keeps on going, full steam ahead, as he stalks closer to me. “Or maybe the fact that you’re in here, late at night with the doors unlocked and the music loud enough that you didn’t notice me standing there for the past ten minutes!” He’s yelling at me now, and it’s starting to piss me off.

I understand where he’s coming from. I absolutely should be more careful if I’m in here by myself, but I don’t need him coming in and yelling at me like a child.

“Oh, fuck you, Axhole. Sure, yesterday wasn’t ideal, but as you saw, I can handle myself. And not locking the door was a mistake for sure, but I usually do. I was just so excited to work on the bike. Not that I need to explain myself to you.” My voice raised as I took a few steps towards him until we were toe to toe, my anger punctuated by sharp jabs of my finger into his chest.

“Fuck!”

I’m startled at his expletive until I look into his eyes and see the panic there. I don’t want to, but I soften a little.

“Don’t you understand what it would fucking do to me if something happened to you?” His voice is pained as he grits the words out.

I don’t even think. I launch myself at him, wrapping my legs around his waist and slamming my mouth over his as I

desperately kiss him and grind on his hard cock.

Axle lays me on the hood of the truck and kisses his way down my chest. He makes quick work of getting my cut-offs and lace thong off before he dives in like a starved man. He licks and nips my clit as his thick fingers thrust into me. It only takes a minute before I come undone on his talented fingers and tongue.

He pulls me off the truck and has to help keep me upright since my legs are like jello. I go to reach for him to pull him down to kiss me, but he spins me around and puts my hands straight out in front of me on the truck. He bends me over and leans his front to my back. I feel his teeth graze my ear, and I can't help the shiver that wracks my body.

“Keep your hands here, baby. You move them, and I will stop. Do you understand?”

Too wound up to answer, I just nod my head. The next thing I know, I feel a slap across my ass. I gasp as I arch my back, relishing the sting from his palm.

“I asked you a question, Sunshine. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Ax.”

“Good. Hold on tight. I need you too much to be gentle.”

Before I can even respond, I feel him split me open. I'm so full, and he's hitting me so deep at this angle. Hell, I haven't even really come down from my first orgasm, and before I realize it, my second is tearing through me. I scream out my

release and arch my back, begging for more. I feel Axle reach his hand around and rub my clit, and I can't help but whimper.

“Give me one more, Sunshine.”

“I ... I don't think I can, Axle,” I gasp out, barely able to catch my breath from my most recent release.

“You can and you will.”

He grasps both of my hips as he sets an unrelenting pace. I wouldn't be surprised if I had bruises tomorrow, and that thought alone is enough to make my orgasm crash through me for a third time. I collapse against the truck as Axle holds me up and thrusts a few more times, spilling inside of me.

He pulls out, keeping one hand on my hip to keep me upright. My eyes are heavy, and all I want to do is sleep. I hear him say something, but my brain is too blissed out to comprehend what he's saying. I can feel his laugh rumble through his chest that's pressed against my back again.

Still laying sprawled out on the truck, he glides my cutoffs back on before he scoops me up in his arms.

I can't fight sleep any longer. The last few days have been exhausting, and I pass out in Axle's arms before we even make it out of the shop.

Chapter Ten

Axle

Emerson doesn't even make a peep as I carry her out of the garage and lock it up. I make my way over to my truck and tuck her into the passenger seat. She tries nuzzling back into me, and I can't help but laugh. She's like a koala bear.

I go to the festival with Torin to check it out since I haven't been in years. It's a lot bigger than I remember. It probably helps that Maverick has a booth set up, where he is selling his beer. The crowd surrounding it makes up at least half of the people attending the festival.

I was on my way home when I decided to swing past the garage. I know Emerson will pull late nights sometimes, but after that dickhead touched her yesterday, I didn't love the idea of her being there late at night by herself.

Not to my surprise, when I got close to the shop, I could see the lights on. I pulled in and parked by one of the bay doors before heading to the man door that leads straight into the bays. I was pissed when I twisted the handle and it opened.

I walked in and closed the door without her noticing. That didn't really surprise me since she had the music blaring and was completely focused on the bike she was working on. I was standing there for what felt like forever before she noticed that I was there.

I was fucking fuming by the time she noticed me. How could she be so fucking reckless? Doesn't she realize how vulnerable she is here by herself, especially when she doesn't lock the fucking door?

Just thinking about it now has my anger flaring. I take a deep breath before placing a kiss on her head and shutting the door. I didn't even think to look for a purse or her keys before loading her into my truck, so I turn my truck towards my house.

I turn onto my road and pull the truck into the driveway. The entire way here, Emerson hasn't made a sound. I forgot how a bomb could probably go off in her room and she'd sleep through it. Kat always had to fight to wake her up when she spent the night.

I make it to the passenger side door and have to crack it open before shoving one hand in to catch her head that's resting on the window. Even though she's buckled in, I don't want her to fall out and wake up flailing. I cradle her head as I reach across her and unbuckle the seat belt. I untangle it from her body before wrapping her arms around my neck and scooping her out of the truck. I can't help but laugh as she wraps her legs around me, clinging to me like a koala bear.

I make it up the front steps and manage to get the door open and closed without disturbing Emerson. I head over to the couch to lay her down, but she burrows into my neck and holds on tighter when I try to lay her on the couch. I chuckle under my breath as I readjust her in my arms. It's not that late, but I'm just as tired as Emerson, so I head upstairs to my room.

I debate taking her to Kat's old room, but it's been my dumping ground for all of my tools and supplies for the renovations I've been doing. The bed is clear, but I don't want her to wake up confused in the middle of the night and hurt herself by tripping over all the clutter in that room.

I kick my door open and make my way over to my bed. I don't know how anyone sleeps this deeply, but I'm a little fucking jealous. Sleep has never been my friend, and it's only gotten worse the older I get. I can basically count on it sucking tonight since it will be sofa city for me. I don't want her waking up swinging when she finds me sleeping next to her.

I try and lay her down on the bed, but she's still glued to me like we're permanently stuck together. Sighing, I sit on the end of the bed. I pull my leg up so I can get my boots undone, which makes Emerson squirm. It takes everything in me to will my dick to stay down as she shifts over me, grinding her warm heat on my dick.

I get my boots off and scoot back on the bed, thinking if I lay down with her for a bit that maybe she'll untangle herself and I can head to the couch. She still has her boots on, but

thankfully, they aren't tied as I reach behind me and pull them off, throwing them on the floor beside my bed.

I settle myself up against the headboard and run my hands up and down her back. Now that I've got her in my arms, I can't fight how fucking good it feels. I have never really been one to snuggle, but having Emerson laying on my chest, I feel my eyes growing heavy and I start to doze off.

When I wake up next, I'm hot as hell, with my legs tangled up in Emerson's as she's sprawled across my chest. I think she's still sleeping until I realize her fingers are tracing slow patterns over my chest. Then I realize my chest is bare as her nail drags over my nipple, and I grunt. I must've ripped it off in the night since this little minx is like sleeping with a heater in my bed. I feel her giggle at my grunt as she squirms on top of me.

Before she can move anymore, I grab her hip and squeeze her to me. My morning wood is in epic proportions today because of her gorgeous, hardly clothed body draped over top of me. Her cut-offs barely cover her ass, and it takes everything in me not to slide my hand off her hip and grab a full handful of her. Her leg is still thrown over mine, and before I know it, she's flexing her hips, rubbing her hot cunt over my throbbing cock. I groan, and she giggles as she fights against my hold to grind down on me again.

"Emerson," I grind out, and she finally stops.

I wait to see what she will do next. She knocks the breath out of me when she props her elbows on my chest and looks in my

eyes. The lust and need I see there are impossible to ignore as she leans closer, eyes on my lips. I run my tongue over my bottom lip, causing a shiver to run through her.

She pauses, lips hovering over mine, before she looks up at me with hooded eyes and crushes my resolve with two little words. "Please, Axle."

It's like the dam broke as I slam my mouth over hers, teeth clashing as my tongue takes what it wants, thrusting into her warm, sweet mouth.

I grab her thigh and pull her fully on top of me, with her hips straddling mine. I ravish her mouth as I roll my hips up to meet her soft thrusts. Even though I have jeans on and she's wearing cut-offs, her hot heat cradles my dick, and I can't help the growl that tears from my chest. She pulls back, gasping for air, as she plants her hands on my chests and starts thrusting in earnest.

I flip us so I'm now straddling her as I watch her chest heave up and down. I make quick work of ripping off her shirt and her bra, leaving her gorgeous tits right there for my pleasure. I cup them in my hands before burying my face in the middle of them. I lick and nip my way to one nipple as I tug the other with my fingers. I rock my hips into her as she whimpers above me.

Her thrusts are more frantic as I switch to her other nipple. I have no doubt that if I keep going, she'll come before I even touch her pretty little pussy. I grind down on her as I suck her

nipple, pulling hard on it as I lash it with my tongue. She tenses before mewling out her release.

“God, Sunshine. That was sexy as fuck. But I’m nowhere near done with you. Lift your hips.”

She lifts her hips on shaky legs as I make quick work of ripping off her shorts and underwear. I slide my fingers over her drenched slit and groan as my head drops to her chest.

Not being able to wait another minute, I kiss my way down her body, heading to her still pulsing center. I’m rough as I throw her legs over my shoulders and dive in. She’s delicious as I lick her juices up.

She came so much that it’s running down her legs and ass. I lick and nip until I’ve got most of her cleaned up, all while she writhes under me.

“Axle, I need—”

“I know exactly what you need, Sunshine.” I latch on her throbbing clit.

She lets out a scream, and I barely keep from coming in my jeans. I suck hard as I slam two fingers into her center. She’s so wet that she’s dripping down my hand. I want to make her come one more time before I fuck her sweet little hole, but I don’t know if I can last.

I lash my tongue out over her clit as I curl my fingers in her hot heat, motioning like I’m telling someone to come, and I suppose that’s exactly what I am doing. My dick is so hard that I am grinding it against the bed to try and stave off my release.

I haven't come in my pants since I was a teen, and I sure as fuck have no plans to do it now.

Thank fuck her walls start tightening around my fingers, and I know she's close.

"That's it, Sunshine. Give me another one."

She's thrashing her head as her other hand tugs at my hair, holding me in place as she starts fucking my face. "I don't think I can, Axle."

I pull my lips off her clit and look her in the eyes. "You can and you will. Do it now, Emerson. Come on my fingers and my tongue, so that I can make you strangle my cock next." She starts pulsing harder, and I dive back in. She starts moaning. "Good girl. Come on my fingers."

She comes as soon as I tell her she's a good girl. I keep pumping my fingers in her as I climb to my knees and unbutton my jeans. I don't even have enough patience to take them off before I'm freeing my cock and replacing my fingers with it on a hard, deep thrust.

Emerson screams as her orgasm pulses and drags out her pleasure. I moan as she tries milking my dick, but I'm not ready to let go yet. I get up on my knees and lift her by her hips. I'm pounding into her as she wraps her legs around my waist, using them to rise up and meet my thrusts. Her chest is flushed, and she's breathing heavily as I slam into her at an unrelenting pace. She's so vocal, and I fucking love it.

I reach down with one hand and thrum her clit. She tries swatting my hand away, and I just smirk, moving it over her faster. She's still fluttering around me, and it won't be long before I can no longer hold off my release. I want to flip her over and rail into her from behind, but I do not want to miss a minute of her falling apart on my cock.

Her moans get louder as she thrashes back and forth more. I need her to come, right fucking now, so I pinch her clit in my fingers and tug. She goes off like a cannon, screaming my name as her orgasm racks her body, squirting all over my cock and bed. My orgasm rips through me as her perfectly tight cunt milks my cock. I come so hard that I can't breathe.

I drop her back down to the bed as I collapse on her. Not wanting to squish her, I grab her and roll to my side, with my cock still buried in her warm heat. The mixture of our cum leaves the blankets below us soaking wet as we lay tangled up in each other and I try to come down from the best fucking release of my life.

I lazily drag my fingers over her bare back, sliding her hair to the side as she snuggles into me. I kiss her forehead as she lets out a content sigh.

“That was absofuckinglutely the best orgasm of my life, but I think I'm even more addicted to your forehead kisses.”

I pause my fingers on her back, taking in what she just said. I've been kissing her forehead for years, but I never thought it meant anything to her. At least, not the way it did to me. I look

down and see a smile on her face, and I can't fight mine even if I wanted to.

I lean down and kiss her nose before claiming her mouth. I've never been affectionate, especially after sex, but there's no surprise that I'm different with Emerson. Sex has always been about a release, but sex with my sunshine is so much more than that. It's why I told her I didn't think it was a good idea.

Needing to stop these thoughts from running wild, I do what Emerson and I do best. I tickle her side before teasing her. "So, was that a 'good girl' kink I just stumbled on?"

She laughs, trying to stop my tickle assault before rolling over on her side with her head propped up on her elbow. "Honestly, you're the first one who's said that to me. Well, maybe not the first to say it, but the first to get that reaction out of me. It was hot as fuck, Ax. I'm probably only admitting this because of the post-orgasmic high, but you could probably say 'good girl' any time you wanted and have me on my knees in an instant."

Her words have my dick twitching as if he's gearing up for a round two as I groan and drag my hands down my face.

"Also, that's the first time I've ever squirted. Sorry for soaking your bed, but I kind of fucking loved it. Do you think you could do it to me again?" Her eyes are filled with mischief as she smiles down at me.

"Fuck, Sunshine. You're going to be the death of me." I slap her ass, making her yelp as I laugh.

She joins in before she climbs on my lap and leans down to nip my lip. I squeeze her hips because I need another minute before I can handle her wild ass.

I swat it again before growling out, “Be a good girl. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were trying to be my dirty little slut.”

Her eyes go wide, and I shit you not, I feel her leak all over my cock at my degrading words. I meant it as a joke, but feeling how she responded has my cock ready to go again. I love sex, but especially on the rougher, dirtier side. Knowing it turns her on just as much is just another strike against my self-control. She grinds down on me, and I growl as I lift her off of me.

I pin her to the bed before I kiss her. “Death. Of. Me.”

She giggles as she squirms, but I can’t spend the whole day in this bed, no matter how much I want to. I grab her hand and drag her out of the bed and head to the bathroom.

“Come on. Let’s get cleaned up, and then we can go grab some breakfast. Do you have any plans this weekend?”

“That depends. Did you want to spend time with me, Axle?” She’s teasing me as I turn on the water.

I turn around and glare at her because the answer is obviously yes, but there’s no way I’m saying that.

Sensing she’s not going to get an answer out of me, she starts pouting, and I shake my head at her.

“I don’t have any concrete plans. I need to keep working on that bike, and I’d like to get out into the woods. I love this time of year. It’s my favorite time to hike.”

We step into the shower, and I guide her under the water. She moans as I run my fingers through her hair. I turn her around so her front is in the water and I can lather her hair in shampoo. She all but melts back into me as I take my time washing her hair and move to the rest of her body.

“Hmm, I haven’t really had a chance to get out and hike any of my old trails since I’ve been home. Would you mind if I tag along?” I pepper kisses down her neck as my hands massage her breasts.

“Mmm, I don’t think I’d mind having you tag along, but it will cost ya.”

“Oh yeah? Name your price.”

“Oooh, brave one aren’t you?” She turns and lifts her arms around my chest as she plays with the hair at the back of my neck. “I want you to come help me at the shop with the bike for a little bit.” She smiles as I raise my eyes. That’s honestly the last thing I thought she’d ask for. I go to respond before she puts her fingers over my lips to silence me. “I also want you to make me squirt again. We’ll only call it even once you do that, no matter how many attempts it takes.”

I huff out a laugh at the smug look on her face.

“Fine, Sunshine. I think I can handle those terms.”

Her eyes go wide as she stares up at me. She obviously did not expect me to give in so quickly. What she doesn't realize is that there's no way I can fight off her advances at this point. I'm fucking done for and along for this crazy ride with her as long as she wants me.

Not wanting to let her dig into how I'm feeling, I dip down and kiss her. She runs her hand down my stomach towards my dick before I snag it to stop her. I glare down at her as she smirks back at me.

“Not now, Sunshine. Be a good girl and finish up your shower so I can go feed you.”

She moans and drops her head to my chest as I chuckle before looking up at me and glaring. “That was fucking mean, Axhole.”

“Maybe, but I know how mean you are when you're 'hangry'.”

I swat her ass as I move her out of the way so that I can stand under the water. I tilt my head back and close my eyes.

I yell as I feel her warm heat latch to my throbbing dick. “Fuck, Sunshine.”

I thread my hands in her hair as she pulls off my cock.

She stares up at me, lust filling her eyes before her sweet lips open. “Please let me, Axle.”

There's no way I can deny her. I slide my dick back in her mouth as I thrust and hit the back of her throat. She gags as

tears roll down her cheeks, and it's as if a beast is unleashed. I hold her head and guide it as I fuck her face.

“I'm so close. You're going to swallow every drop.”

I see her hand moving in between her thighs as she sucks me into the back of her throat. She hums, and I'm coming in a few more thrusts. She gags, and a little dribbles out of the corner of her mouth. I use my thumb to wipe it up and shove it in for her to suck it off, all the while her hand is still circling her clit.

“That's my good fucking girl. You're such a little slut for my cock, aren't you?”

She lets out a cry as she comes sagging to the floor. I scoop her up and rinse her off. I thrust my tongue into her mouth and kiss her as we both come down.

“Come on, Sunshine. Let's go get some food.”

We get out of the shower and head to my room. I'm pulling on clothes as I turn and see her shimmying her cut-offs on without any panties. Ugh, I did not need to know she's bare.

We finish getting dressed before I tug her outside. I wish she had some jeans on so we could take my bike, but my truck will have to do. We climb in and head towards a diner, and I try to think of the last time I felt this content, but I'm coming up short.

Chapter Eleven

Emerson

I never thought I'd be waking up in Axle's arms, but that's exactly where I found myself Saturday morning after our fight at the garage, and every Saturday since then. I wasn't surprised that I passed out on Axle after the hot-as-hell sex we had at the shop, but I was shocked when I woke up the next day at his house.

I remember waking up, feeling completely sated and comfortable as hell snuggled up against a hot body. It took me a minute to remember what happened the night before, and while my brain woke up and pieced together that Axle must have brought me home, I enjoyed the peace between us as we laid there. He was so peaceful and relaxed in his sleep that I just stared at him as I slid my fingers over his bare chest. There haven't been very many times in my life when I could remember Axle looking as content as he did in that moment.

I knew I told him I wouldn't purposely tempt him—well, at least try not to—but I couldn't help myself that morning, and I'm so fucking glad I didn't stop. The sex we had that morning

was hands down the best sex of my life, but even better than that, it broke us out of our normal push-and-pull relationship.

Sure, we still fight and pick at each other, but we also have been having a shit ton of fun together. I knew I was pushing my luck in the shower, but I had never felt so cared for as I did in his arms as he took his time to clean my body and wash my hair. It only took me a minute to decide to drop to my knees and swallow his gorgeous cock.

I was shocked at how my body reacted to his dirty words, but even more so to his praise. I've been with guys who've tried to talk to me the way Axle does, but it has always been more of a turn-off rather than a turn-on. I loved being his good girl and his dirty little slut. His words got me just as hot as his touch or any look he gave me.

After Axle tore us out of the house, we went to a diner and had a delicious breakfast. We headed to my place to change since the weather took a dramatic turn before we headed out to one of my favorite trails to hike. The day was chilly, but it was also gorgeous.

We finished it off by grabbing some grub from The Tavern and heading to the garage to work on my customer's bike together. It was sexy as fuck watching Axle work with his hands, and it didn't take long before he was working me over instead of the bike.

The next few weeks went pretty much the same. We'd spend our days in the garage and some of our evenings and weekends together. Sure, we had nights where we went our separate

ways, but I was insatiable when it came to Axle, and thankfully, he seemed to be the same way.

I ended up spending a lot of time at his place, seeing as his magical dick basically put me in a coma on the nights I let him come out to play. But my favorite nights were the ones when we didn't fall straight into bed. The weather was getting cooler as the days went, so we took the few good days to take our bikes out while we had the chance. We also did a few more hikes and spent a lot of time working on the house. It's going to be gorgeous and perfect for Kat once it's done.

It's Thursday night, and it has been a while since I went out with the guys, so I decided to hit up The Tavern with them. Axle said he was going to go visit his Gram, but he might meet up with us later.

We've done a pretty good job keeping what's going on between us under wraps. We aren't dating, just enjoying a friends-with-benefits situation, so there's no use in telling the people that are close to us and make them worry. Or even worse, in my dad's case, have him planning a wedding for us. Ever since Chayse and Spencer have found great guys, he's been hinting at when I thought I'd snag me a man that I felt like holding on to.

There's no way I would ever tell him what's going on with Axle. He's always had a special relationship with him and thought of him as a son. If he got wind that we are getting along and spending time together, neither of us would hear the end of it.

