



HIS FOR THE
TAKING

MEN IN CHARGE

**TORY
BAKER**

HIS FOR THE TAKING

MEN IN CHARGE
BOOK 5

TORY BAKER

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The trees are about to show how lovely it is to let things go

-Unknown

PLAYLIST

His for the Taking Playlist

Wondering Why- The Red Clay Strays
Tourniquet- Zach Bryan
I Remember Everything- Zach Bryan feat. Kacey Musgraves
With You I Am- Cody Johnson
Work Song- Hozier
Another Love- Tom Odell
Hey Driver- Zach Bryan feat The War and Treaty
Revival- Zach Bryan
You're Gonna Go Far- Noah Kahan
Flower Shop- Ernest feat Morgan Wallen
Leaving- Zach Bryan
Nose on the Grindstone- Tyler Childers
Broken Window Serenade- Whiskey Myers
Way of the Tiune God- Tyler Childers
Universal Sound- Tyler Childers
Straight and Narrow- Sam Barber
Porch Light- Josh Meloy
Watermelon Moonshine- Lainey Wilson
Me On You- Muscadine Bloodline
Kissin' When We're Mad- We Three, A Hows

BLURB

The last thing I needed was to fall for Kody Goodwin, my best friend's sister turned nanny.

There's something about a woman who has no problem putting a man in his place. And Kody does exactly that, she doesn't take my surly attitude or the way I try to ignore her every move.

My heart has other plans, there is no keeping her at arms length. Not when I see her everywhere, the way she looks, her sweet voice, and the way she loves my daughter. Now all I need to do is prove I'm worthy of Kody's love and I'm going to do everything in my power to make it happen.

PROLOGUE

ONE WEEK EARLIER

Jameson

“Come on, Josephine, let’s play while we wait for momma to get here,” I tell my nearly two-year-old daughter. Her mom and I aren’t together. We were each scratching an itch. Add a busted condom, and now here’s Josephine. Anyone who tells you that you can’t feel when a rubber breaks is a dumb-ass liar. I pulled out, not fast enough. She knew the moment it happened. A few weeks later when Emma called me, I knew what it was about. There was no doubt in my mind that Josephine was mine. Emma is a lot of things, but a liar isn’t one of them. We knew the two of us were like oil and vinegar. One night and a handful of talks later, once the doctor's appointments were out of the way, we set up a game plan. There wasn’t a chance in hell we wouldn’t be toxic to one another, and friendship is way better than two people vehemently hating one another for the rest of Josephine’s life. Our daughter didn’t deserve to know what a loveless marriage looked like and what she thought would be okay in her future relationships.

Emma and I are type-A personalities, both competitive, both hardworking in our respective careers, and both control freaks. We knew it’d be a recipe for disaster. I accompanied her to every appointment, and anytime a new milestone was hit, Emma would call me. It didn’t matter if the baby kicked, if she had weird cravings, or if the doctor said her blood sugar wasn’t within the right parameters. We kept an open line of communication and still do.

“Ma-ma coming?” Josephine's baby blues light up her entire face. She's the perfect combination of Emma and me. Our girl has soft blonde hair like I had as a child; it'll more than likely turn darker like mine has. She's also got my blue eyes. The shape of her mouth, eyes, and lips, well, those are all Emma's. Today, she's decked out in a white frilly top, white and pink belle-bottom-style jeans, a gift from my brother and his wife the last time they stopped by. It's now a repeat outfit for Josephine, and far be it for me to fight with her over clothes. Oh no, we deal with that enough when it comes to her hair. I'm a guy. I get that I'm not the best. I've tried the trick of using the hairbrush to get the bumps out of her ponytail, making sure it's wet, and have even attempted the vacuum cleaner trick to get it all slicked back in a secure pony or two pigtails. It's never what Josephine wants, and try as I might, Emma does it better. So, when she's with me, it's a sloppy whatever I can manage to do. I've got big fucking hands and big fucking fingers.

“She'll be here in a few minutes.” I check my watch, seeing it's later for Emma to arrive than usual. She's usually prompt or will call to give me a heads-up unless a meeting kept her later than normal and she can't pull her phone out. Emma's job as a cooperate lawyer forty minutes on the outskirts of town means she's in the thick of it. Our schedule of sharing Josephine works. We trade off back and forth—one week I get her four days, the next week I'll have her for three days, and if we need a breather or something comes up, we work around it. While we're at work, my parents help with Josephine for the most part. Though Emma has it in her head that Josephine should be in school. We're supposed to be interviewing three next week. Where she found these schools in our small county, I've got no idea. I'll say one thing: I'm not sold on the idea. Josephine is barely two, and I hate the thought of her being around strangers. Even if they are teachers. My parents love having her a few days a week. We've made it work. Sometimes, I'll bring JoJo to work with me or Emma will work from home. So, it sucks that she's willing to mix things up and cause this to be our biggest hurdle to date. I've asked Emma to reconsider it, but so far, it's gone unanswered.

“How about if we look inside the fridge for Dad? I've gotta eat dinner, and snacks ain't cuttin' it.” The coffee table shows leftover snack remnants. My girl is a grazer, and I'm one hundred percent her snack bitch.

“Da-da, up!” Josephine holds her arms up in the air once I'm standing from the floor. The living room is a mess of toys, blankets, and pillows from our afternoon. She woke up from her nap and has been balls to the walls ever

since.

“I hear you, princess.” I bend down to pick her up. Josephine’s arms wrap around my neck, legs looping onto my hip, and we head to the kitchen. If Emma’s much later, we may need to reassess dinner altogether. Maybe meet closer to her house and grab dinner along the way for all three of us.

“Snack?” Josephine’s hands come away from my neck as I take a few steps, cupping my cheeks to gain my undivided attention. Blue eyes lock on my own; it’s like looking in a mirror with the clarity of the color surrounding her irises.

“Dinner first, then a snack.” Compromising with an almost toddler is not for the faint of heart. If you don’t stand your ground, she’ll give you the puppy dog eyes, wobble her bottom lip, and then you’re on the receiving end of crocodile tears.

“No, no, no,” she starts winding up. I take a deep breath, ready to have a battle on my hands when my phone rings on the island countertop. I never thought I’d be happy for an interruption.

“Let’s answer the phone. It might be your momma.” That deters her from a meltdown over food.

“Ma-ma!” Josephine claps her hands. I plop her on the counter, keeping one hand behind her back just in case, grab my ringing phone, and find an unknown number on the screen.

“It’s not momma, princess. Hold on just a second,” I tell my daughter as her little grabby hands reach for the device.

“Me want.” Yeah, that’s not going to happen. This could be a work call, and while some people have no problem with a toddler, I can’t say the same for others.

“Hello, this is Jameson,” I answer the phone. The unknown number isn’t unusual, not with my line of work, so I figure it’s someone looking for a quote to clear their land.

“Hello, am I speaking with Jameson Evans?” a male voice asks on the other end of the line.

“This is him.” I’m waiting to hear who the caller is.

“I’m Deputy Sergeant Smith calling from Lane County Highway Patrol regarding Emma Kline.” I’m knocked back. My stomach feels like a lead bullet is lodged inside, and I haven’t even heard the rest of the reason for his call. All I know is this isn’t a call anyone wants to receive. Ever.

“Okay,” I croak the one-word answer, worry taking over my entire being

as cold sweat coats my body while he talks.

“I’m sorry, sir. Mrs. Kline was killed in a car accident. Your name was found in her phone as the emergency contact listed.” I listen as he explains what happened, feeling as if I’m having an out-of-body experience. “Emma died on impact. A semi lost control after a car cut him off. She tried to change lanes, but it was unavoidable when the blown tire from the semi barreled her way.” The deputy sergeant takes a breath. Whether that’s for me or for him, I’ve got no clue, but I swallow, trying to dislodge the golf ball that’s settled in the back of my throat. “It’s an active investigation. We’re taking witness statements, and I’ll need you to meet me at the hospital.”

That’s when my body freezes, hands pressing Josephine closer as if she’s my rock, and it really hits me. Emma’s gone. Josephine won’t have Emma in her life anymore.

JAMESON

PRESENT DAY

The past week has been a clusterfuck. Emma had a goddamn last will and testament. Josephine would go directly to me, no time sharing if Leah, Emma's sister, even remotely came back into the picture. Money set aside for school all through the years. Her house would be sold, and the proceeds would go to me in order to help support our daughter. If she weren't currently buried six feet in the dirt, I'd be giving her a ration of shit. Though, to be fair, Emma was an attorney, so she had shit handled more than other people in their thirties. Hell, I'm not even that prepared, and I'm nearing my last year in my thirties. I swallow the lump in my throat thinking about everything Emma is going to miss out on. Josephine's first day of school, learning how to ride a bike, and a slew of other moments I can't even put into words. Christ, it still feels like it's not real.

"How you doing, big brother?" Matthew asks as he walks up beside me. We're at my parents', where Emma's friends and work associates are currently mingling. My family is here, too, for that matter. It took a bit for my parents to understand that we were just friends, especially Mom. She thought we'd learn to love one another until she saw Emma and me around each other a few times. Then it clicked and she was happy we were both okay doing the co-parenting gig. Leah, Emma's only living relative, should be here, at least to say her goodbyes, but she isn't. Something I can't fathom. There's a lot of heartache where the Kline girls come from, and it's a damn shame all the hard work Emma dealt with to get out from underneath her parents went to waste on her sister. Both of her parents were addicted to drugs and overdosed when she was a teenager, forcing her to grow up too damn early. Emma did

her best with Leah, but that didn't stop her sister from shitting all over it. The way Emma told the story, the second Leah hit eighteen, she dropped out of high school and hit the roads running. They talk every now and then, but other than that, it's like they were two strangers passing on a freeway. One going one way, the other going the opposite.

"As well as can be expected, I guess." I rub a hand down my face, trying to clear the fog. Josephine's been asking for her mom. I've tried to explain to her that she's in the sky, but getting that through to a child isn't easy. "What am I gonna do, man? I've got work piling up, and I can't take the princess to work with me." My job as the owner of a land clearing company makes it kind of hard when I'm on a skid steer for a few hours a day. Sure, there are times she can come to work with me, but on a few jobs, absolutely fucking not.

"You know we'll take her, and so will Mom and Dad. But I get it. She's going to have it tough without a female figure in her life. You ever thought about hiring a nanny?" I look at my brother as if he's got two heads. A damn nanny. Not freaking likely.

"I'll figure it out. Emma set up dates for schools to interview. That should help so she's not shipped around too much between us now." I pull at the tie, loosening its hold. The stress is getting to me with everything that needs to get done. I'd have a drink or two, except I'm driving, and no damn way will I take a chance, especially now.

"Or you can take a look at JoJo. She's over there with Kody." Matthew puts his hands in his pockets and rocks back on his heels, acting like he isn't conniving a plan. Kody is Shaun's younger sister, who is Matthew's lifelong friend, and in turn, mine as well.

"The last thing I need right now is to confuse Josephine." My eyes move to the nearly two-year-old who has me wrapped around her finger. She's doing a puzzle with Kody, who isn't so young anymore. She left in her early twenties or maybe her teen years, I can't quite remember, moved away, and apparently, she's home for good. Nope, she's all woman—dark hair, dark eyes, dark eyelashes, and a body that has me thinking of shit I have no right to.

"I'm just offering a suggestion. Kody's home and is getting back on her feet. Not sure if she's looking for a permanent nanny position, but she used to babysit all the kids around town. It could work out for the both of you." My head tips to the side, and I really look at JoJo and Kody. My baby girl is

laughing for the first time in a week. She's not asking questions I've got no answers to, and she's not trying to get her dad to smile. Josephine is being her normal self.

"Yeah, maybe," I grunt. Meanwhile, I'm eye-fucking a woman who's gotta be ten years my junior, a friend of the family in some aspect, and yet telling that to my hard-as-fuck cock is impossible.

"Let me know if you need her number." Matthew claps me on the back, and a smug smirk is locked on his face. I'd say *fuck you* and knock the look off his mug if it weren't for the fact my eyes are glued on Kody.

KODY

“Is that Jameson’s little girl?” I ask Shaun, nodding to the little girl on the ground playing by herself. I never expected to land back in Lane County and living with my brother after going through a nasty-as-hell divorce. My ex-husband, Richie, was one for the record books. Most would look at him and think he’s handsome, rich, and a pedigree. Which he is for the most part. It’s his personality that kills off any good he may have inside of him. Pompous, arrogant, and a know-it-all. Not to mention Richie would use his words in a way that would tear you down and belittle you in every way. It was so bad that once I was done, I was done. I filed for divorce, on my own, and boy, was that the wrong move. For all I could care, Richie could keep everything. I wanted nothing except my photography business, clothes, and a few personal items. The only place I needed to be was home, back in North Carolina instead of thousands of miles away in Chicago. I ten out of ten do not suggest going it on your own. Especially with a man like Richie Gates. His pit bull of an attorney tried to take even more than I was willing to let go. Richie really wanted to go after my small photography business that he said was a complete and utter failure time and time again. That’s when I knew I had to call my big brother for help. He hired a pit bull attorney for me as well, who had no problem going head to head with Richie’s. Needless to say, months later, I’m finally back home, my maiden name firmly in place, my photography business my own, and living with my brother. Now here’s to rebuilding my life, my career, and everything that goes along with being a divorced woman in a small-ass town.

“Yeah, Josephine, or JoJo as most of us call her. She’s almost two, the

light of Jameson's eyes and probably the one reason he hasn't worked himself into the ground." Shaun's best friend Matthew and Jameson are years older than me. I was an *oops* baby. They thought our mom was going through menopause when yikes, it was a pregnancy instead.

"She's beautiful. Do you think he'd be opposed if I played with her?" She's sitting on the floor, quietly playing by herself, and my heart aches for the little girl who will no longer have her mother.

"Go. I know it's killing you not to. If Jameson has a problem, he'll have no problem letting it be known." I pull up my dress that seems to be drooping down with every slight movement I make. My borrowed black dress ready to cause a boob slip—talk about making a lasting impression. Unbeknownst to me when I landed back in Lane County, I'd need a dress. None of mine fit due to losing entirely too much weight because of the stress of the divorce. Thankfully, my mom and I are similar sizes, except Mom has boobs, while I'm part of the itty-bitty titty committee. That's okay because I'd much rather have an ass than having to deal with bras, tops, and dresses popping open.

"Alright, you know where I'll be." My feet move toward the little girl while I feel like a sea of people have their eyes on me even though they more than likely don't. A long time ago, something like people watching me wouldn't have bothered me. That was a lifetime ago. Back when I was younger, I didn't have a care in the world. If there were younger children around, that's where you'd find me. It helped when I needed a job as a teenager. Being a babysitter in our small town meant I was always busy on the weekends. Some teens my age thought it was a horrible job. They had no idea all you had to do was tire them out, feed them, and make sure they were ready for bed at their bed time. Then you'd have the rest of the night for yourself to watch television, scroll on your phone, and get paid a decent amount where you didn't have to deal with many people. It carried on through my years as a photographer, offering mini session with infants well into childhood.

"Can I play with you?" I ask Josephine, dropping to my knees, watching the skirt in order not to flash anyone.

"Pwease," she says with enthusiasm.

"I'd love to. My name is Kody. What's yours?" I question, already knowing the answer.

"Josephine," she says with a lisp, "or JoJo." She points to herself. A smile is plastered on her face. I'm taken aback because Josephine is the spitting

image of Jameson.

“It’s nice to meet you.” I don’t offer my hand to shake hers. No toddler is going to want to do that anyways. They’re more interested in playing and talking than being Miss Manners. “What’s your favorite thing to play with?” She’s currently playing with baby dolls, picking one up, tearing the dress off, and doing the same to the next until all of them are naked. I’d chuckle if we weren’t in a crowded room.

“Babies dolls, pwuzzles.” She pauses, her little tongue coming out to think about something else to say. “Toons!” she says so loudly, the attention I thought was on me earlier is now on me and Josephine completely. My head turns on a swivel, and when they meet a certain set of crystal-blue eyes, well, there’s no denying where Josephine gets her eyes from because my gaze is locked with Jameson Evans’. The only problem with his sharp, keen eyes on mine is that I’m not sure what I really see staring back at me. All I know is a shiver courses through my body. I’ll have to overanalyze it later. Josephine’s hand covers mine, and I’m pulled back into playing with Jameson’s little girl.

JAMESON

I stood around and listened to condolences for Emma, one eye on Josephine as Kody played with her throughout most of the wake. It wasn't until I saw my little girl yawn four times in mere minutes that I intervened. I thanked Kody with a head nod, my hands went out to Josephine, scooped her up in my arms, and I took her into the bedroom my parents keep for her at their house. When I came back out of the back room after securely placing Josephine in the bed with guard rails, I knew without a visual that Kody was gone.

“Why don't you keep her here tonight? And you can stay here, too,” my mom says quietly once everyone has left. The only people here now are our immediate family. Matthew and Lacey are helping clean up the food, trash, and whatever else was left behind. Dad is standing beside Mom, shaking his head because he already knows I'm not going to let that happen. Not tonight, at least. Probably not for a long while either.

“I appreciate it, but I'd rather be in my own bed and have JoJo at home. She may have questions, and as hard as they are, I know they'll come anytime now.” Josephine won't have any questions. I'm lying to my parents and my damn self. She hasn't yet so far when I've explained to her that her mom is in heaven and looking down at her. She's asked a few times where her mom is, and I'll reiterate the same thing, then she'll go back to playing. Tonight, though, I feel raw, even though I didn't have a physical or emotional relationship with Josephine's mom. My heart still breaks for Emma and Josephine. Which is why, when we get home tonight, I'll settle her in my bed, grab a quick shower, and hold on to my little girl on what she'll never

know will be one of the hardest days of her life.

“It was worth a shot. If anything changes, you know we're here.” I know she’s gearing up to mention wanting to take Josephine full-time while I work.

“I know, and I appreciate it.” I bend down to kiss her cheek. She squeezes my arms, and I stand back.

“Alright, stubborn firstborn boy of mine. We’re here, always,” Mom states.

“Let the boy get JoJo, Mariam. You’ll stay up worrying about the few miles he’ll have to travel in order to get home as it is.” He’s not wrong. It doesn’t matter that I’m nearing forty, that Matthew isn’t too far behind me in age. She expects a call or a text when we get home. The same can be said for Lacey on the rare occasions she’s not with Matthew.

“Fine,” Mom huffs. I chuckle under my breath. As if it pains her to be called out on her worry when we all know it’s coming from a good place. Dad shakes his head as we walk toward the back of their ranch-style house they’ve lived in since we came home from the hospital. Not much has changed in my parents’ house. The walls in the hallway are covered with different-sized frames. Every year or milestone or another, one is added to the wall. There are pictures of Mom and Dad, Matthew and Lacey, but the majority of the pictures that cover the walls. Those are filled with Josephine. Something tells me Mom will eventually run out of room or the older pictures will be taken over by more of the only granddaughter.

“She means well. You know it, and I know it. If you choose to put JoJo in school, we’ll understand, but maybe give your mom once a week with her. Your mother doesn’t do well with change, you know?” Dad makes a valid point. The schools Emma was looking into means she’d attend five days a week. Josephine is only two. It seems to be too much for too long, but what the fuck do I know?

“I’m not pushing you or Mom out of the way, or Matthew and Lacey for that matter either. Everyone has their own lives to live. I think Emma saw that before I did. Our family has put their lives on hold for two years. It’s time you and Mom start to do more than working and watching after JoJo.” I pause in our walk since we’re now standing outside of Josephine’s room. My goal is to move her from the bedroom to her car seat and repeat the process when we get home and hopefully she’ll stay asleep if I don’t jostle her around too damn much.

“Yeah, your mother has been asking me to take her out west for years

now. I think you're onto something, son." I slowly turn the handle on the door. There my princess sleeps, soundly, with her thumb in her mouth and the bunny she prefers to hold on to each night.

"It's not a bad idea, to take a trip here and there." Mom and Dad still work. Mom as a nurse at the local high school, Dad as the manager of the hardware store. One day, when they're both ready to retire, they want to buy one of those vans to travel in; not an RV but a van, all kitted out with the creature comforts Mom wants and demands.

"I think you're right. I'll talk to your mother once you're settled in with Josephine," Dad whispers, standing near the door. I move toward the bed, quiet on my feet. Josephine isn't what I'd call a deep sleeper, especially if she's not in her own bed.

"Shhh," I coo softly as one hand goes beneath her neck, my arm reaching underneath her knees. Josephine turns into my body, holding on to her bunny tightly, and her little eyelids flutter as if they're going to open but manage to stay closed. I take a moment to breathe in my little girl's scent. Her baby scent has long since vanished, but in its place is the body wash she uses now. The fresh scent from her bath this morning lingers lightly, and it calms the bullshit swirling in my head as I whisper, "Let's go home, sweetheart," once I've got her in my arms and she's settled. The thought of Kody and how she played with my little girl for hours without a break comes to mind, how when I did finally run interference, there was a blush on her cheeks. And when she stood up, walking back toward Shaun, it was damn hard not to let my gaze linger on her ass. I shake off the thought of what she'd feel like in my hands.

KODY

“**M**ornin’, sis. Sleep well?” I walk into the kitchen. My hair is in a sloppy bun with a silk headband holding the front pieces in place and out of my face. I can hear the laughter in his tone as he brings the cup of coffee to his lips.

“Yeah, except all I do is sleep till noon. You?” The smell of coffee is like air to my lungs. I shuffle my feet toward the pot of black gold, not caring that I look like a walking zombie. When I say all I do is sleep in, that’s been the size of it, minus reconnecting with my parents, brother, and, by default, the Evans.

“Like a baby. I’m about to head into work. I’m working late and then meeting the guys for poker at Matt’s,” Shaun tells me. He works with Jameson and Matthew at Lane Grading and Clearing, Jameson’s company.

“Okay.” I grab a coffee mug that Shaun set off to the side. Shocker, it’s black again. My brother needs some damn color in his life, and not in the way of my bright floral full-length fluffy robe. Did I mention his house is also the North Pole but in the south?

“You sure you’re okay, sis?” Shaun is probably worrying that I’m upset or deep in my head. That’s not the case. I’m looking at the powdered creamer my brother uses and thinking it’s sacrilegious to use something like that in your coffee. I make a mental note to stop at the grocery store today, especially after a week of this garbage.

“Yeah, I’m not awake yet.” It’s the truth, really, although with a side of yuck. I’m not a morning person, and everyone in our family is fully aware. I gave my parents a run for their money in my teenage years. Meanwhile,

Shaun is the early riser. He also wasn't the one who felt like they needed to see the world, which also meant he didn't get his heart torn to pieces like I did. A hard lesson to learn, one I had to learn on my own. There's a lot of should-haves, could-haves, and would-haves I'd change if I could, except I can't. So, that means being thirty years old and starting over.

"As long as you're positive." This is why I moved in with my brother versus our parents. Not to mention they now have a two-bedroom house and Dad now has a hobby room while Mom has a she-shed in the small backyard. Our parents, Mom specifically, would not let things rest. She'd pepper me with questions I've already answered over and over again. I do not need to hash and rehash my past that is my ex-husband. No freaking way.

"I am, promise. I'm going to the grocery store today, so if you need anything, let me know," I state. "Creamer included." The comment can't be helped. Shaun laughs at my dig on his powdered shit, probably has protein in it, too.

"Yeah, I've got a list going. I'll leave you money, too." I swallow the wrong way when he feels the need to offer cash. Sure, I've been a hermit, not spending money, but I do have some set aside even after paying Shaun back for the attorney fees.

"I've got it. You won't accept rent. The least I can do is buy groceries and cook a few meals a week. I'm also going to look for jobs while I'm out." I turn around, coffee mug in hand. I'm unsure how much more of this hot garbage creamer I can take knowing I'm heading to the store. I might even splurge for a coffee shop cup of coffee instead.

"Kody, you don't have to get a job right away. Settle in, explore the town, find yourself, or take this time to build up your photography business. I'm not home enough for you to be a burden. Quit acting like you need to leave when you just got here." My eyes fill with tears, but I refuse to let them fall. I do a lot of blinking, quickly. My makeup from yesterday is only going to make me look worse, and then Shaun is going to get pissed again. A vicious cycle each time I unfold another piece of my disastrous six-year marriage. "Ah fuck, baby sis. Come 'ere." Shaun's arms are open, and because I'm a lover, not a fighter, the tears fall before I can blink them away. My big brother knows what I need. Something as simple as a pep talk and a hug has me ready to cry a river of tears.

"Thank you." My voice is thick with emotion. Maybe this is why I've been sleeping so much, trying to ignore the emotions bubbling along the

surface. The tears aren't over Richie, honestly. They aren't. They're over the fact I stayed away from home too damn long and dealt with too much of Richie's shit that I never should have in the first place.

"You're good. Take it day by day. Which, by the way, hold off on the job hunt for a week, eh?" That piques my interest even more, wondering why he'd ask me something like waiting to get a job.

"Why?" My voice is muffled as I wipe my tears on my brother's shirt. He offered, and I'm taking advantage.

"Matthew may have mentioned you used to babysit when you were in high school and college. Jameson is checking out some schools for Josephine. He thinks it'll backfire, and he'll need someone to watch JoJo," Shaun explains. I make sure to finish cleaning my face on his bright yellow work shirt, the only color he probably has in his whole closet, and the only reason he has it is because he works in the woods clearing land.

"I'm not going to hold my breath. Jameson looked like he wanted me as far away from his daughter as possible." I step away, shrugging my shoulders. Though I'd be a liar if I said the idea doesn't excite me. Nannying by day and doing some photography stuff on the side; it'd be perfect almost too perfect.

"He's like that with everyone, especially women. You know how this town can be. They see a single dude with a kid, and they're trying to get close to their child in order to get close to the dad." My eyebrows furrow as disgust rolls through my body like a tidal wave. I shouldn't be surprised. Jameson is a catch, in more ways than one. Dirty blond hair, blue eyes, a maintained beard, muscular build, and that's only in the looks alone. What people don't see is the fierce protector Jameson is, how amazing he is with his daughter, and I've only seen him once since I've been back.

"I'll wait a week, no more. I'm not expecting a job to fall into my lap, and I'm still going to see what they have for availability in town." Shaun goes to say something else, but I'm cutting him off before he can object. "I'm still going to work on the photography side, post to social media, and start the re-branding process along with getting my business license moved from Chicago to North Carolina."

"Alright, I can't argue with that. The groceries are another story. If I ask for something specific and you're going to the store, I'll leave a list with the money. The shit I usually buy isn't cheap. I don't expect you to pay for more than your share." This time, it's me ready to interrupt. "Don't start. I make

great money. My mortgage is cheap, and it's not like you hog all the hot water. I'm good. Save your money until you're ready." I nod, unwilling to start blubbing all over my brother's shirt once again. It's hard to fathom staying away from home for so long, minus the holidays, when I have such a great family, especially because I did it for a loveless marriage.

"Okay, Shaun, I'll relent."

"Good, glad that's settled. I'm outta here. If I'm late for work, Jameson will give me a ration of hell at the poker table tonight." I roll my eyes. Shaun can hold his own with cards. Not sure how the others fair.

"Have a good day at work and stay safe," I tell my brother, knowing he's going to be clearing land today on some kind of machine.

"Always. See you later, kiddo." At that, I roll my eyes. This is what I get for having an older brother.

"Later." I don't bother finishing my coffee. There's only so much I can take, and today is the final day. I clean up the small mess in the kitchen Shaun made, then it's time to officially start my day.

