



MOORE
to Love

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ROCHELLE PAIGE

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ROCHELLE PAIGE

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Cover design by Elle Christensen

Edited by Editing4Indies

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About the Author

MOORE TO LOVE

From *USA Today* bestselling author Rochelle Paige comes a single mom, small-town, office romance.

She was sure nothing would ever happen between them...right until the moment he spread her out on his desk.

Ellie's children had been her only priority since her husband left her for a younger woman. Nearly two years later, she was still getting back on her feet when Dr. Finn Moore offered her a job at his veterinary clinic.

Finn's motives weren't completely professional. He hadn't been able to get the single mom out of his head since he first laid eyes on her.

Now Ellie couldn't stop thinking about him, either. She tried reminding herself that her boss could have any woman in town, but that didn't stop the attraction.

Giving into lust and red-hot attraction by letting her boss into her panties was one thing. Ellie wasn't sure she could trust him with her heart, not when her children's happiness was also at stake.

1

FINN

The sound of my cell phone ringing ripped me from my sleep while it was still pitch-black outside. Groaning, I rolled over to stretch my arm toward my bedside table. As a veterinarian in a small town, getting calls in the middle of the night happened more often than I liked. I wasn't officially a twenty-four-seven practice, but my number wasn't exactly a secret. I'd lived in Mooreville my entire life except when I'd been away for college to get my undergraduate and then veterinary school.

"Hello," I grunted after accepting the call.

"I need you to get your ass over to my house," Ryland growled. "That cat you pawned off on Waverly has been puking all night."

I rolled off my mattress and muttered, "It could just be hair balls."

"Whatever it is, I need you to fix it. Now." He heaved a deep sigh. "I have to be in court to give a closing statement first thing in the morning, and I've barely gotten an hour's sleep."

That explained why he'd called Wiggles "that damn cat" when he had fallen in love with the orange tabby just as much as Waverly had. They'd taken him in as a foster a couple of weeks ago, but when I offered to move him to another volunteer after the puppy she'd been housing was adopted, they couldn't let the little cutie go and decided to keep him instead.

"I'll be right over."

"Hurry."

I was tempted to take my time after he hung up on me without saying anything else, but the sudden onset of persistent vomiting in a feline could have a more serious cause than the hair balls I mentioned. A couple of

possibilities could require surgery if they caused a bowel obstruction, and I'd never do anything to put an animal at risk.

It didn't take me long to throw on some clothes and drive over to Ryland and Waverly's house. My cousin must've been watching for me because he flung their front door open before I could knock.

"Where's Wiggles?"

He stepped to the side so I could walk past as he answered, "He's on the couch with Waverly."

I strode through their entryway and to the right, heading straight for them. Waverly was curled up in the corner with my patient resting in her lap. Gracie, the gray kitten she'd found abandoned on the street not too long after she'd met Ryland when they were on opposite sides of a court case, was stretched out over her feet.

My cousin had fallen for her hard and fast, something that had been obvious to me when he'd made a similar call to me in the middle of the night when Gracie had an upper respiratory infection early in their relationship. It had been impossible to miss how well he and Waverly fit together, and she had quickly become one of my favorite people. Not only did she love Ryland and treat him well, but her icy exterior hid a soft heart that loved cats almost as much as I did. The world would be a much better place if there were more people like her in it.

"How has Wiggles been acting lately? Is he still playful? Eating and drinking okay?" I asked.

She stroked her fingers through Wiggles's orange fur. "He seemed fine until his gagging woke me up the first time."

Looking Wiggles over, I was relieved to see that he didn't appear to have lost weight. "Any diarrhea? Or just the vomiting?"

"None." She shook her head. "We did the litter boxes last night and there wasn't anything unusual."

"That's good," I murmured as I examined the little guy, checking for any signs of an obstruction in his digestive tract. When I didn't find any, I flashed a quick smile at Waverly. "Really good."

Ryland perched on the arm of the couch and tilted her head so her cheek rested against his thigh. Then he stroked his fingers through her hair while they both watched as I finished my examination. "Okay, so it turns out that even while half asleep and without seeing my patient, I'm still the best damn vet around."

Ryland rolled his eyes. “Shit, it’s really just a hair ball?”

“Yup, and you caught it early enough that treatment will only be a minor inconvenience.”

Waverly’s shoulders slumped in relief. “Thank goodness.”

I dug through my bag to pull out some medicine. “This is a laxative that will help Wiggles pass the hairball.”