I lock up the shop before heading home to get a quick shower and change into something more appropriate for a night out. Not that I'm looking to score, but it's nice to wear something other than the clothes I wear most of the time at the shop.

I pull into The Tavern and I'm not surprised that it's busy. It's a Thursday night and one of the only restaurants in Sparrow Falls, but the food is also fucking delicious. I texted Kat before I left the house, but unfortunately she has to work tonight so she can't be my wingman when I decide to get a little wild.

I head in and search the bar for the guys. I see them sitting at a table that's close to the stage and wave. Jasper lifts a pitcher and extra glass to let me know he has me covered. I notice Maverick, so I wave at Jasper to acknowledge him before heading over to the bar to see my sister's boyfriend.

Well, I suppose right now he's not her boyfriend, but I know we're about to change that soon. He was a bonehead but thankfully came to his senses and is working on winning Spencer back. There's no doubt in my mind that he won't be successful. Those two are too perfect together to be apart. I'm just glad he realized it and he's including Chayse and me in his grand gesture tomorrow at her school during the Halloween trunk-or-treat.

“Hey, Mav. How are you doing?”

He sees me and gives me one of the first genuine smiles I've seen since walking in here. He's great at putting on a front, but

he can't pull that shit with me.

“Hey Half-Pint. I'm hanging in there. I'll be doing a fuck ton better after we get everything done and I win my girl back.” He looks stressed out now that he brought it up, and I feel bad.

“Don't sweat it, Mav. There's no doubt in my mind that Spencer won't take you back. Everything will be back to the way it should be come tomorrow.”

“I hope you're right. So, what's your poison tonight?”

“Hmmm... The guys have a few pitchers of beer over there, but let's do a shot. I think you could use one about as much as I can.”

He nods his head and grabs a bottle of tequila, limes, and salt before pouring two shots for us. “What's eating you?”

We shoot our shots, him wincing and me laughing at his reaction.

“Nothing. I've just been busy as fuck and am looking to unwind tonight. I took the day off tomorrow and am leaving Axle in charge so I can get some shit done and then be ready for the trunk-or-treat.” I nod to the tequila, and he pours me another shot. I shoot it and feel the warmth of the tequila spreading through me.

“Well, I'm glad you're letting loose here. Then I can keep an eye on you and make sure you get home okay. Unfortunately, it's too fucking cold and the leaves are too slippery so the bike has been stored for the winter.”

I pout back at Maverick before responding. “Mine is too. I *love* fall, but I really hate having to put my bike away for half the year.”

“I feel ya.”

“Well, I should let you get back to your customers and go head over to the guys.”

“Alright, let me know if you need anything.”

“I will.” I lean over and plant an obnoxious kiss on his cheek as he just laughs and shakes his head at me. He likes to act like he’s irritated with me, but I know he loves my crazy ass.

I make my way over to the guys, and Jasper pulls out a seat for me. I’m pleasantly surprised to see Torin is sitting in the other seat beside my empty chair.

“Hey! How are you?” I throw my arms around him as I plop down in the seat beside him. I hate that Torin and Kat aren’t still together, but I love that he kept his friendship with me. It sucked watching them both suffer, and I really fucking wish one of them would be brave enough to reach out, but I’m glad I still have both of them in my life.

“Hey, squirt. Jasper told me you guys were coming out, and it’s been forever since I’ve hung out with everyone so it was a no-brainer. Plus, it’s wing night, and you know nobody beats Maverick’s wings and homemade ranch.”

I moan exaggeratedly because Maverick’s homemade ranch is like crack to me. “Oh, fuck. I didn’t even think about that when I told the guys I would come tonight. Looks like I’m

about to gorge myself not only on delicious beer but some kickass food too.”

We all order too much food and beer, and enjoy each other’s company as the night wears on. I tease them about not drinking too much so they aren’t hungover tomorrow at work.

“Eh, it’s not like you’re going to be there, boss. You won’t know if we all decided to take a two-hour nap instead of a lunch break.”

Before I can reprimand Jasper, a hand smacks the back of his head, and we all turn to see who it is. My stomach flutters as I see Axle grinning down at Jasper.

“She might not be, but I’ll be there and have no problem keeping you dicks in line while the boss lady is out.”

Jasper grumbles, and we all laugh at him.

I have my head tilted back to see Axle when he surprises the hell out of me by bending down and giving me a forehead kiss. Standing back up and winking, he heads around the table to grab an open chair. I’m sitting there with my mouth gaping as Torin laughs beside me before he pushes my chin closed.

“I don’t know that I’ve ever seen you speechless before,” he teases. “Well, I take that back. It used to happen all the time around Axle, but I haven’t seen you react that way to him in years. So, when did you two start fucking?”

I smack him as I shush him. “What the fuck, Torin?”

He just laughs harder at me. “Well, I wasn’t sure you actually were, but you just confirmed it. And I didn’t say it

that loudly. Besides, none of them are even paying attention. I can only tell because he's been my best friend for years, just like you."

I blush because I really didn't plan on telling anyone about me and Axle. I didn't think anyone would think it was a good idea for us to be doing what we are doing. Our lives are too entangled if something were to go wrong. Plus, we never talk about us as a couple, even though that's basically what we are.

"Hey, quit worrying about it. Nobody else is picking up on it. I promise. Besides, I love you two together. Axle is one of the best guys I know, but he will never see himself that way. He will always think he's damaged goods. It's nice knowing that you don't—nor have you ever seen Axle that way. I know you'll treat him right, but you also won't put up with his shit."

"I ... I don't even know what to say to that. We aren't dating, Torin. We're just fucking," I say, but even I am not very convinced of the bullshit I'm spitting out. Needing a break from the mental spiral, I hop up and head to the bar. Maverick is laughing as I shoo a guy out of the way so I can get in. "Shots, barkeep!"

"Barkeep? You okay, Half-Pint?" He's scrutinizing me, and now I have to worry that maybe Torin isn't the only perceptive guy here tonight.

"Fucking fantastic. I just need to get my buzz going. All of your scrumptious food killed the one I was working on earlier."

Maverick laughs as he pours me two shots, the smart man that he is. I shoot them back to back before doing a little shimmy. It won't be long until most of the dinner crowd is gone and the music kicks up. Usually, there's trivia Thursday nights, but with it being so close to Halloween, they nixed it and are starting the partying early.

I go back to the table and hang out with the guys for a little bit. Some of them head to the pool table, and it isn't long before I find Axle next to me. He slings his arm over my shoulder and leans back to talk to Torin as he runs his finger up and down my arm and over my neck. I don't know if he even realizes he's doing it until a shiver runs through me, and I see him smirking out of the corner of my eyes.

Well, two can play that game. I turn my back towards him and lean back on his chest so that I am facing Torin. Axle doesn't miss a beat as he tucks my butt up against his leg as his fingers trace over my collar bone. Deciding two can play that game, I lay my palm on his thigh, dangerously close to his dick.

Torin laughs at the two of us as we do our best to taunt each other. I don't know how Axle is able to carry on a conversation with Torin when all I can focus on is his touch as it dips lower to my neckline and my boobs.

I'm just about to slide my hand farther up his leg to brush his dick when Hozier's *Work Song* comes on. I look at the bar and see Maverick smirking. Is he trying to cock-block me or help a sister out? He knows what this song does to me and how I

literally can't sit still when it comes on. It's like it possesses me, and my body has to move with the beat.

I hop up, about to head to the bar, when I feel a hand on my wrist and Axle behind me. "Don't even think for a minute that I will let you get up on the bar tonight, dancing for everyone in here. If you want to move, you will move with me on the dance floor, pressing that sweet little ass back into me."

I moan and lean back into him as my body sways to the music. I know neither of us is being very subtle right now, but I don't give a fuck.

Axle steps back, smacking my ass before tugging me towards the dance floor. I'm surprised and burst out in laughter when he spins me out before pulling me back into him.

Holy. Fuck. Axle Jenkins can move. I mean, the man is great at sex, but that doesn't mean shit when it comes to dancing, yet Axle has just as much rhythm dancing as he does when he fucks me.

I get lost in him and the music. I get lost to his touch that caresses up my leg, to his fingers that brush my hair away from my neck as his tongue licks a path up before nibbling my ear. I moan as I toss my head back against his chest and give myself over to him and to the song.

Before I know it, one song fades into another as we continue to dance as if we're the only two in the room. I don't even know how many songs we're out on the floor for before Axle whispers in my ear, "Are you ready to go home and be my good girl, Sunshine?"

I shiver and nod because there's no way I can talk without moaning right now.

Axle tugs me towards our table, and I'm surprised to see only Torin left.

"Where are the other guys?"

"Most of them left while you two re-enacted your own version of *Dirty Dancing* out there. If you two are trying to keep the fuckfest under wraps, I'm not sure how good you're doing after tonight. At least when it comes to the guys."

I start nibbling my lip, wondering if I made a mistake by dancing with Axle, but his touch instantly calms me.

"Don't worry about it. None of them will say anything about it."

I smile up at him before Torin chimes in. "Besides, it's not like they haven't seen you succumb some poor sucker to bend to your will before."

Axle growls as his arm tightens around my waist. Both Torin and I laugh at his reaction.

"Fuck off, dick. We're out of here. It was good seeing you, man."

They do a bro hug before Torin rips me out of Axle's arms and gives me a bear hug. As soon as my feet hit the ground, I'm thrown over Axle's shoulder as he heads toward the door. I laugh and smack his ass, and everyone turns and shakes their heads, assuming I'm just up to my normal antics.

Well, everyone except a smirking Maverick standing behind the bar. I can't help but laugh and wave when I see him mouth, *Be careful* as we head out the door. At least, things are never dull when it comes to Axle, and the rest of the night will only prove that, I'm sure.

Chapter Twelve

Axle

The night I took Emerson home from the bar was one of the most fun nights I've had in awhile. I don't know if it's because I spent years pushing people away, especially those in Sparrow Falls, or if it is just because I'm a surly asshole, but I don't usually go out with the guys from the shop. I get along with them fine, but it's been a bit of a struggle letting my guard down and really joining in and becoming part of the team.

Most days when I go into work, I grunt as a way of saying hello and then go straight to work on whatever vehicle is scheduled for me that day. I don't usually eat lunch with them either. I know I have a hard time letting new people in, but I also think it's partly because I miss the guys at my old shop.

Whatever the reason, I don't usually join in, but since the night I went out with them and Emerson and Torin were kind of buffers who helped pull me into the conversations, I've started to loosen up more at work. I've started making an effort to not be a complete asshole when the day starts, and

I've started eating lunch with them, which was one of the best decisions I've made.

Some of the guys are old enough to be my dads, or at least the cool uncles, and their wives spoil the hell out of them with home-cooked meals. Most of the time, at least one of them has enough food to feed all of us, which is a huge improvement from my cold cuts or whatever leftover takeout I can scrounge up.

It's not that I can't cook, I just hate doing it for myself. That's another thing that's changed now that my spunky little boss and I have been spending our time together. Emerson isn't much of a cook, but the girl is a natural with desserts. She was shocked when she learned that I did love to cook and wasn't a bad bet in the kitchen the first night I made us dinner.

I was a little worried about rumors spreading or getting ribbed from the guys for the forehead kiss and getting lost dancing with the boss, but they didn't have much to say. Well, except for Jasper, who decided to run his mouth, but after Emerson put him in a pretty impressive headlock, nothing else was said.

We do well keeping things strictly professional at work. Well, except when we get into an argument on work-related things, but the more time we spend together, the harder that's becoming for me. I've never been carefree or outgoing, and I've always hated PDA, but when Emerson's near me, the desire to touch her is damn near impossible to ignore.

She lights up the room with her bubbly but feisty personality. She genuinely cares about people and always chooses to see the best in them. She's also a giant tease, and it's so apparent how much joy it brings her to make someone laugh and smile. I catch myself fighting a smile more times than not when I'm around her.

One of the good things that came of our night out with the guys was Torin finding out about us. Not that I want to keep it from Kat or Emerson's family, but we aren't really dating, and I do not need another reason to have Clint Wilson be disappointed in me. I've been there and done that enough in my life already. I know he wouldn't be happy to find out that we are just using each other for sex.

But even as I think that, I know it's a lie. Sure, our sex life is hot as fuck. I never could've dreamed of Emerson being into the kinks she is, but it's just one more thing that makes her perfect to me and the ultimate temptation. But lately, I've started craving her smiles and her laughter just as much—if not more than the physical relief she brings me.

It's mid November now, and I finally feel like I'm happy to be back in Sparrow Falls. I know a huge part of that is because of Emerson. It also doesn't hurt that I get to see Kat and Gram more, and that working on the house for Kat makes me feel like I'm making up for abandoning her in the first place.

Kat has the rare weekend off and wants to go visit Gram and help decorate her apartment for the holidays. It will be the first year since we were little kids that Gram won't be making us

Thanksgiving dinner, and we're both struggling with that reality. If decorating her apartment will make Kat feel better, then I'm all for it.

I pull up to her apartment and am not surprised to see her sitting on her front steps, even though it's only a hair above freezing today. She looks like a dork in her big puffer jacket, knee-high furry snow boots, and beanie with a huge pom pom on top bouncing around as she makes her way to my truck. I'm laughing when she opens the door, and she gives me a questioning look.

"You're in a good mood today. What's got you laughing so early this morning?"

"You look like a dork." I laugh as I flick the top of her beanie and the pom pom wobbles back and forth.

She slaps my hand away and tries to look mad, but it's not long before she's laughing along with me. I pull out on the road as she starts to give me shit like normal.

"I may look like a dork, but at least I'm warm. I don't know why it surprises me every year, but I really hate how cold it gets here during winter."

"Me fucking too. I hate having to put my bike away for over half of the year." She rolls her eyes at me since I've been bitching about it since I was a teenager. "So, where do you want to get the decorations from? Oh, and that's for you." I gesture to the cup holder with the piping hot chai latte waiting for her.

She picks it up and inhales before taking a sip and sighing. “Eh, I don’t need much. Let’s just head to the strip mall and see what we can find there.”

“Sounds good.” I smile back at her, but it fades when I glance over and see her staring at me critically.

“What’s that look for?”

“Hmm ... Well, I’m trying to figure out where my brother is because the person who just said ‘sounds good’ to shopping, without grumbling or frowning but with a smile, is definitely not my brother. Are you some weird doppelganger? Oh, or like one of those freaky pod people?”

I scowl and don’t answer her immediately, mulling over what she said. I mean, she’s not wrong that I hate shopping and usually complain about it, but it’s been a while since I’ve hung out with her.

“Cut your shit. I’m not excited in the least bit to go shopping, but since it’s for Gram and I am finally getting to spend some time with my bratty little sister, I don’t really see anything to complain about,” I grump out at her and wait to see what smartass reply she’ll come back with.

I’m surprised when she leans over and pecks my cheek. “Sorry for being a brat. I was just teasing, but I know you’d endure shopping if it makes me happy. Especially if it’s for Gram. And I know I haven’t really been around much. It’s hard being the low man on the totem pole, but I think my shifts are finally starting to become more regular at work. They’ve been scheduling me a lot of nights, but my supervisor

said now that they've hired more nurses, I should be able to get on evenings or even possibly the day shift."

"That's great news, Kat. Maybe you can actually get a social life then, and I won't have to listen to Sunshine bitch about missing her 'bestie'." I know as soon as I finish that sentence that I'm totally fucked.

Kat doesn't know why Emerson quit letting me call her Sunshine all those years ago, but she definitely knows that I haven't used that nickname in a long fucking time. I could probably brush off the comment about her whining since I am her big brother, but it's still a reach.

"So, she's 'Sunshine' again, huh? I thought she forbade you from being allowed to call her that years ago? And why would she be whining to you about us not being able to connect our schedules, hmm?"

I glance her way, but am not ready to answer. Thankfully, we pulled up to the strip mall, so I park my truck and head towards the closest store, making Kat rush behind me. It's too cold to stand around and shoot the shit, but as soon as we're inside the store and warm, she wheels to face me.

"Why are you dodging the question?"

"Because it's not that big of a deal. She still doesn't love that I call her Sunshine, but we have to work with each other five days of the week. We are actively trying not to murder each other. Everyone else calls her Sunshine, so it's hard not to fall back into old habits. And revisiting the part where we work together five days a week, I'm the lucky one who gets to hear

her whine about being the wrong Jenkins that she wants to spend her time with.”

Kat stares at me critically for a minute, but I keep eye contact and try to come off as annoyed instead of feeling a little panicked. It helps that I’m not lying about Em bitching about spending way too much time with the wrong Jenkins and missing her best friend. She was giving me shit about it the other night while she helped me make dinner.

Thankfully, Kat starts laughing as she heads to grab a cart. I stand there and let her get it out of her system before we head into the store and buy way more decorations than Gram’s apartment could ever need. And while the shopping is torture, it’s been nice getting to hang out with Kat. I didn’t tell Emerson that I agree with her about missing Kat. She’d never let me hear the end of it if I had.

After buying what feels like half the store, we head over to Gram’s assisted living center to spend the afternoon with her. We had an appointment with the doctor last week, and although there’s nothing that will improve her quality of life, the medicines and the extra care of being in the facility seem to be doing wonders for her. She still had some decline in her cognitive skills, but nothing near the rate she was declining before we got her moved and her therapy dialed in.

We were both pleasantly surprised when we arrived and found Gram baking in the kitchen. One of the aids was sitting at the counter bar, rolling out sugar cookies while Gram frosted little turkeys, leaves, and something that I think was

supposed to be an acorn. The aid said it was a great exercise for her fine motor skills, and it was also a fun way to spend the afternoon.

She tried to dismiss herself, but Kat insisted she stayed, and I'm glad she did. It was apparent that she cared fondly for Gram, and it helped reaffirm that even though I hated to have to move her to a place like this, she was well cared for and loved.

The afternoon is passing quickly, and I'm reluctant to go. I don't get very many days where I am able to come and see Gram, and it feels like spending time with the woman who loved and raised me. She is slowly slipping away from us, so days like today are complete blessings.

“So, Kat. Please tell me you have Thanksgiving off this year?”

“I have to work, Gram, but at least I don't have to go in until 11:00 p.m. I'm working the night shift, so I figured I'd just come over here and spend time with you since Axle has the kitchen a mess at home.”

“What the hell are you doing to my kitchen, boy?” Gram swats me with a towel, and we all laugh.

“Easy, Gram. I'm just doing some updates. Since the house is paid off and the expenses to live there are so low, I've been sprucing the place up for when Kat moves in.” I've already had this conversation with Gram what feels like a million times, but that's just part of my reality now.

“Oh, well, aren’t you just the sweetest big brother?”

“He sure is, but I’m about to kick his ass if he doesn’t stop spending all his money on that house. At this rate, he’s not going to have any left when it’s finished and it’s time for me to move in. Then, he’ll be stuck in some dingy apartment, resenting me.” Kat pouts, and it’s my turn to swat her.

“Knock that shit off. I’ll be fine. Besides, it’s not like there are really sketchy places in Sparrow Falls. Well, other than the trailer park outside of town, but I make plenty to afford a decent place around here. That’s one thing the Wilsons are good at.”

“They are good people. But you’re going to be missing me if you try and come over here on Thanksgiving.” Kat and I look at each other confused, but before either of us can ask, Gram continues, “Sunshine was here the other day and invited me to go have dinner with them. And before you give me grief, I’m not making it up. It’s right there on my calendar.” She points behind me, and I turn on my chair to look because I really don’t trust that she is correct. But much to my shock, written on her calendar in Emerson’s writing is dinner with the Wilsons on Thanksgiving Day.

“Well isn’t that nice of her to invite you but not me!” Kat acts like she’s put out, and we all laugh.

“I’m sure she’s going to invite you both, dear, so quit getting your panties in a bunch.”

I cringe as Gram and Kat laugh. They both know how much I hate that saying, which is why they use it around me any

chance they get. There are certain things you don't want to think about where your female family members are concerned, and their panties are one of them.

We spend a little bit longer with Gram before Kat starts yawning, even though we haven't even had dinner yet. I can't imagine how much strain she's putting her body through by working the random shifts at work. I'm happy they are finally getting more help and she can hopefully slow down some.

The drive to her house is quiet, but we're both as fucking content as we could be. I treasure the days we get to spend with Gram when they are good, and I know Kat does too.

When I pull up to her apartment, she goes to get out but then pauses to look at me. "Hey, Axle?"

"What's up, Kat?" I can tell she's a little anxious about whatever she's going to say, so I try to give her a reassuring look to let her know she can say anything to me.

"Thank you for coming home. I was drowning, and there's no way I could get through this without you here with me."

I tug her back to me before I wrap her in a hug and kiss the top of her head. "I'm sorry it took me so long to realize where I needed to be. I won't leave you like that ever again, kid."

She sniffs as she squeezes me tighter before hopping out of the truck. But before she goes, she turns back with a smirk on her face. "One more thing ... Do you think you can be nice and not give Emerson too much shit when she invites you to dinner? Promise me you'll go?"