JAMESON

“**Y**ou good?” I ask Shaun when he steps out of his truck. The need to work this weekend superseded spending time with Josephine after yesterday’s funeral and wake. We’re behind on a few projects, which means mandatory overtime for the guys as well as pulling my own weight. Waking up this morning after only getting a few hours of sleep sucked. My head was full of worry, mainly about the little girl who stole half the damn king-sized bed. How a toddler can do circles like a clock a few times, spread out like a starfish, only for her to practically land on top of me, I have no idea. The precise reason why Josephine sleeps in her own bed. Last night was a one off, and she’ll be back in her own tonight. If she doesn’t ask to spend the night at my parents’. Even with only a few hours of sleep, a little hand patting my cheek, waking up to my daughter looking down at me with the same blue eyes is totally fucking worth it. A big smile later, she asked for breakfast, and we were up for the day. We got our day started with Josephine watching cartoons while I made us some breakfast. She asked for wobbly eggs better known as scrambled with cheese, bacon, toast, and strawberries, though she didn’t pronounce them the correct way. It was cute as hell and had me enjoying the pure joy of her words. I made the same for myself minus the cheese and heavy on the black cup of coffee. The toons were turned off, we had breakfast together, and then we got ready to head out. Mom called as I was cooking, asking if she could keep JoJo today, which worked in my favor seeing as how I knew the crew would be coming in today. I’m not the type of boss who delegates work when we’re behind and shit needs to get done. I’m right there in the thick of it. A few minutes into the call, JoJo heard her nan

on the phone. She was ecstatic, and I was relieved. The only snafu I'm learning with Emma gone is Josephine's hair. It's a riot of waves, and her waking up with it sticking in every which direction means water and a comb. Other than that, I'm fucking useless. Maybe tonight I'll find a tutorial to figure out how to work with her hair.

"Yeah, why do you ask?" Shaun asks. I dip my head at his neon yellow shirt. He looks at what I'm seeing. A shirt soaked through and splotches of smeared something or other. Our shirts all take a beating—holes, grease stains, you name it. This is a fresh stain.

"Ah, shit. I forgot to change my shirt. My sister, she said I was being too nice." He takes his cap off his head, runs his fingers through his hair, and replaces it, this time not as close to his eyes. I quirk my lips upward. Shaun being too nice to his little sister? Not sure I believe that. He must see the question. "Her ex-husband was a piece of work, tore Kody apart in more ways than her wallet."

"Kody okay?" There's a tightening in my chest, a knot of fury sitting low in my gut, and my hands clench in tight fists. I try to flex my fingers, but it's no use, not until I know the severity of what went down between Kody and her ex-husband. I knew from Shaun having to take phone calls in between work as he was helping Kody out with her divorce. He didn't elaborate on what was happening, only that she needed help financially.

"Nothing like that. Fuck, no. Richie would be dead if he raised his hand to Kody and I caught wind of it." He must see the anger rolling off my body in waves. "Richie was mouthy, liked to use words more than anything, and right now, Kody's re-learning to live a normal life." He takes a breath before he keeps on talking. "She seems okay, but she's not saying much. I'm thinking it might take some time to get through that thick skull of hers that she deserves more than that pile of dog shit. It's not even that he cheated, because I don't think he did. I think he used her more as a trophy wife and forgot about Kody the rest of the time." What a fucking idiot. That is exactly what her ex-husband is. It shouldn't piss me off, yet it does. Kody with her small stature, dark eyes, button nose, full lips, and long dark locks. Hair that goes well past the cheeks of her heart-shaped ass. Yeah, I looked, a lot longer than I should have. My gaze was on Shaun's sister entirely too much. My head wasn't the only thing screwed; so was my dick, twisted in fucking knots over the woman. The last thing I should have been thinking about when I took my cock with my fist in the shower this morning was Kody. No matter

what I brought up behind my closed eyes, it was always her. I finally relented, needing the release, and thought about her the entire time I jacked myself off. Once I let my imagination run wild, there was no turning back. In my fantasy, Kody's hands would be pressed flat against the shower tile, body arched, her hair wrapped around my hand a few times as I gripped it firmly while I fucked my cum into her tight-as-fuck body. Christ, my cock is having a mind of its own remembering what happened in the shower all too well. Kody's body slick with water, the way she'd have to stay on the tips of her toes to take me, and wanting to see and feel her ass as it slammed back with every deep thrust of my hips.

"She's strong. I've got no doubt with Kody back home and you all surrounding her, it won't take long," I somehow manage to choke out after replaying the visual in my head.

"That's the goal. Though, she's currently out looking for a job." Can't say that I'd blame her. There's nothing worse than living off your family or sitting around a house staring at the walls.

"You can't blame her. From what you've told us, he was a piece of work. It makes sense she'd want a sense of independence." What's that saying? *You never know what goes on behind closed doors.* I only hope it wasn't worse for her than she's let on.

"Still, I can't fix it, and I fucking hate that I can't fix it for her." Spoken like a true older brother. There's not a bone in your body that wouldn't go through hell in order to help or protect a sibling.

"True, but you know she wouldn't want you to fix it either." Shaun nods, knowing I'm right in this instance even if it's a hard pill to swallow. My eyes move to Matthew's beat-up old truck he drives around. He and Lacey have a solid plan. They put a chunk of change down on some property with a small home, and little by little, they've been renovating it. In doing so, having two car payments wasn't an option for either of them. Matthew, being an Evans through and through, put Lacey in a brand-new vehicle to keep her safe, meaning he drives the old truck, and he's perfectly fine with it.

"Come on, boys, it's time to get this shit cleared out. I've got the missus at home, and I'm taking her out on the town," Matthew interrupts us with the squeaking of his door opening. He's got impeccable timing and clearly can't read the damn room. Shaun shakes his head. I look up to the sky for a hope and a damn prayer. Today is going to be long as fuck.

KODY

“**H**ey, Mom, fancy seeing you here.” I walk out of The Java Hut, sucking back an iced coffee. After I did what I wanted around Shaun’s, code for cleaning up the kitchen, I hopped in the shower and scrubbed my face clean from yesterday’s makeup, forgoing washing my hair, or I’d have never gotten out of the house. My brother can make a mess while doing the slightest thing. I will never understand it. Once that was done, I put my hair in a clip and when I let it down after drying off, all I needed to do was run a brush through it. Then came the hard part—figuring out what to wear. I landed on a pair of mocha-colored leggings, a basic white tee shirt, and a long flannel on top to ward off the chill that is slowly creeping in. A basic pair of slip-on shoes, and my outfit was complete. All I had left to do was make my bed, then I was out the door. By the time I made it into town, it was too late for hot coffee, well into the early afternoon, and I needed caffeine of the cold and iced variety. The weather in North Carolina couldn’t be any better. The air is crisp, and you can smell autumn approaching. Right now, as I take my first sip, the cold cream hits my mouth, followed by the pumpkin-flavored coffee. It soothes my soul. Your world may be imploding, but coffee will fix it. You may be going through a heartbreak, but coffee is there, too. You need a pick-me-up because you haven’t slept eight solid hours a night in weeks, you got it, coffee is your best damn friend. The bad part about all the caffeine that will be thrumming through my veins is I’ll be starving while grocery shopping, and that’s never a great combination.

“Hey, sweetie, I came for coffee myself.” She raises her cup, hot to my cold, and much smaller.

“I don’t blame you. Your son has horrible taste in creamer. He and Dad are two peas in a pod,” I grumble. Dad doesn’t even use creamer or sugar. Something about coffee is meant to be drunk black and will put hair on your chest. His former military days still shine through.

“Powdered creamer still? And you’ve lasted this long? Oh, honey, you poor thing. It’s no wonder you’ve got a cup as big as your head.” I’ve been holed up in Shaun’s house too long. Making my debut reappearance at a funeral wasn’t the smartest, but in my defense, I drove from Chicago to North Carolina in one day. The next day I was pooped, Mom came over, and we for a chatted a bit. Mainly her trying to persuade me to move in with her and Dad. The third day, I was back to unpacking, or kind of, getting settled. And the day before the funeral, I was at the DMV, social security office, and post office. Talk about a freaking doozy, literally attempting to keep my head above water there for a bit, which is why it took me this long to finally return to the land of the living.

“That would do it. I’m going to walk around for a little bit, see if anyone is hiring, and then go grocery shopping. Want to join me?” Other than the day she came over to Shaun’s and our time at the funeral, we haven’t had a lot of mom and daughter time.

“I’d love to, but Kody, if you need money, we’ll help you out.” The reason I went to Shaun for the expensive-as-hell attorney is because I knew he’d let me pay him back. Our parents would not; they’d do anything for their kids, and I know it. I also know they’re retired and should not be having to clean up my mess.

“I’m good. I have a nest egg still that Richie was required to give me in our divorce settlement since he kept the house, furniture, and everything in between. I just want to be on the safe side until I figure out how my photography business is going to go down here.” In Chicago, my clients were steady; they’d tell others about me by word of mouth, or they’d find me via social media. Since I’ve taken a hiatus, it’s going to take me some time, and the last thing I want to be is cash broke.

“Alright, I can’t fault you there. Why don’t we start at the home décor store first, maybe see what the furniture store has, and then the boutiques? Maybe one of them is hiring. If not, I need some new fall decorations and, well, your dad isn’t home, so I can sneak them in, and he’ll be none the wiser.” Mom acts like Dad would ever say anything about the shit she traipses into the house. The man cherishes the ground she walks on, and he

knows about her habit of redecorating for every occasion possible. Honestly, it's a wonder they can park her car in the garage with all the totes she has lined up.

"Anything in particular you're looking for this time of year?" I hum at the end of the question, eyebrows lifting and watching as she formulates an answer. This is how my mom shops—it doesn't matter if it's for home stuff, clothes, or groceries, she wings it completely.

"I don't choose what to buy. The items choose me, Kody Goodwin. Goodness, it's like you don't even know me." She's laying it on thick today. It's a good thing I'm chugging coffee like it's an IV to my mainline artery.

"Well, lead the way. Maybe I'll let you buy me lunch." She hooks her arm through mine as we casually walk down the red brick sidewalk.

"Don't be silly. Your father is buying our lunch as well as anything you may find you like." I roll my eyes. It may be Daddy's credit card, but it comes out of the same account.

"Oh, so a seafood dinner, dessert, and bottle of wine would be fine?" I joke. She stops in her tracks, head turning on a swivel. I watch as she sees me trying to hold back my laughter. It's of no use.

"You're as bad as Shaun and your father put together. I'll spring for a steak salad at your favorite restaurant. How about that instead?" she asks.

"I thought Daddy was paying the bill." I wiggle my eyebrows.

"He is, but I don't want seafood today. So, there." We start walking again. The silence between us doesn't bother me; it's kind of nice not to fill it up with useless chatter.

"I missed this, Mom, a lot, and I'm really glad I'm home." I move my head to her shoulder as we walk. The inches Mom has on me allow it. It's times like this with her I've missed the most, not the shopping. The talking about nothing and everything, giving her shit and her dishing it right back. The being in our small town and running into one another, random moments in time. It was hard when we lived states apart. Sure, we'd see each other when I'd fly down or they'd fly up, but it's not the same.

"Well, you don't have to miss it anymore. And my God, Kody, Richie was just awful," she admits.

"Wait, you never liked him? Why didn't you say anything?" I ask, shocked because this is the first time I'm hearing about how she feels about my ex-husband.

"Honey, no one liked him. Not me, not your father, and certainly not your

brother. He always gave me the ick, like he was trying too hard to be something he wasn't. Anyways, your father and I talked, and we decided the best course of action was to stay quiet. Remember when you were a teenager, and we'd say no? You'd figure out a way to do it anyways. Well, we didn't want to lose you by saying something about your husband. Though, to be honest, I wish I had now, thinking back on it. You'd have moved home a hell of a lot sooner, or maybe that's me projecting what I wanted all along.

"Wow, I'm shocked. No one let on, well, except for Shaun. He'd make comments here or there. He always did, no matter who I was with." I'm stunned, but at the end of the day, my mom is right. I didn't see the red flags, and I damn sure wouldn't have listened. My blinders were fully on for the entirety of that rollercoaster until I was ready to get off.

"It doesn't matter now. You're home, right where you belong."

"I am. Now let's go see the damage we can do on Daddy's card and have a good time," I suggest, washing away the heaviness of our conversation.

"Let's do that." We continue our path, shutting the door on Richie yet again. Only I hope this time, it's for good.

JAMESON

“Josephine, you almost ready?” I ask while cleaning up the kitchen from breakfast. Yesterday, we hung out with my parents until about lunchtime, then we had to stop by the grocery store to stock up on food for the week. Next time, I’ll remember to go without the snack monster. The bill was double than what it usually is, and now the fridge and pantry are filled with an overabundance of food.

“Yeah!” she yells through the house. It’s a good thing we live on a little bit of land on the outskirts of town instead of in town, where the houses are on zero lot lines. Josephine would wake up the whole development with the way she’s carrying on.

“Inside voice.” At this age, she’s got two octaves: high or low. I make a mental note to bring it up with her doctor at her next check-up, wondering if this is normal for an almost two-year-old. I’m sure it is, and I’m sure the worry in my gut will eventually settle down some.

“Daddy, here.” Josephine runs down the hall from her bedroom. She may be nearing two, but tell that to her independence. There’s no me picking out her outfit. It’s JoJo’s way or no way.

“Ponytail or pigtails?” Either way, they both suck for me. There’s no easy way to loop anything with the damn tiny-ass rubber ties with what I’m working with in the way of hands.

“Hmmm.” She puts her finger to her mouth, pondering what kind of catastrophe I’m going to make of her hair today. A day when we’ve got to get a move on in order to check out the three schools Emma put down for us to tour. After work on Saturday, Josephine stayed with my parents per her

request, but I was going to ask anyway since it was poker night at my brother's. I came home to the house being entirely too damn quiet without JoJo's chattering, toys going off, or cartoons in the background. Needless to say, my shower was quick, and so was scarfing down a sandwich, getting redressed, and hitting the road.

"A braid?" God, I fucking hope not. We'll be late to the first school for sure if that's the case.

"No, no, pony," she demands.

"Vacuum trick?" I look at the clock on the oven. We've got five more minutes before we'll be pushing it to make it on time.

"No, tanks." Probably a good thing considering I'll have to dig it out, which would take me even longer.

"Alrighty, then." Her arms reach up for me to pick her up. Those little legs of Jo's are wiggling back and forth like she needs them to propel herself in the air. I sit her down on the kitchen counter without having to tell her to spin around. Thankfully, she zones out on cartoons while I pull a wide-tooth comb through her blonde curls. Tender headed she is not. We'd be in a shit ton of trouble if that were the case. Josephine's hair takes on a life of its own after a night of moving non-stop in her bed.

"Daddy, no school." My hands are attempting to gather her hair in one bunch at the back of her head.

"What? I thought you wanted to go check out the school's Mommy picked out." I let her hair fall from where I had it in one hand, fighting with the elastic with the other.

"No school, Daddy," she reiterates, spinning around with the help of her feet, which are still bare because getting dressed does not include shoes for Josephine. My girl hates her feet being inside socks or shoes. Sandals are what she prefers when something on her feet is an absolute must. But for the most part, she wants to be barefoot and in a dress of some kind with her hair down. It's a miracle she lets me put her hair up some days.

"Why?" I ask, befuddled since this is the first time she's making it known that she doesn't want to look at schools. Emma made it seem that JoJo was excited, and it was me dragging my feet through the mud.

"Me no want to." Well, fuck me sideways with a damn spoon. I can't say I blame her, and while this was all Emma's idea, making me feel like I should keep the appointments, if my daughter doesn't want to go, why should I make her?

“Yeah, I don’t want you to either.” The admission leaves my mouth when I should have held back. Oh, fucking well, the gut feeling I had obviously was there for a reason.

“See, wet’s go to da park!” she squeals excitedly. Her l’s come off more like w’s. She is too damn cute. I contemplate what we should do. The park is any parent’s version of hell. A bunch of kids running around, drool and snot coming from some, it’s a petri dish. There’s zero chill. How some parents can sit and watch their kids while catching up, I have no idea. Meanwhile, I’m running after Josephine, worried she’ll fall or a bigger kid might knock her down, or God fucking forbid someone tries to take off with my girl.

“Then your hair needs to be done, you need to change, and you need shoes and socks.” Josephine starts shaking her head, tossing her hair back and forth, but I’m relentless. I’ll give her the not going to school bit; that shit wasn’t sitting right with me either. Which means I’m going to have to ask my family for help or talk to Shaun. Either way, I’m not prepared for the ‘I told you so’ or the full-time hard-on that Kody seems to induce when I so much as think about her.

“No socks.” She crosses her arms over her chest, plops out the bottom lip, and prepares the waterworks.

“Shoes and socks, or we’re not going to the park.” She attempts to wobble her bottom lip. “We’ll bring snacks.” I’m bartering with the queen right now, and I know the second I bring food into the equation, she’s golden.

“Otay.” She pauses before finishing her sentence. “You win.” She stands, launching herself into my arms, her little legs wrapping around my midsection much like her arms do around my neck. “Tanks, Daddy,” she says into my shoulder, and damn, JoJo has me wrapped around her pinky finger.

“You’re welcome. Go get ready. I’m going to get the snacks together and make a few calls, then we’ll head out the door.” She pulls away from our hug, lips going to my cheek, and lays a wet one on me. I’m adding more work for myself today, calling the schools to cancel the appointments last minute, as well as my mom.

“Be back!” She wiggles her feet, signaling she’s ready to get down and tired of me holding her.

“Shoes and socks,” I remind her. Josephine nods, and then she’s darting for the hallway as fast as she can.

KODY

“**T**ell Kari everything, seriously. How are you liking small-town living? Are you happy to be back?” I’m on the phone with my best friend while I walk down the streets of Lane County for the second time in three days. There was no looking for a job when Mom started shopping. Every time I wanted to go one way, she’d pull me in another direction. She finished our day with several bags in her hand, and after we dropped the purchases off at her car, we headed to lunch. I thought the shopping would be over afterwards. Boy, was I wrong. She was hell bent on finding me an outfit, told me I wasn’t buying it, and to shut my pie hole. So, needless to say, I’m now the owner of a new vintage-style band tee, a pair of jeans that are lightly distressed, and a pair of clog-like shoes. All a perfect combo to wear together or mix and match with other stuff in my closet. Specifically the shirt with leggings, flannel, socks, and the clogs. No one likes jeans unless they have to wear them, at least not me.

“I’m really happy to be home. It’d be nice if my best friend were back from traveling, but we can’t all have the dream boat of a man and follow him on his business trips,” I tease. We met in Chicago before she was married to Johnny. I was her maid of honor, and she was my saving grace when I needed to vent about Richie. In fact, if it weren’t for Kari, I probably wouldn’t be as successful as I am. Kari and Johnny had me do their engagement shoot, she posted about my business, and I received a slew of new clients. The pisser was being pulled in two directions—wanting to do her wedding photography and be her maid of honor. Anyways, once the honeymoon was over, Kari decided she could do her job anywhere and wanted to be with Johnny. So,

now they're currently in Italy while he does his thing, and she does hers.

"I'm glad, and I'm not glad. I know you'll never move back to Chicago, and that sucks for me. Not that we're there all that much." Kari pauses, probably taking a sip of wine since she's ahead of time by hours upon hours. "And If Johnny had a brother, I'd have made him fall in love with you just so we could be sisters. Not to mention my husband is pretty spectacular. Oh, before I forget, text me your new address."

"Yeah, but that man cannot be duplicated, Kari; we all know it. And why do you need my address?" I ask. This time, it's me taking a sip, of my coffee instead of wine. Another expense I shouldn't have splurged on. I'm seriously going to become addicted and will need a job just to keep up with my habit.

"I'm sending you a divorce gift, silly. I only hate that I wasn't there the day you signed the papers. I wish you had let me come home instead of insisting I stay in Italy." Sure, how selfish would that have been? I signed the dotted line, got in my car, and drove the fuck away. There was no use in her coming home for an hour only for Kari to fly right back.

"Oh, Kari, I don't need anything. Honestly, remember I'm staying with my brother right now. As for you coming home, that wasn't happening. You FaceTimed me practically the entire drive back home. You did more than enough." As I walk and talk, I keep an eye open for help wanted signs but haven't seen any as of yet.

"Whatever. I'm still sending you something. You deserve it, and I want to do it, so please quit trying to tell me no. I'll call Shaun if I have to." Between Kari and my mother, I don't know which one is worse.

"Fine, I'll text you the address when we get off the phone. Tell me, is Italy as wonderful as all the photos and videos you send me?" One day, I hope to go there and capture it with my own eyes as well as my camera.

"Beyond beautiful." Kari keeps talking. I'm half listening, half sipping my coffee, and half looking for a job. I'm beginning to think Lane County is fresh out of jobs when I hear my name being called.

"Kody, Kody, Kody!" My head turns on a swivel, trying to locate where that voice is coming from. I look from left to right, and back again.

"Kari, I gotta go." I pull the phone away from my ear. My coffee cup drops to the ground as I find Josephine running toward me, my eyes glued to the little girl who is attempting to do the worst thing ever. Why is she trying to cross a street alone, and why does she have a foot out on the asphalt already? There's no way in hell I am going to allow that to happen.

“Josephine, stay!” I yell out, not looking in either direction, worried that she’ll keep coming toward me. Of course, that’s when she takes another step. My heart is quite literally beating out of my chest, my stomach is sinking, and tears are starting to roll down my cheeks. I really hate being an emotional basket case sometimes. It doesn’t matter if I’m happy, sad, or angry, the fucking tears flow without me wanting them to. I hightail it, lungs burning, because one thing I am not is athletic, not in the least.

“Kody!” A car honks, and Josephine’s voice sounds more worried now. She can probably feel it coming off me in waves.

“Josephine!” Jameson’s voice can be heard for probably miles. My eyes move from JoJo’s to Jameson’s. The look of pure terror holds him in its grasp. Jesus, there is no way something can happen to her right after he lost her mom. This must be killing him. His eyes are never off Josephine; the same could be said for the rest of his family. I make it to the other side, my body trembling. Holy shit, my heart is beating out of my chest.

“Thank God,” I breathe out, or more like puff with barely any oxygen as we both reach Josephine at the same time. Jameson picks her up with one hand. The other moves to my lower back and brings me with them and out of the street.

“Thank you,” he mouths. Josephine’s arms are wrapped around his neck, her little whimpers being muffled by his shirt. And Jameson’s hand is still holding me close. Maybe he needs the grasp to calm down his nerves. I know I sure could.

“You’re welcome.” I act like it’s no big deal; meanwhile, all I’m doing is playing a reel of what-ifs in my head. Not one single snapshot is of me being run down by a car. Everything is centered around JoJo. A shudder rolls through my body. Jameson must feel it because now he’s soothing me by rubbing his big hand up and down my back. The man who looked like he was ready to spit fire at me at the funeral seems to have changed his tune.

“Josephine, you can’t run off like that, okay?” She lifts away from him, nodding like a bobblehead.

“I sorry,” she hiccups cries. “I saw Kody.” With each word, she takes a deep breath, trying to compose herself. A part of me wants to question where Jameson was and how she was able to get away from his watchful eyes. The other part of me remembers my babysitting days and how easy it is for kids to dart off.

“It’s okay. Come on. I think we’re done with the park. I’ll build a damn

swing set before we come back here.” I take a step back, not wanting to intrude on their family time any longer than I already have.

“Kody come wif!” Jameson is reluctant to put her down, and for good reason. I’m pretty sure my kid would have one of those stuffed animal backpacks with a leash attached. Not really, but it sounds like a really good idea right now.

“Maybe next time you’re at your Nan’s, alright?” Jameson nods, happy I’m giving him an excuse to be his scapegoat.

“Thank you, Kody. We’ll walk you back across the street.” It almost sounds like it hurts him to say it. Wow, talk about hot and cold.

“You’re welcome, and it’s okay. I’ll see you around, JoJo.” My hand goes out to hers, asking for a high five. Instead of giving me the palm of her hand, she launches her body into mine.

“Want Kody.” Her little body is wrapped around me, legs like an octopus and hands cupping my cheeks. “We play again?”

“I promise we will.”

“Otay, see you water tater.” I smile. Jameson really does have an amazing daughter.

“Come on, sweetheart. Time to let Kody go.” Jameson’s voice is deeper with an edge to it, and while his behavior is that of a wild boar, I can’t help but wonder what his voice would sound like in a different place and time.

“See you around.” This time, it’s me who pulls away, giving them my back, looking both ways before I jaywalk across the street and taking a few deep breaths to get over the tremble that has yet to leave my body.

JAMESON

“Daddy mean to Kody, Nan Nan,” Josephine tells my mother the second I open the door to drop her off for the day. It’s too fucking early, and my nerves are still on edge from yesterday’s scare. Jesus, there’s no way I would have survived if something happened to Josephine. And while my daughter is currently tattle-telling on her father, she isn’t exactly wrong. I was an asshole both times Kody was near. It’s no fault of hers either. I’m blaming it on my damn cock. The fucking thing won’t go soft whenever she’s around, and it turns me into a person I’m not. Maybe I need to get laid. It’s been too many months to count. I don’t see that changing anytime soon, especially since my cock seems to only want the one woman it shouldn’t.

“Oh, really?” Mom arches an eyebrow at me. There’s no getting out this now. “Why was your father mean to Kody?” Josephine may be young, but she has quite the vocabulary and has no problem taking her time to get the story right either.

“At park. He, hmm...” She thinks about the words, sticking her tongue out, while I rock back on my heels, knowing that my mom is going to tear into my hide. Even now at my age, she’ll have no problem boxing my damn ears. “I wanted to pway.” Another pause, this time a finger going to her lip as she draws out the conversation. “Daddy said no wif Kody.”

“Well, we can make that happen. Should we call Kody and ask if she’d like to come over with her mom today?” I roll my eyes. As if a thirty-year-old woman is going to willingly come over and play with a two-year-old. My mother is off her rocker, but she will also do anything for Josephine to make

her happy.

“Pwease, pwease, pwease!” She claps her hands, holding them together in a prayer motion, and wiggles her body around. Josephine doesn’t even have to do that in order to get her way.

“I’ll make sure it happens. Pops is about to head to work. Make sure you go say hello while I talk to your mean daddy.” Here Mom fucking goes. I’m never going to get out of the house now.

“Hold up. Give me some love. I’m heading out the door with Pops, too.” I squat down since Josephine was hell on wheels about not to be held while walking into the house. My heart was in my throat, eyes locked on hers the whole fucking time. The only reason I was even remotely allowing her to walk instead of carrying her was if she held my hand the entire time. Yesterday was a damn fluke. I was chasing after her, and she bobbed and weaved around the kid in front of her, leaving me no other option than to stop in my tracks, further giving her more time to locate Kody and run after her. A lesson I never want to experience again, which is why I ordered her swing set and jungle gym combo last night. All I have to do now is ask for my dad, brother, and Shaun to come over and help set it up.

“Otay!” She waddles her cute little self into my open arms. I may have been mean to Kody in Jo’s eyes, but the same can’t be said for my own. One word comes to mind, and that’s *protective*.

“I love you. Be good for Nan.” I pull her tight to my body, more for me than for her.