As I gave them directions for dosage and the easiest method to get the kitten to take it each day—along with additional symptoms to keep an eye out for—Ryland reached out to take the tube from me. “Thanks, man. Is there anything we can do to make sure this doesn’t happen again?”

“Wiggles is a Persian, so he’s more prone to hair balls. That long fur is gorgeous, but it also means that when he grooms, he’s swallowing more hair,” I explained, packing my supplies and equipment back into my bag.

Waverly’s brows drew together. “I thought he was an orange tabby?”

I stroked the white M on Wiggles’s forehead. “Although people talk about orange tabbies as though they’re a breed, it really just refers to their color. Many breeds can have the orange-and-white tabby pattern, and it’s commonly found in Persians.”

She nodded with a yawn. “That makes sense, I guess.”

“So is there anything we can do?” Ryland repeated her question from earlier.

“The more fur you remove from your cat, the less that will end up as hair balls in their stomach. Brushing him every day can be an effective way to minimize hair balls, and it’ll probably help you bond even more with this little guy.”

“Yeah, I bet he’ll love that.” Waverly lifted Gracie from her feet to press a kiss on top of her head. “This one, too, even though I’m guessing she doesn’t need it as much with her short hair.”

“Anything else we should do?”

“If it ends up being a persistent issue, I can recommend specialized foods with high-fiber formulas that help minimize shedding and encourage hair balls to move through the digestive tract more easily.” I gave Gracie a little scratch behind her ear. “I don’t want to jump the gun on that when he’s been eating well for you guys so far, but we’ll keep a close eye on him going forward, just in case.”

Waverly beamed a tired smile my way. “Thanks for doing a house call. I don’t think I could’ve waited until morning to find out what was wrong with

him.”

“Don’t thank him.” My cousin’s expression held none of the gratitude in his wife’s as he glared at me before scrubbing his hands over his face. “We wouldn’t have needed a vet if he hadn’t talked you into taking Wiggles in the first place.”

“C’mon, admit it. The little guy has grown on you, too,” I teased.

“Too?” Waverly leaned against Ryland’s side, tilting her head back to grin up at him. “Wiggles spends more time on your lap than he does mine.”

“Only because Gracie beats him to yours,” my cousin grunted.

Waverly didn’t look convinced. “Mm-hmm, I’m sure it has nothing to do with all the treats and scratches you give him when you think nobody is looking.”

“I knew we’d make a cat person out of you some day.” I shot him a grin. “I just didn’t think it was going to be this quick.”

“You’re taking way too much credit there. All you did was talk my gorgeous wife into taking Wiggles, which took basically no effort at all on your part.” Ryland brushed a kiss against the top of Waverly’s head.

“That’s fair.” I shrugged.

“How’re things at the clinic?”

“Busier than I ever could’ve imagined.” I ran my fingers through my hair with a sigh. “At some point, I’ll need to consider recruiting a second veterinarian. Preferably someone who has experience with large animals. That’s not my specialty, but I’m getting more and more requests from local farms ever since the vet in Stuart left. I have enough training to help out in a pinch, but Joshua is having a heck of a time juggling my schedule when I go out on one of those calls when the clinic is open.”

Waverly leaned forward and pierced me with her blue-eyed gaze, suddenly looking more alert than she had the entire time I’d been here. “Would an extra pair of hands around the office alleviate some of the issues, even if it’s just someone to do clerical tasks and not another vet?”

“It definitely wouldn’t hurt.”

She perked up even more at my answer. “Remember the day when you talked me into taking Wiggles? Jude was hanging the new sign up at our office, and one of Ryland’s clients stopped to offer to babysit because this guy”—she jerked her thumb at my cousin—“was giving me a hard time about my nonexistent pregnancy after our honeymoon.”

“I do.” My response was a major understatement. The single mom had

been on my mind ever since I saw her on the sidewalk in front of his law office, the same day I asked Waverly if she would foster Wiggles. She had been walking her two children back to her car after they'd gotten ice cream.

Even though I didn't know her, seeing the rust bucket that she was driving had pissed me off. When I said something about it, Waverly had filled me in on her situation. Ryland had handled her divorce from her ex, who Waverly had described as a jerk. When she'd said that the woman didn't have a job, my cousin Jude—who was there to hang the sign—had mentioned that he could use some help at his construction company. I hadn't been thinking about hiring anyone else at the time, but I found myself reacting to his offer by saying that I had some work she could do at the clinic.