I huff out a laugh and shake my head. “I don’t know about not giving her shit, but I’ll go. I’ve missed too many holidays in the past, but there’s no way I’m missing them now that I’m back. Even if I do have to deal with that little shit all day.”

She laughs before waving and running up to her apartment.

When I get home, I’m pleasantly surprised to see Emerson’s jeep in the driveway. We didn’t have plans for tonight, but I’m not mad that she’s here. I’ve become a little addicted to sleeping with her, and I don’t mean in a sexual way. Well, the sex we have before passing out probably helps with the full night’s sleep, but I also know it’s because I have my little koala wrapped around me most of the night as well.

I open the front door and kick off my boots before heading to the living room, where I freeze in my tracks. Emerson has a fire going and candles lit all around the room. She’s got a nest of pillows and blankets in front of the fire, where she’s curled up with a book. Her hair is in a messy bun on the top of her head while she drowns in a chunky sweater that I realize is mine. Her legs are bare except for some adorable fucking socks that come all the way up over her knee.

She’s so lost in her book that she doesn’t even realize I’m standing there. I’m leaning against the door, soaking her in. She’s adorable as fuck as she scrunches her nose and frowns down at her book, furiously turning the page to continue the story.

I could be standing there for five minutes or five hours, but no matter how long I watch her, the warmth that spreads

through me at seeing her so comfortable in my space is not fading. If anything, my affection and desire grow the longer I stare at her.

Not being able to resist being this close and not touching her, I clear my throat and chuckle when she startles. She looks up and realizes I'm home as a smile that could light up the night's sky spreads across her gorgeous face. I walk over before sliding down to join her on the floor.

I don't even say hello before I claim her lips. Her arms wrap around me as she arches up into my body. I lay her out on the floor beneath me as I take my time to worship her mouth. I glide my hand up her thigh to her sweet pussy, only to find her bare underneath.

My fingers slide into her wet cunt, and she moans out my name as I slowly thrust my fingers into her while my palm grinds down on her clit. It only takes me a minute to have my girl quaking underneath me. There's nothing more gorgeous than watching Emerson's pleasure burst across her face.

Dying to drive into her, I unbuckle my belt and pop the buttons on my pants before I slide my throbbing cock into her still pulsing center. We both moan as she tightens around my straining dick. I pump into her slowly with deep, hard thrusts, making sure to hit that spot that makes her leak all over me.

Needing to see more of her, I flip us over, keeping my dick seated in her as I place her legs on each side of my hips. Emerson starts rocking on top of me, leaning back with her hands braced on my thighs. I sit up and push her shirt up, so I

can play with her rosy nipples. I groan when I realize she's not wearing a bra, and I suck one tight bud into my mouth as I pinch the other between my fingers.

Emerson picks up her pace, bouncing up and down on my cock as she chases her release. I'm so close to exploding that I abandon her nipple to rub her clit. Within seconds, she's exploding as she shakes and pants through her release. Her orgasm triggers mine. I thrust up into her a few more times before biting her shoulder as I erupt inside of her.

I scoot us back down and hug her tight to my chest. We stay like that as we catch our breath and our bearings after another round of mind-numbingly great sex. My hands are under the sweater, rubbing up and down her back, not being able to sit idly while she's this close to me.

Finally, she leans up and looks at me with a smile. She places a sweet kiss on my lips before sliding off of me and tucking herself into my side, nuzzling her head under my chin. I kiss her forehead and hear her content sigh. It's only minutes before she is passed out in my arms, lulled to sleep by her release and the warm heat spilling out from the fire.

I knew that being with Emerson would completely rock my world. Coming home to find her here in my place and to acknowledge that what we just did was more than fucking seems like it would be enough to send me into a spiral, but as she softly snores and worms her way closer to me, I have to admit that there's no place in the world I'd rather be than right here with her, just like this.

Chapter Thirteen

Emerson

It's the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, and I'm finally coming to terms with dating Axle Jenkins. I don't really know when the fuck that happened, but we've both slotted ourselves in the other's life, and I'm not mad about it.

Watching Axle let his walls down and let me in a little more every day has been fucking amazing and only confirms my crush on him years ago was well-founded. He is so sweet and considerate. He takes care of me on a daily basis without even realizing it, whether it's by making me dinner or helping me do an inventory order at work, even though he doesn't have to. He just knows how much I hate doing it, so he took it upon himself to help.

The only thing that's been nagging at the back of my mind is that we haven't told anyone. But I suppose if we are going to tell people, we should probably talk and figure out together what we mean to each other. I know what he means to me, but I'm terrified to hear what I am to him. If I'm just a convenient fuck, then it would destroy me.

I'm also having a harder time hiding my feelings at the shop. I'm so used to being able to touch him freely when we aren't at work that I catch myself trying to do the same thing at work. The guys wouldn't care if they found out, and neither do I, but I'm worried about my dad catching on. He still comes in a day or two a week. He says habits die hard. I suppose the only good thing is that Axle still likes to push my buttons and get me going, which helps keep our secret.

But I have a feeling all of it will come to light at Thanksgiving this year. I went to see Gram a few weeks ago and was so happy to find that she was having a good day. She was fretting over not being able to cook a big spread this year because of her health and because of the work Axle was doing on the house. I told her not to worry about it because they were all welcome to eat dinner with us, and she gratefully accepted.

My dad was thrilled when I told him that I'd invited the Jenkinses to join us. Even though there are several years between him and Gram, they have the best of friendships. He was so excited about having a full house this year. Our table was going to be a hell of a lot fuller than it was last year.

Of course, us girls would be there, but Chayse would have Cash and Penny with her, and Spencer would be bringing Maverick and his sister and nephew. With me adding the Jenkins crew, it was going to be a stacked house. Spencer and Maverick are in charge of dinner, and I'd be lying if I said I was disappointed about that. With Maverick being a classically trained chef and Spencer being a phenomenal cook,

it's looking like it will shape up to be one of the best dinners we've had in years.

I am in charge of the desserts, and I'm super excited about that. I do the traditional pumpkin pie for Dad, but my favorite is a delicious pumpkin dump cake that my mom taught me how to make. I also plan on making a dutch apple pie and a few pumpkin rolls.

I let all the guys off at noon today, so that they have time if they need to travel and so I can get a head start on the baking. I'm super excited because my sisters are going to come over and hang out while I bake. Spencer also gets out early, so she'll be over before Chayse since her shift isn't done until 3:00 p.m.

After closing up the shop, Axle decided to head to my place with me for some lunch before he went back to the house to work on it for a little bit. I'm not sure how long I'll be with my sisters, so I'm happy he's coming over now. I'm so used to spending all of my free time with him lately that I miss him when I don't get to.

I'm standing at the stove, working on making egg sandwiches, when I feel a slap on my ass. I yelp and turn to glare at Axle as he leans against the counter, arms crossed and feet crossed at the ankle, smirking at me.

"What the hell was that for, Axhole?" I glare over my shoulder but can't give him my full attention if I don't want to burn our lunch.

“Hmm, are you trying to tell me that my little slut doesn’t like it when I slap that ass? I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what had you milking my cock the other night.” He walked closer so that his chest is pressed to my back, his hands are on my waist pulling me closer to him, and he’s nuzzling my neck with his delicious scruff.

I moan as I push myself back into him. I can feel how hard he is as he rocks into me. Groaning, I drop my head back to his shoulder as he turns off the burner on the stove and moves the eggs. Thankfully, they were almost done and will finish cooking in the warm pan. He steps me back as he makes quick work of unbuttoning my jeans and sliding his hand under my lace underwear.

“Axle, we don’t have much time. Spencer could be here any minute, and unless you’re okay with telling her, we really shouldn’t.” As I’m talking, he dips his hand down and drags it through my soaked slit, slowly moving back up to circle my clit.

“Baby, with how wet you are right now, I’m only going to need a few minutes. This is going to be a hard and fast fuck, Sunshine.”

I feel him step back and hear the zipper on his jeans drag down. He spins me to the counter and pushes my top down, so my chest is flush and I have to turn my head to the side. He doesn’t give me any warning before he thrusts into me, hard. I scream at the invasion as he hits so deep that my legs start shaking.

His pace is unrelenting as he thrusts fast and hard. His hand slides around my front, where he starts rubbing my clit. My hips circle, needing more friction. He drapes his back over mine, sliding his arm under my chest and up to my throat. His grip is just the right pressure, and I feel my climax building.

“That’s it, baby. I can feel you fluttering around me. You love it when I squeeze this perfect little throat while I fuck you good, don’t you?”

“Yes, fuck yes, Axle.”

He nips my neck as he tightens his hand, and I explode, screaming out garbled words as my legs give out to the onset of pleasure flooding my body. Axle keeps me upright as he thrusts a few more times before sitting himself deep inside me as his cock pulses his release into me.

“Fuck, Sunshine. You’re such a good girl, taking my cock like that.”

I mewl as after-waves rock my body at his words. I really am his little praise slut. I can hear him chuckle behind me as he pulls out and helps drag my jeans and underwear up my legs. He scoops me up before plopping me on a bar stool on the other side of the island.

I slump forward on the counter, my head resting on my arms, as Axle busts out laughing. I can hear him moving around the kitchen, but I need a little more time to recover before I can pull myself up and act like a normal functioning human.

I think I dozed off because I'm startled when a plate slides near my head. I look up and see Axle smiling down at me. He pushes my hair behind my ear before placing a sweet kiss on my forehead.

“Ugh, that was delicious, Axle, but you do know I need to function the rest of the afternoon. I can't handle you fucking me into a coma right now.”

He laughs looking proud as hell of himself. “Eh, I'd say sorry, but we'd both know I'm lying. I needed to get my fill since I'm not sure I will tonight, and tomorrow we'll be surrounded by our families.”

Seeing the opening, I steel my spine and take a deep, steadying breath. I don't want to ask this, but he gave me the perfect opportunity. “Would it really be bad if they knew about us?”

He starts frowning and doesn't respond. I'm sitting here, dying to know what he's going to say, but I'm afraid he's just going to ignore me. He finishes his food and puts his plate in the dishwasher before finally turning to face me.

“I don't think we should say anything, Emerson. I'm really enjoying the time we spend together, but I don't want the pressure that will come with telling our families and making a big deal out of it, because that's exactly what will happen. And it's not like we're really dating. We just enjoy spending time together.”

I'd be lying if I said that didn't hurt my feelings, but I'm also not really surprised. I'm trying to keep my emotions in check,

but it hurts and pisses me off that he thinks it will be added pressure. I mean ... I get it, in a way, but our families are so fucking supportive. After maybe voicing a concern about what might happen if we break up, they'd be happy for us since we are happy.

“Okay, I understand.” I don't look at him as I say that but instead stand and throw the rest of my food out. I'm not really hungry now.

“Sunshine ...” He steps towards me, and I hide my head until I can plaster a smile on my face. He tugs me to him and looks down at me with his brows furrowed.

I smooth my hands up his chest and loop them around his neck. “It's seriously fine, Axle. I understand what you're saying. My sisters are nosy as hell and would never let me hear the end of it, so I'm fine just keeping it between us.”

He searches my eyes to try and see if my words are sincere, and I'm hoping like hell that he can't see through how much it actually hurts me to say that. He goes to say something else when I hear the front door open, and Spencer shouts hello. Axle immediately steps back and goes to the stove to take care of the pans from our lunch. Looks like he's throwing one of those many walls back up.

“Hey, sis! Oh, and Axle.”

He turns and gives her a tight-lipped smile. I'm sure he's regretting being here right now, so I try to take the attention off of him.

“Hey, Spence. Axle came over for lunch to cash in on a bet at work. He won, so it was time I paid up. Little did he know that my cooking expertise is egg sandwiches and grilled cheese.” I laugh, and Spencer joins in.

“Um, sorry, Axle, but you definitely got the short end of that bet.” She’s teasing, and I laugh as I swat at her.

“Hey, that’s not nice!”

“It wasn’t bad. I’m going to get out of your hair. I’ll see you both tomorrow.” He heads for the front door. I go to follow him but stop when he gives me a small shake of his head, telling me no.

I know he doesn’t want anyone to know, but now I’m just fucking pissed off. Not wanting me to walk him to the door as if that would tip Spencer off is just fucking stupid. I’d walk any of my guests out, but whatever. I huff as I turn to check the kitchen and see if anything else needs taking care of from our lunch and am annoyed when I see that Axle got everything.

Turning back to Spencer, I try to pull up my bubbly side that everyone is used to so as not to tip her off. When I look over, she’s staring at me with her head cocked to the side.

“Are you ready for this bake-a-thon?” I try to act normal, but it shouldn’t come as a surprise that Spencer can tell something is off. Not only is she my big sister, but she’s also my pseudo mom in a lot of ways. I was the youngest when we lost my mom, so Spencer stepped up to help my dad with Chayse and

me, and I will always have a special bond with her because of it.

“I don’t want to be pushy because we both know that’s not my style.” I huff out a laugh because that’s Chayse’s personality for sure. “But are you okay, Em?”

I want to lie, but before I even realize it, a tear runs down my face. Spencer makes her way over to me before wrapping me in a hug. I sink into it, feeling so good to be able to confide in her.

“Are these angry tears or sad tears?” All of us Wilson sisters have a tendency to cry when we’re really mad. Dad likes to tease us that we got that one from our mom.

“Definitely angry, but maybe a little sad too?”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Yes, but I probably shouldn’t.”

“Let me guess ... Axle doesn’t want to talk about what’s going on between you two?”

I’m shocked as I step out of the hug and look up at my sister. She has a small smile on her face like she’s in on our secret.

“Um ...” I don’t want to answer because I just got done telling Axle I wouldn’t talk about it, but if I’m being honest, I’m dying to get it off my chest.

“I didn’t tell you this, but remember the whole fiasco with Maverick and Bianca at the festival?” I nod. “Well, I needed some space, so I started walking and found myself in front of

the shop. I saw the lights on and figured you were pulling a late night, so I checked to see if the door was unlocked ...” She trails off, and it finally clicks what night she’s talking about. That was the night Axle stopped and our fight turned into fucking.

“Oh, shit!” I burst out, and Spencer starts to laugh.

“I heard arguing once I got closer so I opened the door, but once I got to the shop and saw, well ... I’m sure you know or can guess what I saw, so I quietly left.”

Cringing, I really hope she saw us kissing and nothing else. It’s not like Axle was holding back at all that night.

“Maverick also told me about the two of you at The Tavern the other night. And since Axle was just here, I’m assuming you two have been spending more time together?”

“That traitor.” I roll my eyes at Maverick breaking bartender code and spilling to my big sister. “More like all of our time together. We’ve basically been taking turns staying at each other’s places for weeks now.”

Spencer looks shocked at my admission. “Wow. Okay. So not just a friends-with-benefits thing.”

“I mean, that’s how it all started. But it changed pretty quickly once we started staying over and making dinner together. I’m not kidding that there aren’t many nights when we aren’t together, but ...”

“But you’re seeing this as a full blown relationship, and he isn’t?” she guesses, and I just nod.

“We don’t ever really talk about what we’re doing. We just fell into this comfortable routine. But he’s amazing, Spence, and I don’t even think he realizes how great of a guy he is. We were talking about dinner tomorrow, with all of our family being there, before you came in and I asked if it would be so bad if we told you all. He didn’t say that it would be bad, necessarily, but he did not want to tell anyone since ‘We’re not really dating’. His words.”

“I’m sorry, Emmy. I’m sure that didn’t feel good to hear.”

“No, it didn’t. And then I basically stood here and watched him rebuild his walls once he heard your voice. It was plain as day he regretted being here when you showed up.”

“Ugh, that stinks. I’m sorry if I caused any strain. But it’s a small town, and we’re a close family. Not to mention, his little sister is your best friend. Somebody is bound to notice what’s going on with you two.”

“Yeah, you’re right, but we don’t leave our houses much, so we’ve been insulated into our own little bubble.”

“Which is probably the only reason why you’ve been able to hide this for as long as you have. But do you really want to keep hiding it? I can tell that it’s hurting you, or at least bothering you. You deserve to be happy, Em.”

“That’s the shitty part. I *am* happy. I love spending my time with Axle, but I can’t force him to realize that we are basically in a committed relationship even if we don’t acknowledge it.”

“Well, as long as you’re happy, then maybe see how it plays out. Maybe he’ll change his mind and want to go public.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. But enough talk about the Axhole.” Spencer laughs at my mean nickname for him as she shakes her head at me. “Let’s get to baking. I have a lot more desserts to make this year since our humble little meal has all but tripled since last year.”

“It has, and I couldn’t be happier about that.” Spencer smiles as she looks down at the ring on her finger. She’s so ridiculously in love with Maverick. I’m so glad everything worked out between them, even if he didn’t tell Chayse and me that he was proposing at the trunk-or-treat.

I pull out all the ingredients for the dessert as Spencer organizes them. We each start on prepping everything for the dessert we’re working on. We are comfortable as we work around each other like we’ve done so many times before while we’re in the kitchen together.

Chayse comes over around 4:00 p.m. with some beer and takeout. We take a break to enjoy the food and get caught up on each other’s lives. It sucks that we’re all so busy that we don’t get to spend as much time together as we would like, but I love when we get days together like this and will be lucky to do it again tomorrow with some of our favorite people as well.

Chapter Fourteen

Axle

I've been twisted up since leaving Emerson's house yesterday afternoon. I went home and tried to do some work on the house, but after my second stupid mistake, I realized my head wasn't in it. I haven't felt like garbage that much since I was a pissed-off teenager.

Not being able to sit in the house anymore because everywhere I look makes me think of Emerson, I decide to head to The Tavern for a few beers and some food. I need to figure out my shit before tomorrow, when we will be surrounded by both of our families.

The place is busy when I get there, but I'm able to snag a seat at the bar and am glad it still seems like the dinner rush and not everyone coming out to reconnect since everyone comes home for the holidays.

I've just finished up my first beer when Maverick shows up behind the bar. I don't know why I'm surprised to see him when he owns the place and his fiancée is at Emerson's, helping her bake for tomorrow.

“Hey, it’s Axle, right?” I nod, hoping he’ll pass me by and go wait on someone else. “How’s it going, man? Can I get you another drink?”

“Sure, just give me whatever’s your favorite. I’m not picky.”

He pours me my beer and places it in front of me. He crosses his arms and cocks his head to the side, and I can only guess what’s going to come next.

“So, what’s the deal with you and Half-Pint?” I try to play dumb, but I know that’s his nickname for Emerson. “Oh, don’t look at me like that. What the fuck is going on with you and Emerson?”

“Nothing. We’re just friends, and that’s really more of a recent development. I’m pretty sure she hated my guts.”

He cocks his brow, and I’m kicking myself for saying that.

“Hmm, you looked awful friendly that night you were in here. Especially out on the dance floor.”

“I—”

Before I can say anything else, he holds a hand up. “And from what Spencer witnessed, I’d definitely say there’s something more going on between you two.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I’m legitimately confused since Emerson and I are careful when we’re anywhere but at our homes.

“Oh, well ... I did something stupid at the festival, which sent Spencer walking home to get a break. She passed the shop and saw the door open, so she went in to talk to Emerson but found you there with her in a very compromising position.”

It only takes me a second to remember the night he’s talking about. “Fuck,” I mumble out, which causes Maverick to laugh.

“So, you want to change your answer? I know we don’t know each other, but I already think of her as my little sister, and I’m curious why she hasn’t mentioned anything about you two being together.”

“That’s because we’re not. At least, we’re not dating or anything.”

He raises his hand before I can go on. “Dude, I drive past her house on my way home from here. I’ve seen your truck parked there about half the time I drive past, and the other half of the time, her jeep isn’t home, so cut the fucking shit.”

I blow out a breath, trying to calm down my panic and anger. I came out tonight so I could get out of my head and away from all thoughts of Emerson. I didn’t think it through that Maverick may get on my shit about her. I knew they were close, but I definitely didn’t think he’d pull the big-brother act on me.

“We enjoy spending our time together, but that’s it. We’re not really dating, and we didn’t want to get our families all worked up. Plus, Kat is her best friend. I don’t want to put her in the middle of us or have to worry about a fallout. It’s just easier to keep this shit between the two of us.”

He thinks over what I said before someone calls to him further down the bar. I'm relieved when he walks away, but I can't stop thinking about my situation with Emerson. My food comes out, and I all but inhale it so that I can get out of here, but Maverick gets to me before I'm lucky enough to leave.

“Listen, I'm sorry for giving you shit. If you ask Olive, sometimes I go overboard on the ‘protective big brother’ shit. I know she's not my actual little sister, but she will be by marriage soon enough, and I love her as if she were. I'm not going to tell you that I think what you're doing is fucking dumb. You're both grownups and can do what you want. But I will tell you how fucking lucky you are for that girl to be giving you her time, attention, and affection.”

“You don't think I fucking know that?” I cut him off.