“Me will.” She pulls back, hand going to my cheek before kissing me on the other. “Wove you, too!” I’m going to hate the day she starts talking correctly. Instead of the cute way she talks, in its place will be my little girl growing into a little lady. When she’s done, I stand up and watch as she runs toward the den, where Dad has his own area set up so the two of them can watch what they want without arguing.

I walk toward the kitchen, heading to where my travel mug sits empty. I can always count on my parents to have a full pot on at all times. I’m going to make another in order to get through what I’m sure is going to be a lengthy question-and-answer session. “Let’s get on with it. Kody helped me out yesterday. I didn’t handle the situation well.”

“I’ll say. Josephine never tells me you’re mean. So, what happened?” Mom asks in the *I’m not taking this shit lying down* way of talking. I take my lid off, pour as much as the cup will hold, and put the lid back on, then turn

back around so I'm facing her.

“Josephine decided to run off at the park yesterday. I was trying not to truck down a little kid when she darted across the street toward Kody. Between Josephine and Kody, my head wasn't in the right state of mind when she asked to play with Kody afterward. All I could think about was getting Jo home, where she'd be safe.” I take a sip of my coffee. It burns my mouth and throat on its way down. The look on Mom's face is one of shock, horror, and worry. The full impact of what I went through is looking right back at me.

“Well, shit, I know how quickly these things happen all too well. Matthew ran off at the hardware store once when he was Josephine's age. I don't know if you remember it, but God, I was an absolute nightmare for five minutes straight. Thank God your dad was with us, or I'd have been in a way worse hysteria than I already was. That being said, you owe Kody an apology. I excused your behavior at Emma's wake, but this is too much. We've known their family for a long time, and I won't have you being a grump to that pretty girl. She's been through enough, more than I'm sure Shaun has led on, but I'll tell you what. It took Cleo everything she had to keep David and Shaun from driving to Chicago and bringing Kody home. That girl is more independent than Cleo and I put together,” Mom finishes, leaving shit hanging in the air. Maybe Shaun doesn't know as much as he thought he did.

“I was already going to. I don't have her number, and showing up on Shaun's doorstep would probably raise a lot of eyebrows since we work together. You don't happen to have it, do you?” Mom doesn't have to know it'll be through a text. The less interaction with Kody I have, the fucking better. I don't even want to get into the way her voice sounds or how often I've imagined her say my name while she's on her knees sucking my dick.

“As a matter of fact, I do. Let me grab my phone.” There's a twinkle in her eye. Fuck me, that's never a good sign. I bite my tongue, knowing if I say a word, I'll never get the hell out of here. No freaking thanks.

KODY

“Let’s try this again, shall we?” I say to myself as I walk out of The Java Hut for the third day in a row. This time, my camera is around my neck and I’m doing what I was after yesterday, only this go-around, I’ll get some shots. My goal is to scope out a place that would be out of the way while still garnering some interest for a fall mini shoot. That is if I can get approval from the town management and find a good area. Maybe I’ll rope my dad and brother in to helping me set up a few props. The only problem with that is I’ll need it done within the next week in order to set up the weekend after in time for the pumpkins to be in their prime.

I take a slow sip of my iced coffee. Walking while drinking with my super ridiculous camera around my neck is sketchy. Which is why I have my free hand on the lens, just in case. After the fiasco with Jameson yesterday, I tucked my tail, crossed the street, picked up my discarded cup, and threw it away. Then, since I didn’t want to leave a sticky mess or allow ants to take over, I walked into the nearest store and asked if I could use a pitcher of water to wash it away. After that, I was going to call it a day, let the day go without doing what I set out to do. Almost, I almost let the meanness and his cruelty stop me from looking for jobs. But I somehow pulled myself together, realizing that Jameson Evans is just another man who feels like he’s better than anyone else. Well, good for him, though he does have a cute daughter, a hot body, and a way about him that makes my thighs clench. Nope, not happening. Don’t even think about it, Kody. I’ll continue to use my toy. He doesn’t talk back, is always consistent in the O department, and is easy to put away when I’m through. Either way, it’ll never happen. I knew that before he

could even speak the words. So, I went about my day, popping in and out of places that looked like they'd have potential for work even if they weren't displaying a *Help Wanted* sign. Sadly, I struck out in finding a job until I got my feet wet in the town of Lane County. This is why today, I'm not stopping until I've got everything figured out. There's social media I need to be active on, my website needs to be updated, and I need to find out who a girl has to talk to about setting up a small event. I also need to call Kari. Texting is only going to work for so long after telling her via a voice message what happened. I walk down the red brick sidewalk. The downtown area is quiet for a Monday morning, with only a few people, which should help me relax more. My penchant for people watching means nothing would get done. Though, I kind of wish I'd brought my laptop to work outside today. Maybe I'll do that since my days are filled with a whole lot of nothing. I am promising myself this is the last time I hit up The Java Hut until I've got a steady income. A large iced coffee a day adds up quickly when you're not working.

The trees in the distance will be the perfect area, red maples showing their beauty in the way leaves change in autumn. It'd be perfect for what I have in mind. There's even a bench, an added feature that wasn't there when I left town. Truthfully, the whole downtown area has been completely restored, with the historical district stepping in to make sure everything is done in a way that highlights the area instead of taking the beauty away. My walk is slow. Time is not of the essence, a massive change of pace after living in a city. There are a lot of things I'd change about the past eight years of my life, some good and some bad. The bad was definitely staying with Richie for as long as I did, but I guess that's what happens when you marry someone fresh out of college and he schmoozes you with a charm like you've never encountered before. The last year of our marriage was when it finally clicked that I was worth better than his verbal barrage. Kari was also a big part in figuring that out after I watched how Johnny is with my best friend. The good part was definitely learning the do's and don't's in life as well as professionally. What I really have to give Chicago credit for is creating a friendship with Kari that's so strong, even though she's countries away, we still talk daily. It taught me that I can survive in even the worst circumstances. Becoming a roommate with your future ex-husband makes for a weird strategy, and one I quickly remedied. Thank you, Kari and Johnny. My feet take me to the bench beneath the red maples, a grouping in the center

of the street, the pavement wrapping around them in the same red cobblestone that's on the sidewalks. Some leaves have changed and dropped to the ground. I pick one up, rubbing the leaf between my thumb and forefinger. The texture soothes me, along with the wind swirling through the trees, leaves rustling on the ground. I'm going to sit here and enjoy my coffee.

"Of course, the one time I didn't want my phone to go off, it does." I pull my camera from around my neck, setting it beside me and within sight. My coffee is next, and I'm mourning the fact I'll be putting it down in order to answer a phone. Just once, I'd like to finish my iced coffee with a little bit of peace. Except I'm not the girl who will let an alert go unanswered. I'll hyperfixate on it until it's answered, work or personal. I pull my phone out of the side pocket of my leggings, glance down at the screen, and see a number that's not programmed in. My phone unlocks with facial recognition, then I read the text message.

Unknown: Hey Kody, this is Jameson Evans. I wanted to apologize as well as thank you for yesterday. I didn't handle the situation the greatest, and well, Josephine made sure I was aware of that. Thanks again, Jameson.

I roll my eyes. How very Jameson like, acting as if I know another Jameson. So, I do the dumbest thing in the world—I program his name in my phone before typing out a response.

Me: No problem. I can't say I wouldn't have been the same in your situation. Please tell Josephine hello for me.

Man, I should have said *you're welcome* and left it at that. Clearly, working on being the people pleaser Shaun calls me is rearing its head. Which is why I'm shocked when Jameson texts me again.

Jameson (JoJo's Dad): I hear you'll be saying hello to her sometime today. Thanks again.

I have no idea what the hell he is talking about. What I do know is I'm not going to continue conversing with him through text. The last sentence speaks volumes. He was shutting down the discussion, which is more than okay for me. I'm going to finish my coffee, head to the historic district building, and see about setting up a small photo booth.

JAMESON

I'm pacing the floors of the house a few days later trying to come up with a plan, nearly at my wit's end on what to do or how to fucking do it.

Mom is working tomorrow. Dad is, too. Matthew will be on a job, same with Shaun, and I've got no idea who's going to watch Josephine while I'm in a meeting. Usually, I'd take her with me, but there's no way it'll work this time around. When I've got to submit permits to the county, no big deal. Working on a small area to clear, no problem. A meeting with a new client? Yeah, that's posing a big-as-fuck problem. I run my fingers through my hair, pulling at the ends while trying to come up with a situation that isn't centered around Kody Goodwin.

"I've got one last Hail Mary, and really, I have no idea if she'll do me a massive favor." It's either ask Kody or cancel the meeting, which will be a bitch to do since it's now eight o'clock at night and the meeting is in less than twelve hours. I pace the length of the kitchen once again, hand tunneling through my hair, my phone taunting me on top of the kitchen counter. I'd text her, except it's late, and I need an answer immediately. I'm completely fucked. Maybe Emma was right about putting Josephine in school a few days a week. When there were the two of us, it worked. Emma would work from home one day a week, and I'd do similar or take JoJo to work with me if there wasn't anything going on with new clients.

"Quit being a pussy. Call the woman already," I give myself one last pep talk, reach for my phone, and pick it up while my thumb enters the code to unlock the device. The goal is to not overthink this shit and not come off as an asshole. When I talked to everyone I could about not having anyone to

watch JoJo for me, the answer was always the same: Call Kody. Hell, even Shaun said to ask her. Apparently, she's not working, and it's stressing her out. My thumb scrolls through my contact list. Minus family and a few work people I talk to more often than I'd like, there aren't a whole lot of people saved in my phone. There are too many times I'll save their contact information, and the next thing you know, they've gotten a new number. It was more of a pain than it was worth, which is why Kody's name is easy to find. I click on it before bringing the phone to my ear.

The line rings a few times, and I figure it'll be just my luck that Kody sees my number and ignores me. I'd also more than fucking deserve it.

"Hello." She sounds out of breath when she finally answers my call. Thoughts of what could have her winded plague my mind. An image of her naked in bed, hair down, covering her pretty tits and what I would assume are dusky-tipped nipples, only giving a sneak of what she's hiding. Feet planted on the mattress, legs spread out, one hand buried between them as the other grips the sheets while she plays with herself.

"Hello? Are you there, Jameson?" Clearly, I took too long to respond, so wrapped up in what she was doing while another fucking fantasy to fuck with my mind had no problem taking root.

"Hey. Uh, yeah. I'm here." It's a damn good thing no one is around, because my cock is rock fucking hard and I'm having to resituate myself in order not to have a zipper imprint on my dick. "I know this is out of left field, but I was wondering if you're available tomorrow."

"Um, well, that depends on what you need me available for," she replies with humor. It's then I realize my plunder. Jesus, not only have I been a grade-A dick to the woman, now it seems like I'm interested in her in a different way. The only way I want Kody is spread open, bent over, or bouncing on my cock. And something tells me she wouldn't be interested in being a fuck buddy. Hell, she doesn't seem like the type, and Kody deserves a hell of a lot more after what Mom mentioned.

"Shit, I'm botching this up. I'm in a bind, and well, Josephine likes you, talks about you non-stop. What I guess I'd like to ask is, would you be available to watch her tomorrow while I'm at work?" I look down at the floor, staring at my work-scuffed boots and hoping like hell she'll help me out.

"Why didn't you say so from the beginning?" Kody questions with humor in her tone.

“Josephine would really like you to hang out with her instead of going to a meeting where she’s going to have to be seen and not heard. She really does like you better than me most days,” I lay it on thick.

“Jameson Evans, are you using your daughter to get your way?” I’m pretty sure she is laughing at me in her head.

“Don’t you dare tell my momma. She won’t let me live it down, but I’m not above using my daughter if it means you’ll help me. I’d really appreciate it. And hell, maybe you could watch her a few days a week? Contrary to what your brother thinks, I’m not a cheapskate,” I tack on the end in case she thinks I’m asking her to do this for free.

“How early are we talking?” I’m going to have to sweeten the deal, I can tell already.

“Seven, seven thirty. I’ll have coffee made, and Josephine probably won’t get up until closer to nine. So, you could nap on the couch if you wanted.” Should Kody say yes, I’ll wake JoJo up before I go to bed, tell her Kody will be here in the morning and she’ll be in the living room.

“Holy crap, I remember why I’m in the photography business. Everyone starts so early. But yeah, I’ll be there, and I will not nap on the couch. I’m being paid, therefore sleeping isn’t part of the equation. As far as me watching her a few days a week, we should probably see how tomorrow goes first.” At least someone is the voice of reason, since clearly, I’m not. Desperation, that’s what I’ll blame it on today.

“Thanks. You’re doing me a solid, and well, you seem to keep helping me every time I turn around. I’d like to return the favor in some way.” I’m probably going to eat my words, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

“As a matter of fact, I may need your help. I’m doing a mini photo shoot in the downtown area next weekend. Can I borrow Josephine for a few photos and add them to my website?” I don’t respond, too stunned by the favor she’s asking. It’s fucking too simple for how she’s helping me out. “I’d need her to stay until more people come along, and of course, you’d get the images for free.”

“Yeah, Kody, I can do that.” It’s not nearly enough.

“Alright, well, I’ll see you tomorrow. Bright and early. Don’t forget to text me your address.” She doesn’t sound too chipper when she talks about getting here around seven.

“I’ll do that now. Thanks again, Kody.”

“You’re welcome. See you.” She hangs up the phone well before I’m ready, and there’s no fucking way I’m touching that subject. Not when I’ve got a hard cock and a fantasy to play out in the shower. Christ, Kody might be doing me a favor when it comes to Josephine. Too bad all it’s doing for me is making my dick ache with the need to feel her tight wet heat surrounding me. It’s going to be a long-as-fuck night.

KODY

Dear God, it's entirely too early to be up, out the door, barely caffeinated, and looking like I'm not trying to attract the attention of a man who makes me act like a giggling schoolgirl. I will say it was nice to hear him not so composed. I probably should have made him sweat a little more, and I would have, too, if it weren't for Josephine. My only saving grace was my brother making me a mug of coffee doctored up just how I liked it. He gave me a quick hug, and then we were both heading out the door.

Now, I'm standing at his door, a coffee mug in my hand, my crossbody bag holding everything I should need plus a surprise for Josephine, and I've got my hand raised to knock on the door. What I don't expect is for Jameson to answer the door before I make contact, or the way his eyes sweep my body from head to toe. The same could be said for myself. Clearly, he's in his business mode, unlike me. I went for comfort since I'd be chasing after a toddler today. A white top, semi-cropped, black leggings, a flannel, socks, and a pair of suede clogs. My hair is pulled to the side in a braid, and I opted for no makeup. Jameson, though, dear God Almighty, the man is filling out his clothes in all the right ways. A dark blue long-sleeved buttoned shirt, jeans that mold to his muscular legs, and I'm having a hard time controlling my tongue from licking my lips. Even his hair is styled, though I have to admit, I like it best when it looks like he's run his fingers through it a thousand times a day.

"Hey," I finally break the silence, kind of hating myself because it also broke the trance he seemed to be absorbed in. The man is definitely hard to

read when his walls are built up so high. When he does drop them, well, it makes me forget all the reasons I'm currently on a hiatus from men.

"Hey, come on in. Josephine is still asleep, except she's in my room. I'll show you the way as well as the house. We're pretty easy going. She'll take a nap after lunch and has no problem letting you know what she'd prefer to eat." There's the no-bullshit Jameson Evans I've come to know. It's like a light switch he can turn on and off at any given time.

"Sounds good. Lead the way." I walk in as he steps back, opening the door for me. I notice there's an area off to the side with shoes, so I move toward it and kick mine off. I'm really glad I decided to wear socks because Jameson's home is wall-to-wall wood flooring. There's no way my feet wouldn't get cold, and I'm pretty sure he'd frown upon me searching his laundry room or bedroom for a pair of socks to stay warm.

"Living room. The remote is on the coffee table. JoJo's toys are in the built-in cabinets." He points toward the area. My eyes sweep the room from each direction. The soft beige walls with the dark wood floors are beautiful, and the leather couches look worn and lived in. You can tell Jameson takes pride in his home. The built-in cabinets house frames with pictures of him and Josephine as well as a few of their family. There are a few books scattered throughout to bring it together.

"Alright. Anything she can't get into?" I ask.

"Nope, the place is pretty much still baby proof. The garage would be the only place I wouldn't want her, but you shouldn't need to go in there. Which reminds me, I'll put the spare car seat in your car on my way out, just in case." My head spins sharply to his, taken aback by him leaving me with a car seat. Never in my wildest imagination would I think Jameson Evans would give over that much control. "Just in case. I don't want you stranded out here if something were to happen. Not that I'm expecting anything, but life can be a fickle bitch." He must have read my expression clear as day. It's not like I can hide my expressive ways; it's the one quality I wish I could control.

"Yeah, makes sense." He walks me near the open kitchen.

"Kitchen. Help yourself to whatever. Josephine has no food allergies." He's on a mission because I barely get a look at the dark olive-green cabinets and stone countertop before we're walking down the hallway.

"That's good to know. Is she fond of anything particular?" I ask quietly to his back, uncertain if JoJo is a deep sleeper.

“Pancakes, eggs, but you don’t have to do all of that.” He opens a door. “Josephine’s room. Bathroom is across the hall. The next door on the left is my home office, and that leaves us with my bedroom.” I remain silent while following him. His backside... shew goodness. Broad shoulders, tapering to a waist that is not thin in the least. Don’t get me wrong; he’s muscular, but not in a lean way at all, and his ass can definitely fill out a pair of jeans.

“My room.” He opens the door and walks inside while I remain at the doorway. My shoulder rests against the frame, and I watch as Jameson bends over the massive king-size bed. It’s what he does next that kicks me right in the heart. There, in the middle of his bed, lies a little girl who’s currently sprawled out, and the man who definitely has two sides to him. Well, let’s just say seeing Jameson with his daughter is like seeing him come to life. One knee goes to the bed, and he moves soft tufts of blonde curls off her forehead, places a kiss there, whispers something in her ear, and then tucks her in. Jameson Evans as a dad is one of the hottest fucking things ever. Too bad when he opens his mouth he loses any manners his mother ever taught him. At least when it comes to me, they’re practically they’re non-existent. I back away, allowing him to finish telling Josephine goodbye, and walk back toward the kitchen. It’s a really good thing he’s not the nicest to me, or I’d be breaking my vow of man-hating in a heartbeat.

KODY

“Kody, you here!” I heard the rustling of sheets in the living room an hour after Jameson left. So, I got up from my place on the couch, choosing to keep the house quiet so I could keep my ear out for her waking up. Now, I’m sitting on the edge of Jameson’s bed, watching as Josephine’s arms lift up in a big stretch. I was almost worried I’d scare her if I came in here, but I figured her waking up alone without Jameson making noise in the house would be worse.

“I am. I hear you and I are going to have fun today.” I’m actually surprised she slept well past eight o’clock in the morning. Jameson really won in the sleeping-in lottery with his daughter.

“Yes!” she whisper-shouts, and then I realize she’s been asleep for a while and probably needs to head to the bathroom.

“How about I start breakfast while you go to the bathroom?” I didn’t even ask Jameson if she was wearing a nighttime trainer or not. What a rookie move that was.

“Otay, fwench toast?” she asks. I nod. That’s easy enough, and I’m sure Jameson has every amenity handy when it comes to food.

“You got it. Do you need help in the bathroom?” She shakes her head. “Alright.” I’ll let her do her own thing in the bathroom. That doesn’t mean I’m not going to stay within hearing distance just in case. I stand up, and she rips the sheets off her little body and does a stomach shimmy off the bed until her feet touch the ground. Then all that’s heard is the pitter-patter of her feet against the wood floor. A light automatically turns on when she walks into the bathroom, and I stay where I’m planted, waiting for her to do her thing in

case she needs anything. I'm going over what we're going to do to stay busy today when I hear the flush of the toilet then the turning on of the faucet, and after what seems like minutes of her splashing around in the sink, Josephine comes out.

"All set?"

"Yes." The tail end of her word comes out like a hiss with her little lisp. "I hungry." She holds her hand out for me to take and then leads me out of Jameson's bedroom. A good thing because his woodsy scent is doing dangerous things to my senses.

"What do you want to do after breakfast? Well, after you get dressed and we do your hair." We make it to the end of the hallway. JoJo lets go of my hand, darting to the remote on the coffee table to turn on the television.

"Toons!" I guess that settles that. She's going to watch cartoons, and I'm going to make breakfast. On the counter, there are various things spread out. If I'm cooking, the first order of business is at least picking up. I start on my task, doing a search through the drawers to get myself acclimated as I put away a rogue cord, a few pens, and a notepad. The rest are cups and sippy cups; those go in the sink for now. Then I'm going after the ingredients while I keep an eye on Josephine.

"Are you thirsty?" I call out, opening the fridge. There's milk, orange juice, and apple juice.

"Juju, pwease," JoJo asks, not getting up from her spot on the couch. There's a blanket pulled over her body, and her thumb is in her mouth.

"Apple?" I question. She nods vigorously as I get to work on preparing her drink and pulling out the ingredients for French toast. "Okay, JoJo, what else do you want with breakfast?"

"Woobly, uh..."—she pulls her thumb out of her mouth—"eggs and berries!" Hmm, woobly eggs, that's a new one for me.

"Does daddy mix the eggs a lot or a little?" I feel like I'm asking a million questions to a toddler when I should have asked her father instead. See what I mean? That man has me losing what little brain cells I have.

"A wot," Josephine says around her thumb. Scrambled it is. The berries are easy to decipher with the clear containers in the fridge. Honestly, I'm pretty impressed with how Jameson has everything organized in the fridge. Shaun would never. Hell, the only reason his house is clean is because of the weekly cleaning company. Maybe Jameson does the same thing. The thought of him pushing a vacuum or using a feather duster literally has me trying to

contain the giggle bubbling up in my chest. I can imagine trying to explain the reason behind my laughter to Josephine, and trust me, kids have no filter, and she's no doubt run to her dad and let him know we were talking about him.

I get the griddle out and make work of getting it hot while using as few dishes as possible. There's a reason why any house I've ever lived in was always cleaned, only needing to deep clean every couple of weeks. I learned from my mom to clean as you go along, use as little as possible, and you won't have to spend a full day scrubbing a house from top to bottom. I crack the eggs, preserving the majority of them for her scrambled eggs, which I'll have as well. No need in making two separate meals. Then I start on the French toast.

"JoJo, you want to help me flip the toast?" I ask, unsure if she helps out with her dad or Nan. Her eyes are glued to the television. I'm kind of wondering if she'll hear or acknowledge me. I dredge the bread through the egg while waiting for a response before plopping it on the griddle.

"Me, help!" I look up and watch as she flips to her stomach, kicks her feet, and slides off the couch. Then she's running as fast as she can, her head out in front of her body like it's propelling her. I probably should have had her change out of her footed pajamas and put her hair up so it's not in her face. The chill still lingered in the morning air, so I decided against it.

"Of course, you can help. Let me grab a chair." Jameson and Josephine could really use one of those stool things that has bars all the way around them so she can't fall. Since I don't see one, I grab the chair, and she meets me at the kitchen island when I'm ready.

"Up, pwease." JoJo lifts her arms in the air, and I scoop her up and place her on the chair. My hands stay put until I know she's steady on her feet. I stay beside her, handing her the spatula.

"Do you know how to do this?" Her hair answers before her head with the way her curls bounce every which way.

"I help Nan." She's bound and determined to do it on our her own, her tongue out on her upper lip as she chases the bread until it hits the lip of the griddle, the spatula sliding under. "I did, I did!" with one hand on top of the other, she turns her whole body as she executes the flip. We repeat the process until everything is done. For the eggs, I let her whip them up until they're nice and fluffy, then throw them on the griddle while she plates the fruit of her choice. It doesn't take long before our breakfast is done. So far,

today has been easy, and I'll have no problem helping Jameson with Josephine, even if it's only a couple of hundreds of dollars a week. It'll be perfect while I get For The Moments Photography settled into a new town, drum up new customers, and feed my ever-growing iced coffee addiction to The Java Hut.

"Are you about ready to eat?" I ask while she meticulously puts an equal number of blackberries, blueberries, and strawberries on the plates. I don't have the heart to tell her blackberries are not my favorite. I'll have to choke them down without her noticing.

"Alllllll done." The l is drawn out. I finish off the plates with our eggs. All we need now is napkins, forks, and syrup. I'll also need to cut her French toast into bite-size pieces. Maybe next time, I'll make French toast bites. That would be a lot easier for her to eat.

"Perfect. Let's go eat." I turn the griddle off, scoop Josephine up in my arms, and head to the kitchen table. I'll come back for the plates. As soon as her tush hits the booster that's strapped onto the chair, she's dancing in her seat.

"Yummy, yummy," she sing-songs as I pull the knife and fork out the drawer and cut up her French toast. She keeps going, "In my tum, tum, tummy." I laugh at her pure happiness over something so simple. Jameson Evans may give me whiplash, but one thing is for sure: I could fall in love with Josephine very easily, and that could be very dangerous for my own heart.

JAMESON

“Goddamn it!” The palm of my hand hits the steering wheel. I take a look at the clock on my dashboard. That fucking meeting took twice as long as it should have. Sure, the contract is ours, but it took nearly four hours to go over the land, agreeing on terms and when we’ll be starting the project. It was utter fucking bullshit. I gave the man a ridiculously high quote, hoping he’d say no. I’m talking triple than what I’d charge him if he were closer to Lane County. He didn’t even blink about it, asked when we’d be starting. Which meant I was stuck. It’ll be great for the company, venturing out and all. The guys will love the hours. Overtime will once again be mandatory, but with the holidays creeping in, it’ll be good for all of them. What won’t be good is all the hours I’ll spend away from home and Josephine. I can only hope that things work out with Kody and she won’t mind helping me when my mom has to work.

The passenger door of my truck opens, and Matthew slides in. “What did your truck ever do to you?” I roll my eyes, pissed that I’m not going to make it home in time for dinner, or probably even putting Josephine to bed. I’ve still gotta help the guys out on this plot of land. When Emma passed away, the world stopped spinning. Work was the last thing on my mind, and Matthew helped out. The other shit piled up, like meeting customers for quotes and paperwork. The fucking paperwork never ends; it’s a daily task I hate, and I’m the one who refuses to hire help. The last time I did, it was a mess, more of a hassle than it was worth, and made me realize it’s easier to stay up late after Josephine is in bed to finish it instead of dealing with people.

“This next job I tried to overbid backfired. I’m late getting to the job site, and now it’s looking like we’re all working late again.” We’ve got a four-man crew, myself included. With me down for as long as I have been, it’s taking a hell of a long time to get back on track.

“Shaun mentioned Kody has JoJo. You know she won’t mind staying longer, and if she does, Mom can always come by and stay with her. Lacey might be able to as well,” Matthew offers solid advice, except I hate having to pick her up while she’s asleep and transfer her from bed to car seat only to repeat the process once we get home.

“I could, yeah, but I’ll ask Kody first. The text she sent me of Josephine, it speaks volumes.” I scroll to our text thread, pull the picture up, and look at it before showing it to my brother. Josephine is standing next to the coffee table, her hair done in a way I could never fucking attempt. Two pigtails that aren’t lopsided, curls popping in a way I know took more time than I usually have in the morning. “It’s the way she’s smiling, the sparkle in her eye, and you can see just how fucking happy JoJo is.”

“Well, shit, big brother.” Matthew takes a look at our girl, holding the screen so it’ll show the live photo. Josephine’s laugh echoes through the truck. “And I’ll say this, and you can kick my ass later. Look in the mirror, Jameson, because your little girl isn’t the only one happy. You are, too, and I think it’s because you want Kody.”