“Good. I'm glad you see it too. All I want to say is that if you don't see things progressing any further, then maybe you need to think about letting her go. Sure, she's focused on growing the business and getting her feet under her, but I also know that Emerson does want to settle down with someone who can be her partner some day. If you don't think that can be you, then don't lead her on. She deserves the best.”

I nod to let him know I hear him, and he walks away. I know better than anyone that Emerson deserves the best because she is the fucking best woman. She's fun and loving, bubbly and caring, but she's also fierce and badass. Some dude is going to be fucking lucky when she chooses him as her forever someday, which fucking guts me. I know I'm no good for her,

but thinking of her being with someone else makes me fucking livid.

Not being able to sit here any longer with all this shit running through my head, I throw some money down the bar before heading towards home. Maybe I need to talk to her and set more realistic expectations. No more staying over and cooking dinner together or curling up on the couch after a long day. Maybe if we get back to just fucking, the lines won't be so blurry and I won't have to disappoint her again, like I obviously did this afternoon. Tomorrow is going to fucking suck, and I can't wait to just get it over with.



Before I'm ready for it, I've picked up Gram and Kat, and we're heading to the Wilsons for Thanksgiving dinner. It's the first time Kat and I have taken Gram out, and I'm pretty fucking nervous to see how she does. She was a little confused when we got there, but once Kat explained what we were doing, she was extremely excited.

We're the last ones to arrive, which makes me even more nervous as I guide Gram up the front steps. I go to ring the bell when Kat swats my hand away, opens the door, and walks right in. She holds it open for me and Gram before helping Gram out of her coat and hanging it up.

I trail behind them as they make their way back to the kitchen. It smells fucking amazing, and I can hear cheering

from the living room as a football game plays in the background. Two kids come flying past us, and I'm immediately overwhelmed.

I don't know that I've ever spent a holiday like this with this many people around. Even when we were younger and would drive to Gram's to celebrate, it was always a small get-together. Here, the house is filled with so much noise and people all having a great time together.

I'm all ready to leave until I spot her. Emerson is in the kitchen with Spencer and Maverick while Chayse sits on a stool, watching them. It's almost as if they choreographed their movements, that's how in sync with each other they are. Without even realizing it, I've somehow guided Gram and myself into the kitchen.

Kat already barged in, so I shouldn't be surprised when Emerson's eyes lock on mine. I can't tear my gaze from her. She's stunning in a sweater dress that comes to her knees. It's a deep maroon color that makes her creamy skin glow. I'm so caught up that I don't even notice Clint walk in beside me until he claps a hand on my shoulder, startling me. Emerson smirks as I turn towards her dad.

"Hey, son. It's good to see you. And Gram, you're looking pretty as ever."

She titters at his compliment, fluffing her curly hair at the base of her neck. "Don't I, though? One of the girls at the complex helped me fix my hair up real pretty-like."

“Well, it looks beautiful, just like you.” Clint gives her a hug, and she pats him on the back.

I have to look away when I see the unshed tears brimming his eyes. I forget how close they are and how hard it must be on him to watch her slip away. I didn’t even know he goes and visits her at least once a week until Emerson told me.

All those years, I thought we were going at it alone, but the Wilsons have been there, walking alongside us and helping lift us up. I know it has to be just as hard seeing our tough-as-nails gram slowly slip away to this fucking awful disease.

Clint clears his throat as he pulls out of the hug and guides Gram into the dining room.

“Hey, Axle, I know you’re not crazy about football, but Cash is in the living room trying to watch a game. Maybe you can go pick his brain about some of the projects you still have to do at the house?”

Emerson is throwing me a lifeline, and I couldn’t be more grateful. Today is already hard enough with bringing Gram out and being terrified she’s going to have a bad day. I can’t handle all of the people in the kitchen as well. I head towards the living room and find Cash on the floor with the two pipsqueaks climbing all over him. I lean my shoulder on the frame of the case opening and watch as they all laugh and fight each other.

Finally being tackled to the ground by the tiny terrors, Cash catches me standing there before laughing as he tries to untangle himself. “Alright, I need a break, you two.”

They groan but both get off and race out of the room as Cash gets back on his feet.

“Hey. Axle, right?”

“Yeah, how’s it going?”

“Not bad. Just trying to keep the terrible tornadoes out of everyone’s way in the kitchen. They want to help, but I’d like dinner to be edible and within this century.”

I chuckle as I settle on the opposite end of the couch from Cash.

Before we can say much more, Chayse comes in with a handful of beers, passing them out to us before plopping down on Cash’s lap. They share a quick kiss, and I wonder how it can be so easy for them to share their affection. Sure, I can be like that with Emerson when nobody is around, but she’s the only exception, and it took weeks before I was truly comfortable when I’d freely touch her without thinking about doing it first.

“Hey, Axle. How’s the house coming along?” Chayse asks with a friendly smile, and I’m glad she decided to pick a safe topic.

“It’s going slow, but I make a little more progress every day.”

“Oh, I forgot Chayse said you were redoing Gram’s house. I’m pretty slammed with work right now, but if you ever have questions or need a hand, hit me up. I don’t work weekends, so I could swing around for an hour or two.”

Before I can respond, Chayse dives in. “Yeah, me too. Well, not about the weekends because I work at the ER in the hospital, but I love doing home renovations, so I’m sure I could lend a hand too. Emerson showed me the tile she did in the bathrooms. It looks gorgeous.”

“Fuck yeah, it does. She did an amazing job with it, and I’m glad she insisted on helping me. Now, Kat will have the bathroom of her dreams.”

Chayse’s intense stare bores into me, and I’m so glad I learned a long time ago to keep an indifferent expression on my face. I know I said more than I normally do in situations like this, especially when I just sang Emerson’s praises. But they are well-earned because she did do a kickass job on the bathrooms.

I clear my throat and look over to Cash. “Emerson did say you’re awesome with woodworking. You think you could come see if we could put some built-in bookshelves somewhere? Kat loves to read, so I want to surprise her with some if I can swing it.”

“Fuck yeah, man.”

“Daddy, that’s a bad word. You have to put money in the jar when we get home.” Cash’s daughter pops out of nowhere, startling us all.

He chuckles before shaking his head. “You’re right, Penny. I’ll make sure I do that once we get home.”

We all laugh and spend the next half an hour talking about the renovations on my home and some of the projects Cash is working on. I can't help but smile when he tells me he has tried bribing Emerson on more than one occasion to come help him and his partner, Reid, tile a few of their swanky bathrooms.

Emerson comes into the room at one point and plops her delicious ass right between me and Cash on the couch. With Chayse still sitting in his lap, Emerson has to lean into me to fit. Having her side pressed against mine and not being able to touch her the way I want to is absolute torture. When she turns my way with a smirk on her face and a twinkle in her eye, I know she's doing it to fuck with me. She's going to pay for this later, but I think that's exactly why she's doing this. My dirty little slut loves to push my buttons to see what way I'm going to make her suffer once we're alone.

Thankfully, Spencer announces it's time to eat, and I'm saved from torture. We head into the dining room, and I'm amazed at the spread. There is so much delicious-looking food on the table that there's barely any room for the plates. And the smell ... Holy fuck, does it smell like heaven in here.

Gram and Kat are already seated at one end of the table, so I head down towards them and sit across from them. It shouldn't surprise me when Emerson plops down beside me, but I'm instantly assaulted with her delicious scent, which is impressive considering the spread laid out in front of us.

The food is fucking phenomenal, but I knew I was in for a treat with Maverick and Spencer cooking. Half of the dishes I've never even heard of, but I try a little bit of everything and am not disappointed in the least bit.

But as amazing as the food is, Emerson is a constant distraction sitting beside me. I can't keep my eyes off of her as she lights the entire room up with her smile and her laugh. It also doesn't help that we're sitting close together, and no matter how much I try not to, we always seem to be touching. Before we dive into dessert, the little brat has given up on her subtle touches and has been tracing her fingers along my thigh. I've moved her hands away a few times before. I was afraid that move would give her away, more than just letting her keep her hand there.

The girls are just cleaning away the main course to make room for the desserts when I notice Gram starting to get agitated. The room is loud with people laughing and talking over each other. It's almost like I watch in real time as a curtain is pulled over her eyes and she slips from her lucid state into one of confusion and aggravation.

“Hey, Gram, are you okay?”

“Who are you, and why are you calling me Gram? The only people who call me that are my grandbabies and their close friends. I don't know you.”

Hearing her words is like a knife to my heart. I know she doesn't mean it, but I'm sure she's having a hard time

recognizing me. I don't look like I did as a teen. I've bulked out, and have a beard and way more tattoos than before.

“Gram, it is me, Axle. I know this is confusing for you, but you're okay.”

“You are not my grandson. Where are we? Who the hell are all of you people?” The panic starts to rise along with the volume of her voice, and I freeze.

I don't know how to handle her like this.

Thankfully, Clint catches what's going on and comes to sit beside her. “Hey, Sally. It's Clint Wilson. You're at my house for Thanksgiving dinner.”

She looks confused, but at least she seems to be calming down some. My jaw is clenched tighter than my fists, and it takes everything in me not to storm out of the house right now. I'm no fucking help, and that pisses me off even more than this disease that is stealing Gram from me.

“Hey, Gram, I brought you some dessert.” Kat comes in from the kitchen, not realizing what we have been dealing with out here.

“Why are you calling me that? Clint, why do they keep calling me Gram? My babies are still young. I don't know these people.” She starts to look around the room, and her panic grows once again. “I don't know any of these people. Where are your girls and wife?”

I look up at Kat to see the tears she's been trying to hold back spill over her face. We've had some shitty days with

Gram so far, but none where she's slipped this far back and not known who we are. Emerson tucks Kat into her side as she silently starts to cry. Seeing her broken like this tips my anger over.

Clint senses the rage bubbling in me and makes eye contact. "Go. I'll get her home safely. She probably wouldn't go with you right now anyway."

I do not want to get up from this table and abandon Gram and Kat like this, but I know he's right. When Kat and I tried talking to her, we only made her more agitated. There's no way she's going to trust me enough in this state to get her in my truck and back to her apartment.

I jump out of the chair and storm for the front door. I hear Emerson call my name from behind me, but there's no way I can stop right now. I'm beyond pissed off, and I do not want to lash out and take this anger out on Emerson. I don't even stop for my coat but rather rip open the front door and sprint down the driveway to my truck.

I tear away from the Wilsons and drive. I don't know where I'm going, but I know I cannot stay there anymore. Emerson tries to call me, but I just can't talk. I text Kat at a stop light before I shut my phone off and hide from the world like I've done for years whenever shit gets to be too much.

Chapter Fifteen

Axle

It's been a few weeks since Thanksgiving, and my head is just as fucked up now as it was the night I stormed out of Clint Wilson's front door, not stopping when Emerson called to me. I didn't know where I was going that night, I just drove as fast as I could as if my demons wouldn't be able to follow me.

I don't even know when I made the conscious decision, but when I pulled my truck over for the night, I found myself staring at Torin's front door. It shouldn't surprise me that I ended up there because I used to do the same damn thing in high school when shit got to be too much and I needed to hide away.

It was later than I realized, but the lights were still on in the living room and I could see him relaxing on his couch. When I pounded on the door, he was there in a minute, letting me in and handing me a beer. When I gave him a questioning look, all he said to me was, "Sunshine."

I paused, beer halfway to my mouth, before shaking my head and chugging half of it. Thankfully, Torin is used to my surly ass and didn't push to find out what was going on. Chances are Emerson told him, but if not, who knew me well enough to know I needed time to cool down and process whatever sent me spiraling?

That night was the biggest smack in the face that my Gram was never going to be the same again. We've had so many good days since she moved into the assisted living center that I didn't see this coming, which was fucking stupid and why I was so mad at myself.

Well, that and the fact that when Kat needed me, my rage was too strong to be able to comfort her or be there for her the way she needed me to. I turned my phone back on to see that she texted me back that she was home and called off work for the night. She said Emerson was going to stay with her, which brought me some peace but also made me jealous as fuck.

Not that I wanted to admit it to myself, but now that I cooled off a bit, the only place I wanted to be was with her. Whether it would be buried deep in her sweet heat or tangled up in her as she slept on my chest. Emerson has brought so much peace to my life without me even realizing.

She softens my hard edges, but she also likes me the way I am. She doesn't try to change me or make me into something I'm not. I've never been as comfortable with someone in my life as I am with her. Well, except for maybe Kat, but even that's different.

I hung out with Torin the next day since the shop was closed and I wasn't ready to head back to Sparrow Falls. He has a few project cars that he's currently restoring before he'll sell them to start all over again with another one. We spent the entire day piddling around in his garage, and I clued him into what went down that night.

It made me feel like I was less alone, even though I know all of the Wilsons have and always would step up and help with Gram. Torin is what Emerson is to Gram. Just another adopted kiddo that she claims as her own. He hates hearing how much she's declining just as much as me.

But knowing I couldn't hide out forever, I decided to head home Saturday night to check in with Kat and Gram. I knew none of the head administration would be there at the assisted living center so late in the evening, but I needed to see that she was home and safe with my own eyes.

The aid who helped her get ready is at Gram's when I get there, and she greets me with a sympathetic smile. She says Gram had a tough night and they had to give her a mild sedative to help her calm down to sleep, but that she seems to be doing a little better today. She is sleeping in her recliner, so I don't disturb her.

After I leave, I head to Kat's to check on her. She's doing surprisingly good, considering what we went through the other night. She says it helps her knowing that it's the disease and not Gram intentionally hurting us. But she does want to see if

we can get Gram into the doctor's for another check-up, and I tell her I'll be there no matter what.

Even though I know I need to text her back or give her a call, I'm not ready to face Emerson yet. I grab some takeout from The Tavern and am eternally grateful that Maverick isn't behind the bar when I go in. I don't think I could handle the big-brother act without completely losing my shit.

I spend the rest of the weekend ignoring everything and drowning myself in projects with the house. I know I'm being a coward for not calling Emerson, but I just can't face her optimism and bubbly personality. I'm afraid I'll lash out at her, and that's the last thing I want to do.

I finally break down and text her back on Sunday. I'm waiting for her to come back at me in typical Emerson fashion, with a tongue-lashing, but when she is sweet to me, I don't know how to handle it. I make up some bullshit, which I'm sure she sees right through, and tell her I'll see her at work.

I resist her for about a week before she corners me one night after everyone left and has it out with me. I have been trying to avoid her all week, but I know I don't want to anymore, which is how I find myself alone with her. We have another repeat of angry fucking right there in the middle of the shop before she tugs me out the door and heads back to her house.

I don't want to fall into this pattern again, but I can't resist her as much as I try. I do pull back on the sleepovers, using Gram as an excuse, but I need to build some of my walls back

up. I know I can never be her forever, and it isn't fair playing pretend until I have enough balls to tell her that.

Gram's appointment doesn't go the way we hoped, and every day she slips a little further from us.

It's a week before Christmas, and we're at another appointment with her doctor.

"I'm sorry, but her test results show that her decline is increasing exponentially. Even from last week, her cognitive tests are trending down. I've also been in close contact with the facility, and I'm afraid it's time for us to talk about moving her into an actual nursing home. The facility has said that every day she starts to neglect her personal needs more and more. Whether it's forgetting to eat or forgetting to change her clothes, she's just not able to do what she needs for herself."

I look over to Kat and see silent tears rolling down her face. I wrap my arm around her shoulder and tuck her head under my chin. Her arms come around me, squeezing me as if I'm her lifeline. I exhale before turning to the doctor.

"It's obviously not what we wanted to hear, but if I'm being honest, I think we both knew that this conversation was going to be happening soon. Kat and I have both been spending more time at Gram's, and we've noticed those issues. Add in that half the time she doesn't know who we are, we knew she wouldn't be able to stay where she is."

"I'm sorry that we've hit this part, but it's time to make sure that she's safe, and right now, being at the assisted living center is not safe. I've reached out to the Sparrow Falls'

nursing home, and they have availability in their dementia wing. They are highly trained to handle cases like your Gram's, and they take every measure to keep her safe. Access to their wing is only available through the main doors, and you have to be buzzed in to get on the unit."

I nod, and Kat starts asking more medical questions that go right over my head. I hate that we are here, but I also can't deny that Gram needs this place. We finish up with the doctor before taking Gram back to her assisted living facility.

Not ready to go home and deal with this on my own, I suggest going to get something to eat. Thankfully, Kat must be feeling the same way as she's quick to agree. We go to a little diner a few spots down from The Tavern that has kickass breakfast, but neither of us are really hungry.

"I fucking hate this," Kat lets out as her bottom lip wobbles.

"Me too, Kitty Kat. It fucking sucks."

"It does. And the worse part is, I knew she was getting older, but she's always been larger than life, so I just wasn't ready for this."

"Fuck, don't I know it. Remember that time I got suspended for fighting at school again?"

"Um, Ax. That happened on several occasions. You've got to be more specific than that."

"It was the time that douche football player cornered Emerson. I found him groping her as he pinned her against the

locker and his douchebag buddies were circled around, watching.”

“How could I forget? She was so pissed at you for stepping in, but I know she was relieved. She probably could’ve easily gotten away from him, but there’s no way his buddies would’ve let her get out of there.”

“Oh, I fucking know. Just as I shoved past his clowns, she kned him right in the balls. It gave me the perfect opening to clock him in the jaw, and I didn’t stop until that little shit jumped on my back and put me in a headlock.” We both laugh—me, remembering being shocked out of my rage-filled haze, and Kat as she imagines Emerson jumping on my back to put me in a headlock to quit beating the piss out of the dickhead who thought he could touch her.

“Anyways, I thought Gram was going to tan my hide, but once we got home, she cracked a beer and then handed me one and told me to sit. I was fucking shocked. Like, mouth hanging open, looking at the woman like she lost her mind. She started cackling before gesturing to me to drink my beer.” I’ve never told Kat, so she’s hanging on my every word to see what happened next. “Gram told me that she could never be mad at me for doing what was right, especially since it was Sunshine that those boys thought they could touch without her permission.”

Kat has a sweet smile on her face picturing Gram and me talking. “That sounds exactly like something she would say.”

Our food comes, and we share more stories about Gram. It should be bittersweet, but it's exactly what we both need. Our food is long gone before Kat starts giving me the stare down.

“What?” I furrow my brows because I honestly don't know what could be causing her to look at me like that.

“So, when were you going to tell me you're sleeping with my best friend?”

I try to cover my reaction, but she shocked the hell out of me, and before I can put a bored expression on my face, she saw it for herself. She crosses her arms and raises her brow, waiting for my answer.

“Fuck, Kat. Seriously?”

“Seriously me? Seriously you, Axle! Did you honestly think I wouldn't figure it out at some point? And what the fuck has been going on with you two lately?”

I blow out a breath before scrubbing my hands down my face. “No, I didn't think you'd find out, and honestly, I didn't want you to.”

She looks hurt and I hate myself for it, but I also won't lie to her. “Why wouldn't you want to tell me?”

“What, you want me to say, ‘Hey, Kat. Hope you don't find out, but I'm fucking your best friend. But don't worry, it's just sex, so nobody will get hurt.’ Like that would go over well.”

She reaches across the table and smacks me on the head so fast that I don't even have time to flinch away. “Yes, asshole, that would've been nice. I am a big girl and could've handled

it. I don't need details or anything, but I also don't need to be left in the dark. And you skipped my other question. What happened with you two? I haven't really seen her or hung out in months, but these past few weeks, we've hung out multiple times. Not that I'm complaining because I love her to death, but I know something happened between the two of you."

"Have you asked her about it?"

"Fuck no because there's no way she would tell me the truth. She's way too fiercely loyal, and if you asked her not to say anything to me, which I'm sure you did, then I won't be the ass to put her in the position to choose whether to be loyal to you or me."

As annoyed as I am that she figured us out, I also couldn't love my little sister more. She's right that Emerson would be put in a shitty position if she asked, and I'm glad that she didn't. Emerson shouldn't have to lie to her best friend or feel guilty for telling the truth just because I asked her not to say something.

"It just became too much, Kat. We were spending too much time together, and I think she was getting the wrong idea."

"She was getting the wrong idea, or were you getting too comfortable? I know you don't think you would make a good partner or don't ever see yourself being with someone, but you're wrong, Axle. You are so caring and have so much to give someone. Emerson would be lucky if you actually let yourself be with her. Just like you're so fucking lucky that she sees through all of your bullshit." I go to say something, but

she holds her hands up to stop me. “I don’t want you to say anything else because you’ll probably just piss me off, but at least think about what I said. Please?”

“I will, Kat.” There’s no way I won’t be able to avoid it. Emerson has taken over my every thought, whether I want her there or not.

One way or another, I need to decide what I want. It’s only fair to her to let her go if there’s no real chance with me. She deserves the fucking world, and I refuse to be the asshole who keeps it from her.

Chapter Sixteen

Emerson

Things with Axle have been different since Thanksgiving, which doesn't surprise me, but it also doesn't mean I'm okay with it. At first, he tried to push me away and keep me at a distance, but thankfully, that didn't last long. But even though he let me back in, he still has too many of his walls built back up and it's driving me nuts.

With just a few days before Christmas and a little over a week until Spencer's wedding, it's been extremely busy. Wanting to help Spencer with her wedding isn't helping the distance between Axle and me, but until he's going to make me a priority, I'm not going to wait around for him to pull his head out of his ass.

I love Christmas and all of the traditions we've upheld, especially since my mom has passed. My most favorite tradition would have to be spending all day at my dad's, baking with my sisters. We make all kinds of cookies and treats, but decorating the sugar cookies is my absolute favorite. We always take one of the same cookies and make our dad

decide whose is best. I'm sure he'll be happy this year to have the other guys help be judges.

Christmas is in the middle of the week this year, so I gave the guys Monday, Tuesday, and then Wednesday—which is Christmas—off. They all have vacation they could use if they want off, but I know I'd rather be with my family, so it's just as easy to shut the shop down while the guys still get paid.

It's Monday morning, and I just got home from the store after stocking up on supplies for our baking marathon the next day, when I'm surprised by a knock on the door. When I open it, the last person I expect to see is Axle.

“Hey, Sunshine. Mind if I come in?”

It's freezing out, and it started snowing late last night and hasn't let up so there's a few inches covering the ground. I swing the door open further and step back for Axle to come in and get out of the cold.

“Not that I'm not happy to see you, but what are you doing here?”

He lets out a deep breath before scrubbing his hand through his beard. He's let it grow out some this winter, and I can't say I mind it, especially when he's buried between my legs. As soon as my thoughts drift that way, my pulse picks up, thinking about all the delicious ways Axle works over my body.

It's not until I hear his gravely chuckle that I realize I zoned out. I look up and see that delicious smirk as his pupils darken.

“Damn, Sunshine. That’s not why I came here, but if you keep looking at me like that and making those little mewls in the back of your throat, it’s making me forget why I’m here.”

I bite my lip, dying for him to make a move. He crooks his finger and makes a “come here” motion. As soon as I get closer, he grips his hands around my waist and tugs my body flush against his. I can feel his cock harden, and I can’t hold back my moan. He pops my lip from between my teeth before rubbing his thumb on my bottom lip and then shoving it in my mouth. I wrap my lips around it and suck.

“Fuuuck, baby. I came here to see if you’d go shopping with me to get something for Gram and Kat, but we’re going to have to put that off for a bit. Are you going to be my good girl and take care of me, and then help me find some gifts?”

I moan, still sucking on his thumb.

Axle pulls his thumb out before he grips my hair at the base of my neck, tugging my head back. “I asked you a question, Emerson.”

My eyes flutter shut as I gasp. “Y-yes.”

“That’s right. How about you use that dirty fucking mouth and get me ready to fuck that perfect little hole?”

Before he can say anything else, I drop to my knees and start working his pants and boxers down his legs. It’s the first time I realize we’re still in the entryway of my house, standing in front of the front door where anyone could see in the window.

Seeing me glancing away from him, Axle turns his head to see what I'm looking at. When he turns back to me, smirking, I know he knows exactly what I was thinking and how hot it makes me knowing we can be caught.

“You really are a little fucking slut, aren't you? The chance that anyone can come to the front door and see you choking on my thick cock probably has you drenched, doesn't it?”

By now, I have Axle free and am stroking his cock. I'm dying to swallow him, but he pulls my hand away before I can do anything. He lifts it above my head before he spits in it. It should not be sexy in the least, but I love it as he shoves it back on his cock. His hand engulfs mine as he uses it to stroke himself.

After a minute, he slaps his leaking tip on my lips before rubbing his precum all over my mouth. I dart my tongue out to savor every drop as we both moan. Him from the tip of my tongue, grazing his sensitive head, and me from tasting him on my lips.

“Enough,” he growls out before thrusting into my mouth.

He's not remotely gentle, but I fucking love it. With one hand still wrapped around his length, I bob my head down his length as I twist my hand up to meet my mouth. I do this for a minute before he's swatting my hand out of the way and fucking my throat. I've learned to relax and take all of him, but I still gag and gasp for breath every chance he gives me.

His hand wraps around my throat as I swallow him down again. The added pressure of his hand squeezing as he fucks

my face has me seconds away from orgasming, and I haven't even touched myself. I slide my fingers into the front of my leggings as Axle groans.

“Fuck, baby. Slide those pretty little fingers in you and give them to me. I need to taste you.”

I swirl my clit a few times before dipping my fingers into my aching center. I know I should do what he says, but I'm so close to coming that I can't stop. I thrust forward on my fingers as my palm rubs my clit. My orgasms rips through me, shocking the hell out of me.

I'm not even close to coming down when I hear Axle growl. He rips my hand out of my shorts and licks my fingers clean, all the while still fucking my face.

“I did not tell you you could come, Emerson.” He pulls out, leaving me a whimpering mess.

Axle hooks his hands under my arms before lifting me and heading towards the living room. He sets me down beside the back of the couch before turning me and folding my front over the back of the couch.

I feel my leggings tear down my legs, exposing my drenched center to him. My walls are still clenching from the aftershocks of my orgasm. Axle smacks my ass hard before shoving two fingers into my center. My walls clamp down, and the orgasm that was fading is now turning into one long drawn-out release.

I'm so lost to the feel of him consuming me that I barely register his tip at my center until he splits me open on one hard thrust, seating himself deeper than he's ever been. He starts thrusting hard before I feel another crack on my ass. My release rips a scream from me as Axle roars behind me.

I don't even realize that I passed out until my bare ass lands on the cool counter in my bathroom. When I peel my eyes open, a naked Axle is standing in front of me, peeling the rest of my clothes off me.

He guides me into the shower and has to hold me up the whole time as he helps me clean up. I'm finally waking up by the time we get out, and Axle is drying me off.

"Fuck, you're completely wrecked, aren't you, Sunshine?"

I wrap my arms around him as I rest my chin on his chest and look up into his eyes. I smile at him as my eyes close. "Absolutely, and in more than one way. So, where did you want to go today?"

"You don't have to come with me, Emerson. I know you're tired and how hard you've been working lately between work and helping Spencer with the wedding."

I pinch his side, making him yelp. Not because I hurt him, but more so from surprise. He glares down at me before he pinches my ass, hard. That one is definitely going to bruise.

"I figured we could check out the shops downtown. Gram probably doesn't need anything since she'll be downsizing again, but I figured I could get her some kind of a sweet treat.

And I have no fucking clue what to get Kat, so any help from you would be great.”

“I think we can do that.”

We both put our clothes back on before heading downstairs. We decide to grab food while we’re out, which I’m grateful for since I didn’t really buy groceries, just baking supplies, when I was out early.

I go to reach for Axle’s hand as we walk out my front door, and Axle pulls away. I try not to let him see how much it hurts me. I know we don’t do PDA, but I’m so used to being able to touch him that I didn’t even think about what I was doing when I reached out for his hand.

I try to act as if nothing is wrong, but Axle is off for the rest of the day. Instead of going to The Tavern, we get lunch at the little diner downtown. It’s just as good, but it’s almost as if he’s trying to avoid as many people as possible. I try to make conversation throughout our lunch, but it’s stilted and awkward. I can’t stand the tension, so I finally just give up.

The rest of the afternoon is pretty much the same as Axle rushes us through the shopping. We get some baked goods for Gram at the bakery across the road from the diner. There are a few cute stores that I point out as Axle cringes at the clothes.

Instead, we head into a little shop, where Axle gets her some candles and bath stuff. At first, he acts as if it is weird since he’s her older brother, but when I point out that we just remodeled the master bath and her long shifts at the hospital, he decides it’s okay.

He pays before guiding me out of the store and back towards his truck. He opens it for me, and I climb in. This is fucking awful, but I don't know how to make it better. He's way too in his head to hear me right now, and I'm afraid he's just going to end up hurting me more if he reacts the way he did earlier.

He pulls into the driveway, but doesn't shut the truck off, so I know he's not coming in.

“Um, so what are your plans for Christmas?”

“I'm going to go see Gram. Kat has to work, so I think we're getting together tomorrow. I'm basically done with the house, so I'm excited to show her everything and see if there's anything else she wants done. Her lease is up at the end of the year, so we've got to figure out getting her moved, and I need to find a place.”

“Oh, that's exciting for her. Let me know if you need any help with house hunting. And you know, you're more than welcome to come to my dad's house on Christmas.”

“Thanks, but I'll probably just use it to work on the house to get it completely finished or move some of Kat's stuff while she's working.”

I had a feeling he would turn down my offer, but it still hurts. I know we're not dating and he could see me taking him to my dad's as something a boyfriend would do, but my dad has also seen him as a son and wants him there just as much as I do.

“Alright, Axle. Well, have fun with Kat tomorrow.”

He nods, and I take it as the dismissal that it is. I hop out of the truck and slam it harder than I probably should, but I'm fucking tired of this.

I spend the rest of the night drinking too much wine and wrapping Christmas presents. I have one for Axle, but now, I'm wondering if it's a good idea to give it to him.



I'm hungover when I get to my dad's, and I'm happy that Chayse won't be here until later. I need to recover from this hangover a little bit more before I can handle her brutal honesty and teasing.

I'm unpacking all of the ingredients when my dad comes in the back door, stomping his shoes on the mat to get rid of the snow. I figured he was out in his workshop when he didn't answer when I yelled for him.

"Hey, kiddo. How are you?" He pauses and gives me a discerning look.

"Eh, I've been better. I drank more wine than I realized while wrapping presents last night."

He chuckles and shakes his head at me. "How about I whip us up an early lunch? Are your sisters coming over soon?"

"Spencer is. Chayse will be over after her shift, around 3:00."

We fall into a comfortable silence as we both get lost in our tasks. Although it's different than being at the garage, it's familiar and exactly what I needed after yesterday. I know that it's not fair to be frustrated with Axle when we aren't dating and it's my own fault for catching feelings, but I am because I know he feels it too. He's just so used to running when shit gets hard that he doesn't see that he's doing it with me.

“So, how are things at the shop?”

“They're great. The guys are awesome, and everyone gets along well. Hell, Axle has even started to loosen up some and is starting to relax.”

“That's good. Those kids have had it hard, but especially Axle. I'm glad he's settling in here since it always seemed like Sparrow Falls was the last place he wanted to be. Do you know what they're doing for the holidays?”

“Kat has to work, so they are celebrating today with Gram. He said he's probably going to finish up some projects at the house and start moving Kat's stuff tomorrow.”

“You invited him here, didn't you?”

“I did, but you know how Axle is.”

“Hmm, don't I ever.” He looks like he's about to ask me something when the front door opens, and we hear Spencer call out.

She comes back and joins us, and we spend the entire lunch getting caught up and talking about her wedding. Dad leaves

us be, and we start working on the list of things we're going to bake.

I'm rolling out the sugar cookies and pouring all of my frustration with Axle into the dough before I realize it. I'm about to pound the ball of dough with the rolling pin again when Spencer snags it out of my hand.

"Want to talk about it?" She looks at me with open eyes. Spencer has always been amazing at listening and not judging. She gives you the space you need to get whatever is bothering you off your chest without pushing.

"I'm so fucking frustrated with Axle."

"What's going on? Is it because of what happened with Gram?"

"Yes and no. Knowing Axle, he's probably beating himself up for leaving that night and not being there for Kat. Not physically being able to stay and help her because his need to run away so he doesn't hurt someone he cares for by lashing out is so ingrained into him at this point." I blow out a breath before diving back in. "So many of his walls came slamming back up after that night. Hell, it took him a week to quit avoiding me, but even when he did, it's not been the same. And then, yesterday ..." I trail off, needing a minute to gather myself before diving back in. "Yesterday he came over when I wasn't expecting him. He hasn't done that since everything with Gram. I was so damn happy to see him that one thing led to another—"

Spencer holds up a hand, cutting me off. “Axle is hot, but I do not need to hear about your sex lives.”

I smile because if it were Chayse, she’d be demanding the dirty details.

“Anyway, he came over to see if I’d help him go pick out presents for Gram and Kat. I was happy to and even more excited that he asked me to. When we were walking to his truck, I reached out my hand and grabbed his. I’m so used to being able to touch him whenever I want since we’re usually in the privacy of our homes.”

“Let me guess. He pulled his hand out of yours?”

“Yep, which fucking hurt, but I would’ve gotten over it. But it was the awkward stilted conversation, or lack thereof, that hung over the rest of the day that’s pissing me off. I know we’re not dating, but it was an honest mistake. But him shutting me out fucking hurt and pisses me off so much more.”

“I’m sorry, Sunshine. That would hurt anyone if they were in your shoes. Did you talk to him about it?”

“Ha. That’s a big fat fucking no. The tension between us was so thick by the time I got home that I knew there was no point. Especially after he shut my offer down to come over here tomorrow if he wanted.”

“Does he know that he hurt you?”

“I don’t see how he couldn’t. You all call me Sunshine for a reason, and there was zero sun between us yesterday afternoon.”

“I’m sorry, Em. It sounds like it might be time to have one of those talks that we all dread having, but you need to know. It’s not fair for him to have you all tied up like this.”

“I know, but I don’t ever see him changing his mind on dating, so it’s more like I need to prepare myself to walk away.”

“Well, walk away or be okay with having a relationship behind closed doors for the foreseeable future. Neither option is very fun, but don’t you think it will be better to know than floating in this weird limbo space?”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m just not looking forward to it at all.”

“I don’t blame you, but I’m here for you no matter what and for whatever you may need.”

I go around the counter and give Spencer a huge hug. I sink into her embrace and let her calm wash over me. “Thanks, sissy.”

She smiles at me before giving me a kiss on each cheek, making me giggle just like it did when I was little. “Always.”

We both go back to the treats we were working on. We’re both so focused that we don’t even realize how late it is until Chayse comes bursting into the house. The rest of the evening is filled with takeout, baking, too much booze, and the three of us curled up on the couch watching *White Christmas* as Dad dozes off and on in his recliner.

We have a fire going, and I’m so content but also have the nagging dread from knowing I need to talk to Axle. But

tonight has been perfect and just what I needed. I choose to be in the moment for the rest of the night and tomorrow, when we all come together to celebrate Christmas. The day is filled with so much love and happiness that I'm so glad I chose to be present. Hopefully, everything with Axle will work out this way too, but if not, at least I know I will always have my sisters with me.

Chapter Seventeen

Axle

I'm a miserable fucking bastard, and it's all my own doing. I was such a fucking dick to Emerson the other day over something that was so inconsequential. Yeah, she grabbed my hand and I pulled away, but it's not like I haven't done the same thing to her, just only in the comfort of our homes.

I don't know why it set me off so badly. Well, I suppose if I'm being honest with myself, it's not because I was afraid that people would see. It was because I liked it. Not just because it felt nice, but I fucking loved the feel of her hand in mine and how natural it was. It freaked me out, so I defaulted to my normal behavior and retreated.

But as soon as I pulled my hand away, I saw how much it hurt her, which only confirmed that I have no idea how to be in a relationship and that she deserves so much better.

I spent the rest of the day so in my head that it wasn't until we were at the shop, looking for a present for Kat, that I realized she quit talking to me unless she was making a suggestion of what I should buy my sister.

By the time I was dropping her off at her house, I could tell she was either pissed or hurt, but I didn't know how to make it better. Accepting her offer to go to her dad's on Christmas would probably have gone a long way, but I didn't want to face all of them after walking out at Thanksgiving.

Instead of just talking to Emerson about what was going through my head, I completely shut her down. I went home and drank myself stupid that night, needing a break from everything running through my head.

When Kat woke me up the next day, I was hungover as fuck and a sad sack on top of that. But I knew the day was going to be hard enough, so I got a shower and tried to pull myself together. Gram was being moved to the nursing home at the beginning of the new year, so Kat and I went to her apartment to spend the day with her.

It was fucking heartbreaking as far as Christmas goes. Gram didn't have any idea who we were. The last time we saw her doctor, he suggested that if she was in a state where she didn't know us, to just tell her we were there to visit but not that we were family. It would just confuse and agitate her because she didn't have the ability to recognize or rationalize who we were to her. So we spent the entire day pretending the only family member we had left didn't know us.

When we left the apartment, Kat lost it and completely broke my heart. This was by far worse than losing our mother. Sure, losing her was tragic, but slowly watching our Gram slip away

is fucking miserable. We went back to the house, where I showed her all of the progress I made, but it was a sad affair.

Kat loved all of the improvements I've done with the help of Emerson, but it was bittersweet. The only reason Kat is getting the house is because Gram isn't here, which was a huge reminder to exactly what we were losing.

We exchanged gifts—Kat loving the bath stuff Emerson helped me pick out for her—before she headed home. I wandered around the house, taking in everything I was able to get done with the help of Emerson.

The next few days were lonely and miserable, and only made worse by the present I found on my front door, which obviously came from Emerson. She got me a really nice set of sockets since I was bitching about the one I had, getting me something I would love but also needed. She texted me on Christmas, wishing me a Merry Christmas, but that's all I've heard from her and it's killing me. I know I can reach out to her, but I have no idea what I would say.

I'm so fucking twisted up in my head when it comes to her. I have never wanted a forever type of relationship, but I'm starting to realize how much I need her and how miserable I am without her. I don't think I'll be good at it, but I also don't think I can stay away from her, either.

Work on Monday is awkward as fuck. For the first time since I've been home, Emerson is the one to avoid me. It fucking kills me, but she also knows I won't start anything at work. The guys can all sense the tension and avoid both of us.

Thankfully, with New Year's Eve being on Tuesday, we only work Monday and half the day on Tuesday before we have the rest of the week off.

We are done for the day Tuesday and all of the guys are heading out, but I can't handle this anymore. I hang back so that I can finally talk to Emerson. I don't mean to startle her, but there's no way I'm leaving until we talk. Especially since she has her sister's wedding tonight, and I won't be there.

"Fuck, Axle! You scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry, Sunshine. I didn't mean to do that, but I need to talk to you."

She shifts back and forth on her feet before she looks up at me, giving me her undivided attention. "Okay."

I blow out a breath and try to find the courage to say what I need to. "First, I want to say thank you for the socket set. It was an awesome present."

"You're welcome. Is that it?"

"No." I run my hand through my hair. "Fuck!" I yell, startling Emerson again, but she takes a step closer to me before she wraps her arms around my waist.

My hands drop from my hair as they pull her to me. I tuck her head under my head and breathe her in.

"Fuck, Em. I'm sorry for the other day. I'm an asshole and reacted poorly, and then I was so in my head that I treated you like shit."

“You did, but it’s okay.”

“It’s really not.”

She pulls back to look at me before nodding and taking two steps out of my reach. “Axle, I can’t keep doing this.” She motions between us, and my heart drops to my stomach. “I mean, I can’t keep us a secret. I want to be with you, Axle. I want to be able to hold your hand in public, to go out on a date, to kiss you in front of my family. I want to be with you in the light, not hide in the shadows. I want to take you as my date to my sister’s wedding tonight, to dance with you as we celebrate one of the happiest days of my sister’s life, and then go home with you and let you ravish me until the sun comes up. I want you, but I *need* you to want me just as much.”

I run my hand through my hair again as I try to respond, but my heart is racing as fast as my mind.

“If you can’t do that, then I can’t keep doing what we’re doing.”

“Emerson, I don’t know that I can.”

“Okay.”

“Okay? Just like that?”

“No, Axle. Not just like that, but I can’t and won’t force you to be with me. It hurts too fucking much.”

“Fuck. I just need some time to think, okay?”

“Sure, Axle. I need to go get ready for Spencer’s wedding. I’ll see you there.” Without looking back, Emerson heads to

the door and walks out.

I knew this was coming and was exactly what I needed to talk to her about, but of course, I fucking froze like normal.



Going to Maverick and Spencer's wedding is the last thing I want to do, but there's no way I was going to miss it.

The ceremony is short and sweet. At first glance, you wouldn't expect Maverick and Spencer to match so well, but I don't know if I have ever seen a more balanced, well-suited pair. Seeing their love for each other makes me wish I were different.

The reception at The Tavern is growing as it opens up to more people, who are not only there to celebrate the two of them but also to welcome the new year in. Kat wasn't able to get off for the actual wedding but will be joining me a little bit, and I can't wait. I'm struggling to put on a happy face with how fucked up I am right now.

Emerson is fucking stunning. Her bridesmaid's dress is gorgeous on her. It almost looks ethereal on her as she flits and floats throughout the bar, greeting people and making sure everyone has what they need. Her hair is wild and wavy like I love, and the smoky makeup is stunning on her.

Other than a quick smile she sent my way after the ceremony, she hasn't talked to me. It pisses me off, but I only

have myself to blame. If I could've just told her how I was feeling, I could be there by her side instead of sulking in the corner, watching her.