“Matthew, don’t fucking go there. Not today, not ever. Don’t try to be a matchmaker when there isn’t anything there to match.” From what our mom said, she’s going through a lot. She’s also, with any luck at all, become Josephine’s babysitter a few times a week. The last thing I need is to add a complication into either of our lives.

“We’ll see about that,” he grunts, hands me the phone back, and goes to grab the handle of my door. “Finish having your pity party, then let’s get to work.”

“Get outta here. I’ll call Kody and then the backup if needed.” My brother, ever the shit starter, lets out a low whistle and gets out of the truck. That leaves me with making plans. I shoot out a text to Kody in case Josephine is down for her nap. Waking her up is the last thing I want to do right about now.

Me: Hey, you got a minute?

Kody: Sure

Me: Calling now

I get the text sent, wait until the message appears as read, and hit the call button.

“Hello,” Kody’s answers quietly. I hear the door open and then closing in the background. Probably stepping into the bathroom or walking out front to take my call.

“Hey, sorry to call. I figured it’d be easier than relaying everything through text.” I had the truck running when I pulled up to the site and while Matthew was inside. Now that he’s gone, I turn my vehicle off, take the key out of the ignition, and drop them in the cupholder.

“It’s not a problem. I’m technically working for you. You can call whenever,” she replies. I’m sure by now, she saw the baby monitor I leave in the living room, a display with a live feed to Josephine’s room. Even still, I should have gone over things a bit more.

“Thanks, I appreciate that. I was calling to see if you would mind staying late?” I wince out the question, worried I’m scaring her off before she really has a chance to settle in and agree to potentially watch JoJo a few days a week.

“Not at all. Do you mean late as in dinner time or late as in get her ready for bed?” Once again, Kody is saving me ass when I don’t deserve an ounce of her help.

“Fuck, the way work is going,” I grumble, “It’ll probably be around bedtime, which I know I didn’t give you a lot of information to begin with, so I will now. The monitor is in the living room. She can sleep in my bed or hers, probably better in her own bed, but I’ve been letting her decide.” A decision that will no doubt kick me in the ass when I wake her up on one of my bouts of insomnia or I when I get home too late and end up making more noise than a pack of wolves. Then she’ll be up for hours, completely fucking me.

“Noted. What about dinner ideas, bath time, and bedtime?” She takes me asking her to stay late with grace. Jesus, she’s perfect but also off fucking limits.

“She’ll eat whatever, but there are chicken nuggets in the freezer I use in a pinch. Josephine likes salad, and she’ll want either macaroni and cheese or rice. Whichever you feel up to. Bath time before bed, which is around seven,

depending on how tired she is. She'll want a bedtime story, too. Shit, I feel like I'm asking entirely too much. Are you sure you're okay with this?" I ask, worry sitting in the pit of my gut.

"I've got this. In case you haven't noticed, I don't currently have a job, and Josephine is not a hardship. One last question, then you can get back to work. A sippy cup at bedtime, and if so, what does she get in it?" Josephine isn't in a crib anymore. Emma caught her trying to climb out of hers. I take that back, not *trying* to; she had her whole body over the side of the rail, her stomach on the top bar and her legs kicking for traction. She transitioned her into a big girl bed that night. I did the same the next time she was at my house.

"Sometimes, she'll take water, but for the most part, she'll only get up if she's thirsty. Obviously, you know she's potty trained by now, which I didn't tell you this morning. I promise I usually have my act together," I tell her honestly. If it weren't for Shaun and my mom telling me all of her experience with kids, I'd have never asked Kody to watch her in the first place.

"It's okay. I learned it pretty fast this morning. Kudos, by the way. Not even a trainer at night, and she's Little Miss Independent. Okay, I think that covers everything. I can always call my mom if something comes up and you're not available. I better get back in the house. Josephine is starting to squirm on the monitor. I'm assuming nap time is about over." I'm still wondering where she's at in or outside of my house.

"Yeah, you'd be right. Thanks again, Kody. I really appreciate all your help."

"You're welcome. See you tonight. I'll have her FaceTime you before bed," Kody offers, and fuck me, that means more than I'd like to admit.

"That'd be great." I've been spoiled being home with JoJo every night except the occasional one night a week she spends with my parents. It makes me feel like I'm missing out or she'll have some kind of trauma with losing Emma as abruptly as she did. I know it's guilt. Doesn't mean acknowledging the subject makes it any better.

"Alright, well, duty calls. Bye, Jameson."

"Later, Kody." The phone clicks off on the other end, and it signals me to get my ass out of the truck. It's time to get this clusterfuck of a day over and done with. I've got a little girl to get home to tonight.

KODY

I think I may have screwed the pooch on my first day of watching Josephine, especially if Jameson asks me to watch her again. The bar is going to be set pretty high after the day we had. In the morning, we made breakfast, played dress-up, and then had lots of arts and crafts type fun. After lunch and a nap, she was back in action with an abundance of energy. There was still a lot of day left, so we spent the majority of our time outdoors. I went into the garage and found a wagon and a stroller, figuring the wagon would be better for Josephine. There was no doubt in my mind she'd want to walk for a while. I also knew she'd eventually get tired and would want to take a break. She lasted longer than I thought, and while walking, she picked up a plethora of items along the way. The flowers, well, more like weeds she picked we put in a glass of water for Jameson. The leaves, we traced her hands and feet and then glued the leaves around them, breaking them up until they fit. It was kind of a reverse effect since Josephine collected so many. We left the rocks for another day, where I promise she could paint them and disperse to her grandparents' and uncle's.

Needless to say, I've set the bar high, and I'm really going to put my thinking cap on for my next day with Josephine. Maybe I'll stop at the store and pick up a few new puzzles and some other crafts since she really enjoys them. There's no way I'm going to even attempt to take her to the park after last time. Jameson would probably kill me. I could see if he'd be up for putting her in those jungle gym classes once a week. The weather is only going to turn colder, and with the energy she has, keeping her inside is going to be impossible.

The sun is finally down. JoJo is fast asleep in her own room, which didn't take much convincing either. After a FaceTime call to her dad and a few bedtime stories, she was out like a light. Now, I'm sitting on the couch while the television is quietly playing a mindless show, not that it's holding my attention. Clearly, I'm tired. It's been a long time since I've been as active as I was today. I guess it's slowly catching up to me. One minute I'm trying to keep my eyes open, and the next thing I know, Jameson is whispering in my ear, "Kody, babe." I hear his voice, but I'm warm, he's being nice, and I want to enjoy the moment for a few minutes longer.

"Son of a bitch, I'll call Shaun and let him know she's staying here tonight." I blink my eyes rapidly. They feel like sandpaper, but there's no way I'm spending the night on Jameson's couch.

"Jameson." His name comes out in a croak. It does the job at getting his attention. I watch as he places his phone on the counter and waits for me to say more. "Sorry, I'm awake. I promise I didn't mean to fall asleep." I pull the blanket off my body. Maybe the cold air will wake me up from the fog that's currently trying to take hold of me.

"Kody, I wasn't worried about you sleeping. I'm more worried about you traveling home when you're already exhausted." He leans against the counter, crossing one ankle over the other, arms doing the same across his chest. He looks like he's had a rough day. His hair is mused, there are dark circles beneath his eyes, and he has what is either dirt or oil smudged along his cheekbones and on what was once a clean outfit.

"Shaun only lives ten minutes away. I'll be okay. Unless you need me early again tomorrow?" Now it's me crossing my fingers, hoping it's not another twelve-hour day. Okay, that sounds awful even in my head. Josephine was easy. The problem is me. I'm the problem. I'm no longer used to working twelve hours a day running after a toddler. Give me a photo shoot all day long. I'm tired the next day, but not nearly as badly as I currently am.

"Are you sure? The couch is yours if you want it." I shake my head and stand up, hanging on to the blanket to fold it. After Josephine's bath time, which was longer than usual, an absolute must after we ate spaghetti for dinner—I think she even had red sauce in her ears—she watched television for a few minutes, enjoying her tunes as I picked up the kitchen, preparing a plate and putting it in the fridge for Jameson. The last thing I wanted was for him to come home hungry and have to deal with a dirty house. Especially since it was clean when he left this morning.

“I’m positive.” I place the now folded blanket on the ledge of the couch before moving toward him. “Let me grab my stuff, and then I’ll be on my way. Oh, I promised Josephine you’d kiss her good night no matter what time you came home.” I need to get my bag and shoes, then get to Shaun’s. As sweet as it was for Jameson to offer me, I’d probably toss and turn. The last thing I want to do is explain to Josephine why I spent the night. No, thank you.

“Alright,” Jameson responds. “I’ll walk you out and then come back inside to tuck her in.” I nod then walk to the front door in a handful of steps. I loop my bag over my shoulder and slide my feet into my shoes.

“Ready when you are.” There’s no telling him I can walk myself out. He wouldn’t listen to me anyway, plus he’d probably bring my brother into the conversation and how he’d be doing me a disservice.

Jameson’s hand goes to my lower back. I can feel the heat from the palm of his hand through two layers of clothing. It’s impossible to hold my composure when a simple touch makes my insides shiver. He opens the door for me, allowing me to step outside first. My body quakes with a different sensation. Jesus, it’s going to be a cold winter. Not as cold as Chicago, but still cold. I only hope there won’t be a lot of snow. Cold I can handle. Ice and snow, please don’t even think about it, Mother Nature.

“Shit, you’re cold. Hand me your keys. I’ll go start your car and get it warm.” Must be nice to be Jameson in this moment. He’s completely unfazed by the cold air or the fact that it’s mostly him who has my body trembling.

“It’s okay. My car doesn’t take long to warm up.” I pull my keys out of the outside pocket of my purse and continue our walk to the driveway. Jameson’s truck is parked on the other side of my car, and we make it there in record time.

When we reach my driver’s side door, he holds out his hand, and I drop my keys into it. I’m too tired to fight him. If this moves things along faster, well, I’m not going to fight it. I lean against the back passenger door, watching as he maneuvers his much bigger body into my car and starts the engine.

“All set.” He backs out, standing to his full height. We’re close. So close I can smell his scent. “A temptation, that’s what you are to me,” he mutters right before his mouth lands on mine. His hands engulf my hips, and his tongue sweeps along my upper lip before repeating the process on my plush bottom lip. A soft sigh escapes me. His tongue slides inside, invading more

than my mouth. He's invading my every waking thought. My hands that have wanted to know what his hair feels like move up the slopes of his muscular arms. His heat sears me along the way. Finally, I reach his dark blond hair. It's soft, softer than I expected, and his hold on me tightens when the tips of my fingers knead his scalp. Jameson's body heat scorches me from the inside out. He groans into our kiss, deep, rich, throaty, and my legs threaten to give out. It's a good thing he realizes how much I need him and tightens his hold. I feel the tips of his fingers work beneath the fabric of my flannel and cotton shirt. His skillful hands make quick work until they meet my heated skin. I moan, hands clutching him as tightly as possible, and when he slides his calloused fingers around the edge of my leggings, he groans, "Tell me no. Tell me to stop. Tell me you don't want this." He nips at my lower lip, expecting a response when my brain is short-circuiting. There's no way I can reply as his hand slips beneath my leggings and he's cupping my naked sex.

"Answer me, Kody, or this stops right fucking now."

"Yes." My breath hitches. His gaze is full of unrestrained desire. "Please," I say louder than I probably should have. Jameson lives on a quiet street in a rural area, and I'm hopeful his neighbors didn't just hear me beg for him to fuck me with his fingers.

"Eyes on me, temptress." My eyes that were shuttering snap open. Jameson's middle finger slowly circles my clit. "Jesus, you're fucking soaked for me." He works me up, never dipping any lower. He's teasing me, taunting, and even as I go to stand on the tips of my toes, attempting to move his fingers lower, he stays rock steady. There's no denying he's in control right now. There's no making him do what my body craves, to chase the high I'm desperately after.

"Jameson." My lids lower when he dips his finger further down my slit. I'm wetter than I've ever been. There's not another man, a toy, or myself that has this effect on my body.

"Eyes, Kody, or I'm taking my fingers away from your slick-as-fuck pussy." His voice is commanding. I swear the man has my whole body aching. My breasts feel fuller, achier. My lace bra abrades my nipples in a delicious way. Goose bumps pepper my skin along with a coating of perspiration. "Fuck, I'm barely inside you, and your cunt is sucking at my finger like it's dying for me. Soon, it's going to be my cock slipping inside of your tight little body, Kody." His blue eyes blaze with a storm of emotions, and really, it's the only reason I'm able to keep mine locked with his. As

much as he wants to watch me, I want to watch him.

Another finger slips inside. I pulse around his digits. “More.” My hands grip his hair tighter, having never let go from their purchase. Only now I wish my legs were wrapped around his thick, solid waist, clinging to him while opening me up further. Maybe then he’d sink deeper and give me what my body is begging for.

“I’m going to make you come all over my fingers, Kody, but you’ve gotta stay silent. Can you do that?” He thrusts deep, all the way inside. The palm of his hand hits my clit, and my body jerks with the movement. “Can you be quiet while you come on my fingers, your desire dripping so much that you’re coating the inside of your thighs?” Jameson slowly pulls his fingers back, dragging along the walls of my center. I clench around his digits, not wanting to lose him. Of course, he chooses that moment to flutter his pointer and middle finger back and forth while finger-fucking me.

“Jameson.” My voice echoes through the night, unable to hold the moan of his name.

“Fuck, you’re going to make the neighbors come outside, temptress.” His palm is back where it started, directly on my clit. The small swivel hits me just right as his fingers keep up with the torturous motion. “You like that, don’t you? I can feel your cunt tighten around my fingers with the thought of getting caught.” There’s no controlling the spiral I surrender to. My body is his in this moment, chasing an orgasm so intense that no matter how hard I try, my eyes are unable to stay open.

“Yes.” My voice sounds louder, even to my own ears. “Jameson, God, yes.” So much for being quiet. I’m unable to hold it in any longer. My core clenches one last time, my body softens, and if it weren’t for his mouth fusing to mine, I have no doubt that I’d wake up the whole damn neighborhood. My breathing is choppy, as if I’ve run a marathon. Jameson’s eyes are open and watching me as I slowly open mine at just the right moment.

He pulls his hands out of my leggings, the streetlights giving me ample lighting to see how wet they are. What I’m not prepared for is the way he brings them to his nose. “Fuck, you smell good. You probably taste just as good, too.” That’s when he does the absolute most. I watch as he licks my wetness away, sucking his fingers into his mouth and groaning while doing so. Never in my life have I seen something so utterly sexy as a man tasting me from his fingers.

“My turn.” I’m ready to drop to my knees. The bulge in his pants is clearly visible. He takes a step back, causing my hands to leave his hair, which is now even messier than before.

“No.” He stops my hands from attacking the button of his jeans. I freeze. He doesn’t give me a response, but I’m not an asshole. No means no, no matter if it’s a woman or a man saying it.

“Oh, okay. Well, um. I’ll see you later.” I lower my body, dipping under his arm that he managed to prop himself up with on the hood of my car.

“Kody.” I shake my head, not wanting to hear what he has to say. No woman likes to be told no. “Fuck, woman. At least text me when you get home.” I nod, refusing to give him my eyes or my words. I’m once again left with the whiplash that comes with Jameson Evans. I should have known better. Now I’ve made a mess of everything. It takes two to tango and all that jazz. I know I had an effect on him; it’s kind of hard to deny the bulge or the way he had no problem licking his fingers clean. And now, there’s another worry. A little girl who could feel the brunt of this if Jameson decides to be an even bigger jerk than he already is and won’t let me watch her anymore. That’s it. I’m done with men. I’m striking them off my list for good. The lie tumbles from my brain because I know if Jameson used his mouth or his fingers on me again. I’d forget every man who came before him or after him. My headlights illuminate his silhouette as I back out of the driveway. There’s no way I’m going to dissect this, not until I can talk to Kari at least. Damn her for being a continent or ten away. I could really use my best friend right about now.

KODY

I knew sleeping was going to be out of the question last night, which is why I'm rolling over for what must seem like the millionth time in so many hours. I punch my pillow when what I really want to punch is Jameson and his stupid handsome face. There's no use staying in bed. I've got a best friend to call and commiserate with, now that it's a normal waking hour for her. The same can't be said for me due to the lack of sleep and it being barely eight o'clock in the morning. I roll over, grab my phone, and see another text from Jameson.

Jameson: You make it home?

I left him on delivered, the preview on my phone doing wonders to make him feel like the asshole he clearly is. Next on the agenda is calling Kari. I fluff my pillows to prop my back up and pull the covers up so I don't inadvertently give anyone a view of my nipples through my nightshirt.

"Wow, Kody, you look like you've had a rough night," Kari answers on the first ring of our FaceTime call. I may look like hell, but she looks like she just walked off a runway.

"Don't mince words, do you?" She is sitting on a terrace, giving me a beautiful view of where she's at in Italy.

"Never. Seriously, what's wrong? I know that look. Someone upset you, clearly. Was it Richie? I'll be on the first plane out if so." I laugh. Leave it to Kari to come to my rescue on a moment's notice. She's that friend who has the shovel ready and a place to bury the body scoped out.

"Nope, not a word from him. I don't think I'll ever hear from him again."

"Thank God. So, what happened? I mean, you're in a small town, and you

babysat a little girl yesterday. Not a lot could go wrong, if you ask me.” She insinuates that small-town living is boring. Little does she know there’s usually more gossip and drama than in a big city. Everyone knows everyone here or is somehow related. Unlike when you’re in a more populated area, where you can make an ass out of yourself and chances are you won’t see the same people ever again.

“Her father, that’s what happened. Jameson freaking Evans. The man can use his words to light up your entire body or as a weapon. Sadly, I was on the receiving end of both last night, and now I’m ignoring everyone and everything.” Which I won’t be able to much longer. I didn’t get paid for watching Josephine yesterday, and now it would feel super skeezy if I did. That means today, I’ve got to find a job because I’m not sure it’s going to work out should I have to be around Jameson that much.

“Honey, you know you’re supposed to avoid certain types of men. The ones you work with, the ones who have never settled down, and the ones whose name starts with the letter J.” Kari started this when she first met Johnny. He was a walking red flag, confirmed bachelor, a complete dick to Kari when he slammed into her on a busy sidewalk. She called him an asshole for not watching where he was going. He laughed and then asked Kari for her number. “You know what that means?” Kari says with a smile.

“Red flag,” we say in unison as Johnny appears behind Kari, hands wrapping around her in a possessive way.

“Not this shit again. Do I need to remind you two that not all men with the name beginning with J’s are arrogant pricks?” He presses a kiss to the side of her neck. I avert my eyes, giving them a moment of privacy. This is how they always are when they’re together; it doesn’t matter where they are. They could be in a crowded room full of onlookers, and the only people they see is each other. I look around my room while they have their moment, knowing it won’t last forever. Especially with Johnny in a business suit and carrying a briefcase. That usually means he’s coming or going. I’m betting he’s leaving for a meeting, judging by his tie alone. There were many times I’d be at their place, and Johnny would walk through the door, his tie was off, and I was leaving quickly. He never made me feel like I was a burden. Neither did Kari, but their love for one another is palpable. And when your own marriage was basically in name only, especially at the end, well, it’s hard to be around them.

“Kari is yours now, Kody. Hopefully, this J character isn’t a total

douchebag.” He winks at the phone. Kari squeezes his hand, and then Johnny is walking away.

“Okay, tell me everything. Don’t leave a single thing out. I mean, if he has you this flustered, it must have been good.” Ugh, she’s not wrong. I came home last night and took the hottest shower ever in an attempt to erase the feeling of Jameson’s hands on my body. It didn’t work, not at all, and when Shaun yelled good night through his closed bedroom door, I felt ten times worse. Jameson is Shaun’s boss. This could go from bad to worse.

“Ugh, where do I begin? First off, babysitting his daughter, easy peasy. She’s adorable, funny, and keeps me busy, so it makes time fly by. Jameson, on the other hand, sears me with one look, gives me mixed signals, and doles out amazing orgasms. I’m talking off the Richter scales, and he only used his fingers.” Kari’s eyebrows are nearly to her hairline. A slow smile crosses her face. My best friend is conjuring something, and I’m going to hear about it for a good long while.

“Okay, so he gave you the best orgasm of the century, then what happened?” she questions, grabbing the glass of red wine and taking a healthy sip.

“I tried to repay the favor. He told me no. There was no reason to stick around, so I went home, and I’m currently ignoring his text messages.” I slam my head back against the stacked pillows. Maybe it’ll knock some common sense into my head. Yeah, that’s not likely to happen. Goose feathers are too soft to land any real blow to my thick skull.

“Hmm, there are a few reasons why he’d say no. And he texted you?” Maybe I’m overanalyzing everything. Maybe I should be thankful for the orgasm. And maybe I should forget everything that ever happened.

“Yes, he asked if I made it home. I didn’t respond, and now he’s texting again.” I see the alert appear on the top of our screen.

Jameson: I owe you an apology. Meet me at The Java Hut so we can talk?

“What did he say? Oh my gosh, it’s like you don’t know me at all. Kody Michelle Goodwin, answer me now, woman,” Kari demands.

“He wants to apologize and meet for coffee. Ugh. I can’t do this. I’m not doing this. The first guy I actually feel something for after a loveless marriage, and he’s another asshole. I’m done. No more. I’m sticking with my toy. At least they don’t give me whiplash.” I go on a wild tangent, Kari

listening to me the entire time like the best friend she absolutely is. Except her watchful eye is seeing more than I want to let on, and I'm about to get a mouthful.

“Okay, shut up with the no man thing. There’s a guy out there for you who will absolutely treat you the way you deserve. It’s also clear you feel something toward Jameson. Maybe you’re overthinking things?” Kari hits the nail on the head. Overthink, overanalyze, the story of my damn life. And when did Kari become the voice of reason? Usually, she’s the overreactor while I try to calm her down. “Answer his text, meet him, and if you don’t like what he has to say, at least you’ll get the closure. Now text him back while we’re on the phone, or I know you won’t.”

“Yes, mother.” I pause the screen and type out a response.

Me: Sure, can you meet in an hour?

“There, it’s done. Now I have an hour to prepare myself, and I’m going to need the entire time.” My hair is a tangled mess, makeup is going to be a must to hide my circles, and then there’s making a decision on what to wear.

“Good. I want a call immediately after. Unless he takes you back to his place and fucks you hard.” Always the demanding one between the two of us.

“I will, and I promise our next call will be more about you instead of all about me. Again.” Nothing like drama on top of drama. It wasn’t always like this, but lately, my life has been one thing after another.

“Thank you. Oh, by the way, Johnny and I are trying for a baby. Love you. Talk soon.” Kari hits the end button after dropping that little bombshell. I immediately send her a text, knowing I don’t have time to hit the call button repeatedly and her taking at least eighteen times before she finally answers.

Me: Kari, first of all, OH MY GOSH, I AM SO FREAKING HAPPY FOR YOU GUYS! Secondly, have fun practicing, and keep your phone handy because we are talking asap. I love you lots!

I throw my phone on the bed, kick the covers off my body, and get my ass in gear. It’s time to be presentable while also making Jameson realize what an ass he’s been to me.

JAMESON

“No, no, no.” Josephine is clinging to my neck as I’m trying to leave her at my parents in order to meet up with Kody. “I go wif.” I look up at my mom. I fucked up, a rookie mistake in parenting. You never tell them who you’re going to see or where you’re going if you need time away without a little one. JoJo caught wind that I was hitting The Java Hut with Kody after I dropped her off at my parents’, and now here we are.

“Not this time, sweetheart. I’m going to work right after, but I’ll be home early tonight.” I gave the guys this morning off. They’ve been working a shit ton of hours, picking up when I wasn’t around. The look of relief was written on my brother's face, the same for Shaun, and a couple of the others. Plus, I needed this morning off to fix the epic fuckup I’ve become with Kody. Jesus, last night while I was looking in the mirror, I wanted to punch something. The something was me.

“But Kody my fwend.” Josephine pulls away, popping her lower lip out to get me to agree with what she wants.

“She is your friend, and hopefully, you can see her tomorrow.” Mom’s eyes zero in on me, a frown marring her face. I’m going to have to come clean about how I’ve been the biggest asshole in all of Lane County. Mom really shouldn’t be surprised. This is who I’ve always been, a lot like my father, whereas Matthew is more like Mom.

“Fine.” She crosses her arms over her chest, juts her chin, and taps her foot on the floor. Christ, the sass that comes from my daughter. Teenage years are going to be hell on wheels, and I don’t even want to think about when she starts dating. The only good thing coming from her fierce

independence and attitude is she won't take shit from someone like me.

"Love you, JoJo. So much," I tell her.

"How much?"

"This much." I spread my arms out as much as I can, and her frown is turned upside down.

"Love you lots." She gives me another hug, and I stand from my crouched position. "I go pway," Josephine tells me and her Nan the plans she has before her little feet take her into the den.

"Hopefully? Jameson Michael Evans, what did you do?" Mom reads me like a fucking book. There's no hiding from her, except I'll be damned if I spill every single thing.

"I've been a dick, I know that, you know it, hell, Kody knows that. Words aren't my strong suit, and last night was probably the worst. So, I'm going to meet her for coffee, try and apologize, schmooze her with one of her favorites, and come up with an agreement in the terms of her babysitting Josephine as well as a price." Matthew came in clutch when I told him I was hoping to meet Kody. He snickered. I asked if he had any insider information since he and Shaun are fucking closer than close. His words to me were '*I fucking knew it,*' then he texted me her order, where she likes to hang out after she grabs her coffee, and how she's going to need help this weekend for her photography stand. I knew about the last part. What I didn't know was the latter. Josephine is going to be there, but so will I, bright and early to help set things up, and hopefully, Mom can bring JoJo when it's time.

"You better fix it. My granddaughter loves her, we love her, and that's what matters. I don't know why you have to be such a grump ass like your father, but it's going to shoot you in the foot one day. There aren't a lot of women out there who are willing to put up with your shit. I know that for certain. Good grief, you Evans men are going to drive me to drink," Mom grumbles as she moves around the kitchen, closing cabinets harder than normal, dumping utensils in the sink with a loud thud, and she won't stand still. Fuck, the way she is laying it out on me, I'm guessing she and Dad got into it today. I just so happen to be taking the brunt of it since he's nowhere in sight.

"I'm going to, promise. Thank you for watching Josephine for me. Would you mind watching her this Saturday while I help setting up her booth, and then bring JoJo so Kody can do her thing?" I'm trying to sugar her up, and from the way she slows down on her tirade, I'd say it's working. There's

nothing my mom would love more than to see me settled down and Matthew and Lacey with a child or three of their own.

“That’s not a problem. I was planning on going either way. I’ll keep Josephine here Friday night instead of Saturday night. That way, she doesn’t have to wake up early.” I nod in agreement.

“Thanks. Now I’m outta here. Anything I should tell Dad if I happen to see him in town?” I ask, trying to figure out what the hell happened.

“As a matter of fact, will you drop off his lunch? He was grumbling and groaning about teenagers not showing up to work, so he was called in at the last minute. Why can’t he go down to part-time or retire already? We’ve worked hard enough. I’d like to go on a vacation every once in a while.” Ah, that would do it. Dad and I just talked about him slowing down, and clearly, he’s not up to it just yet.

“I can do that. Is it by the front door?” When Dad would forget his lunch growing up, it was always in the same spot. Mom always placed it there for him on days she didn’t work, and depending on what was going on, you can count on Dad leaving it at least once a month.

“Yes. I’m going to book our vacation. That way, everyone knows we won’t be here, and they can’t call begging him to work. Shit, I can’t do that until you know for sure if Kody can watch Josephine.”

“Book the vacation. I’ll take JoJo to work with me. Lacey might be available, too. I have a feeling that Kody will watch her even though she’s not happy with me and my damn penchant for being an asshole.” I grab Dad’s lunchbox so it’s in my hand and I don’t forget it as well.

“Well, they say the first step is admitting you have a problem. At least you’re further along than your father ever has been.” I make my way back to the kitchen. She’s pattering around. Probably pulling out stuff to bake with Josephine.

“You love him the way he is, and you’ve got no problem putting him in his place. Are you baking pumpkin muffins?”

“That depends. You got a hug for your mom before you leave.” That’s not a question; it’s a statement. In this house, you didn’t leave or so much as get out of the car without a hug and an ‘I love you.’

“Sure do. Josephine, I’m leaving. Come give me a hug.” I didn’t get it back then when I was younger and thought it was stupid to always show your parents affection. Now I get it. Boy, do I ever.

“I watch toons!” she groans, but I hear her stomp her little feet out of the

den as I give my mom a hug.

“Up?” I meet her at the mouth of the hallway, already ahead of her question. She wraps her arms around my neck, and I soak up as much time as I can with her. When I turn around, I see Mom shaking her head, mouthing, *‘Been there, done that. It sucks huh?’*

“Love you. Be good for Nan and convince her to make pumpkin muffins for me, eh?” I kiss her forehead. Her eyes light up at muffins.

“I cook wif Kody,” she tells me for the third time today.

“Yeah, and now you’re gonna bake with Nan,” I reply.

“Chowcolate chwips, Nan?” JoJo kicks her feet. I set her down, and she runs to the chair.

“You betcha. Get out of here, Jameson. Don’t forget your dad’s lunch.” I stand and watch my mother help Josephine scoot the chair across the tile floor. The two of them go about their day. I may as well not be here when it comes to their time together.

“Bye bye!” Josephine says one last time.

“Later, gator.” She throws me a kiss. I catch it with my hand and smack it on my cheek. Josephine’s giggles follow me out of the house, helping me feel lighter than I should. Hell, I’d be a fool to hope Kody would forgive me, and I have a sinking suspicion she’s going to make me work for it, too. That’s alright with me because I’ve got Josephine, and I’m not above using my daughter if it means I’ll get the girl in the end.

KODY

I'm a glutton for punishment, but also, an iced coffee won't hurt. As long as Jameson doesn't open his big, fat mouth and make me want to throw it in his face, that is. Those are my thoughts as I open the door to The Java Hut. The noise of beans being ground, the scent of the strong-smelling nectar of the caffeine gods, and I am hustling to the counter to place my order.

"Kody," Jameson's voice mutters in my ear. His hand is spanning the entirety of my lower back, and my stupid body responds to him even when I don't want it to.

"Good grief, you about had me peeing my pants." Boundaries. Jameson has none of them as he pulls me into his firm body.

"Sorry, figured you didn't need two iced coffees. Our order is at the counter." I'm utterly confused, and my face must share the sentiment. "I called in reinforcements. I didn't get food, though." He looks uncertain. The man who always looks stoic, his shit isn't locked down, almost like he's shaking in his boots. I must be really lacking sleep, delusional in my state. Why else would I be happy to see him feeling unsettled?

"Coffee is good. I take it Shaun had no problem blabbing his mouth." My big brother is a talker. My parents once teased him when he was little that he'd talk to a brick wall. He'd talk to a stranger at the grocery store or standing on a street corner waiting at the crosswalk. He never met someone he couldn't have a conversation with, and he's still the same way to this day. As for me, I'm a bit more hesitant, unless it's a child. They're much easier to understand than adults.

"Eh, not so much Shaun. I used Matthew, who then asked Shaun. My

little brother covered for me. I'm not ready to admit to your brother how much of a fuckup I've been before I talk to you first." I inhale a deep breath, holding it in for a few moments before exhaling. I'm really in deep shit if Jameson is finding the error of his ways already. I mean, sure, he's been a giant dick hole more times than I'd care to admit. The saying goes, three strikes and you're out. Last night was definitely his third and final, so I'm not sure why I'd give him the benefit of the doubt. Yet here I am, getting my hopes up. It's all Kari's fault. She's the one who told me to hear him out, putting in little words of wisdom and encouragement. She has to know by now that not everyone can be as amazing as Johnny.

"Jameson." I go to stop once again on our way to the pickup counter. He must have felt my body tense.

"Hold that thought. Let's get our drinks, take a walk, and we'll talk, okay?" He wins me over with a smile that's panty freaking dropping. Where's my backbone when I need it? Somehow, it manages to disappear when I'm awarded with a smile, an orgasm, or when he whispers dirty words into my ear in his driveway.

"Alright." Jameson reaches the counter first, grabbing my iced coffee. A sigh leaves me at the perfect color coffee. You know it's going to be a good day when there's a perfect amount of creamer added to it.

"Here ya go." I greedily take the cup, my mouth wrapping around the straw and taking my first sip. "Jesus, Kody," Jameson grunts. His massive hand wraps around what looks to be a large hot coffee, and yet he dwarfs the cup. Not that I really have a clue on what he's packing. He stopped that before I got started. All I know is the saying I've heard more times than I care to admit or remember, but this is what you get when you grow up with an older brother who walked around the house saying, 'Big hands, big feet, and big meat.'

"What?" I ask, acting like I wasn't just taking him in from head to toe.

"Come on, before you start a riot with that mouth of yours." It's then I put two and two together, pull the straw out of my mouth, and have the good sense to look down at the ground. The last thing I want to do is add unwanted attention. Jameson's hand hasn't left my lower back, and I'm starting to wonder if he's declaring something I'm not prepared for. We walk toward the side door. I push it open with my free hand, and then we're away from the noise of the chatter of the coffee shop.

"Thank you for my drink," I tell him as we walk down the small red

bricked alley that leads us to Main Street. Jameson stays silent, only giving a small nod of his head as he takes a sip of his coffee. It's a good thing he's guiding the way, so to speak, since my gaze is riveted to his side profile, watching his every move.

"You're welcome. I'm pretty sure I owe you more than an iced coffee." He doesn't elaborate, yet the list running through my head is a mile long. We turn left out of the small alley. Fall is here to stay. The leaves are turning from green to the richest colors of golden yellow, a burnt orange, and a deep red. Most people who live in colder climates hate when the leaves change, a sign that winter is on the horizon, ice and snow coming along with it. As for me, I love everything about fall. Spring too; it's worth going through a brutal winter in my eyes. Especially to have this type of beauty surrounding us. "Are you okay to sit here while we talk?" He nods to the black metal bench facing the street under a maple tree.

"Sure, that works." I take another sip of my coffee, knowing I'm going to need it in order to get through what I hope isn't an awful conversation. I swear if this man tries to apologize for last night or say it was a mistake, I really will throw my coffee at his stupid handsome face.

Jameson waits for me to sit down before he does. My butt meets the bench, and I pull one leg beneath me, the back of my thigh on top of my ankle. The outfit I chose to wear today is similar to yesterday's, only this time, my leggings are olive green. I'm not wearing a flannel but a cream-colored crew neck, two sizes too big in order to cover my butt. On the front is a vintage-style logo of a pro football team. One of my finds I found at a thrift store in Chicago. It's a team my dad shakes his head at because it's his arch nemesis when it comes to Sunday night football. Hence why I bought it. I love to give him as much grief as he gives me. Today, I'm not wearing sandals with socks. Knowing we'd be in town, I didn't want to step in a puddle and be left with wet feet. My shoe choice was easy, really. A pair of canvas sneakers completed the look.

"So, yeah." Jameson sets his coffee on his jeans-covered thigh with a hand on top of it. His other hand runs through his hair. I can tell he's nervous.

"Yeah," I respond. His watchful gaze is on mine, and I'm waiting for him to say something stupid again.

"I need to apologize for last night." My chest rises, I purse my lips, and Jameson continues on as my hand tightens around my cup. He clenches his jaw for a moment before his tongue darts out to lick his lower lip. "Fuck, I'm

screwing this all up. No way in fucking hell am I apologizing for watching you come apart on my fingers and getting my first taste.” He keeps his eyes planted on mine as he bends down to place his cup of coffee on the ground, and then he’s moving closer until his knee is touching mine. “I’m sorry I made you feel like I didn’t want you on your knees. I’d have loved nothing more than to feel your mouth around my cock. Last night was for you, not for me. That along with how I treated you at Emma’s wake and the park... I’m a dick, an asshole, a slew of other names I deserve to hear.”

“I’m not saying I didn’t think those things or say them to my best friend. I appreciate the apology and the clarification on the other part, too.” He may be able to talk about sex openly where people could hear him, but that is not me. I enjoy sex as much as the next person. What I don’t want is for others to hear what happens in my personal life.

“You deserve more than an apology and an iced coffee. I shouldn’t even be asking this, except I’m desperate, greedy, and I’ve got no damn shame when it comes to making it known that I want you, Kody.” And there goes me holding a grudge like it’s my will to live. Jameson Evans is dismantling every wall I keep erecting, and I should have known he’d tear them down. I knew it the moment he looked at me when I was playing with Josephine. Sure, he wasn’t the nicest, but he also couldn’t keep his eyes off me all the same. “I still owe you for watching Josephine yesterday, and I’ve got it on high authority that you’re her friend.”

“Are you using your daughter to persuade me once again, Mr. Evans?” I ask, taking my last sip of coffee. I’m tempted to pout and order another, except with too much caffeine and a lack of food, it’ll make me a jitterbug.

“And if I was?” Jameson slides closer, hand gliding beneath my long dark locks, looking like he wants to take my mouth.

“I’d say you’d have to prove it to me. As far as Josephine goes, I’ll always be her friend and will watch her any day of the week. But you, Jameson, are going to have to work harder to get back in my good graces.” Pulling away from him is the absolute last thing I want to do.

He dips his head, lips going to my ear, his voice causing me to shiver.

“And work at it I will, promise.”

“Jameson.” I’m not a pushover, damn it. Except for right now. He’s edging backward, and all I want to do is follow him.

“The next time you say my name like that, it won’t be in public.” And there go any thoughts of coming out of this conversation without wondering

how he'll make that happen. "Now, I hate like hell I've gotta change the subject, but if I pick Josephine up from my mom's without a promise of you being over tomorrow, she'll never forgive me. Are you busy tomorrow?"

I shake my head, clear my throat. "No, everything I need to do I can do while she's napping. What time?" A few social media posts are the only thing on my must-do list. Sadly, I'd like to say it should be easy, except it never is, and I spend the majority of my time second-guessing everything until I'm finally over it, then I hit publish and walk away.

"Same time as yesterday?" Jameson grimaces. It's early. Really early. Totally doable, though.

"I'll be there," I respond. My hand goes to my empty cup, Jameson does the same, and then he holds his hand out for mine.

"Thank you. I'll have your money on the counter. Did you walk here?" he asks. No way is he going to walk me home to have to come back for his truck.

"You're welcome, and yeah, I did. I'm going to walk around a little before heading back to Shaun's." I'll stroll around for a bit, burn off some of the caffeine, and then see what my mom is up to. Maybe she'll be up for helping me work on a few pieces.

"Alright. I'll call or text you later." Jameson grabs my cup from my hand and walks to the trash can, giving me an unobstructed view of him in his work clothes, and my oh my, is it hot—worn boots, rugged jeans, and a shirt that molds to his upper body perfectly.

"Okay." The look he tosses over his shoulder is pure mischief, and now I know where Josephine gets it from. I'm going to need to call Kari back quickly because I am sinking faster than quicksand when it comes to this man. Especially when he heads back to where I'm standing, cups my cheek, and drops a kiss to my lips. There's nothing fast about it either. My heart beats rapidly, and my hands fist in the edges of his shirt.

"I should have known one taste wasn't going to be enough," he says in between kisses before he pulls back one final time. "See you soon, babe, real fucking soon." His statement has me left in a stupor, one I'm not sure I'll ever come out of.

JAMESON

“**L**ook who finally decided to show up,” Matthew greets me when I show up to the jobsite. He and Shaun loaded up the machines and brought them over to the land we’re currently clearing, giving me the time I needed to get my head out of my ass. Now that I’ve got a solid game plan on winning my woman over, I know it’s going to be a work in progress, and after last night, I’m pretty sure I’ll never fuck up again. There is nothing like wanting to climb in your truck and drive after her, but I couldn’t do that unless I woke up Josephine. Plus, it was too late at night to call someone to come sit at my house to go after Kody. Instead, I paced the damn floors, waiting for her to respond. She never did, and for good reason.

“Fuck off.” Matthew knew firsthand what I was doing. He covered for me with Shaun for the time being. Which I’ll be telling him straight up what’s happening between Kody and me.

“You’ve got it bad.” He lets out a low whistle. Matthew is poking the bear in order to get more information. Good luck, Chuck. What happens between Kody and me is ours, not anyone else’s. Matthew was the same exact way when he brought Lacey around, locked that shit up so tight that no one knew how serious they were until he was ready.

“And?” Matthew grins.

“Happy for ya. You gonna need help breaking the news to Shaun?” Ain’t no way I need help. We’re not kids, and I’m not a wimp. I can handle whatever Shaun throws my way. Even if it means he knocks me on my ass for being a grade-A dick.

“Nah, I’m good. Thanks, though,” I tell him.

“No problem,” he responds as I head toward Shaun. He’s got the tailgate down in the back of his truck, studying the plans, and didn’t hear a word of what my brother had to say. A damn miracle with as loud as he can be. I’m not sure if Kody let her brother know what happened last night, whether it’s the watered-down version or the truth.

“Hey, Shaun, you got a minute?” I ask once I’m closer to where he’s currently camped out. Probably waiting on me so he and Matthew can get in the woods. We have a system. The more eyes, the better. Especially when there’s new hires on the job.

“Hey, and yep. Everything okay?” He drops the pen on the plans. We’ve covered a lot of area on this job and should wrap it up in the next week or so, which is good since we’re going to have to deal with traveling next.

“Depends. You got a problem with me going after Kody?” Shaun stands up to his full height, crossing his arms over his chest. At least he’s not throwing a punch at my face.

“Fuck, you gonna treat her right? She dealt with that douchebag Richie long enough. She’s finally back home. I don’t want her running off if shit gets bad.” Shaun doesn’t have to say anything more. The message is received loud and clear.

“We haven’t talked about her past yet. I’m sure we will. Mom is taking JoJo Friday night. I didn’t want it to be weird when I show up on your doorstep and it’s not for poker. That being said, I see where you’re coming from. I’m not looking to fuck her over or make her run away. Especially because Kody hasn’t just left a lasting impression on me but also Josephine.”

“Damn. Well, alright. Kody’s a grown woman. It’s all good with me, but one question.” Shaun can ask all the damn questions in the world. It’s not like I can easily walk away when we work together and he and Matthew are still thick as thieves. Hell, we all play poker at someone’s house once a month.

“What’s that?”

“You the reason she was holed up in her room all night and when I left this morning?” I don’t get a chance to say anything before he goes on. “I swear to God if it was fucking Richie, I’ll drive my ass to Chicago and shove my boot so far up his ass he won’t be able to sit down without thinking about hurting another woman.”

“It wasn’t her ex. It would be me who was a dick. Kody’s also the reason I was late getting in this morning. I had to drop Josephine off at my parents’, then she caught wind I was meeting up with your sister and let me know

Kody was her friend, not mine.” Shaun shakes his head. JoJo has everyone wrapped around her finger. “Anyways, I met Kody for coffee, apologized, we talked. She’s going to watch Josephine, and I’m going to do my damndest to earn your sister even if I don’t deserve her. That being said, if you’ve got a problem, too fucking bad.”

“Glad to see she’ll be with a real man this time around. You hurt my sister, I’ll hurt you harder. Matthew’s brother, boss, or Josephine’s dad, I’ll knock you off your ass,” Shaun states.

“Got it. Loud and clear. I hope it never comes to that, but I understand all the same.”

“Woohoo, did I join the party at the right time?” Matthew breaks up our conversation. Probably a good thing, too. Shaun and I can both be a bit of a hot head.

“Yep.”

“Seems so,” Shaun tells Matthew.

“It’s about damn time. You could slice the sexual tension between those two with a knife.” Matthew is inserting his foot into his mouth. Where the hell is his damn filter when he needs it? Lacey needs to rein her husband in or at least stay stocked on duct tape.

“Dude, shut the fuck up. That’s my sister, and you’re putting thoughts in my head no brother should have. Jesus, I’m getting to work.” Shaun rolls up the plans until they’re secured tightly with a rubber band, slams the tailgate of his truck up, and then storms off.

“I think you pissed him off more than I did. Anyone ever tell you, brother, your mouth could use a filter?”

“What? I didn’t say anything others weren’t already thinking.” He throws his hands up like he wasn’t at fault.

“Let’s get to work. This land ain’t gonna clear itself.” I head back to my truck, digging my phone out of my pocket to make sure I didn’t miss anything. Mainly from Mom and Josephine, which is why I’m shocked when I’ve got a message from Kody. A picture of her and Josephine appears on my screen. JoJo has her arms around Kody’s neck, looking like she’s squeezing all the oxygen out of her. The smile on Kody’s face says it all. It’s a smile that lights up the whole damn room, and damn, am I happy she’s giving me a chance even if I don’t deserve her.

Kody: Hanging with my friend. I hope you don't mind. My mom was on her way over to your mom's when I called to ask for help on my photo booth this weekend and invited me along.

Me: I never thought I'd be jealous of my own daughter. Wish I were there with my two favorite girls.

I pocket my phone, grab my drink from the truck, and get to work. The faster the workday is over, the sooner I'll get to hear Kody's voice. Maybe we'll get this shit done quickly enough I can talk her into having dinner at my house tonight. Fuck, I really like that plan, and once Josephine goes to bed, I could get another taste of my dark-haired temptress.

KODY

I'm in a sour mood. There's no rhyme or reason to it except I got my hopes up and I'm the only one to blame for it. The reason being is Jameson. This time, I can't even blame the grumpy single dad. I know his job isn't nine to five, and neither is mine when I'm at a shoot. He never promised he'd see me today either. I just got excited at the potential of seeing him. I'm a basket case, it's official, or I'm becoming one of those needy girls who has to see the guy they're talking to every waking moment. No, that cannot be the case, can it? I guess it's a good thing Shaun wasn't home when I came in, or he'd see me having a temper tantrum and call me out on my shit. So, like the adult I'm pretending to be, I made a sandwich for dinner, took a hot shower, scrubbed my body, shaved, but ignored washing my hair. I was not in the mood to blow it dry, and with how annoyed I am with myself, my hair would have taken the brunt of my foulness.

My phone lights up on the covers beside my hip. "Hi," I answer Jameson's call on the first ring, trying to sound chipper. Seriously, I'm a nemesis to myself. This pity party needs to see its way out the door, or I'm going to drown myself. Not really, but it sounds good. I'm sitting in bed, in my usual position. A stack of pillows propping me up, back to the headboard, knees lifted as a makeshift table. My sketchbook propped up as I doodle on the last few remaining pages. Since I've been back in Lane County, this has been my downtime every time I crawl into bed. I keep my sketchpad and pencils in my bag in case there's a moment I need to occupy myself when I'm out and about. This pad is almost full, so I'll need to hit up the store soon for a new one.

“Hey, babe.” Jameson’s voice on the other end of the call is soothing, yet I can hear the rasp in his tone giving away that he’s tired.

“Rough day?” I ask. Shaun still isn’t home, and if Jameson is only now calling this late, it means Josephine is in bed. My brother probably stopped at a bar to have a drink or is meeting someone. I really need to get my shit together and find my own place. He swears up and down I’m not cramping his bachelor ways. I know the truth, though. I am. Shaun doesn’t bring any of his dates or one-night stand here. There’s no waking up to a strange woman in his kitchen, and while I appreciate it more than he’ll ever know, I also feel bad that he’s rearranged his whole life for his younger sister.

“Too fucking rough. I got to Mom’s as Josephine was getting ready to eat dinner, so we all ate together. By the time we got home, she was tired, and I was tired. I lost my cool, and she had a meltdown.” He takes a deep breath. I can imagine him running his fingers through his hair for the umpteenth time today. “It was a shit show. We both needed a hug, and I had to apologize for the second time today. I’m going to talk to Mom, and if you can handle three or four days a week watching Josephine at my place, it might be better.”

I finish drawing a leaf while he lets it all out. “Jameson, you’re doing a great job. I’m good to watch her as much as you need. It’s not like I’m super busy with photo shoots, but if I have one booked, I’m sure your mom can take her for an hour or so, then I’ll pick her back up. Josephine is probably trying to figure out her new routine.” I know his words can be harsh. I also know that when it comes to his little girl, he would never purposely make her cry.

“I’d appreciate it. I’m pretty sure it’s the waking up early, going to bed late, add in Emma being gone and her not asking many questions. I think it’s all too much.” I did notice Josephine hasn’t asked me about her mom, but I figured it’s because she talks to others.

“Well, I’m here to help in whatever way I can. Do you mind if I take Josephine to the store tomorrow? I need to get a new sketchpad, and she’s slowly outgrowing the puzzles you have at the house.” I’m trying not to have a huge opinion on certain areas with Josephine. I don’t want to step on toes and open my mouth when the advice isn’t wanted or warranted.

“Babe, you can take her anywhere except the fucking park. Jesus, I still have nightmares about what could have happened.” He pauses. “The playset for the house is coming next week. I need to see if I can rally the guys to come help me build it.” There’s the Jameson Evans I know when he drops

that shield of his—overprotective, fierce, and loves his little girl with his whole heart.

“So, take her to the park. Got it,” I tease, trying to get him to laugh and decompress at the same time. He really is carrying a lot of weight on his shoulders. I’m sure he’s also dealing with more than he lets on about Emma. My brother told me there was nothing romantic or love involved. I’m not sure that matters when you have a child with someone. I think that’s the one saving grace with Richie; we didn’t have kids. Going into our marriage, I knew I wanted them, voiced my opinion on the matter. He even agreed. Then, a year into our relationship, Richie changed his mind, and there was no negotiating. In the long run, I was thankful, but at the time, it was one of those moments that crushed my soul.

“Woman, I’m trying to go slow with you, and here you are, pushing my buttons. My hand is itching to see what your ass would feel like warmed up by my palm slapping down on your soft-as-fuck skin.” So much for getting him to laugh. There’s an ache between my thighs that wasn’t there moments ago, but the threat of Jameson spanking me, well, I’m seeing the appeal more and more.

“Jameson,” I all but moan out his name, head dropping back, eyes closing, and why are we taking things slow again? Oh, that’s right, because Jameson’s tongue is sharp and wicked. He could also use the strong muscle in a completely different way. Yet he hasn’t.

“And this is where we get off the phone for the night,” I grumble in annoyance. “Kody, we keep this up much longer, your fingers will be buried inside your pussy, my hand will be wrapped around my cock, and I’ll be telling you exactly how you’re going to come over the phone.”

“Is that a promise?” My hand abandons the colored pencil I was using and slides beneath the blanket until my fingers trail a path down the inside of my thigh.

“It’s a guaran-fucking-tee.” I hear the hiss of a zipper on the other end of the line. “Now get some sleep while I jack my cock to another memory of how you taste.” He hangs up the phone without so much of a goodbye. I do one better. I kick the sheets off my body and shimmy my sleep shorts off, leaving me in a deep blue lace thong. It takes me no time at all to set up the shot. My thighs are spread, my fingers are beneath the fabric, and my middle finger is on my clit. I make sure the camera is in live view and take a few pictures as I warm myself. My body shudders in bliss as I find the best one to

send him. With a press of his thumb, he'll get the action, and Jameson will see what he does to me. I pull up his text thread, attach the image, and type out:

Me: You're a tease, but I can do better.

I drop my phone, ignoring the way it's going off with a text, then a call, then another text. Jameson keeps going, and I don't stop what I'm doing to answer. I'm too busy making myself come. Maybe next time, he won't decide what I want and don't want.

JAMESON

All damn night I was at war with my head and my cock. My head telling me to stay put, don't call a family member to come over and watch Josephine. My cock saying do it, go after the woman who made you rock hard with a moan and a picture. One I used to jack off to last night and this morning. My damn palm is nothing compared to Kody's, and visualizing those long dainty fingers of hers fucking her cunt while I was watching between her spread thighs. And Kody is definitely making me work my ass off when it comes to her. The woman can ignore her phone like no one I know. My calls and texts went unanswered, and while it was probably for the best, I didn't like it one single bit.

I'm standing on my front porch waiting for the temptress to pull into the driveway. Josephine is still asleep, tucked into her bed, bear next to her and thumb out of her mouth. A sign of a deep sleep, one she won't be coming out of for a while. I'm just raising my cup of coffee to my lips when I see her car turn the corner onto our street. This is probably the first of many cups I'll have to get me through the day after a night where all I could think about is Kody. She's pulling in the driveway as the sun barely starts to rise behind her car. A signal that I'm going to have at least thirty minutes of alone time with Kody before I need to leave for work. I abandon my coffee, set it on the rail, and head down the stairs in nothing but a pair of jeans to help her out of the car. She's barely in *Park* before I'm opening her driver's side door, bending down, and unbuckling her seatbelt.

"Jameson, well, good morning to you, too." She pulls the keys out of the ignition. I grab her bag in one hand while my other is helping her out of the

car. As much as I'm craving my mouth on hers, I know once I start, there's no stopping. The last thing I'm willing to do is make another display of Kody out here in the open, even with my truck obscuring her for the most part. Been there, done that, almost lost my woman because of it.

"Babe. House, now. Then I'll show you how good of a morning it's about to become." I notice she is wearing her usual leggings, this time with a long-sleeved slouchy sweater thing and what looks like slippers on her feet, but they are hard soled. She's a creature of habit and comfort. It works for me, easier to get her out of the clothes and gives me an unobstructed view of her sexy-as-fuck body. I'm right behind her, watching the natural sway of her hips, and she's not even trying. All I know is I'd get on my knees, bury my face in her ass, and enjoy every damn moment of eating her until her cum is dripping down my cheeks.

"Someone's very testy today." My arm wraps around her from behind, hand spanning her lower abdomen. My thumb hooks in the top of her leggings, fingers sliding downwards until I can feel her heat.

"Kody, you've got no damn idea. We don't have a whole lot of time. Josephine will be up sooner than I'd like, and I've got to get to work. You teased me last night. Now I'm going to tease you. Then, when I get home tonight, you're going to stay until Josephine is in bed, and I'm going to give us both exactly what we need." My mouth is hovering above her ear. Kody's body trembles against mine, ass arching backward until we can both feel what she's doing to my cock. The need to bend her over the first available surface, rip her leggings down, free my dick, and take her raw is bubbling at the surface.

"Jameson, God, please," she begs so prettily.

"Open the door, babe." My other hand that's not playing with her pussy through the fabric is fisted in her braid, tipping her head back, and I lower my head to the column of her throat. Her hand twists the knob, and we walk in together, my legs bracketing either side of hers. As soon as we clear the door, I let go of her long dark hair, itching to take it out of the braid and see her in nothing but her hair. I close the door, making sure it's not slammed shut before I spin her around and pin her with my body.