The food, of course, is delicious and the drinks are flowing. Maverick is having an open bar with their beer for all of the wedding guests. For people who are coming to the party, he had a \$25 cover charge, which gets you as much beer as you want for the night, but they had to pay if they wanted liquor. Needless to say, it isn't long until the crowd starts to get a little rowdy.

Maverick also got a band for the night. They've just started the set and they're really good. Spencer looks stunning as she and Maverick share a first dance. I don't think I've ever seen Clint look happier than he does tonight while dancing with Spencer. After getting all the traditional dances out of the way, the band turns it up, and more bodies flood the dance floor.

Emerson and her sisters are radiant and the life of the party as they dance as if nobody is watching them. I couldn't tear my eyes away if I tried. I'm startled when a hand lands on my shoulder.

“So, when are you going to pull your head out of your ass and lock her down?” It's Maverick, with a smirk on his face and his arms crossed as he nods to the girls on the floor.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, fuck off. You know exactly what I mean. I've seen the two of you together enough to know that something is going on between you two. Also, my wild-child little sister has been

a hell of a lot more mellow lately, if not completely MIA. She was always in with the guys or your sister, bringing the party when there wasn't one."

I blow out a breath because I know he's right, and I'm fucking tired of denying it. But I don't know what to tell him.

"I don't know what to tell you, man. That girl deserves the fucking world. So much more than my emotionally stunted ass could ever give her. She's fucking sunshine personified, and I'm like the dark cloud hanging around to snuff her out."

He stares at me as if he's assessing what I said. I'm uncomfortable as fuck, but for once, I'm not going to run. I don't want to be having this conversation, but I know Maverick and Emerson have a special relationship, and I'm not going to be a dick to him on his wedding day.

"You're not really wrong that she deserves the world. She's special, and I think everyone who meets her knows that. She is also one of the best judges of character I've ever met. Don't you think you owe her a little credit if she's choosing you?"

God, I'd love to believe him, but he doesn't really know me. Thankfully, he doesn't push me anymore about it.

"Alright, I think I've given you enough of the big-brother bullshit for now. I'm going to go snag my gorgeous bride from her sisters. Maybe you could go keep Emerson entertained?"

Fuck, do I ever want to do that, but I still don't know where my head is at, and I'm not going to fuck with her. I respect her

too much to toy with her. At least, that was my plan before I saw a guy move in behind her.

At first, she turns and steps away, but whatever the asshole says has her throwing her head back and laughing. I feel my jaw tense as my fists clench, and I want nothing more than to punch the douche-canoë in the face. My anger finally wins out when he wraps his hands around her hips and they start to dance.

It's as if my feet have their own mind as I race across the dance floor towards her. The dick's back is to me, which might be his only saving grace. Emerson sees me coming and steps out of his embrace. She side-steps him and puts herself between the guy and me. He turns confused by her sudden change until he sees me barreling towards them. I can only image how murderous I look at his gall to touch my woman right in front of me.

I'm literally seething until I feel small hands slam into my chest. I'm so much taller than Emerson that I can stare right over her head at the asshole. He looks as if he wants to stand up to me, but the moment I take another step in his direction, he raises his hands as if to surrender.

He walks away, and I'd still be glaring at him if it weren't for Emerson. Her dainty hand with calluses on the palm grips my chin, forcing my face to turn down to look at her. Her eyes are blazing, but I can't tell if it's lust or frustration staring back at me.

I can't have this out with her right here. Not in front of everyone. It's her sister's wedding and I refuse to cause a scene, even though I want to flip her over my shoulder and haul her out of here like the caveman that I am. Instead, I grab her hand and head towards the hall that takes you to the back where the brewery is.

I find a door that looks like it might be Maverick's office. I'm surprised it's not locked, but I did go through a couple others on my way to find someplace more private. I don't think he'll mind too much since he just asked me what was going on with her.

I slam the door shut and lock it as I pin Emerson to it. I go to talk, but she shoves me and I take a step back.

“What the fuck are you doing, Axle?”

“I don't know, Emerson.”

She throws her hands up in the air, completely frustrated with me, as she starts to pace back and forth. She stops abruptly, squaring her shoulders as she glares down at me.

“I can't do this with you right now. I just can't. I need to be out there with my sister, but I can't handle you staring at me and looking like you want to eat me or carry me away and lock me up so you can have me all to yourself.”

“Would that really be so bad?” I take a step towards her.

She retreats for every step I take until her back is against the wall. Her pupils are blown, and she's breathing heavily. I know, I fucking know I should not touch her right now, but

she's like my own brand of the best drugs, and I'm craving the high only she can deliver.

I grip the long strands of her wavy blond hair before I pull it hard. Her head tilts back as a gasp escapes her red, full lips. I run my tongue from her collar bone up to her ear before I suck it into my mouth. She moans, and I'm fucking down.

I slam my mouth on hers while my hands slide behind her back, gripping her ass and lifting her up against the wall. I use my body to pin her against it so my hands can wander. I grab her ankles and wrap them around my back as I thrust my aching cock over her hot heat.

Her dress is flowy, so I gather it as I glide it up her legs and bunch it around her waist. I slide my fingers up her bare legs and groan when I realize she's not wearing any panties. I'm too fucking wound up to take my time with her, but thankfully, my girl doesn't mind that.

I pull the straps of her dress down, exposing her luscious tits. Even though Emerson is petite, she's got great tits with the perfect rosy buds that I can't resist pulling into my mouth. I suck hard, making her arch into me. I pinch the other nipple, rolling it between my fingers, and my other hand goes to her warm slit. Her arousal is dripping down her legs, making me growl out my approval. I'm not gentle as I thrust two fingers into her hot center, all while I keep playing with her chest.

She starts riding my fingers, causing her clit to rub against my palm and the walls of her hot pussy to tremble around my fingers. She's close, and I'm dying for her release. I pull my

head back to look at this goddess as she chases her pleasure on my fingers.

“Fuck, gorgeous. You’re so close. Be my good little slut and come on my fingers. Come so that I can lick you off them before I take my hard cock and fuck this pretty little cunt.”

Before I can even finish my sentence, she’s coming so hard that it rips a scream from her. I slam my mouth over hers to cover it, but I doubt anyone can hear us with the band playing.

I slowly bring her down as I pop the button on my pants and unzip them. I pull them down just enough to free my cock and replace my fingers with it as I thrust into her hard, seating myself to the hilt. I pause, needing a minute to calm myself, before I turn into a one-pump chump.

Finally finding my composure, I start thrusting into her dripping heat. Her pussy was fucking made for me as it squeezes me almost as if it’s trying to pull me in deeper. It’s hot as fuck as we nip and pull at each other. Seeing the desk beside us, I move over to it. I pull out, setting Emerson down on shaky legs before I turn her around and bend her forward so that her top is splayed out across the desk.

I hold her down by the back of the neck as I slam back into her. I’m hitting her so deep that it pulls her up on her toes. She’s a whimpering mess, rambling nonsense as I take us both higher. Needing to be closer to her, I lay my chest down over her back and wrap my arm up under her chest, then grab her throat. Immediately, her walls start to constrict around my dick.

It only takes a few more pumps before we're both exploding, flying high on our releases. She's gasping and shaking underneath me as her perfect little cunt milks me for all it's worth. Finally spent, I sink down on top of her and try to catch my breath. Once we've both calmed down some, I pull out and tuck myself away. Watching our cum drip out of her pink slit has my dick twitching in my pants.

I find some tissues and wipe the mess up before balling them inside another one and burying it in the bottom of the trash. When I turn back to Emerson, she's standing in front of me, putting herself back together, but she won't look at me. Immediately I know I've fucked up.

"Emerson, I—"

She holds a hand up stopping me. "Just, don't Axle. Unless you're telling me you're ready to walk back out to that party hand in hand, please don't say anything else."

"Fuck, Emerson I want to. I want to so fucking badly, I just ..." I pause, and I see the sadness fill her face.

"But you can't. I get it, Axle, but I have to go back out there. I need and want to be there for my sister. But since you can't do that for me, I need you to leave. I can't have you here this close to me if you aren't going to be with me. Especially after what just happened."

"I'm so fucking sorry, Emerson. I-I just need a little more time."

She looks fucking devastated as she looks up at me. “It’s fine, Axle. But I need some time too. Please don’t contact me unless you want to let me know what your decision is about what you want us to be.”

Before I can say or do anything, Emerson is halfway to the door. I should fucking stop her and tell her how much I need her, but I know I’m already causing her so much pain that I don’t want to fuck it up and ruin this night for her even more than I have. I follow her back to the party as I stand at the edge, watching her walk back to her sisters and being the brilliant sunshine bringing smiles to all of their faces.

Needing to get out of here and get my head straight, I leave, knowing that even though I’m hurting her, she’s surrounded by the people who love her the most and, no matter what, my girl will be okay in the end.

Chapter Eighteen

Emerson

I try to keep my smile on my face as I make my way back to Spencer and Chayse, but it's so fucking hard. This back and forth with Axle is killing me. I know that I shouldn't have pushed his buttons and we definitely shouldn't have had sex in Maverick's office, but that's the effect he has on me. He makes me fucking crazy until the point where we're literally screwing.

Thankfully, Spencer's smile is so loved up that mine is genuine when she turns to greet me.

"Where did you slip off to, little sister?" Chayse asks with an arched brow, but I'm saved by Cash coming over to grab her hand. She smiles as he dances her towards the center of the room.

Spencer grabs my hand and tugs me towards the band. "Come on. You're not going to want to miss this." She waves at the lead singer and then tugs us back so we're standing near Cash and Chayse.

Before I even realize what's happening, Cash is down on one knee with a gorgeous ring in his hand. Chayse is crying as she nods, and the people around her explode in cheers and applause. I look over to see Spencer crying as Maverick tucks her into his side.

I'm so fucking happy for my sisters, but I'm dying inside. The tears spring free on their own accord, but Spencer takes it as tears of happiness for our sister. She grabs my hand and pulls me to her other side. I look up at her but am caught off guard when I see Maverick frowning down at me over her head. My lip wobbles, but I can't break down here.

Spencer slips out from between us, going over to give Chayse a hug. I go to follow her but am pulled back into a bear hug from Maverick. He tucks me in, and I can't help but sink into the hug, burying my head in his chest. He kisses the top of my head as he squeezes me a little tighter.

"You're so fucking strong, Emerson. Whatever is going on with you two, you're going to be okay, ya hear me?" I shouldn't be surprised that Maverick figured us out.

I take a step back and he gives me a nod, impressed with how I'm pulling myself together. I turn and pull up my bubbly self, even though I'd rather be anywhere else right now.

I bound over to my sisters and throw myself at them. They both laugh as I almost tackle us to the floor. Cash is standing there and steadies us. We all marvel over the gorgeous ring as the band kicks back up. We dance for a few more songs, but

I'm so fucking relieved when they tell me they are going to head out.

I don't have to stay any longer, and I couldn't be happier. Kat hasn't made it yet, and when I get to my purse and check my phone, I see a text telling me she's staying in tonight. She had a bad shift and isn't in the mood for a crowd, and I'm so relieved. I snag my coat, say goodbye to a few people, and escape out the door. It's so cold, but it's also a gorgeous night.

I should go home, but there are too many memories of Axle there. There are no safe spaces for me anymore that don't include memories of Axle. I should go home and change, but my anxiety is too bad. I'll just drive myself crazy if I go home now, so I head to the shop.

As soon as the door closes behind me, I inhale a deep breath that settles into my bones. I've been coming to the garage since I could walk. It's my safe space just as much as my childhood home is. I head back to my tiny office and strip out of my gorgeous dress, then slide on a spare change of clothes that I keep here in case.

I head out into the shop and crank up some music as I head to the last bay. I've kind of taken over this bay with a side project for one of the guys I met a few years ago at a car show. He found an awesome old Chevy truck that he brought to me to restore. I fucking love this truck and have been having a blast working on it.

I have all of the body work done and it runs like a beauty, but now I get to do my favorite part, which is painting it and

bringing it back to life. I raise it up so that I don't have to hunch over while I put the tape on the truck. It's going to be a gorgeous forest-green with gold pinstripe details. It might not be the most traditional color for the truck, but it's going to be beautiful when it's all done.

Even though it's getting late, I have no idea as I lose myself in the task at hand. I needed this more than I realized. Everything with Axle has me so twisted up. I know with all of my heart that I'm in love with him, and I truly believe he's in love with me too.

But I also know his past. I know how verbally abusive his dad had been before he left. I know how awful it was when he tragically lost his mom. I know how angry he was as a teenager, which earned him a bad reputation.

He was told for years that he was never enough and wouldn't amount to anything. That he wasn't worth staying for. I know he thinks he's damaged, but he's not. Sure, he has some rough edges, but he's so fucking good too. He may have left, but as soon as he knew Gram and Kat needed him, he uprooted his life and came back. He spent months remodeling his childhood home so that it could be the dream home for his baby sister. He left a really good job, where he was a manager, to come somewhere he'd never get that option.

I know I'm asking a lot of him by taking a chance when not many have done the same for him, but I want him and I'm willing to fight for him. But I can never convince him that he's good enough. Only he can do that for himself, and until he

can, I don't see how we can work. I can't keep living in this limbo with him.

Even though it kills me to take a step back from him, I need him to make up his mind so that I can know either way. I hope like hell he chooses me—chooses *us*—but I can't stand not knowing anymore. I need more than the quiet touches and the stolen moments we hide away from the world.

I want to go on double dates with my sisters. Hang out at my dad's and be able to kiss him or curl up by his side. Have movie nights with Kat while I snuggle with Axle. I get him when it's just us, but I want him all the other times too.

I'm just pulling out my phone to switch the song when I hear a weird noise. It sounds hydraulic and high-pitched as metal grates on metal. I look around the shop but don't see anything out of place. That's when I notice it looks like the truck is shaking some. I look under the truck when, all of a sudden, a horrible noise screeches through the air and the truck lurches.

Before I can move, the titling truck frame smacks me in the head, sending me sprawling backwards. I moan as I feel something warm and wet sliding down my face. I reach my hand up and pull away blood-soaked fingers. My stomach instantly heaves, whether it's from the knock on the head or the blood on my fingers.

Before I can help myself, I'm spilling my guts on the floor beside me. I vomit violently as the throbbing in my head explodes. I'm so caught up in being sick that I don't notice the truck tilting more.

Blinding pain shoots up from my legs as metal crunching rings in the air, along with the scream ripped out of my throat. The pain is so excruciating that it causes me to heave again, but I have nothing left. I'm sobbing as I wipe the back of my hand across my mouth.

I look down and see my legs pinned beneath the truck. I have no fucking idea what happened, or how the truck is no longer on the lift but is instead pinning my legs to the floor. Everything hurts so bad that I find it's hard to keep my eyes open.

I don't know how long I've passed out, but when I wake up, my head is exploding and there's a pool of blood seeping out from where my legs are pinned under the truck. I try wiggling my feet, but there's no moving this truck and I have no idea if it works. All I know is pain.

I'm sobbing, trying to figure out what to do, when I remember I had my phone in my hands when the truck hit my head. I look around me and see it just out of my reach beside me. I stretch my hand out, but it hurts too much to move. I know I need to try and get it if I want someone to come help me, but before I can, I pass out again, welcoming the dark that takes away my pain.

I keep drifting in and out until I hear my phone ringing. I snap my eyes open and see Axle's name on the screen. I need to get my phone. If I can just reach it, I know he'll come help me. I stretch and a scream rips out of me, but I get my phone. I slide the answer key before a sob racks my body.

I can hear Axle yelling, but I didn't get the phone close enough to grab. I try to reach again, but the pain is too much and I pass out again. I don't think I'm out long, but I can hear Axle yelling through the phone.

"Axle, pl-please help me," I sob because there's not much else I can do before passing out again.

The next time I wake, it's because someone is yelling at me.

"Emerson, baby, please open your fucking eyes. Please, baby."

My eyes flutter open, and I see the most handsome face I have ever seen in my life. Axle is here, and the relief of knowing I'm going to be okay washes over me. I try to reach my hand to his face, but everything fucking hurts.

"Shhh, you're going to be okay, Emerson. The ambulance will be here any minute. You're going to be okay. You have to be."

"You came." I gasp in between crying.

"Of course I came. I might be an idiot, but I'll always come when you need me, baby. I love you, Emerson. That's why I was calling you. I'm an idiot, but I'm not dumb enough to let you slip through my hands. You make me a better man. You push me in all the best ways, even when you're pushing my buttons. I *need* you in my life, and I'm so fucking lucky that you chose me."

Even though the pain is damn near blinding, I can feel the smile spread across my face. I try to reach up again, but it

hurts too fucking much.

“I love you too, Axle.” I try to keep my eyes open, but I just can’t hold on any longer.

His hands grip my face as his lips brush against mine before I succumb to the darkness again.

I briefly wake up when the EMTs and firefighters get there, but the pain is too hard to fight. I know I’m okay the entire time, though, because Axle refuses to leave my side. The rest of my memories are flashes of bits and pieces: riding in the ambulance, being surrounded by people in the ER, and finally waking up in a hospital bed. But every time I open my eyes, Axle is there and I know I’ll be okay.

Chapter Nineteen

Axle

This has been the worst fucking night of my life. I left the reception but was too keyed up to go home, so I decided to go for a drive. We got a lot of snow recently, but the roads were clear and the night was still young, so I headed out of town to try and find some solace in the night.

I had been driving aimlessly for about an hour when I realized that maybe I should trust Emerson. She sees something in me that I don't, but Maverick was right when he said she was a good judge of character. That girl knows her mind, and she's got a heart of gold. If she sees something in me, maybe I should lean into it.

I know I've always seen myself as a fuck-up, but I'm not that punkass, angry-as-fuck-teenager anymore. I'm a functioning, responsible adult. I work hard, pay my bills, and am actually a well-standing, contributing member of society.

I know I'm not going to start believing overnight that I'm an awesome person, but I can start believing Emerson and what

she sees in me. And hopefully, I'll learn to see myself the same way she does.

I turn my truck back towards town and back to the woman who holds my heart in her hands. I need to tell her that even though I feel like I'll be shit at it, I want her and I want to try being with her and being the man she deserves.

Even though I've been driving around for about an hour, I haven't made it very far outside of Sparrow Falls. I pull out my phone to call Emerson, but I don't have any service. I toss it on the dash and figure I can call once I get closer to town.

I'm just getting into town when I get enough service to call. The phone rings, and I'm afraid it's going to go to voicemail, when it finally connects and the blood freezes in my veins. All I can hear is Emerson sobbing.

“Sunshine, what's wrong?”

She doesn't answer, but I can hear her crying harder. My girl is a badass, and although I've seen her cry a handful of times, I've never heard anything like this.

“Emerson! Baby, what's going on?”

She's still crying, but I can also hear her whimpering as if she's in pain. I need her to answer me, so I can get to her. I'm fucking terrified as I tear through town. I'm not sure where to go, but knowing Emerson and the night we had, it's a good bet that she's at the garage.

“Baby, are you at the garage? I need to know where you are so I can get to you.”

But she doesn't answer. She's still crying, but then I hear the worst sound I've ever heard in my life. Emerson lets out a blood-curdling scream that almost makes me wreck my truck, before she's silent and I can't hear anything else.

I blow through a few stop lights as I race to my girl. I know that whatever I walk into is not going to be good, but I'm praying that—whatever has happened—she's okay. I know I should call an ambulance, but I can't make myself hang up. The shop isn't too far from downtown, and I'm whipping into the parking lot in minutes.

I race to the door and try ripping it open, but it's locked. If I wasn't so fucking scared, I'd be proud of my good girl for keeping the door locked and doing what she can to keep herself safe while she's here late at night. But right now, my fear is winning out as I try and get the key in the lock but fumble a few times before ripping it open.

When I finally get inside, all I can see is the lift bent at a weird angle and the truck Emerson's been working on flipped on the side. I can't see her anywhere, but my heart stops when I realize the only place she can be is somewhere under the truck.

I run over to the truck and race around the side to find Emerson with her legs pinned under the truck and laying in a pool of blood. There's blood covering her face from a nasty gash on her forehead and more pooling from under the truck, which must be coming from one or both of her legs. And under all of that blood, she is so unbelievably pale.

I stumble as I make my way over to her. She has to be okay because there's no fucking way I will be if she leaves me. I fall to my knees by her side and check for a pulse as I watch her chest. Thank fuck she's still breathing and I can feel her heart beat, but it seems slower than it should be.

“Emerson, baby, please open your fucking eyes. Please, baby.”

I call 911 and briefly tell them what's going on, and to get an ambulance and firetruck here ASAP. They tell me to stay on the line, but there's no way I can focus on them with my love like this. Her eyes start fluttering open, and relief floods through my body.

“Shhh, you're going to be okay, Emerson. The ambulance will be here any minute. You're going to be okay. You have to be.” I'm stroking her arm, too afraid to touch her anywhere else so I don't cause her more pain.

“You came.” She gasps in between sobs, and it takes everything in me not to break down with her.