"Back against the wall, and you gotta be quiet, Kody, real fucking quiet." I step into her body, moving her legs so they're spread and I can dip my hips. The need to feel as much of her as possible is consuming me. A soft sigh, the perfect in I need, not that I'd allow it any other way. My tongue slips inside,

hers meets mine, and there's no way this is going to end any time soon. I swallow the whimper that tries to leave her mouth.

I feel her hands dig into my shoulders, one leg hiking over my hip, spreading her open even more, and I step in closer. My cock notches at her entrance, our clothes the only barrier keeping me from going any further. My hips rock along the seam of her slit. Kody's lips pull away from mine. Her chest rises and falls breathlessly. Fuck, she's damn sight.

"More," she says barely above a whisper.

The more I want is going to leave us both wanting, but I don't see any other way around it. Soon, I'll need to head out the door, and I'll be damned if I don't get a taste right from the source. I back away, lowering her leg until she has both feet planted on the ground. My hands go to the top of her leggings as I drop to my knees, slowly dragging them down along with her thong, this one black, and damn if she isn't soaking wet. The lace is clinging to her sex. Kody shimmies, trying to get me to move faster. Fuck that. There's no way I'm going to rush getting my first view of her cunt up close and personal. It's already bad enough I'm going to be leaving her wet and aching, and me, well, I'm going to get very acquainted with blue balls today.

"Shhh, Kody. You don't want this to be over before it really gets started, do you?" I ask. Her clothes are halfway down her thighs, and my head dips lower. Her scent is damn intoxicating, sultry with a hint of sweetness. She's all woman, and she's fucking all mine. My tongue slides out, starting at her clit and working my way down until I'm at her entrance. The last time I had this taste, it wasn't directly from the source. Now it is, and there's no other way to describe how I feel besides addicted. So much for me teasing her or myself. There's no controlling me now. My hands rip down her leggings more, pulling one leg from its binding, and I move closer. Kody realizes what I'm doing. Her hand slides into my hair, keeping my face planted in her wet-as-fuck cunt. I glance up, and she's watching me, hot as hell, too, how she's covering her mouth to keep from getting louder as I eat her like I'm starving for my last meal. I'm half tempted to pull the button to my jeans through the loop and give my cock some much-needed relief when Kody's body arches off the door. I drag my fingers along the inside of her leg that she has planted on the ground. My lips wrap around her clit, pulling on it with deep pulls. She needs more, she needs to get off, and I can't wait any longer. I slide two fingers inside her slick, tight heat, the tips moving in a forward motion as I pull them in and out. Kody's legs tremble on my cheeks, and I make a solid

vow the next time I'm eating her, it'll be with her sitting on my face, riding me, her thighs on either side, squeezing the oxygen out of me as she comes a part on my mouth. Fuck, what a damn way to go. Death by the sweetest pussy a man could ever taste.

"Jameson." Her voice is muffled. Her cunt clamps down tightly on my fingers, and I pull away from sucking on her clit. Instead, I lick at it in slow figures eights, drawing out the orgasm she's barreling toward. My hand not fingering her pussy is still clamped on her hip, holding her in place, and with our gaze locked on one another, it happens. Kody's eyes close, her body shutters, fingers tensing in my hair, and she comes unfuckingdone. She's pure and raw beauty. There's no way one taste would have ever been enough. I should have known that the first time I watched her walk across the room, the first time she ignored me and my bullshit, and the first time she put me in my damn place. Kody Goodwin is going to be mine in every way imaginable. Now I just have to make sure I never screw up again.

As her body comes down from her orgasm, I wipe my cheeks on the inside of her thighs, leaving a different kind of mark on her with my beard abrading her soft and sensitive skin. I love the way it looks, wishing I had my phone handy to add another picture to my collection of Kody.

"Jameson, you are not at all what I expected." The rasp in her tone is doing nothing for my hard cock.

"The same could be said for yourself." The clock is not on my side. "I'd like to continue, and we will, tonight. Now let's get you back in your clothes before we have to explain the birds and the bees to Josephine at an entirely too young age." Kody's body is still recovering, so I help her step into the leg of her pants. It has me reconsidering going to work at all today. Once she's back together, I stand up, holding her in place one last time and lightly grazing her lips. "I'm going to get ready for work. The coffee pot is on. Your creamer is in the fridge. Help yourself to whatever." She doesn't respond verbally; instead, she nods in understanding. Her face is flush. The orgasm I gave her was a doozy. I leave her where she is and do what needs to be done in order to get back to her faster.

KODY

I barely pulled myself together from the mind-altering orgasm Jameson doled out like it was no big deal. This time, his foot wasn't inserted into his mouth, and I didn't let my mind wander in a negative direction. He left me to get ready for work. And I was ready to follow him. The need to give him some relief after getting mine didn't stem from the feeling like I owed him. There's a deep-seated desire to watch Jameson come undone. The always-in-control single dad, who has no problem getting on his knees for me, well, I wanted to return it, and I'm going to. The second I get a chance this evening when he gets home. Jameson came back to the living room after I finally pulled myself together and made a cup of coffee for myself and a travel mug for him. Then he left me with a kiss that had me gripping his shirt so tightly it left wrinkles in the fabric. There was no walking him out to his work truck. He told me he didn't want me out in the cool air, and there was no way he'd leave if I followed. Instead, I walked him to the front door, where he left me with a soft kiss, nipping at my lip for good measure, and then he was out the door.

"Kody, you here!" I'm now on my second cup of coffee. Jameson has been gone for close to an hour, and I wasn't going to sit around and do nothing besides sit on my butt.

"Hey, JoJo, I am. Did you sleep well?" While she was sleeping, I got breakfast going—a burrito of sorts of eggs, cheese, and bacon wrapped up in a tortilla, and then wrapped in foil to keep warm. We've got big plans today. I'd like to hit up the craft store and grocery store before nap time comes around.

“Da best! Daddy read me.” She holds up her fingers and proceeds to count, “One, two, tree books!” Her ringlet type curls are every which way, the side of her face has lines from the sheets, and Josephine has her bear wrapped beneath her arm.

“Wow, that’s great!” I notice her eyes are full of tears, and her bottom lip is wobbling, “What’s wrong?”

“I have accident,” she says, and I look down to see the proof. Then I move. No longer am I leaning against the kitchen island; I’m double-stepping it.

“It’s okay. I’ve got you.” I sweep her up in my arms. “Shhh, accidents happen all the time. It’s okay.” I try to soothe her as we walk through the living room, down the hallway, and into the bathroom. “Will you turn on the light?” I ask, trying to get her mind off her forgetting to go to the bathroom before finding me. Which I feel is my fault. I’d gotten started on breakfast and didn’t hear or see her through the monitor, so immersed in my task I didn’t think.

“You not mad?” Josephine asks, flipping on the light.

“Nope, not at all.” I can feel the proof of her accident on my clothes. “Can you get undressed and finish going to the bathroom?” JoJo is sucking back tears, and damn if that doesn’t make me pull her closer. The last thing I want is her to be upset with herself. She’s hardly two and doing great.

“I be big girl,” JoJo says.

“You are a big girl. Don’t ever think differently. I’m going to start the bath. Bubbles?” Redirection is going to be key in order to turn her morning around. Something tells me Josephine does not like disappointing herself or others. JoJo is pretty advanced for her age, or maybe I’m biased. Probably a mixture of both, really. She’s already potty trained, talks in sentences even if they’re somewhat broken, and is killing it in her dexterity skills.

“Pwease.” She strips down completely naked to finish going potty. I’m trying to hold back my laughter. Jameson warned me that this happens from time to time, especially when she’s going to be there for a bit.

“No problem.” I turn the water on, making sure it’s not too hot and not too cold, and pour a healthy amount of the bubble bath in. “Are you okay?” I ask.

“I go number two!” Alright. Gone is the sadness, and in it’s place is Josephine’s happiness. Thank goodness.

“Okay, you stay on the toilet. I’ll be right back.” I hurry out of the

bathroom, keeping the door open and my ear on any different noises that I'm not used to over the bath water, and grab paper towels and cleaning solution. My clothes will have to wait until Josephine's bath is done. I'll have to wash them and steal something of Jameson's. I make quick work of cleaning up the mess on the floor. Really, she caught it as much as she could. The wetness seeped onto me, so there's no trail, just a small puddle. It's good as new in no time, and Josephine will be none the wiser.

I grab my phone off the counter. Ideally, I'd call Jameson and let him know right away, but he probably won't hear his phone if he's on a machine. Here's to hoping he answers my text. If not, I'll get ahold of Shaun. His watch is always on him and sends him alerts.

Me: Hey, JoJo had an accident. She's okay and everything is cleaned up, but I'm going to need to wash my clothes. Do you mind if I grab something from your room?

"I done! Pwease wipe!" I no sooner get the text message sent, and I'm being summoned. I'm trying not to laugh, but she's so independent until it comes to this part. Maybe it was Jameson, Emma, or Miriam who instilled it in her to let an adult help. I can't really see Josephine allowing anyone to help when she could do it herself, though the pile of toilet paper might have been the deciding factor in the grand scheme of things.

"Kody at your service, Princess Josephine." My phone is still in my hand as I walk into the bathroom, greeting JoJo, who's waiting for me, a happy smile on her face with how I announced her name.

"I ready for bath." She wraps her arms around her chest, showing me she's shivering, except it's a bit exaggerated with the way she says, "Brrrr." I take care of her as quickly as possible.

"You flush the toilet while I wash my hands." I give her a task to keep her busy. She steps off the stool and does what seems to be every little kid's favorite thing to do—playing with water of some kind.

"Let me check the temperature." Josephine is already standing close to the bathtub, so it comes to no surprise to me when I see her leg over the ledge, and she is wiggling her toes in the water.

"It good!"

"Hold on." I plunge my full hand into the water just to be sure. "Alright, hop in. Did Nan or daddy wash your hair last night?" I'm guessing neither of them did with the state of her hair. It looks like she put her finger into a light

socket. The frizz is one giant mess.

“No, you do?” she asks.

“Of course. Play with your toys for a minute. I’m going to answer my phone.” It buzzed in the side pocket of my leggings.

“Otay.” I pull my phone out and hope like hell it’s Jameson. In all fairness, I could load Josephine into my car after her bath and breakfast, stop at Shaun’s to grab a quick shower and change. That also seems like a lot of work, and there’s really nothing for JoJo to do there, which could be a recipe for disaster.

“Who dat?” Jo asks, playing with a few of her cups, filling up the water and tipping them over on her head.

I unlock my phone. Jameson’s text is on the screen.

Jameson: Damn, she hasn’t done that in a while. Is everything okay? You think something triggered it? Take whatever you need and call me when JoJo is taking a nap. I want you in my bed with nothing but my clothes on.

“It’s your daddy. He was making sure I didn’t fall asleep, and you weren’t painting the house.” I wink at her. She nods, then gets back to playing.

Me: I don’t think so. More like she got excited and forgot to go. As for your request, you’ll have to wait and see. Talk soon. I’ve got a little girl who is very demanding, exactly like her daddy.

“I no paint da house.” I get the shampoo ready to tackle her hair, knowing the conditioner is going to need to soak in before I can get the tangles out, and then leaving a bit in for her curls.

“No?” Josephine shakes her head.

“No, only da wall. Once.” She tips her head back, laughing at her joke, and I join in. Josephine Evans is one in a million and will always keep you on your toes.

JAMESON

“**W**here are my girls at?” I shout, opening up the door to the house after getting off much earlier than I ever anticipated. The guys and I decided we’d work through lunch. We were all ready for an early day. Not taking an hour break then shooting the shit for another thirty minutes had us wrapping up early. It wasn’t until got in my truck and pulled out my phone that I saw the picture Kody sent. It’s a damn good thing, too. Jesus, the woman is going to give me a damn run for my money. Or a stroke. Or both. Either way, it’s a good thing I don’t do shit that’s bad for my health. Working out has been harder with Emma gone, and I need to make more time for it, especially with Kody in my life. The pictures she sent me have my damn heart nearly beating out of my chest, dick staying in a permanent state of hardness, and if I don’t get some cardio in somewhere, I’ll keel over. The latest image from her, I’ll be saving forever. Hell, I might even get it framed and make it a permanent fixture in my bedroom. Kody in nothing but my shirt on, nipples pebbled through the thin white cotton, sitting on the edge of my bed with a fuck-me look on her face. Son of a bitch, it didn’t end there either. Her legs were straddling the mattress, legs open on either side, hands between them, giving the effect that she’s using them. But when you look closely, she’s holding the shirt in place, which molded my borrowed shirt to her curvy little body. It didn’t leave much to the imagination; at least it didn’t to me, especially after having my mouth on her bare cunt. I want one of her completely bare. The only thing covering her tits and pussy will be her long dark hair, strategically placed.

It wasn’t only her body made my cock swell and decide to make me

detour to Shaun's. It was the look of desire written in her soulful eyes and pouty lips. A quick phone call to Shaun and a fifteen-minute trip out of the way had me stopping at his place to pick up a few of her things. Then I was on my way to the house. I should feel like a damn creep going through her drawers and picking out what she'd have to wear tomorrow, along with a few toiletries. I don't, though. I grabbed a bag Kody had hanging on the closet doorknob and deposited everything in it, forgoing pajamas because she'll be sleeping in my bed tonight, naked.

Now I'm home, and the house is quiet; the television isn't on like it usually is. There's an aroma of dinner in the air, and I can't quite put my nose on what's simmering on the stove. I kick my boots off, close the door, and walk further into the house. My first stop is going to be the kitchen. After skipping lunch, I'm more than ready to eat an early dinner. The house is in its normal state, picked up except for a few toys on the floor and other stuff on the coffee table, usually a puzzle, but today, it looks like a board game. I mosey toward the kitchen, find a pot on the stove, and I lift the lid. Damn, Kody's the fucking best. She's got a stew simmering, and now that I know what we're having for dinner, a dinner I didn't ask for her to cook, my stomach grumbles in hunger. She took that upon herself, and fuck, am I loving it. I put the lid back on and make my way out of the kitchen and toward the hallway. On the islands sits a new piece of artwork, and judging by the lack of anything new lying around, I'd guess my girls didn't hit up the store like Kody mentioned she would.

"Dat my mom," I hear JoJo's voice once I'm at the entrance to the hall. I'd like to say my house has a split floorplan, one where the master bedroom is on the other side of the house. Sadly, it's not, and when I bought the place, I wasn't exactly thinking about having a woman here all the time, especially not Kody. Now I'm going to have to wait to hear her let go. Twice now she's had to be quiet, only allowing a quiet moan when all I want to hear is her scream my name when I finally fuck my thick cock into her tight pussy.

"She's very pretty." There's a picture of her and Emma in Josephine's room on her nightstand. I'm sure she's talking about Emma to Kody. For a while now, I've worried JoJo would forget her mom. Add in the fact Kody's here, watching her and we're dating, the gnawing edge of worry settled deep, especially since Josephine hasn't asked about Emma since the day after the wake.

"Like me." My little girl does not lack confidence. I love that about her.

“Yes, exactly like you,” Kody responds. I peek my head around the frame of the door. Josephine and Kody are sitting on the floor, JoJo has the frame in her hands, and the two of them have a few toys in front of them.

“She in heaven,” Josephine says absentmindedly, setting the frame down beside her. “An angel. Dat what daddy say.” The pit in my stomach lessens. Never in my life do I want JoJo to forget about her mom. I also don’t want to her to feel like she’s missing out on having a mother. It’s a hard fucking line.

“I think your daddy is right,” she replies, picking the picture of Emma up and placing it back in its rightful spot. “Ready to help me make the biscuits to go along with dinner?” I step back. Neither of them heard me come into the house, and the last thing I want to do is make Kody feel like I was checking up on her. I walk to my room, dropping the bag of Kody’s stuff onto my bed and pulling my shirt off. I’d take a shower now, but if I don’t say hi to Josephine first, I’ll never hear the end of it. Plus hearing her talk about Emma, I’m not trying to add to any trauma she could develop. I smile as I hear JoJo’s little feet. My girl stomps as loud as a stampede of elephants. My feet carry me out of the room. Kody is behind Josephine, and I wrap my arm around her waist. “JoJo,” I get her attention while Kody lets out an audible gasp.

“Daddy, you home!” She spins on her heels, barreling toward Kody and me. I should probably quit hugging Kody. We’ve yet to talk about how we’re going to go about our relationship. A conversation we’ll be having tonight. I’m not sneaking around. Her brother knows, my brother knows, next Josephine will know, after that our families will know, and then I’ll work on the whole fucking town knowing she’s mine by planting a baby in her belly and sliding a ring on her finger.

I’m well aware the ink on her divorce papers is barely dry. I’m also aware that her marriage was over long before she went through with everything.

“I want in!” JoJo runs toward Kody, who picks her up without pause, with no silent look saying she’s not impressed, so I roll with it and enjoy the two of them the entire time.

“Soon, babe, real damn soon,” I promise, pushing my hips into her shapely ass as she sinks into my hold, letting her feel what she’s doing to my cock.

JAMESON

“She down for the count?” I’m propped against the doorframe of my bedroom. Josephine asked for Kody to tuck her in after we both read her a story. It hit me then that JoJo is just as attached to Kody as I am. A damn good thing, too, because after tonight, I’m going to permanently tie her to us

“Yeah, I stayed for a few minutes until her thumb fell out of her mouth and she curled into her bear.” I make my way toward her, my hands going to her hips, pulling her closer to me while turning her around and walking her backwards into my bedroom. While she was wrapping up bedtime, I hopped in the shower and threw on a pair of pajama pants I wear on occasion. Usually when JoJo is sleeping in bed with me or when I’m ready to relax for the rest of the night. Tonight, they’ll be off the second I get Kody inside my room.

“Good, now it’s time for you and me.” She’s in one of my shirts, braless judging by the way her nipples are pointing through the dark material. My mouth waters thinking about sucking on each pebbled tip, fabric and all. My cock twitches remembering this morning and how I had her taste on my lips well into the day; now there’s only a hint left.

“Jameson.” I walk her through the doorway, my foot grabbing the door and closing it. The bed would be a good place to start, but right now, it’s too far away, plus there’s something about making Kody helpless. Sure, she’s a willing participant, but pinning her in place, taking her how I like, it’s fucking phenomenal.

“Fuck, yeah. I bet you’re wet already, Kody.” With the bedroom door

closed, I walk her backwards until she's pressed up against the wall. One of my hand goes to the wall, the other lifts her borrowed shirt and runs along the seam of her sweats. She squirms. I'd bet my left nut she's bare beneath her pants, too. "How wet are you, babe? You gonna tell me, or am I going to find out for myself?" Her stomach quivers beneath my touch as I glide my fingers down lower. Kody doesn't answer me, whether that's because she doesn't want to or can't, I've got no damn clue, but I'll get my answer soon enough. I flatten my palm to her smooth bare skin, and when the tips of my fingers hit her wet slit, her body arches off the wall. My hand not currently on her cunt pushes at the waist of her sweats.

"Oh, fuck," she purrs out loud. I should cover her mouth with my hand, but finally being able to hear her is the sweetest damn music to my ears.

"I'm about to fuck you, babe. Rough and deep, wet and bare, long and hard." I'm taking Kody raw, not a damn thing between us. With anyone else, I'd never take the chance. It's different with Kody. Life is different with Kody. It's damn perfect, exactly like her.

"Yes." Her hands clench my flannels, pulling them down. I'm not complaining one bit. The faster we're both naked, the faster I'll be fucking my cum into her hot-as-fuck snatch. My cock makes an appearance first, slapping against my stomach. Kody's eyes are no longer closed; she's watching the tip of my dick. Pre-cum coats the head, and I've barely scratched the surface of having her naked for me.

"Take off your shirt, Kody. I want my mouth on your nipples as I'm taking your pussy, babe." I back away, my hand still pressed against her wet slit, sliding my fingers back and forth yet not dipping inside. Her hips undulate. She's on the tip of her toes, hoping to get me to move so she can fuck my fingers.

"Jameson, God, please, more." Her plea is like a victory in a football game after being in double overtime, and when she whips her shirt over her head, hair falling down, tits moving up and down with each breath, it's me who is ravenous. I push down her sweats, she steps out of them, and I kick my own away.

"Hands above your head, legs locked around my waist, Kody," I demand then move my hand away from her pussy, mourning the loss. The only thing keeping me sane is knowing my cock is about to be in its newfound home, buried inside Kody.

"Jameson, please." Yep, this round won't last long. The buildup is too

strong, it's been too damn long, and being inside her raw, there's not a chance of dragging this out. Kody presses her hands against on the wall. I capture her wrists in one fist as my other hand engulfs her thigh, helping her lift her lithe body up until my hips are situated between her spread legs.

"Look down, Kody. Watch my cock as it slides inside." She lifts her head off the wall, eyes opening, watching as I glide the underside of my cock along the lips of her pussy. "Get me nice and wet. Fuck, I love how wet you get for me, babe." I rock my hips, this time dipping them until the head of my cock sits at her entrance. Her cunt pulses around my mushroom-shaped head, attempting to suck me in before I'm ready.

"Jesus Christ, I hope you're ready, Kody, because there's no way I'm stopping now."

"Don't hold back. Fuck me, Jameson." I push my cock inside her in one solid thrust before she finishes her plea. There's no waiting for her to adjust to my length. My patience is gone. The velvet clutch of her cunt is too damn intoxicating, and I'm too fucking gone for her. I feel her fingernails press into my skin. My mouth seeks hers, needing to swallow down her moans before this is over because of a certain little girl. I make a mental note to pick up a sound machine for Josephine's room. One of those that's supposed to keep you in a deeper sleep, then maybe Kody can be a shit ton louder when I fuck her. My tongue teases hers, wrapping around hers, claiming her mouth like I'm claiming her pussy. I move closer, my chest rubbing against hers. My chest hair scrapes along her nipples, giving her another sensation to build up. On each piston and swivel of my hips, I hit her clit.

I pull away from her mouth, wanting to watch her face as she comes apart. It's the sweetest damn thing to witness. A sheen of perspiration coats our skin, only making the slap of skin that much louder. "Take my cock, Kody, and get there," I groan. My tempo never stutters, and she has no problem using her thigh muscles to lift her hips. I should have known better than to think I'd be in complete control of the situation.

"Jameson." I let her hands go from their place on the wall. I can't get deep enough, and I'm going to need the bed in order to do that. I walk us toward it, hands gripping her hips, the tips of her fingers digging into my biceps as I bounce her on my cock with each step.

"Hold that thought, Kody. Not yet," I order when I feel her clench around my length. I'm not ready for her to come. Before that happens, she needs to be flat on her back, legs elevated to allow my swimmers to do their job. I

wasn't fucking around when I said she'll be pregnant soon, and since Kody didn't say no to me going bare, she knows it's about to happen.

"I don't think I can." I hold us steady as her back meets the mattress.

"Legs on my shoulders, Kody, then you need to hold the fuck on." My jaw is clenched. The way she's squirming, this won't last too much longer. My hands keep their firm grip on her hip. She'll probably have bruise marks tomorrow, and that's okay. Besides, I'll probably have some matching ones myself. I'll wear them with a badge of fucking honor. Kody may not realize it in this time, but she's marking me on the outside while I'm marking her on the inside.

"Oh fuck," she whimpers. She fucking whimpers. I've got one knee on the mattress, a foot planted on the ground, and I'm sinking so deep inside her, I swear the tip of my cock is hitting her cervix.

"Kody," I groan her name. She tightens around on my dick, body arching back, skin turning red, and her mouth opens on a silent moan. Fuck, there's gonna be no more of her staying quiet. I want to hear my woman scream my name when I'm inside her. I keep thrusting my hips through her orgasm, chasing my own, and when the first spurt of cum paints her wet depths, it's me tossing my head back, closing my eyes, and letting the orgasm take over. Jesus Christ, this is ten times better than me using my hand to a fantasy about Kody.

"Jameson." I drop down on top of her, checking my weight. Her calves fall away from my shoulders, and I wrap my body around Kody's, hugging her tightly to my chest.

"Hold on tight, babe. Rolling to my back and taking you with me." Fuck leaving her legs up in the air for a few minutes. I can barely feel my body from my waist down after the sex we just had.

"We're going to make a mess," she mutters but does as I say. My back hits the mattress, and she's lying on top of me, my cock still semi-hard and managing to stay inside of her.

"Don't give a fuck. Give me a few minutes, and I'm going to take you again." I lift my head, mouth meeting hers, and I silence anything else she has to say with a kiss already knowing she won't be leaving my bed for the foreseeable future.

KODY

“I really should go home, Jameson. This is going to confuse Josephine if she wakes up in the middle of the night.” The clothes he brought from my brother's place are sitting on top of the dresser. Jameson has this all planned out, but I'm worried about the what-ifs. Especially considering we're lying in bed, beneath the covers, completely naked, and the insides of my thighs are coated with Jameson's cum.

“The door is shut. I'll hear her before she even gets out of bed, and the baby monitor is right beside me. I want you in bed with me, and I don't want to hide this from Josephine. The best days I've had were with you. I'm not stopping them now that I've finally had you.” I lift my head off his chest. Jameson is relaxed, the lines around his eyes are subdued, and he's rocking a permanent grin. The man is cocky as hell, and he's currently getting his way. I'm close to relenting, but I need to know a few more things.

“And what are you going to do with me now that you have me?” I should have really made him work harder to earn my forgiveness, but when I talked to Kari, she told me a few things I needed to hear. One, Jameson apologized, a night-and-day comparison to what Richie would have ever done. Two, he went through a lot with losing Josephine's mom. They weren't in love or anything, but they had a system, he could bounce ideas off her, they were a team, and now he's dealing with a whole new world. Three, Jameson is hot, and he doles out killer orgasms. Maybe I shouldn't have told my best friend everything, but then again, I wouldn't have moved on as quickly and I'd have held on to a grudge, meaning I wouldn't be here, having the most amazing sex of my life while looking into Jameson's blue eyes.

“You’re mine. Figured you’d realize that when I fucked my cum into you without wearing a condom, and I know you’re not on the pill. So, unless you have an implant I’m not aware of, that’s how much mine you are.” His eyes are glued to me. I knew we weren’t being smart or safe when we were having sex without protection, and in the back of my mind, I know I should have said something. The truth of the matter is, I didn’t want to. “I want you, today, tomorrow, forever, Kody. Josephine thinks the sun rises and sets with you. What you do for both of us, it’s more than I ever knew we needed.” My forehead drops to his chest. His hand drifts through my hair. It’s going to be a knotted, tangled mess yet totally and completely worth it.

“Jesus, Jameson. I was not prepared for you, not at all.” My head comes off his chest, his hand not in my hair cups my cheek, thumb sliding along my skin. His gaze looking at any part of me has my body blazing like an inferno. He must feel and see what he’s doing to me. His thumb slides to my lips, rubbing along the seam. My mouth opens, sucking his thumb inside.

“You good?” he asks, a deep rasp to his tone. My thighs clench. It doesn’t matter that I just came less than fifteen minutes ago; I’m more than ready when it comes to Jameson. I nod my response. “Good. I’m gonna take that mouth now. Lie on your back, head hanging over the mattress. While you’re sucking my cock, I’m going to play with these tits.” His thumb leaves my mouth, dragging it down my body in a trail of wetness until he’s circling my nipple.

“Jameson.” I close my eyes. My flesh comes alive, and he’s making it hard to do what he asks when he’s playing with my body.