“Of course I came. I might be an idiot, but I'll always come when you need me baby. I love you, Emerson. That's why I was calling you. I'm an idiot, but I'm not dumb enough to let you slip through my hands. You make me a better man. You push me in all the best ways, even when you're pushing my buttons. I *need* you in my life, and I'm so fucking lucky that you chose me.”

I never thought I could be as happy as I am terrified until Emerson's face splits in a smile and she says the three words I

never thought I'd ever deserve to hear, especially from her.

“I love you too, Axle.”

Not being able to keep my distance any longer, I lean forward and press the most gentle kiss on her soft lips. She sighs contently before passing out again. I start to freak out, but then my brain recognizes the sirens and the lights flashing through the room, and I turn to see the cavalry has arrived.

Even though I don't want to leave her side for a minute, I jump up and slam my hand to open one of the garage bay doors. EMTs and firefighters come pouring in, assessing the situation. I run back to Emerson, not being able to move away.

“Sir, I need you to back up.”

“Respectfully, you can fuck off. I'll stay out of your way, but I'm not leaving her side.”

“Sir, I understand your concern, but I need five minutes to assess her head and neck. I need to stabilize her spine before we can even think about moving her. I know she's Clint's daughter. Have you called him yet?”

I scrub my hands down my face. “Fuck. No, I haven't. I'll call him now, but that's all the more time you get before I come back over here.”

He gives me one quick nod as he gets to work, and I make the worst phone call I've ever had to make in my life.

Clint answers the phone on the third ring, sounding groggy. “Axle, is everything okay, son?”

“Um ... Hey, Clint. I wish I could say it was, but Emerson’s hurt and it’s really fucking bad. I called her because we had a fight, and when she answered, I knew something was wrong. I’m at the shop, and she’s pinned under a truck right now.”

“What!? What the hell was she thinking being there so late? Where are you now? Where’s my baby?”

“The EMTs and firefighters just got here, and they’re working on getting her out from under the truck. I think they’re ready to lift the truck and pull her out. I overheard them say something about Sparrow Falls hospital. Can you call Chayse and Spencer? If you guys can meet us there, maybe Chayse can get us more information once she’s with the doctors. I’m going to ride over in the ambulance with her.”

“Yes, I’ll tell the girls and we’ll meet you there. Please keep me updated, Axle.”

“I will, Clint. I promise.”

I hang up the phone and watch as the firefighters lift the truck and the EMTs pull her out from underneath it. There’s so much blood, but they tied tourniquets on both of her legs, so thankfully, the blood seems to be under control.

Everyone moves so fast as a few splint her legs and wrap them in gauze before they turn her and slide her on a backboard. One of them bandages her head, and then they’re lifting her and heading for the ambulance.

I follow by her side and hold her hand. She keeps coming in and out of consciousness, but they told me that’s to be

expected with the laceration on her head. I'm only half hearing what they're saying, more concerned with watching her chest rise and fall.

We make it to the hospital, and it's pure chaos as people swarm her, cutting clothes off and yelling out information to each other. I get shoved into a corner, but they don't make me leave and I'm pretty sure I have Landon to thank for that. He's working diligently on Emerson, even though I'm sure this is hard as fuck for him.

I have no idea what anything they're saying means and am so fucking relieved when Chayse comes bursting in. She looks fierce as fuck as she storms back, demanding to know what's going on. One of the doctors tries to tell her that she should wait outside, which is immediately shot down by a resounding, "Fuck off."

A few people pause before Landon snaps at them, and everyone gets back to what they're working on.

Chayse is shoved toward the side, but I can tell it's killing her not to help and that she's on the edge of losing it. I snag her arm and pull her to me, tucking her into my side. She stiffens before looking up and realizing it's me. Thankfully, she doesn't take her frustration out on me but rather seems to take comfort from our embrace. I need it just as much if not more as I watch all of these people fight for my girl.

I hear something about her being stable enough to go to get scans as they start readying her to move. Chayse steps back, so I follow suit as they wheel her out. She slumps against me, the

fight from earlier draining as tears spill over. That scares me more than anything—watching this woman, who is as tough as nails, break down.

“Level with me, Chayse. How bad is it?”

“It’s bad, Ax, but not as bad as it could’ve been. My guess is that the truck actually stopped her from bleeding out. It would’ve been a lot worse if you hadn’t gotten to her. But she’s got a long road ahead of her. She’s got a concussion and multiple fractures to her legs. She’s going to get a CT to make sure she doesn’t have too much swelling, and if she gets the all-clear, they’ll probably take her right to surgery. She’s going to have a lot of hardware in her legs if she’s lucky. If she’s not, she could lose one or both of her legs.”

I blow out a breath at the thought of my girl losing her legs, and the thought is too much for Chayse as she breaks down.

“Come on. Let’s go out to the waiting room. Like I said, if she doesn’t have too much swelling, they’ll take her right to surgery. And if she does, they’ll take her straight to the ICU. We might as well go give everyone an update.”

I nod and follow Chayse through the maze of halls out to the waiting room, where the rest of Emerson’s family and my sister are waiting. Kat runs into my arms, sobbing as I pull her close. I squeeze her close and try to keep the little bit of control I have left as I usher her over to Chayse, so she can hear the update.

The next few hours are excruciating. Emerson’s brain has minor swelling, so they take her straight to surgery. The doctor

sends out a nurse to tell us it will be hours before they have any updates and urge us to head home and get some sleep. Spencer and Maverick reluctantly leave, only after making us promise to call her as soon as we hear something. Chayse fights Cash tooth and nail until Landon comes out and tells her to take her crazyass home. He is working the night shift and will call her with any and all updates, but says she is making the other nurses nervous, which is a distraction for them to do the job they need to. As they leave, I see Cash turn his head and mouth, *Thank you* over his shoulder. His best friend Reid follows them out, leaving me, Clint, and Kat.

I know Kat already had a rough shift and this is not helping her any. She doesn't want to leave, but between Clint and me, we convince her to go home. I'm a little worried about her driving this late after the day she had, but she promises to text me when she gets home.

It's been two hours since everyone left and three since they took Emerson back to surgery. Landon or one of the other nurses have come out when they can to give us updates. They don't have much to say, but finally, the nurse comes out and says the doctors are very optimistic about the surgery and saving Emerson's legs. It's still early, but right now, the course they are on is fixing the damage and saving both legs, and she seems to be responding well.

Clint lets out a relieved sigh before he wraps his arm around my shoulder and pulls me into a back-slapping hug. And it's this hug that pushes me over my breaking point. I slump into him as everything I've been holding in comes pouring out. I

cry like I've never cried before. I've felt like I haven't been able to breathe since she answered the phone, but now I'm finally able to.

I have no idea how long we stand there, but when I straighten, I'm completely fucking exhausted. I slump into a chair as Clint follows and sits beside me. I take a steadying breath before turning to him and squaring my shoulders.

“Clint, I'm in love with your daughter.”

He lets out a chuckle before he claps me on the shoulder, and I'm completely fucking shocked. That's not really how I thought he was going to react. I didn't think he would necessarily be pissed, but I also didn't think he would laugh about it. He knows me as much as my family and Emerson, so he knows all of my flaws and bad traits.

“Axle, I know. Quit looking so forlorn. I'm elated for you two. I couldn't pick a better match for either of you. Plus, you're both so damn good for each other.”

I lean back in my chair as I try to take in everything he's saying. Of course, I know how good for me Emerson is, but I never thought I brought any value to her life.

Seeing the disbelief on my face, Clint chuckles again. “Son, quit freaking out. Well, unless you haven't told her. She should be the first one to hear those words from you.”

“I did tell her. I told you we had a fight. I left the reception and went for a drive, where I realized how much of an idiot I was being. I turned around and called her the first minute I had

cell service to find out where she was. I was going to tell her how much I loved her and wanted everything with her. My world almost shattered when I answered the phone to her sobs.

“I was so fucking scared. I felt like the moment I realized everything I needed and wanted was right there in front of me, the universe was trying to take her away from me. When I got to the shop and saw her lying in the pool of blood, pinned under the truck, I almost fucking lost it. But I could feel her pulse and see her breathing.

“Once she opened her eyes, I told her how much I loved her and needed her. We both know how stubborn she is. There was no way she could leave me after I finally pulled my head out of my ass. And the best part ... Even though our world would never be the same as we know it, she fucking loves me too.”

“Of course she loves you, Axle. I know you have some misconceived notions about yourself—and not all of those were planted in your mind on your own—but you’re not nearly as bad or a lost cause as you think you are. You’re good for my girl, but even more importantly, you’re good *to* her as well. You don’t even realize how well you treat her or all the small things you do for her on a daily basis.

“But my baby is going to need you more than ever, Axle. You both are going to have a long road ahead of you, but with you by her side, I know she’s going to be okay. I love you, son. Always have, but this is just the icing on the cake for this old man.”

His warm smile helps break some of the constant self-loathing and doubt that's hung over my head for years.

It's another three hours before Emerson comes out of surgery, but the doctors are confident in their work and Emerson's recovery. They have her settled in the ICU and are keeping her sedated. Her brain still has some light swelling, and the surgery alone was very traumatic. They wanted to give her body a little more time to reset before lifting the sedatives.

We move up to the waiting room for the ICU and grab a cup of coffee. It's awful, but I need anything that's going to help me stay awake until I can see my girl again. One of the nurses from the ICU comes out and informs us that we can go to see Emerson two at a time, starting at 8:00 a.m.

Since it's almost 7:00 a.m., Clint calls Chayse and Spencer to give them the good news. I shoot a text to Kat, not wanting to wake her with a phone call if she's sleeping. By the time we can go in and see Emerson, all of her people are sitting in the waiting room. As soon as the clock hits 8:00, I'm out of my chair, pushing through the ICU doors.

A nurse looks up from the desk situated in the middle of a giant open room with U-shaped bays on the three walls that surround it. She points towards a room directly in front of the desk, and I nod as I head towards the woman I love.

She looks so small in the bed that it draws me up short. Her forehead is bandaged, but I can see a bruise spreading out from beneath it, heading towards her eye. Her legs are covered by blankets, but I can tell there's a lot going on underneath.

I head to the bed and pull up a chair beside it so I can get as close to my girl as I can. I squeeze the hand that doesn't have an IV in it as I lean forward and place a chaste kiss on her lips. I want more than anything for her to open her eyes, but she doesn't. I try to remind myself that sleep is good for her and it's what her body needs to heal.

Clint grabs a chair on the other side of the bed and strokes her hair out of her face. I have no idea how that man looks as strong and steady as he does after everything we've gone through since yesterday, but I try to pull some of his strength in.

He was right that we have a long road ahead of us, but I'll be right by her side, making sure I do everything in my power to help her get healthy again.

She stirs, and when her eyes finally open, a small smile pulls the corners of her mouth up.

"Hi, baby. You really fucking scared us."

"I'm sorry."

"Ssh, don't worry about it. I love you, baby."

"I love you too, Axle."

I let out a shaky exhale as it sets my heart on fire, and I know for the first time that my girl is going to be okay. I lean forward and kiss her again before she turns to her dad and gives him another smile. She tries to get us to tell her what was going on, but before I can even explain anything, she is out again.

There will be plenty of time ahead of us to talk about everything and what our next steps going forward will be, but for now, I'm completely content knowing my girl loves me and the team behind her will do everything to get her healthy again.

Chapter Twenty

Emerson

The last month has been the hardest month of my life. Everything changed for me on New Year's Eve. Sure, the accident was fucking awful and causes me daily pain, but having Axle realize what I mean to him was amazing. Hearing him tell me he loves me gave me everything I needed to fight.

And fight is exactly what I've done for the past month, even when I really didn't want to or the pain felt like it was about to cripple me. I have the absolute best support system and know that I always will.

I didn't move from the bed for the first week I was in the hospital. I had several rods and even more pins and screws in my legs. The orthopedic surgeons pieced my crushed bones back together, and they needed time to make sure everything was set.

But once that first week was over, the work really started. I've had to relearn everything. I'm currently wheelchair bound and probably will be for at least a few more months. I also haven't gone home since the accident. Everyone at the hospital

is wonderful, but getting home has been a huge motivator to listen to the doctors and put the work in.

My home was one of the issues I was trying to figure out for when I get my get-out-of-jail card. I didn't have any way to get in my house with my wheelchair. Knowing that, my PT and OT therapists have been working with me to be able to get up the three steps to get in the front door.

Cash offered to build me a ramp, but I know how busy he is and I didn't want to be a burden to him. Dad or Axle could probably do it, but they've been my shadows since day one. One of them is here at all times. My dad takes turns running the shop with Axle, rotating days. When they aren't at the shop, they're with me to help me with all of my therapy and also to learn how to help me once I leave the hospital.

Axle is here so much, and because of Chayse working here and being a valued employee, they put me in a private room and brought a bed up for Axle. He spends most nights with me, and although I feel bad about it, I wouldn't be doing as well if he weren't here.

But hopefully I won't be here much longer. I've consistently been able to make it up three steps on multiple attempts for the past three days. I haven't told Axle or my dad about it yet, but I'm so fucking excited. That's one of the biggest hurdles I have with going home. The other is going to be the actual layout of the house.

My bedroom is on the second floor. There is a guest bedroom downstairs, but it only has a half-bath, which never

really made sense to me. There are two other full baths in the house, but they're both upstairs.

Kat offered for me to come stay with her at her house, but I really want to go home. She's so busy that I don't want to be an added burden to her. She's been kind enough to insist on Axle staying there until we got everything else figured out with my health.

Not only have my family come to visit me and help brighten my days, but all of the guys from the shops have come to see me. The home-cooked meals from some of their wives have been greatly appreciated.

Speaking of food, I'm fully blaming Maverick and Spencer for the almost ten pounds I've gained since I came into the hospital. The two of them always have food with them when they come and visit me.

I feel fucking awful that I ruined their wedding night. When I tried to apologize, Maverick got so pissed that he yelled at me. Of course, Spencer stepped in and tried calming things down.

I ended up waking up fully by the afternoon on New Year's Day. I was coherent enough and moved out of the ICU pretty quickly with the confidence of the doctors that I wouldn't need to stay there for any reason.

When Spencer and Maverick came to see me, I insisted on them going on their honeymoon. It took a fuck ton of talking before I won out by telling them I'd never forgive myself if

they missed it. Sure, the guilt trip was probably a little dramatic, but it worked.

I still felt bad that one of the conditions of them going was to Face-time them every day. It was actually Maverick's idea, but knowing my sister well, he knew that's what she would need to put her mind at ease with being away from me. It was a small and easy concession to make if it meant that my sister got the honeymoon she deserved.

I was just hanging up with Spencer when Axle came into the room. He gave me a kiss before sliding onto the bed with me. He is always so careful with me, that I'm missing my domineering caveman, but I know it will be a while before I get to see that side of him again.

With both tibia and fibula having multiple breaks, it was a miracle the doctors were able to piece them back together. The only good thing was that when the truck fell, it didn't completely crush my bones but rather resulted in several clean breaks that pieced together better than they could have hoped for.

When I found out that my family had to wait hours to learn whether or not my legs could be saved, I felt awful for them. Thanks to my concussion, I don't really remember a whole lot from that night. I never knew it was a question of whether or not my legs could be saved. I can't imagine the anxiety and turmoil they all faced as they sat there, waiting for any scrap of information on how I was doing.

The one thing I do remember with perfect clarity from that night is Axle telling me he loved me. I couldn't believe it, but I honestly think it was what guided me to keep fighting. I couldn't just give up when I knew how much it took for him to tell me those three words.

He's been absolutely amazing since then. It's like he's finally letting everyone see the side of himself that he only ever showed me, Kat, and Gram. I love nothing more than seeing the relationships he's building with my family. Of course, he's known Spencer and Chayse for years, but he was never close to them. They were more acquaintances than friends.

Now, I have to all but kick Chayse out when she comes and visits me because the two of them together drive me nuts. It's almost like my relationship with Maverick, and as much as they tease me and gang up on me, making me crazy, I absolutely love seeing how much they have each other's backs.

Being Chayse's little sister has also been a godsend. Not that the staff at Sparrow Falls aren't top-notch, but having one of their own's family to take care of has them treating me like I'm a celebrity. I'm never left long if I need something.

Having Chayse be a nurse has also been helpful in convincing PT, OT, and my ortho doctors to let me go home sooner than other patients would be able to. Axle has watched and taken many lessons from the nurse on how to care for my bandages and help bathe me, but it's nice knowing that we have Chayse to help us and be a backup for us.

I'm just getting back to my room from a grueling PT session when Axle shows up with food. He must've stopped at The Tavern after work on his way here. Maverick has been trying out new recipes to update his winter menu to his spring menu and using me as a guinea pig.

I make grabby-hand motions at Axle, who just laughs.

"Gimme, gimme, gimme. I'm starving." I whine, causing him to laugh as he pulls the tray over my bed and sets the food on it.

But instead of dishing out my delicious dinner, he walks closer to me and cups my face before he kisses the breath from my lungs. "Hi, Sunshine. I missed you."

"Hi, babe. I missed you too. How was work today?"

"It was good. Convincing Torin to come help out at the shop was a brilliant idea. He already gets along great with the guys, and it's nice being able to hand over a car and trust that he knows what he's doing."

"So, are you any closer to convincing him to come work for us full-time?"

"Work for *you*, Sunshine. I'm just the fill-in until you're back, barking orders and whipping our asses into shape."

We both laugh as he dishes out our food.

"No, Axle. I might be the boss, but you're my partner in every way. When I think of the shop, that's exactly how I think of your role there. Even though I do love being the boss of

you, it's not necessary. You love that place just as much as I do.”

“I really do. So, I think you'll be glad to know that I'm pretty sure I have him convinced.”

“That's great! I'd love to have him with us. So, have you heard anything from the manufacturer about that lift? With it being newer than most of the other ones in the shop, I highly doubt the malfunction was from overuse or age like they first suggested.”

“I did, and they've been kind of giving me the runaround. But, I have some good news about that. I've been doing my own research into the lift, and you're not the first person to have it malfunction on them the way it did for you. I actually found a whole forum online about it. I reached out and was put in contact with a lawyer.”

“A lawyer? Really?”

“Really. Apparently, other people had the same idea I had once they weren't getting anywhere with the manufacturer, so they took to the internet to try and get some answers.” He blows out a breath, looking extremely sad. “Emerson, some of these people's stories are fucking tragic. There have been quite a few deaths and several very severe injuries.”

I suck in a breath as my heart breaks a little.

“There were also several pictures of the faulty lifts. There were three that I found that failed in the same exact way yours did, but I'm sure there's more than that. Most people didn't

think to take a picture of it, but many commented that theirs looked the same after the incidents, which is where the lawyer comes in.

“Now, all that legal bullshit went over my head, but what I got from the conversation is that people are suing the company for negligence. They may even try for manslaughter in a few cases if they can prove the company knew about the possible failure with the lifts but moved ahead with production and sales of it.”

“Holy shit, Axle. That’s fucking insane.”

“It is. I’ve only talked to the lawyer over the phone, but they said they would be in touch via email shortly. They want the pictures I took, and they want to talk to you as well.”

“Okay, I can do that. I’m not sure how much help I’ll be, but if we can prevent this from happening to anyone else, I’ll do whatever I can.”

We both fall into a content silence as we eat our food. The only sound you can hear is chewing and the occasional moan, mostly from me, because of how good everything tastes. When I look up, Axle’s eyes are filled with lust, but I know he won’t act on it.

I need him, but there’s no way he’ll risk hurting me. I tried to get him to let me give him a hand job or a blow job, but he’s been adamant about not doing either in fear that it will in some way hurt me. He’s probably going to kill me when I tell him I asked my PT if either option was off the table and she laughed before giving me the go ahead.

She also said that he could return the favor, but only with his hands, as if that wouldn't be very fun or fulfilling for me. What she doesn't know is that my man is excellent with those hands, and I can't wait to feel them on my body.

“So, I had an interesting conversation with my PT today, and I got cleared for a couple of things.”

“That's fucking awesome, Sunshine. What did they clear you to do?”

“I was cleared to give you blow jobs and hand jobs.”

Axle spits his drink out of his mouth as I cackle at his reaction. I didn't mean to tell him that right after he took a drink, but this was even better than how I imagined it going down in my mind.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

Pulling out my phone, I open up my photo gallery and pull up the paper signed by my doctor for him to see.

“Oh my god, you're fucking serious. I'm never going to be able to look her in the eye again.” He looks at me incredulously. “Also, even with you being cleared, it's not happening here. It can wait until we go home. I don't need it when all I need is you, happy and healthy.”

“That's sweet, and I figured you'd say that. Swipe to the next picture.”

He does and reads what else I'm cleared for. Once he realizes I get to go home this week, he lets out a whoop before slamming his mouth down on mine.

“Fuck yeah, baby. I’m so proud of you.”

We talk a little more and snuggle before passing out.

The rest of the week goes by in a blur while I try to do what I can to be as prepared as possible to go home on Friday.