“Fuck, you make it hard to think straight when you say my name like that.” He pulls his hand away from my breast. I spur myself into action, not wanting to lose any part of him. I salivate thinking about having his cock in my mouth, not caring that I’ll be tasting the two of us together.

I crawl to the edge of the bed. He watches while he stands, and then I lie on my back. “Help me?” I ask, using my feet to scoot back. Jameson’s hand is wrapped around his thick cock. Jesus, I’m not sure how I’ll fit the full length of him in my mouth, let alone swallow him.

“Fuck, yeah.” His hands move to my hips, leaning over and pulling me closer until his cock is within reach. My mouth opens before he’s able to stand back up to his full height, and I’ve got my lips wrapped around the mushroom-shaped head of his cock.

I moan around him, tilting my head back farther, and take as much as I

can. My hand moves to his balls, cupping them. I'll slowly work them in the palm of my hand soon enough. Right now, I'm only holding them, so I don't suffocate. Jameson isn't like other men who have length but not balls, or balls and not length. He has the trifecta—length, girth, and balls. God definitely chose favorites when they created him.

“Just like that, Kody.” I settle in, adjusting to my position and trying to take more of his length with each small movement of his hips. One moment his hands are on my hips, holding me steady, the next I feel the tips of his fingers sliding along my pelvic bone and skating downwards. I swallow around his dick when I feel two of his fingers glide along my slit, forming a V, conveniently staying away from my clit. That's okay. Two can play this game. I relax my throat, push my head back another inch, and take his cock deeper. Apparently, he likes what I'm doing. His other hand grabs the back of my neck, holding me steady, and his thumb, well, I was not prepared for him to sweep it along the vulnerable spot of my throat. He doesn't press down on it or make it to where I can't breathe. He sweeps it up and down, letting me feel his presence there with each movement.

I utter a moan. Jameson rocks his hip backward and forward, sliding deeper inside. That's not what has me on the edge, no, his fingers are doing that. One digit dips inside me, gathering my wetness before he pulls it away. He's teasing me; there is no other way to describe it. The only way I know how to taunt him back is to roll his balls in the palm of my hand. Two can play this untold game, one where we're both trying to one-up the other, to see who can hold out the longest, and who will come the fastest. I already know I'm going to be on the losing side of this game, except am I really losing if Jameson succeeds in making me come by only playing with my clit? His thick expert fingers are moving in circles along my clit for a few strokes before they glide back inside me, working me up into a fevered pitch. With each forward thrust of his hips, he plunges two fingers inside my wet depths. When he pulls back from my mouth, that's when he goes to my clit. Jameson Evans is playing my body like a cat would with a mouse.

“Jesus, Kody, your mouth, your throat, your pussy, your tits, your whole fucking body, it's mine, and I'm going to take everything you have to give.” There is something about this man talking in the midst of an oncoming orgasm, telling me and showing me exactly what I do to him. I swallow around his thick dick on a forward thrust, attempting to hold him there, breathing through my nose, really trying to push him over the edge. Except

my plan backfires. Jameson keeps his fingers inside my fluttering cunt, working them back and forth without pulling out. His palm rubs against my clit, and I'm a freaking goner. Mouth open, losing the suction I had on his cock, I moan around him, eyes watering, saliva dripping down my cheeks, and I'm losing the will to hold the fuck on.

"Fuck yeah, Kody, come on my fingers," Jameson groans, voice rumbling, and this time, it's not me being too loud, it's him. My mouth is still stuffed full of his cock, and the only thing I can focus on is my orgasm and not choking. Even still, Jameson is a master at working his fingers in tune with his hips. My body is his to use, unashamedly. A sob works its way up from chest, and then I'm soaring like an eagle high in the sky. "Swallow, babe, take all of me."

His wish is my command. My body slowly relaxes after coming down from my high as I feel the first spurt of his cum hit the back of my throat. I'd like to say my body didn't attempt to pull away from the sudden sensation of the warm saltiness hitting the back of my throat. Jameson holds me still, continuing to rub my throat as I swallow. Then he slowly pulls out of my mouth, my eyes locked on his dick the entire time, having a hard time grasping the idea that I was able to take his length. I don't care there's a trail of cum clinging from my lip to his cock; it's freaking hot.

"Jameson." He helps me into a sitting position, then plops down beside me, immediately wrapping my body up with his in a way that's loving and possessive, and all I can do is hold on.

"Shhh, Kody. You're okay. I've got you." The intensity of our time together hits me like a freight train.

"I don't know why I'm so emotional." Tears cloud my vision, and I hate myself for them. Why does this have to happen to me right now? Couldn't it have waited until I was in the comfort of my own room?

"My cock is magical," Jameson cracks a joke, helping me settle down with a laugh. "Seriously, you came a lot, Kody. Then you trusted me. And, babe, it means a fuck of a lot to me." He runs his hand down the length of my spine, his other hand going to my hand, taking it in his and lacing our fingers together.

"Yeah." I move my head from where he placed it beneath his chin, tipping it up until our gazes are locked. The glassiness in my eyes is thankfully now gone. "Kiss me?"

"Fucking gladly." His lips meet mine. He knows exactly what I need. Soft

and sweet, caring and loving, and he has no problem giving to me freely.

JAMESON

My fantasies were nothing compared to the beauty in my bed, falling hard and fast also wasn't in the cards but with a woman like Kody it was only a matter of time.

The last thing I wanted to do this morning was untangle my body from Kody's. She groaned and grumbled, attempted to roll over and fall back asleep until I smacked her ass. Then the lightbulb clicked, and I got a beautiful sight of her wrestling with the sheets. Her naked body, hair flinging around wildly as she looked at the clock. I put her out of her misery, helped her out of the sheets, then we headed to the shower. We helped one another wash, then I was taking her again, this time from behind. Her hands were on the tile wall, body pushing back with every forward thrust of my hips. After that, I had to double-time it out the door in order to get to work.

Kody waited for Josephine to wake up. Once she was awake, they got ready and headed to my mom's. And from what I heard, JoJo was unimpressed that Kody was leaving her. Mom sent me a text of my little girl standing at the screen door, hand on the glass, watching Kody until she was gone. Even then she stayed rooted to the spot asking for her Kody. Yeah, that got me right in the fucking feels. It seems Kody Goodwin has a permanent place in both of our hearts. I can't say I've ever taken a day off work to help someone out who isn't family either. Yet I called my crew off a job to head over to the Goodwins' and work on the prop Kody had envisioned with her dad, brother, and mother. We were welcomed with open arms, especially since we needed the machine to lift the damn thing onto the trailer and will need it again tomorrow to off-load then re-load to bring it back.

“Kody, you ready to eat?” I ask her. I’ve got my arm wrapped around her shoulder, giving her my body heat. The sun has long since set, and she gets cold all too easily even with the light sweater she’s wearing.

“Yeah, where do you want to go?” she responds to my question with one of her own. She’s been in her head since we’ve been walking down the street in our small downtown area. I figure she’s thinking about every single thing for tomorrow. I get it. I’m like that when we’re about to start a new job. The mental checklists are never ending, the feeling of forgetting something important is right on the tip of your tongue, and you don’t figure out the missing piece until you’re on the project. Usually, it’s a tool, the plans, or a simple thing like making sure the fuel tank was refueled at the job site. Yep, the one fundamental item you need to work on. I’ve done it more times than I care to admit.

“It’s up to you. Tonight is your night. We’re celebrating you, babe.” She stops in her tracks, her body turning toward mine, and I rest my other hand on her trim waist. Her eyebrows are furrowed in confusion. She knew we were going out tonight. I sent her a text earlier in the day letting her know Josephine was spending the night at my mom’s, she’d be at my house tonight, and we’d drive into town together tomorrow morning in order to get her photobooth set up. However, I’ll scoot away, grab her favorite coffee she hasn’t had in a few days, and attempt to make her see reason to eat breakfast. The woman loathes eating first thing in the morning. She much prefers waiting until she’s wired on caffeine and her stomach is eating a hole in its lining.

“What? Why are we celebrating me?” She’s confused, not sure why we wouldn’t have a date night out for her. As much as I’d like to hole us away in the house, she deserves to be wined, dined, and sixty-nined. Though, we did that last night. I’ll be switching shit up tonight. I haven’t had her in nearly as many ways as I’ve wanted yet.

“What do you mean, why? Kody, you’ve got a shoot that the whole damn town is salivating to be at. Your social media has been in a frenzy with all the moms, grandmas, and single dads.” I wink at that last one because we all know I’m the only fucking man who matters. “We’re celebrating your success, babe. Tonight is all about you.” I dip my knees in order to be at eye level. Kody’s eyes close in a powerful way. She’s reflecting, gathering her thoughts, and I wait. Hell, I’d stand like this forever. Kody needs to understand I’m in her corner always. Even when I’m being a dicksickle,

Shaun is a wealth of information. Apparently, before I got my act together, he'd heard Kody and her friend Kari talking about me and the way I treated her.

"I've never had this before, and it's not like the event is over. It could be a total failure." She opens her eyes, but she's focused on her feet. The sole of her shoe is being dragged by the tip of her toe. My woman is nervous, she's second-guessing herself, and with that comes self-doubt. No fucking way am I going to let that happen. I don't care if I've gotta scout the whole damn town, give them money to come to her mini-shoot. I'll do what has to be done. That being said, I've got not one single fucking doubt that she's going to be slammed well past the time the event is over.

"Babe, this is the first of many. You're gonna have to get used to it. I don't care if you have one shoot a month; we're gonna celebrate." I tip her chin up with my fingers, not wanting to tell her this to the crown of her head. "We're a team. I've got your back, and you've got mine. This may be hard for you to understand right now, but I'm gonna make sure you know how valued you are each and every fuckin' day."

"Jameson, never in my life would I have thought the man who shot daggers my way would give himself so freely. I shouldn't have tried to make you work your way back into my good graces, not like it happened anyway. You, Mr. Evans, can weasel your way into someone's heart very easily." I cut her off.

"Not someone's. *Yours*, Kody, only yours." My head dips. I need her mouth, to shut her up. I'll be Goddamned if either of us says those three words we mean to one another in the town square, where I can't take things further. My lips land on hers, hand sliding beneath her hair, this time in soft waves cascading down her back. Fuck, what this woman does to me. Our kiss starts out soft, then I take it deeper. Her taste is what I need, her body is what feeds my craving, and her voice is the balm to my soul when there's a storm swirling inside my head. I could go on and fucking on about all the things Kody does for me. I show her instead of telling her. Tonight isn't the time, and it's not the place. The soft hum in the back of her throat does nothing to stop me from having a full make-out session here in the busy streets on a Friday night. If Lane County didn't know she was my woman before, they sure as fuck do now.

"You are the absolute best, Jameson. Thank you." We pull back from our kiss, and both of our breathing is choppy. Fuck dinner. I'm going to find the

nearest alley and bend her over while I tunnel my cock in and out of her tight pussy. Maybe this time will be the one to get her pregnant. Then she'll be tied to me forever.

“Nah, babe. It's all you. No thanks needed. Now, the choice is yours. Sit down at a restaurant and have dinner or pick something up to go and head home?”

“Home. We have the night to ourselves, and I don't want to share you with anyone else. We've gotten more than enough looks while walking around.” She picked up on the looks; I figured it'd happen.

“Thank fuck. And, Kody, it's not every day the town of Lane County sees me walking with someone who isn't Josephine. It's twice they've seen us together, not to mention the day at the park. People talk, they look, but none of them matter. It's you, me, and Josephine, yeah?”

“I like that, a lot.” Her hand goes to my chest, right on top of my heart. I place mine on hers a beat. Then I thread our fingers together, press a kiss to her knuckles, and get us the hell out of here.

KODY

“I have to get up Jameson. We’re going to be late.” His head is currently buried between my spread thighs, the back of them hanging over his shoulders. He’s not letting up, and it’s partially my fault. I tried getting out of bed earlier this morning. I no sooner slightly lifted the sheet to move when his arm banded around my waist. Jameson hovering above me, bed head, and slightly awake, was a sinful sight.

“Not until you come on my tongue.” He lifts his head, lips, chin, and cheeks coated with my wetness. Jameson Evans is a fucking workhorse in the bedroom. Case in point last night, we picked up dinner—pizza, salad, and dessert—which we ate on the couch, that turned into sex on the coffee table, then we moved to the shower. I was on my knees, his hand holding my hair in a ponytail. Apparently, it was one of his fantasies, and he replayed it verbatim until he was close to coming then stopped because he was hell bent on his come only going inside my pussy. The man is obsessed with knocking me up, and I can’t say that I’m upset with the notion. He dried us off quickly, his cock hard as steel, standing up against his stomach. My pussy was throbbing with the need to get off. Only he had other plans, which consisted of eating our dessert off my body and him feeding it to me slowly. Neither of us lasted long before I was flat on my back in the same position I’m in now, only his cock was sliding inside of my pussy instead of his tongue. A change of sheets, another shower, and we were finally going to sleep. Except for me, it was more of a cat nap. My brain wouldn’t shut down, and I stayed as still as possible until the first peeks of light filtered through the window. Jameson needed the sleep, and I wasn’t about to stay in bed, tossing and turning,

keeping him from getting a couple of more hours.

“Jameson, Jesus. I can’t be late to my own event.” The scruff of his cheeks presses against the inside of my thighs, ensuring I’ll have beard burn there to match the ones on my breasts from last night.

“You’ve got an hour before you even need to think about getting ready. Clearly, I’m not doing a good enough job of eating my woman for breakfast if she’s worried about work.” I let out a small laugh. Jameson chooses that moment to wrap his lips around my clit, pushing two fingers inside my center, and his thumb, well, he’s pressing on my back entrance, making me wiggle, unused to anyone playing with what people call a forbidden area. The joke’s on them. With Jameson, it does nothing but make the experience ten times better.

“Jameson.” My hands leave the sheets they were fisting, one going to his hair when he rasps his teeth along my clit. I arch my body, begging for more. He has a trifecta going on—clit, pussy, and ass. The only thing missing is his hands on my breasts, which is where my other hand is heading now. He’s not rushing this; he’s taking his time and building me up as slowly as possible. Too bad I’ve got another plan, one that includes getting him off. My hand not currently tangled in his hair moves to my breast, cupping it, my thumb and pointer finger pinching and pulling on the distended tip.

“Fuck, yes. Look at you, Kody. You’re fucking wild for me.” He pulls his mouth away, never stopping the onslaught of his fingers the entire time. Our eyes meet as he gets back to working me up to another orgasm I absolutely know will rock my world. I only hope I’m not a crying mess afterward. No amount of makeup can hide the splotchiness or red eyes, and trying to explain to your family that your man fucked you so raw it sent you in a tailspin would not be easy. Jameson keeps his watchful gaze locked on mine, his blue eyes searing my own. I’m a shivering mess. Another set of sheets will have to be changed after this, especially given how wet I am.

“Oh fuck, fuck, fuck!” My head tips back, thighs locking around his ears, hips twisting, wanting to get away yet stay perfectly still. It’s a conundrum with how amazing Jameson can make me feel, yet my body is saying to move to make it last longer. It’s an intensity like no other. I’m rushing toward the best feeling in the world. Jameson’s sucking on my clit, moving his fingers in and out of my wet center, and when my orgasm starts, he takes the opportunity and pushes the tip of his thumb inside my ass. My head rocks back on the pillow, vision blurring, and lights burst beneath my closed lids.

I don't move. I stay completely still, the energy completely zapped from my body. I cover my eyes with my arm, blocking the light slowly creeping along the horizon. Neither of us remembered to close the blinds last night, and now I'm paying the price. Jameson doesn't seem to mind. The man is currently placing a kiss on either side of my thighs, wetness from his cheeks left in his wake. The sensation does nothing to calm the euphoria within me.

"Babe, you good?" he asks. I move my arm, wanting to see the visual beauty of him when I feel him climbing up my body.

"Yeah. I mean I think so." I'm awarded with a smirk. He's the proud peacock shaking his tail feathers. I'd never say that aloud. He'd laugh and show me exactly how proud he is and how fast he can make me come. Cock, mouth, fingers. And I wouldn't put it past him to bring my toys out to play.

"You stay here just like this. I'm going to make some coffee. I want this view when I come back." He runs the underside of his thick and heavy cock along my wet slit. If I weren't completely spent, I'd hitch my legs over his waist, attempt to lock him in place, and move my body back and forth until he's coming all over my wet pussy.

"If I must." He shakes his head, drops a kiss on my lips, then crawls backward, his cock dragging along my wet center yet again. When he stands up after moving off the mattress, I plant my feet, spreading my legs further, and find his look of sheer determination.

"You must. Coffee first." The way he licks his lips... My wetness may now be dried on his lips, but I have no doubt my taste still lingers. I watch as Jameson walks out of the bedroom in all his naked glory, enjoying the view of his tight backside. Jesus, my core clenches, aching for him all over again, and I just freaking came. Jameson Evans has me completely addicted to the way he doles out orgasms. He's ten times better than any toy could ever be, even when he puts his big ole foot in his mouth at times.

KODY

I rub my hands on my jeans for the hundredth time since Jameson parked the truck and we've been walking toward the photobooth. I was going to wear leggings, an oversized sweater, and boots but then had a change of heart, put jeans on, a tighter-fitting shirt, and a cardigan with ballet flats. My hair is down, my makeup is light, and my nerves are on fire.

"You got this, babe. Everything is ready. All you have to do is show up." Jameson rubs my lower back as we make our way, ready to get to work and set everything up.

"I hate to break it to you, but there's way more than just showing up. I've got to set up the props, make sure the lighting is right, have a panic attack, and pray I don't bomb." I love the confidence Jameson has in me, a facet I one day hope to achieve. Today is not that day. Maybe next time or the time after that. There's a reason why I'm working with mini sessions today, twenty to thirty minutes for either children or a family. I was going to do an appointment system of sorts then thought better of it. The more the merrier, or if I had a slot not fill up, I wouldn't be standing around looking like a total loser. I'd rather have my mom give them a ticket and a time frame in which we'll be with them; that way, they can come back. It's easier on everyone, especially the children.

"Babe, trust me. All you have to do is show up," he repeats as we round the corner from where we parked on a side street. He's carrying my bag with my most-prized possession on his back. It was hard to give it up when we packed up to leave this morning. My eyes were locked on it the entire time. I'm ridiculous, I know, especially seeing as how Jameson trusts me with

Josephine.

“I don’t think you have any idea,” I mumble under my breath, getting hot under my collar and thinking about all the work there is to do. Mom, Dad, and Shaun agreed to get the booth over to the area I was able to secure, and I’d meet them here to get started on setting the rest up.

“You’ve got plenty of time.” Okay, this man is getting on my nerves. I take a few deep breaths. The overwhelmingness of everything is making me grumpy, and if I’m not careful, I’ll take it out on Jameson, and how unfair would that be?

“Alright, I’d have more time if someone didn’t need two meals for breakfast.” His second meal was not of me, sadly, and Jameson didn’t even get off. I’m adding that to my list of annoyances.

“Kody, you weren’t complaining when you were coming on my fingers and your cum was wetting the sheets. Now, do you need me to calm your ass down again, or are you going to simmer your shit so you can see the surprise we’ve all put together?” Jameson halts us in our tracks, his hand on my lower back guiding me until I’m standing in front of him. His eyes hold a fire in them. I know that look. I’m well acquainted with it. Jameson will pull out all the stops in order to get his way.

“Did you say surprise? Jameson Evans, what did you do?” I hit him with two questions at the same time.

“You’re about to see if you’d stop your yapping and get a move on, woman.” I roll my eyes. He laughs for a moment and then drops a kiss on my forehead.

“Fine. Move your handsome butt, Jameson. I’m a sucker for a surprise.” My switch has officially been flipped, and I’m in a much better mood for it. Am I worried? Absolutely. But a surprise, that’s right up my alley, even if it’s only a coffee. It’s the thoughtfulness behind the surprise which makes me the happiest. And let’s face it, Richie would have never. It was my parents and brother who always did the most for me. A flower delivery or random gift from my family really made me realize Richie wasn’t in the marriage anymore, especially when he started forgetting my birthday, our anniversary, or even a normal day. He’d be too busy, and that’s okay because at the end of the day, I fell out of love with him as well.

“Then come on. The faster you get there, the faster I can go to The Java Hut and grab your iced coffee. It’s been a few days, right?” He is acting like a funny guy. It’s been longer than three days. I’m not going to tell him the

craving was hitting me last night when we were near the store, and I was tempted to drag him inside to get my caffeine fix. Jameson laces our fingers together. He's moving faster with his longer gait, and I'm having to double-step to keep up with him. I guess he's excited to get this show on the road. Freaking finally.

"You know it has. I'm going to need them to start a delivery service at least twice a week." The Java Hut shouldn't do that, not at all. I'd be their number one customer. Any money I make would go to them, and I'd have zero profit.

"Babe, you need to get your fix before coming to my house, come a bit later. You need me to pick it up on the way home to you and Josephine, you've got my number, Kody. Use it." Okay, I take it back. This man is not annoying. He's really freaking sweet.

"You have no idea what you're asking for. You'll be late every single day." I stop short. My eyes have to be deceiving me. No fucking way. "How?" There in front of us is my photo booth. Two massive oak wood doors with glass panels, standing nearly ten feet tall. A huge find that was in my dad's never-ending storage facility of a barn. All they needed was a lot of cleaning and a brace to support them, which was no easy task considering we're working with the outdoors here. Then there was the floral arrangement Mom made in the antique brass containers, what seems like hundreds of plastic pumpkins we painted to make look cohesive, and she had it perfected. Well, not quite. We were still hung up on how people were going to pose or sit, but it looks like the gang figured that out.

"Babe, I work with your brother. It was easy to get the ball rolling. He needed a machine. I've got it. They needed the manpower. Got that, too. I told you I'd do anything to see you be as successful as possible. Now, are you ready to get things to your liking?" All I can do is nod. Words are hard, my eyes are filling up with water, and this man, my family, his family, they all do so freaking much that words will never be enough, not ever. "Kody, babe, you okay?" he asks. I suck back the tears and get myself under control.

"I will with you by my side. I know this took a lot, and I'll never be able to repay you, Jameson." I can't help myself. My arms band around his waist, and I plant my forehead on his chest. I feel him inhale and then exhale.

"Kody, you do more than you could ever know. This isn't a tit-for-tat situation. We help one another out when we can. Now, I hate like hell we gotta quit having a moment, but our families are about to attack, and that

includes JoJo. My daughter isn't happy when she's not getting your attention." Jameson isn't wrong. She loves nothing more than to be right in the middle, and I'm her friend, not Jameson's anything.

"Thank you." I lift my head. The cat's out of the bag. Everyone and their brother knows we're together now. Jameson wasn't hiding it from anyone, not even Josephine. The two of them talked. He told her I'd never take the place of her mother, and he's right. I don't want that either. Emma gave her so much, and she'd keep giving her everything she could if her life didn't end so tragically.

"Welcome. Now give your man a kiss and get your ass to work. I wanna see my woman shine." Crazy man. He barely gets the word out, and his mouth is on mine, sliding his tongue inside and teasing me relentlessly until I'm panting.

"Woohoo! Get it, boy!" We pull away from one another. Matthew and Shaun are standing together, arms on each other's shoulders and making catcalls. They're a bunch of teenage boys, I swear.

JAMESON

There's something about watching your woman do what she loves. Her happiness is so infectious that you're smiling and laughing while being the gopher bitch.

Iced coffee, check.

A charged battery for her camera, check.

Interacting with people waiting, check.

If this were any other person, I'd be saying fuck this, especially with the pile of shit starting next week. A project we're all fucking dreading, every last one of us. I made a proposal to get the job done faster. Of course, it means being away from Kody and Josephine for a week straight. Mom and Dad are going to pick up where Kody can't, though she's made it clear there's nowhere else she'd rather be than with JoJo. After today, her schedule might change, and her business might pick up substantially.

"You did good, bud. Glad you finally saw what everyone else did." Matthew knocks shoulders with me. There was a shit ton of other shit I did, too. Our families congregated, took shifts, and helped where we could. Though Josephine stole the damn show with Kody taking pictures of her first. My little girl is a ham who loves the attention, and she got it in spades. Then she proceeded to stay glued to Kody, who gave her small little tasks, moving this or that, with the patience of a damn saint.

"She's the fucking best, man. It's gonna suck next week." Matthew and Lacey probably aren't liking this too much either. Shaun and a couple of the other guys will. They're single, plus it's money. I'm offering unlimited overtime in order to get this job done as long as we remain safe. We'll get

hotels to eat, sleep, and shower; otherwise, we're working.

"It will. Lacey isn't big on the idea. The money will help, and that eases the burden a bit. We're going to start trying soon, and we both want some extra padding in the savings account." A long time coming for those two. They were married before Josephine was born. Now that they're actually taking the plunge, it looks like JoJo will have a cousin, and just maybe a little brother or sister, too.

"Glad to hear it. It'll be nice to have another one running around, keeping us on our toes." My eyes take in Kody. She's got Josephine on her hip, camera in her hand, holding it up for JoJo to look at and snap pictures. I can hear the two of them giggling. It's damn music to my ears.

"Don't tell Mom or a soul. Lacey will have my balls. She doesn't want the pressure of anyone knowing in case something happens." My eyebrows furrow, thinking there's a problem. "No, no. Nothing like that. She's erring on the side of caution, and I'll be in her corner no matter what."

"I'm not saying a word, brother. You need me, no matter the day or the time, whatever you all need." They've saved my ass on more than one occasion. Hell, they still do.

"Appreciate it. We're outta here. See you at the job site." We turn into each other, doing a half-hug, and then he's on his way to his wife. The crowd is thinning out. No one else is standing in line, and I'm hoping we can wrap this up. It won't be too much longer until Josephine's sugar high comes down, then we'll all be screwed, and no way am I leaving Kody, her parents, and her brother to put all this away. They've done enough with setting things up today. The only thing we did yesterday was a dry fit and built a few crates, sanded them, and stained the wood a natural color for clients to sit on.

"Jameson! Get over here with Kody and Josephine!" Mom gets my attention. I'm so wrapped up in watching my two girls together, everything else fades away into nothingness. My world is consumed by them. Never in my life did I think I'd bring Kody, or anyone for that matter, into JoJo's life after she lost Emma so suddenly, yet here we are. Kody is like a beacon of light. The sun shines wherever she is, and there was no resisting the magnetic pull we feel toward each other.

I meander toward her even as she's walking away from the spot she was in, the damn busybody. My mother never stops moving. The woman can run circles around Josephine most days. A short nap for her and her granddaughter, then they're back on the run.

“Come on, get over here. I want to take a picture of the three of you,” she says, her phone at the ready once I get close enough to be in earshot.

“Mariam, I’m not really dressed for pictures. Maybe another time?” Kody asks once she realizes what my mom is after.

“Not on your life. You look great. You always do. Now, Jameson, don’t give me any lip. A few pictures, and we can be done. I’ll take Josephine back to your house until everything is squared away, and then everyone can relax.” I salute my mom knowing there’s no getting out of this.

“Quit it. You act like I’m a drill sergeant.”

“That’s because she is.” My dad comes up behind me, hands going to my shoulders like he did to Matthew and me as a kid. “I’ll take your camera, Kody,” he offers as I move away. Josephine’s arms stretch toward me when I’m within reaching distance.

“Daddy, Kody come wif us?”