Axle spends Friday with me so that he can be there to talk to every doctor, nurse, and therapist helping me prepare to go home that day. It is an information overload, and I’m glad to have him there with me. He is just as anxious to get me home as I am to be there, but it isn’t until we pull into my driveway that I realize why.

Part of my front stairs has been turned into a ramp. When I turn to Axle, he gives me a sheepish grin and a shrug.

“After your surgery, we didn’t really know when you would be able to come home or if you’d ever have function in your legs like you did before the accident, but we didn’t want that to stop you from coming home. So, Cash and Reid have been helping me build the ramp and get a few other things ready for when we did get the go ahead to bring you home.”

“Oh my god, Axle. You guys didn’t have to do that, but I’m glad you did.”

He smiles before leaning over and giving me a quick kiss. “Come on, baby. Let’s go home.”

Axle jumps out of the truck and runs around it to my side. He grabs my wheelchair out of the back before he helps me swing my legs out of the truck and lower into the seat. I let

him push me up the ramp, and I sigh as he pushes me across the threshold into my house.

I've never been so happy to be home in my life as I am now.

“Come on. Let's go put your stuff in the bedroom downstairs.”

I wheel down the hallway and stop as soon as I make it through the bedroom door. The room looks the same, but it looks bigger too. There's definitely never been that much room around the bed before. When I turn a questioning eye his way, he tips his head towards the bathroom door.

I wheel over and push it open, and my jaw drops. I have no idea how he pulled it off, but Axle somehow built an addition onto this room in a month. The room looks bigger because it is. They must have taken the space the old bathroom was in and turned it into the room so I could maneuver my chair around easier. Then they built a whole new master bathroom.

I turn back towards him, with tears streaming down my face, completely shocked. “How?” I mumble out.

“A lot of people love you, Sunshine. I never would've been able to pull it off without Cash and Reid. They were able to push the building permit through, something with it being an emergency filing. Once that happened, they dedicated as many of their guys and spent as much time as they could themselves here, helping me with it. Chayse and Spencer did a lot of the work too. Spencer insisted on doing the tile work, even if she wasn't as efficient or quite as good as you. It was a team effort, but everyone wanted you to have the ability to come

home to a safe space, where you could be able to thrive as soon as you were ready.”

I’m full-on sobbing as I look at all of the work my family and friends did for me. It’s amazing, and I don’t even know how to begin to thank them all. Even though I tried not to show it, I was definitely worried about getting around this room and having to have Axle carry me upstairs to use that bathroom.

I spin around again and roll into the bathroom so that I can check everything out. It’s absolutely stunning, and I can’t wait to use it. When I roll back out to my new room, Axle is at the end of the bed on one knee, and I lose it all over again.

“Emerson Rose Wilson, you are hands down the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and I’m glad you were strong enough to fight for the both of us. I never thought I’d be here, but I could never in my life imagine asking any other woman to be my wife. So, what do you say, Sunshine? Will you marry me?”

I’m sobbing and nodding as I wheel over to him.

He leans up and gives me a long, breathtaking kiss before pulling back to slide the ring on my finger.

“Yes, I’ll marry you, Axle.”

His smile could light up the room, but instead, it fills my soul with so much joy.

“I love you so much, and I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you, Sunshine.”

“Right back at ya, Axhole.”

I smirk, and we both burst out laughing. I never could have made it through everything life has thrown at me this past month without this man, and now, I’m glad I’ll never have to worry about not having him for the rest of my life.

Chapter Twenty-one

Emerson

I t's been three long, grueling, but also completely mind-blowing months since Axle brought me home. Even though I'm home, I have PT and OT three days a week, usually all day long. Most of the time, Axle or my dad will drive me to the hospital for them. Sometimes they'll stay, and other days they'll drop me off and head to the shop.

The shop is going strong, even though I'm not there to help run it or keep up with our schedule. Axle was smart bringing Torin over for a visit one night after work, and as soon as I turned my pleading eyes toward him, there was no way he was telling me no to our job offer. He teased me for guilt-tripping him, but I know he's been loving working with the guys, which makes me happy to know that when I finally do get back to work, I'll have another one of my best friends surrounding me most of the week.

Axle and I continue to talk to people from the forum and the lawyers. It is heartbreakingly amazing for me to talk to some of the people who had lifts fail them like me and hear their

stories. I'm reminded every day how lucky I am. We uncover way more deaths and a lot more amputees, the longer we dig and the more we talk to the lawyer, which is completely devastating.

When February rolls around, I'm having a really hard time, and Axle and I are hit hard. Covid is on the rise and going around the nursing home. The staff does all they can to lock it down and prevent the spread, but Gram gets it. She is so sick, and finally her body loses the fight. It is fucking devastating, but to Axle and Kat, it is also a blessing in disguise. She passed peacefully. They no longer have to watch their Gram slip away from them and know she has finally found some peace.

Not only do we lose Gram in February, but I have plateaued at PT and OT, and I started having nightmares from that night of the accident. The nightmares are awful because they are twisted, fragmented memories, filled with lots of pain. I wake myself up thrashing around, or Axle will wake me up because I am sobbing or screaming. He finally convinces me to talk to someone, so I reach out to one of the other victims, who also happens to be a girl close to my age.

Her name is April, and we instantly hit it off. Not only did we both suffer traumatic injuries because of the lifts failing, but we bond over being women who work in a predominantly male field. I had it easier than April did, with how supportive my dad always has been and still is.

April comes from a rough neighborhood and got into cars while she followed her brother around and would help him boost them. When he wrecked one of the cars he stole, she decided to see if she could fix it and instantly became hooked. She joined the technical program that her school offered in high school and never looked back.

We have been talking for a few weeks, but I am still struggling. The hospital offers therapy, but I don't feel like I need it. I'm in a spiraling depression when April and Axle finally convince me to give therapy a chance. I'm not a fan at first, but after trying a couple different doctors, I find one I click with. We meet once a week, and she's been a godsend to me. She even convinced Axle to sit down and talk with her since his past has been so traumatic, and I was pleasantly surprised when he went.

March is a little better mentally, but every day is still a fight for me. I started to do walking exercises at PT. Those days are long and exhausting, but every step I take is worth how utterly exhausted I am those nights. Chayse and Cash get married on St. Patrick's Day weekend, which brings even more joy to our lives.

The weekend after their wedding, Axle and I are sitting at home when there is a knock on the door. Axle has me get it, which annoys the hell out of me. I have to transfer from the couch to my chair while that asshole has two able legs that can carry him to the door in seconds to see who is there. But as soon as I open the door, I realize why he had me answer. Standing on my porch is April.

She drops her bags and steps towards me, wrapping me in a hug. We both sob as we cling to each other. That one hug is more cathartic and healing than half my therapy appointments. It's hard to benefit from the therapy when they haven't gone through what I'm going through, even though my therapist is wonderful and really has helped.

When we finally let each other go, Axle ushers us into the living room, where we excitedly talk over each other. We spend the entire afternoon laughing and talking. I didn't know how much I needed this. April lost one of her legs to her accident, but you'd never be able to tell. She's so steady with her prosthetic and seeing her up and moving around encourages me so much. I'm so fucking thankful to Axle for getting April here.

We spend a week together, and it helps my heart and my head so much. April goes to my therapy appointments with me and gives me the push I need to keep going. We also spend some time at the shop. She is very impressed with our setup and gets along with the guys like she's always belonged there.

After our trip to the shop, I ask Axle what he thinks about offering April a job. He smirks at me before full-on laughing. He teases me that bringing her here to meet me wasn't his only motivation. He wanted to get her to the shop just as badly as me, to see how it would go before he was going to bring the same question up to me.

The owner of the shop where she worked and was injured was nice, but it was never her forever place and she knew it.

I'm so happy knowing Axle and I are on the same page. We ask her if she'd like to join us while we drive her back to the airport. She sobs before exclaiming yes so loudly that it hurts my ears.

After April's visit, Axle has a day planned for me, my sisters, and Kat. We take over my house, having a complete pamper day. At lunch, he comes home with food sent from Maverick and a stack of magazines. I don't think I've ever seen him read a magazine, but I am pleasantly surprised when he tosses them in my lap and tells me to start planning for the end of April.

When I look down, I see they were bridal magazines. Chayse is smirking as Spencer smiles sweetly at me, and Kat giggles as I have silent tears streaming down my face. When I start to protest, Axle silences me by devouring my mouth with a kiss. I have started walking around the house with a walker and can even go small distances without it all together.

He tells me how proud he is of me and how he knows I'll be ready to walk down the isle to him by the end of the month. I cry, but they are tears of joy. He tells me to eat up because after lunch, we have a day at the bridal shop downtown to try on dresses. I can't believe that this is my life, but in true Axle fashion, he knows exactly what I need when I need it.

Which brings me to my dress rehearsal. Spring in Sparrow Falls is gorgeous. Axle and I decided to get married at one of the state parks that surround Sparrow Falls. Axle and Cash built a beautiful arch for the ceremony. We draped it with

gorgeous greenery and hundreds of all kinds of white and peach colored flowers.

We are having a small wedding, so the rehearsal doesn't take long to get through. Maverick roped off one side of The Tavern, and we're all gathered here to eat food and celebrate. We're also having the reception here tomorrow. Maverick has gone all out on the food, and Cash and Chayse surprised us by hiring the band from Spencer and Maverick's wedding.

We spend the evening laughing and enjoying the company with our friends, but I am exhausted and so relieved when Axle tells me it is time to go home. I'm in my wheelchair at this point. I don't have to use it all the time, but my legs aren't strong enough to be on them for hours at a time. And I want to save as much strength for the actual wedding day.

I don't even realize I fall asleep until I Axle gently lifts me from the truck and carries me in the house. He lays me in bed, but I'm awake and needing him. "Axle, please."

"Sunshine, it's been a long day, and tomorrow is going to be even longer. We should probably just go to sleep, my love."

I groan, pulling him to me. I know if I can just kiss him, there's no way he'll deny me.

Our bodies are flush as his tongue slips into my mouth, and I moan. I love feeling his weight on me. We've been cleared to have fun with our extracurricular activities, but Axle is always concerned about hurting me. It's sweet, but I miss the way he commanded my body before the accident.

The fact that he's laying flush against me is a great sign for how the night is going to go. I thrust my hips up into his hard length. It feels so good, and I'm so close to coming already. I slide my hand between us and squeeze his throbbing cock, and it's like a flip is switched in him.

He leans up and rips his shirt over his head, and I can't help but drool at all his delicious tattoos and his gorgeous abs on display.

"Strip, Sunshine. Let me see those luscious tits."

I moan as I rip my dress over my head and unclasp my bra. I didn't wear any panties tonight, and the moment Axle realizes I've been bare, heat flares in his eyes.

He runs his fingers from my collar bone, swirling and tweaking my nipples, down, down, down to my achingly wet center. I'm already trembling, and he's barely touched me. He slides his fingers through my slit, gathering my wetness before he circles my clit and has me seconds away from coming.

"You need to come, don't you, Sunshine?"

I nod because I'm so close that I couldn't answer him if I tried. It would just come out as nonsense.

"Good. You're going to be my good girl and come on my fingers before you come on my fat cock, you got that?"

I whimper, and without warning, he thrusts his fingers inside me, making me explode. I'm a trembling mess as Axle frees himself from his jeans and spears me, filling me completely on his first thrust.

“That’s my dirty little slut. You take my dick so good. I can feel your walls clenching me so tightly. Fuck, you’re such a good fucking girl, wrapping your slick heat around my cock.”

Fuck, I love his dirty mouth. Between his words and his hard length thrusting in me, my first orgasm is still dragging on. It’s not as intense, but it has me a panting, sweaty mess as it builds again.

Axle sets an unrelenting pace, and it feels amazing. I’ve missed him and this. He’s still gentle with me, but he’s also letting himself go, and by doing that, I’m about to spiral out of control again.

“God, Emerson. I’ve missed this. Missed having you milk my cock so good with your perfect cunt. I’m not going to last much longer. Play with your clit, Sunshine. Make yourself feel good.”

I slide my hand between us and swirl it over my nub. I’m so sensitive, and it’s almost too much as I thrash my head and Axle keeps thrusting into me hard. With one more swipe, I feel my orgasm rip through me as it tears me apart. I scream as Axle bellows above me before collapsing on me, completely spent.

I try to keep my eyes open, but I’m so satiated and tired that sleep is pulling me under.

“I love you, Sunshine. I can’t fucking wait to make you mine forever tomorrow.”

I fall asleep with a smile on my face.

When I wake the next day, I'm so fucking excited for my big day. I reach over for Axle, but I find his spot cold. My hand hits something, and when I crack my eyes open, I see that it's a note from Axle. He went to meet the guys and would see me at the end of the aisle in a few hours.

Along with the note, I see a tray filled with food and gorgeous flowers. I take my time eating and showering, enjoying the peace and excitement of the morning. When I come downstairs, my sisters are there waiting for me.

We head to the salon where we meet Kat to get our hair and makeup done. The girls at the salon have champagne for us, and the morning is filled with laughs and happiness, made better when April shows up and joins us.

The rest of the morning is a whirlwind as we get ready. We head back to my house, where we meet my photographer. She takes so many pictures before we head to the wedding site. We take more pictures so that we don't have as many to take after the ceremony.

My dad is waiting there, looking dashing in his suit. We both dissolve in tears as we're overwhelmed with the emotions of the day. This man has been my rock since I was a little girl, and I know it can't be easy for him to send his last baby girl off.

When it's our turn to head down the aisle, I can't tear my eyes away from Axle. He's left his beard a little on the longer side but keeps it nice and clean for me. His hair is pulled back off his face, giving me the perfect view of his stunning

sapphire eyes that are filled with tears. A few make their way down his face, matching my own.

The ceremony is a whirlwind and before I know it, the pastor is telling Axle he can kiss his bride. In true Axle fashion, his bad boy ways choose now to shine through, kissing me so thoroughly that he has me aching for him by the time he's done. Chayse lets out a wolf whistle, causing my cheeks to heat.

We take a ton more pictures before heading over to The Tavern. Maverick shut down the bar today, only opening it for our guests. I tried telling him it wasn't necessary, but he wouldn't listen. He insisted that his "little sister" have the reception of her dreams, and he wouldn't let any drunk assholes ruin that.

The food is amazing and keeps coming all night. Maverick completely outdid himself, and we are both so grateful. The band is also amazing. We do all the traditional dances, and I'm able to dance with Axle and my sisters for a few songs before the exhaustion from being on my legs for so long starts to set in.

Always taking care of me, Axle has my dad bring my chair for me. Is it ideal being in a wheelchair at my wedding reception? No, but if it means that the rest of the day is more than I could ever dream of, it is a price I am willing to pay. One of my favorite parts of the night is watching Torin ask Kat to dance after I ribbed him about it. Those two are perfect together, and I'm glad that they are finally at this point.

So even though the year started out with a disaster and devastation, every day since has been building to this day. The most perfect day of my life, where I finally got to make Axle Jenkins my forever man.

Epilogue

Axle-Three Years Later

Cookouts at Clint's house are pure fucking chaos, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't love it. What started out as a tradition between Clint and his daughters has exploded over the years to include their own families, friends, and extended family. Clint has loved me and treated me like his son long before Emerson and I got together, but it's the love from everyone else that overwhelms me in the craziest but best possible way.

Cash and Maverick have become two of my closest friends. They hit it off with Torin, and the lot of us get together at least once a month for a guys' night. Of course, since we all get together, our women get a day to themselves as well.

It makes me laugh because on those days, we all still end up together. The guys just have their brood of kids with them, and I have my sweet little lady. We got pregnant about a year after we got married and had an even bigger shock when we found out we were pregnant again.

Spencer is about six months pregnant, and Cash spilled the beans earlier that Chayse is also pregnant. I can't believe we are all going to be having babies so close, but I couldn't be happier about it.

Being a dad was never something I thought I'd want. I didn't have a good example, and I didn't think I'd be any good at it. Emerson encouraged me to talk about it with my therapist, and I was able to work through all of my hang-ups. I never thought I'd be happier than the day I married Emerson, but the day she told me she was pregnant and the day I held our daughter were the happiest days of my life.

I can't fucking wait to go through this journey with her again. She's super excited to be experiencing it with her sister this time around. I know she's going to lose her shit once she finds out Chayse is also pregnant. I just hope I'm there to see it.

Life is better than I ever imagined it could be for me, and I owe it all to my sunshine. Not only is everything going well in our personal lives, but the shop is thriving. With April and Torin joining us, we have the best crew around and everyone knows it.

We also joined the lawsuit against the manufacturer of the lift that failed and injured Emerson. They were found at fault and had to pay restitution to all of the injured and family members of the deceased.

With the extra money, Emerson was able to expand the shop and focus solely on her custom car renovations. April pitched

in, and the two became partners. They are highly sought after for their custom motorcycles and for refurbishing older vehicles.

Watching them transform the vehicles together is like watching magic. I know my girl is a fucking amazing mechanic, but she blows me away with her skills every time when I see her finished projects.

I was glad we had April here to help her once we found out she was pregnant. My girl is stubborn, but she agreed not to crawl under the vehicles in her state but rather let April handle that.

Her accident will always and forever be the one day that completely rocked my world and changed my life for the better. Sure, I had already decided that I wanted to be with her and that I was head-over-fucking-heels in love with her, but having to face a world without her in was all I needed to make sure that never happened. Telling her I loved her opened up an entire new dream for me, even if it started out as a tragedy.

Finally realizing that I was made to love Emerson was one of the best days of my life. I count my lucky stars that I'm the one she chose and that I get to take the crazy ride our future holds, knowing she'll always be by my side—now and for as long as we live.

Acknowledgements

There are so many people who helped make my dream a success, and I wouldn't be here without them.

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Thank you, J, for all of the support, input, social media help (we all know how much I STRUGGLE with this part), and just being the best newbie author friend a girl could ask for! PS-my author logo is gorgeous!

Lauren, you're a doll and I am so glad to have found a new author who checks every single day to see how I'm doing, without fail. You take the time to make sure I'm seen and to listen to me vent about all the things. You are so supportive and ready to help, and it's made a world of difference on the days when I'm struggling.

Thank you Kristina, Shelby, and Victoria for unknowingly being my alpha readers! I'm so glad to have met you all and to be able to call you friends. I value your support and friendships so, so much!

Thank you to all of my ARC readers, especially those who take the time to send me the typos you find while reading! (Emma, I'm looking at you!) It is so helpful when you see the things I've missed since I'm so close to the story.

Thank you, Kate Farlow of Ya'll. That Graphic, for making the most gorgeous cover and release images to help launch my book and get it into more readers hands. You were so patient, and it meant so much to me that you took the time to explain the logo and help me understand this process in bringing my book to life.

Thank you, Nina, for helping make my book the best it can be and being so sweet and supportive. I feel like every author has imposter syndrome at some point, but you're support and belief in my writing has been exactly what I needed to hear. Everyone needs someone to champion them, and you do this so well! I can't wait to read your words!

Thank you to my girl gang, Kate, Michelle, Krista, and Kahlea, who have been so supportive. I'm fortunate to have some pretty amazing friends who have been so excited and celebrate each step of this process with me even though romance isn't necessarily their go to books. Having you ladies support me makes me believe that I can do anything.

To my three amazing kiddos, I love you three goons with all that I am.

And last, but not least, I need to thank my husband who lost many nights to me being absorbed by this story. He's been so supportive and understanding throughout this entire process. Thanks, LOML.

About the Author

Hi All,
I'm Jay and I am a newbie author. I've been an avid reader for years, but finally decided to give writing a chance. I had so much fun bringing this book to life and can't wait to add more to this series.

So, a little about me. I'm a Mama to three kick ass kiddos, work full time, and have been with my husband for ten years. We also have two awesome puppers who my kids absolutely adore. I work in a predominately male field, so my jokes borderline those of a pre-teen boy, and I may or may not swear like a sailor. Sorry, not sorry!

I love sports. I loved playing anything I could when I was younger, but basketball was my hands down favorite. I don't play much now, but I still love watching all sorts of sports and supporting the local teams. I've been a coach for girls' basketball on and off for years and am a total sideline coach when it's not my team playing. To say I'm competitive is a bit

of an understatement. Hopefully one of my kids will decide to play and I'll be able to coach them some day!

Harry Potter will always hold a special spot in my heart. It fostered a love for reading at a young age that grew into a love for romances in my adult life. I love the promise of a HEA and all the many different tropes to get lost in, which also makes writing romance one of the best stress relievers for me. It's amazing creating a world full of characters that you can lose yourself in.

So, I hope you loved Emerson and Axle as much as I did and hang around to see what Sparrow Falls has in store for us next. There's no way I'm ready to leave this small town, yet. If you loved them and would be so kind to help me out, please leave a review!

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The Wilson Sisters of Sparrow Falls

Rescue Renovations

<https://a.co/d/iXdSYgo>

Brewing Brilliance

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Magnetic Mechanics