“Yeah sweetheart, she’s coming home with us. You wanna take a few more pictures for Nan?” Josephine’s hand goes to my chest, playing with the buttons on my shirt.

“Otay!”

“You good?” I ask Kody once she comes up beside me, JoJo sandwiched between us.

“Yeah, I am. Are you okay with this?” She’s always thinking about other people.

“Nowhere else I’d rather be, babe.” I pull her in close. Mom starts moving around, clicking the button on her phone rapid fire like. It’s clear she’s been watching Kody at work.

KODY

It's been four days since Jameson kissed me stupid before heading out of town to work on a job. Josephine is feeling the loss of her dad coming home each night. Ditto, kiddo, ditto. That being said, I've kept her as busy as possible. The swing set was delivered, but the guys haven't had time to put it together yet. So, that meant signing Josephine up for a little gym class twice a week. Going back and forth to my mom's or her Nan's on days we didn't have anything planned. And the ladies at the craft store will know us by name seeing as we're there just about every day lately. The park was out since I promised Jameson I wouldn't take her there after the last scare. Overkill, absolutely, but if it's the one thing that gives him a bit of peace, then it is what it is. When Josephine is napping or sleeping, I get to work on my photography stuff. The orders from Saturday are just about edited, and after tonight, everything will be sent out. Then I can work on the appointments a few clients from the weekend are asking for. The one I'm really excited for is a newborn shoot. The mom-to-be is even open to me doing shots while she's in the hospital. If the stars align and it doesn't happen in the middle of the night. I'm more than excited about the idea. It'd be my first one, so the need to look up inspiration is thrilling yet nerve wracking.

“Kody, me sweep wif you?” The pitter-patter of Josephine's feet told me she was out of bed. It's a rarity that she leaves the bed unless it's to go potty. Once I knew she was asleep, I grabbed a quick shower and parked my butt on the couch to work. There's a lingering sadness in JoJo's eyes that Jameson isn't home. It doesn't matter that he FaceTimes her morning and night. She misses her dad. I should have voiced my opinion on this matter more. I

started to, but Jameson said there was nothing he could do. The contract was already signed, and well, it's a fine line, not wanting to interfere too much. But if Josephine isn't feeling better after tonight, I'm saying something. This is her first time away from Jameson for more than a night at a time since Emma passed away.

"Of course, you can. Want to watch some toons for a few minutes? I'm wrapping this up, and then I was going to climb in bed, too." The three of us had a conversation about me staying here with her while her daddy was away. It also opened the door for Jameson to tell her we were together, not that it wasn't already out in the open. The man can't keep his hands or mouth to himself, no matter where we are. That being said, I'm not exactly sure she understood what all our relationship entails since her response was, "Kody my friend, not yours."

"Pwease," Josephine murmurs around her thumb in her mouth, bear hanging by its ear with the rest of her fingers. I move so she can walk in front of me and climb onto the couch. JoJo prefers footed pajamas, and it works well with the cooler temperatures rapidly dipping.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" I ask once she's on the couch, grabbing the blanket for her to snuggle up with. Leather couches are nice for maintenance, but not in the evening; it's cold to the touch and makes you shiver.

"Miss daddy." She finds the remote next to me, hitting the button for her toons. Jameson has them recorded and saved. Clearly, she either watched her father many times or taught herself because she knows how to operate the whole system better than I do.

"Do you want to call him?" When she talked to him earlier today, he was out on a skid-steer loader. Yep, I now know all the machine names, a feat Shaun tried to teach me for years. I'm around Jameson for a few weeks, and I can tell you the names of the machines and what they're used for. It's dark out now, so he should be back in the hotel room and will probably have his phone on him. Even still, I'm going to text him before she tries to call and gets a contact unavailable. Who knows if it'll send her into a tailspin? The last thing I want is for JoJo to be upset. Crocodile tears would tear my heart in two. I grab my phone and unlock the device; the picture of the three of us is my background. Miriam did a great job, and while it's not perfect and I could nitpick the hell out of everything because of my professional eye, I love it because our small little somewhat of a family is there for me to see anytime I want.

Me: Hey, I've got a little girl here who wants to talk to you again.
FaceTime me if you have a chance.

Josephine still hasn't answered by the time I send the text message to Jameson. She's probably so involved in her show that she didn't even hear me. During the day, I try to limit her screen time, usually by playing or doing some kind of arts and crafts. Right now, we have a puzzle going on the kitchen table. The edges are all done, and tomorrow, we'll work on the inside. The pieces are bigger, easier for her to finagle around, plus it's taking her longer to put together with the size of the puzzle.

"Oh, well, I guess she just needed some company," I say quietly, when I look at where she's now asleep, tablet flat on her chest she must have picked up with my eyes going back and forth to my phone. Her mouth is open and she's breathing softly. The remote is lying off to the side and while I could probably move her back into her bed, I won't. I was going to work for another few more minutes, but it can wait. Since she asked to sleep with me, being the big softy I am, I'll pile her up in Jameson's bed, put pillows on his side of the bed, and make sure my back is to what is my side of the bed.

Josephine has bumpers on her big girl bed in the form of pool noodles beneath the sheets. In Jameson's bed, there won't be anything to stop her from falling on the floor. Also, the girl does circles in her sleep, wakes up with bedhead sticking up every which way, and from what Miriam told me, you'll wake up with her on top of you. That might sound like a night of piss-poor sleeping to some, but to me, it sounds like a little girl who's been through entirely too much at such a young age. JoJo needs someone to snuggle with, and that someone is going to be me. I let Josephine sleep while I stand up, stretching my arms above my head after sitting in the same position for too long. She hasn't moved. I take the time to walk through the house, turning off the lights in the kitchen, picking up a few cups from our after-dinner dessert. Josephine had an ice cream sandwich, and I had cheese with crackers. I'm a savory snacker, while JoJo is most definitely a sweet eater, so much like Jameson in looks and eating habits. I've seen him put away some dessert after our pizza night.

I double-check all the doors are locked, then walk back to the living room. My laptop can stay where it is, especially since Josephine will be in bed with me. She hasn't messed with it before, and I doubt she would. Besides, the girl would rather watch television than play on a screen. Jameson lucked the heck out, I'll say that much.

“Come on, sweet girl, time for bed.” I grab the remote, turn the television off, and then pick her up. Her bear drops, and I make sure to scoop her stuffed animal up. I place my phone in my pajama shorts pocket. Thank you, Mom, for searching high and low for the unicorn of all unicorns when it comes to pj’s. I walk carefully and quietly toward Jameson’s room. His home really is cozy, not overly big or too small. It takes us no time at all to make it to the bed, where I place her on the side I’m not sleeping on and then arrange a pillow on the side closest to the nightstand. A yawn escapes me. Maybe it was a good thing JoJo came out and asked to sleep with me because all of a sudden, I’m feeling tired. I move around to the other side of the massive king-size bed, taking my phone out of my pocket to see if Jameson texted back. When I’m left with no response, I quickly type out another message and add a picture of a sleeping Josephine.

Me: Hey, never mind on the FaceTime call. The princess asked to sleep with me tonight and is already fast asleep. I hope you get some sleep tonight <3

I wait for a moment, and when the message doesn’t appear read or a phone call doesn’t come through, I put my phone on charge on the nightstand and climb beneath the covers with Josephine. God, I hope this week flies by. JoJo isn’t the only one missing Jameson today. I am, too.

JAMESON

“Jesus, I’m worn the hell out.” Matthew greets me after he loads his equipment on the trailer. We don’t usually leave the equipment on the job site, but this is better than trailering it back to the hotel, where it’s easier to get broken into. This way, no one really knows where it’s locked and loaded. I also have a GPS on the trailer, along with each piece of equipment. The next time we get a proposal more than forty-five minutes away, I’m telling them thanks, but no fucking thanks. Four days I’ve been gone from my girls, and I’m a miserable asshole to everyone except Kody and Josephine. Probably because the reason I’m a damn grump is because I’m only talking to or seeing them a few minutes a day.

“Tell me about it. This shit is for the birds,” Shaun agrees with Matthew. I didn’t think he’d be as annoyed with the job as he’s been. Maybe we’re all just getting older, because the rest of the crew is eating it up. Per diem, a hotel, and overtime, they’re thriving. They’re also more than ten years younger than us. Fuck, I’m feeling every bit of my thirty-nine years old today.

“Never again. I’ll walk away. There’s no amount of money that makes me want to work twelve- to fourteen-hour days, barely get to see Josephine, and put it all on Kody’s shoulders. Nope, never again.” I’m commiserating with my brother and friend turned co-worker. We all know when we’re at work, it’s a boss-employee relationship, and outside of work, we’re friends and family.

“Thank fuck. I miss my damn bed, and now that my sister practically lives with you, I’m able to walk around my house buck-ass naked or have

women over every once in a while.” Shaun is so full of shit. He may miss walking around naked, but everyone knows he doesn’t bring women back to his house. It’s his cardinal rule. Guys’ poker night, yes. His sister living with him, also yes. Women spending the night, hard fucking no.

“Got that right. When we get home, I’ll be helping her pack her bags. I’m about over her thinking she’s gotta live out of a damn suitcase at my house.” I want her shit littering the house along with Josephine’s. Hair ties, work shit, a pair of shoes. Anything besides feeling like she has to pick up after herself every damn minute.

“Good luck with that. She’s still using suitcases and boxes at my house,” Shaun elaborates.

“The actual fuck?” Now that I recall, everything had a spot, was orderly, and there were boxes stacked along the wall with her belongings.

“Yeah, she always feels like a burden at my house, tries to buy groceries and slip me money.” I shake my head. The other two crew members walk by, dropping off their keys to the equipment. We shut down the conversation for the time being. It’s not that we exclude them, but this is personal to both Shaun and me.

“Thanks, guys, see you tomorrow,” I tell Derek and Brandon. They went to the bar last night while Matthew, Shaun, and I hit a restaurant then moseyed on to our hotel rooms for the night. There’s no telling what time the younger guys got in, and the last thing I want is to be at a crowded bar.

Derek and Brandon say goodbye as my phone vibrates in my chest pocket. I felt it earlier, figured it was Mom or Dad. Kody already called with Josephine, and we reserve our time on the phone to once I’m back at the hotel and in for the night. I doubt very seriously it’s her. Still, I pull my phone out of my pocket. On the screen are a couple of text messages from Kody. My palms start sweating, worried something is wrong until I read the messages. This shit is hitting Josephine hard, especially with what I’m reading and the image that appears toward the end.

“Fuck it. I’m outta here. I’ve got two girls in my bed. JoJo isn’t handling this too well. She’s in bed with Kody. There’s a sad look on her face even in her sleep and circles beneath her eyes that shouldn’t be on a baby. Kody mentioned this might not be a great idea, and she was right.” I look up from my phone. My traitorous fucking brother is giving me that stupid smile of his that takes over his whole face. Meanwhile, I can see what he’s not saying. There’s an ‘I told you so’ deep down that he’s dying to get out.

“Don’t tell Kody she was right. She’ll never let you live it down,” Shaun says, shrugging his shoulders. “I’d be willing to travel back and forth if you pay the gas, keeping the per diem and hotel, if you’re offering.”

“He’s offering. Give him a minute to mull it over. I’ll be the one who needs to get his shit out of the hotel while he leaves us in the dust,” Matthew finally pipes up.

“Done. Matthew, get my shit from the hotel since you so graciously offered. If ya’ll wouldn’t mind staying tonight, get the guys up to speed, offer them the same thing. We’ll come out ahead, but if not, that’s okay, too. I’m going home to my women. I’ll call you when I’m on the road,” I tell Matthew and Shaun.

“Get outta here. I’m going to the hotel and telling Lacey to keep the fire burning, and I’ll be home tomorrow night,” Matthew chimes in.

“Appreciate it, more than you know.” I lift my chin.

“Tell my sister I’ll be getting my key back. She’s officially kicked out by this weekend. You’re welcome.” I shake my head. That’s gonna be a fun conversation. I’m not going to say a fucking word or how happy I am about Kody living with us full-time until her brother does first. I’ll leave the subject matter to Shaun.

“Thanks.” I’m already looking down at my screen and typing out a text.

Me: On my way home to my girls.

Afterward, I toss the trailer keys to Matthew, and I hit the road to head home, right where I’m meant to be.

JAMESON

“Jameson?” Kody’s eyes pop open as I slide into bed next to Josephine, who’s currently cuddled in the crook of her body. The two of them slept since I’ve walked through the door, they didn’t budge with me unlocking the door, walking in, locking it back up, and walking around the house doing a quick check to make sure everything was locked for the night. I’m sure Kody did the same before bed. Still, I’m gonna double-check just in case. Everything was as it should be, and the house was picked up except for the usual places, the coffee and kitchen tables. Once I was done walking through the house, I made my way to the master bedroom, where my two girls were sleeping peacefully. I dropped a kiss on Josephine’s forehead, moved a piece of hair out of Kody’s face, and she slept through the entire process, even as I showered. They must be worn out. From the handful of times we’ve talked, the pictures Kody has sent, she’s been keeping Josephine as busy as possible, and it must have finally caught up with her.

“Shhh, I’m going to move JoJo to her own bed,” I tell Kody as I slide in on the other side of the bed, moving the pillow that was hanging over half of my side. Josephine must have moved a lot in the couple of hours she’s been sleeping.

“Don’t. She’ll be happy to see you’re home in the morning.” Kody clears her throat from sleep. Josephine is cuddled into her side, face buried in her neck and softly snoring. It’s her legs that have me scratching my head. The top half of her body is on Kody, the bottom half is spread-eagled.

“You sure? We’re probably going to get beat to hell tonight.” She nods, the sleepiness dissipating with every moment she’s awake.

“Yeah, she’s had a rough couple of days.” I slide into bed, the sheets a rumpled mess from the acrobatics Josephine does all the time. My daughter will be sandwiched between the two of us. I’d have liked to talk to her without JoJo in our bed. That’s okay. Kody knew what our girl needed, and that’s what matters. Though, I’d be lying if I said it’s not the best scenario when I could really use Kody’s body on mine.

“Same. Not doing this ever again, babe. Not leaving you and Josephine while I work. You two will either go with me, or I’m not taking another contract like this.” An idea forms, one where it could work out for the entirety of the Evans family. I could buy a motorhome, use it for work when necessary, then my parents can take it on one of their vacations. That way, it’s not sitting all the damn time. Man, why the hell didn’t I think of this before? It’d be tight, but even Matthew and Lacey could bunk, too. Shaun would be the odd man out, but I bet he wouldn’t care either. No one likes hotel living or eating out three times a day.

“Is everything okay?” I move closer, hand sliding beneath the pillow, so I have both of them as close as possible without squishing JoJo.

“Yeah, you sent me that picture, and I couldn’t stand it. There’s no amount of money worth earning to leave my two girls here. Josephine isn’t taking this well, it’s a lot on you, and worst, it’s hard on me. The two people I love more than life itself shouldn’t be left for work. Life is too damn short, and I’ve worked too damn hard not to see what’s right in front of me.” Kody’s eyes fill with tears, and fuck me, there’s not much I can do about it right now.

“You love me, Jameson? Really?”

“Yeah, babe, I really fucking do. It’s impossible not to love you, Kody.” She’s incredible. It’s in everything she does. Her love, her devotion, her encouragement. She adds a light to my life I didn’t know existed or that I ever knew I needed. Kody is who makes me want to be a better man for her, for Josephine, and for any of our future kids. “One day soon, my baby will be growing inside your belly, and you’ll have my ring on your finger, Kody Goodwin, mark my words. I don’t care what others think. All that matters is you and Josephine.”

“I love you, Jameson Evans, you and Josephine. I love you both so much.” She no sooner gets her words out than JoJo’s eyes open, she sits straight up, and lunges her little body at me.

“Daddy! You home!” I wrap my arm around her back. Kody sits up as

well, hand going to her mouth, watching with pure love and adoration written all over her face.

“I’m home, princess. Daddy missed you and Kody a lot.” I kiss the side of my daughter’s head while my hand reaches out for Kody, pulling her close until I’ve got them both in my arms and hugging the shit out of them.

“Me missed you wots. Kody too. Never weave us again.” Kody shakes her head and mouths, “We were okay,” trying to calm the storm inside of me for feeling guilty. Fuck, this woman knows where my head is going before I can voice my thoughts.

“Princess, I’m not leaving, not for a long, long time.” Josephine lifts her head. There are no crocodile tears. Thank fuck.

“Otay. Me have snack?”

“Yep, you sure can. Fruit snack?” Kody laughs and moves away from my arms. A grunt leaves me because no fucking way was I ready for her to leave my arms. She lies on her back, giving off a view of her flat stomach when her shirt bunches up, and opens the drawer.

“When did you start keeping snacks in the nightstand?” I feel like I should have known about this little habit of hers.

“You da best!” Kody sits back up and opens the snack packet for Josephine.

“Ummm, since you went out of town. JoJo found my stash one night when I was in here snacking, so I added to the pile. There’s nothing with crumbs because eeww. It’s become our thing if she wakes up in the middle of a nap or when I’m in here winding down for bed.” She shrugs her shoulders like it’s no big deal. This, this right here, how she ebbs and flows with Josephine, it means Goddamn everything to me.

“Hand over the goods. It’s time to snack, settle down, and get some sleep.” I lean back, Josephine settles in beside me, Kody hands me a snack, and life is fucking good.

“Me wub you, Kody,” JoJo says, handing her the now empty wrapper, clearly devouring it before I can even start on the chocolate-covered almonds Kody hands me.

“I love you, too,” Kody replies without hesitation. Fuck yeah, she’s absolute perfection, and as soon as Josephine falls asleep, I’ll be moving her into her own bed and fucking my baby into Kody all damn night.

EPILOGUE

SIX WEEKS LATER

Kody

“Jameson Michael Evans, get back here right now!” I holler from the shower stall. We took a shower together, which led to more than washing each other, we both received mutual orgasms when we celebrated the news I gave him.

This morning, I was able to wake up before him and get out of bed without him knowing, take a pregnancy test, and hide the test when it came back positive. I wasn't going to hide it from him, but I did want to tell him in a way that would be memorable. Which I did in the shower, my legs wrapped around his waist, my back to the tile in a position Jameson always loves to put me in. If his fingers, mouth, or cock are working my pussy. I'm plastered to a car, a wall, his chest, It doesn't matter where and the list is never ending of how Jameson likes to take me.

So when Jameson fucked me this morning and I told him I was pregnant, naturally, we were in the same position.

“Can't, I'm busy right now.” I hear the opening and closing of drawers in the bathroom as I wring my hair out, trying to get as much water out of my locks as I can before wrapping it in a towel. I didn't expect to tell him I was pregnant, him to pull out of me, dick wet from my slickness, and not finish the damn job.

“Fine, I guess I'll finish taking care of myself.” I abandon my hair, open

the door, and step out completely naked.

“The fuck you will. Where’s the test, Kody? I wanna see it. Didn’t get this with Emma for obvious reasons, but this time, I’m going to.” Well, fuck. Now I kind of feel bad. Maybe I should have planned this out a little better, and I can’t fault him for pulling out now. Even though I’m kind of ticked, I also understand him. There’s so much more to Jameson than what meets the eye. You just have to get to the heart of him. He’s more than father; he’s a lover, he’s a fighter, a fierce protector, and at the end of the day, he’s mine.

“Top left drawer,” I tell him as I walk toward him while being careful since he left a trail of water in his path. My front meets his back, arms wrapping around his stomach, feeling the flex and pull of his muscles as he finds what he’s been after all along. “I’m sorry.” His blue eyes lock on mine in the mirror. This man sets my body on fire. One look, one touch, one taste is all it really takes, and he’s doing it right now.

“You don’t ever have to apologize. Not ever, Kody.” He lifts his arm, wrapping it around the back of my neck and bringing me into his front. In one hand he’s got the positive pregnancy test, and in the other he has me. The only person we’re missing is Josephine. She’s going to be so excited to hear the news when we tell her.

“I should have shown you or at least told you I was taking the test.” His hand moves to my abdomen, spanning my waist, holding me like I’m going to disappear.

“No, this is perfect. I wanted to see it for myself. Knew it would happen, wasn’t sure when. I’m sorry I left you without saying a word. Not one of my better moments, that’s for sure.” He nuzzles my neck, hips dipping, and I feel the proof of our unfinished romp in the shower.

“At least you didn’t leave the bathroom.” It wasn’t an ideal situation, but I can also understand the worry he has surrounding him. Emma being gone still poses some challenges for Josephine and Jameson. There are days she asks about her mom and days she doesn’t. There are days Jameson is hit with guilt and days when he’s not. We’ve been navigating it together.

“Leave it to you to see a positive when I’m being a dick.” His eyes darken. “You know, she’d have been happy, for me, for Josephine, for you. Hell, Emma would have liked you more than she ever did me. Especially how you put me in my place on more than one occasion.”

“I’d have liked her a lot because she’s a part of you and Josephine.” He goes to say something, but I don’t allow him to. My hand covers his mouth so

I can continue what I'm saying. "I know you weren't in love with her. Emma and you created Josephine. Therefore, she'll always have a special place in everyone's heart."

"Jesus, fuck, I don't deserve you or your love. I'm an asshole more than fifty percent of the time, and yet you still love me relentlessly. You take care of Josephine like she's your own but not in a way that would replace her mom. You, Kody Goodwin, soon-to-be Evans, are an absolute Godsend, and I can't wait to see you with our child. Love you, babe."

"I love you. Now shut up and kiss me. Then let's go get our girl and tell her the news, okay?" I turn around so my back is facing the mirror, cupping Jameson's cheeks while he lifts me up on the vanity. My legs spread open to welcome him closer.

"First, I'm going to finish what I started, give credit where credit is due while using my fingers, mouth, and cock." He spurs his plan into action. I feel a finger slide through my drenched folds. My eyes close, his mouth meets mine, and he does exactly what he promised.

I hope you enjoyed Jameson and Kody's story!

Want more Men in Charge? Needing His Touch, a forced proximity, he falls first, small town romance is coming Nov 19th!

[Amazon](#)

Prologue
Carsynn

Three weeks earlier

TODAY IS THE DAY, today is the mother stinking day. It's pathetic, no I take that back, I am pathetic. A whole lot of a naïve too, I should have known things weren't ever going to get better. They haven't thus far and now here I am at the age of twenty-five-years old feeling as if I'm double the age I truly am. My body hurts, my heart aches, and my soul yearns for an easier way of living. I should have taken the scholarship and ran, what person doesn't take the opportunity given for zero dollars? Oh yeah, that would be me and the reason for that cause is currently yelling in my face.

"You're a piece of shit, Carysnn. I should have aborted you when the clinic gave me a choice," dear old mom is at it again, usually when dad leaves to go on a three day bender. There once was a time when I'd look at her and see so much of myself that I was happy. Lucky even to have her genes, now I'm thankful I don't have an addiction and I know what all it can destroy all too well. My mom is a shadow of herself, her skin is paper thin, her hair is brittle, and I swear her teeth are starting to decay. We no longer look anything alike, well maybe there's one thing we have in common. The bags beneath our eyes, mine are from working doubles and hers are from drug abuse. Two very different scenarios but one I'm getting myself out of. If I'm going to work my fingers to the bone I'm at least going to come home at night to a peaceful and happy home.

My dad on the other hand, well we look nothing alike, not at all. We've never been close and now that I'm older it's even worse. I'm still unsure of how he's able to maintain his job in order to pay for his penchant of alcohol, probably because even alcoholics can function to get their next fix. All I know is I'm the one who pays the rent, power, water, and groceries. At first when I started working at the legal age of sixteen, all I thought was yes, now I won't go to bed hungry. I can take care of myself, save money to get out of this hell hole. The joke was on me, the money I worked for was taken away the second my mother got a whiff of cash. A never ending saga in this house with four walls, a roof, and running water.

I remain silent, mom is itching for a fight, ready to continue on her tirade, and I've learned the less I say the faster she'll go away. Which is what she needs to do, soon. A light bulb went off a few months ago, on one particular night when I came home after working a twelve hour shift, both of them were

home, one womb doner and one sperm donor coming right up. They were sitting in front to the couch, dad drunk on his beloved penchant of cheap rum, mom much the same except she likes to takes pills.

Everything became clearer, the need to get out of her as fast as possible hit me or else I'd end up being exactly like them.

"Got nothing to say for yourself, do yeah. Just standing there like the mute girl you are!" She sways on her feet, the slurring with her words and enunciating each word with anger. I'm not exactly sure the reason she's always so angry and dads always the quiet one.

I shake my head, mom can call me everything in the book, tonight is the night. I've been scrimping and saving, working as much as possible without raising an alarm of where I'm at or what I'm doing. Talk about always being on edge, going so far as to barely sleep at night for a whole different type of dread of what could possibly happen. It's the fear of uncertainty, who they could let in through the apartment door, if mom owed money to a dealer, or what she was doing to make extra money on one of her particular bad benders. Tonight though, tonight is the night. As soon as she's passed out on the couch, I'm out of here. It's time I put myself first. There's no saving people who don't want to be saved, had that been the case I'd have worked my fingers to the bone in order for that to happen.

Obviously, that's not the case and they can figure out the bills on their own. My extra money was put in a different bank account, neither of them are none of the wiser, each of them too blitzed out to realize my late shifts at the diner. On the rare occurrences they were still awake I'd climb the fire escape and sneaking into the bedroom of the small two bedroom apartment.

"Useless, you're useless Carsynn," she smears my name and I should be the one calling her those names. Especially after the car accident we were in when I was nearly fifteen years old. Somehow mom came out unscathed yet addicted to pain medicine by what I know was faking an injury and smooth talking her doctor. Meanwhile it was my side of the vehicle with the most impact, literally and figuratively. Mom ran a red light, we were t-boned and I sustained a fractured wrist, broken collar bone, and a concussion. The only thing that saved me from the car accident was me sitting in the backseat, always my first and only choice. The further away from my parents, the better off I am.

The slamming of the front door allows me to breath, "God if this is you watching out for me, thank you. Also, please give me ten minutes to get out

of this place without her returning.” I look up at the water stained ceiling with a smile on my face for the first time in well ever. After a deep breath, unsure why seeing as how the air in the apartment is anything but fresh. This life of turmoil ends today.

I’ve got a solid game plan, a new place to live thousands of miles away from bum fuck nowhere West Virginia and should be in New Hampshire in a day and away from parents who think I’m nothing but an ATM machine. What I don’t expect is becoming stranded on a desolated road and a gorgeous man stopping to save me on a cold snowy night.

Amazon

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tory Baker is a mom and dog mom, living on the coast of sunny Florida where she enjoys the sun, sand, and water anytime she can. Most of the time you can find her outside with her laptop, soaking up the rays while writing about Alpha men, sassy heroines, and always with a guaranteed happily ever after.

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Naughty Noelle

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wouldn't be here.

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Julia: How do you deal with me and my extra sprinkling of commas? The real MVP, the one who deals with my scatterbrained self, missing deadlines, rescheduling like crazy, and the person I live vicariously through social media.

Amie Vermaas Jones: Thank you for always and I do mean always helping me on my last minute shit. It never fails that I'm sending you an SOS asking for your eyes. Beach days are happening and SOON!

Thank you for being here, reading, not just my books but any Author's stories. We do appreciate you more than you know, the reason why we can live out our dream is for readers, bloggers, bookstagrammers, bookmakers, Authors, and everyone in between. THANK YOU!

All this to say, I am and will always be forever grateful, love you all!