Waverly proved that she had a great memory as she asked, "Would you be willing to interview her for a possible position at the clinic?"

"If you two vouch for her, she doesn't need to interview. The job is hers, however many hours she can give me."

With as often as I'd thought about Eloise over the past month, hiring her probably wasn't the smartest call. I barely knew her—hadn't even said a word to her in our brief interaction—but there was no denying that something about the single mom had captured my attention. And it wasn't just the difficulties she faced.

With her wavy, light brown hair, green eyes, and plump lips, there was no missing that Ryder's client was attractive. But her killer curves had made the biggest impression on me. Even dressed down for an outing to the ice cream shop with her children, I hadn't missed the swell of her breasts stretching her sweatshirt. Or her perfect ass when she'd bent over to help the kids into the car.

If she worked for me, I couldn't go there with her since I would never take advantage of an employee like that. I wouldn't be able to act on any attraction I felt for her, but she could probably use a job more than a date with a man who had no time for a relationship.

The school drop-off line was the seventh circle of hell. Getting Benjamin and Madison out of bed, dressed, fed, and into the car was hard enough each morning. But the excruciating wait while other parents demonstrate how very little they cared about anyone else was the worst.

“C’mon,” I muttered as the mom in the BMW ahead of me put her car into park and popped her trunk. The number one rule of drop-off was that the parents didn’t get out of their vehicle. If you needed more time, you were supposed to do the considerate thing and park in the lot before walking your child inside.

When she pulled a pink backpack out and handed it to her daughter, I rolled my eyes. “You have to be kidding me.”

“What’s wrong?” Benjamin asked, leaning forward in an attempt to see what I was complaining about.

Looking over my shoulder, I shot my seven-year-old son a reassuring smile. “Nothing important. Just someone not following the rules.”

“Again?” His eyes widened as he shook his head, bending over so far that he was almost sliding off his booster seat.

“Kinda like you’re doing now.”

I let the kids undo their seat belts when we were within a couple of cars of the drop-off zone, but they had to stay in their seats until the teacher opened the door to help them out. This gave them just enough time to put on their backpacks, which helped keep the line moving for the parents behind me.

He got the hint and scrambled back while his sister sing-songed, “I in my

seat.”

“Sorry, Mommy,” he grumbled, sending her a dirty look. Benjamin was two years older than Madison, and he was a great big brother. But no matter how good he was with his little sister, sibling rivalry was alive and well in my household, especially when she pushed his buttons.

“It’s okay, kiddo. I just want you to be safe.” I shifted my focus to Madison. “You forgot the ‘am’ in your sentence, sweetie.”

“I *am* in my seat,” she muttered, jutting her chin out. My little girl had no problem pointing out when she did something better than her brother, but she hated when anyone corrected her. Especially in front of Benjamin.

Turning forward so she couldn’t see that I was biting my lip to stop myself from laughing at her irritation, I sighed in relief when the mom climbed into the driver’s seat of the BMW again. Even knowing that there were child-free hours ahead of me didn’t help tame my impatience as I waited one measly car length outside of the safety zone where the kids could climb out of the car.

“Bye, Mommy!” Madison scrambled out of her car seat to follow her brother out the door being held open by one of the teachers.

“Have a good day, sweetie! I’ll see you soon,” I called back with a smile.

Unlike the mom who’d been ahead of me, as soon as the teacher shut the door behind my daughter, I pulled forward so the parents behind me didn’t have to wait any longer than necessary. The drive home was short, and it went by fast without the kids in the car with me. Benjamin and Madison were the best part of my life, but I appreciated getting time to myself now that my daughter had started kindergarten.

I’d raised them mostly on my own, even before the divorce. Thad was two years older than me and had been in his first year of dental school when I got pregnant with Benjamin. We had Madison when he still had another year to go, and then once he graduated and we moved back to Indiana, he was busy learning the ropes from his dad. I’d thought we would get more time with him once school was done, especially with him working at his dad’s practice, but he spent even less time at home during the two years before our marriage ended. He told me it was because he didn’t want to let his dad down and needed to build up his half of the business, but I eventually discovered it was just one of the many lies he’d told me.

Refusing to dwell on the past, I turned my thoughts to everything I wanted to accomplish before I returned to the school to pick up the kids.

First, I took care of the chores that needed doing. I tossed a load of laundry into the washing machine, cleaned the breakfast dishes, and vacuumed the entire house. Once that was all done, I set myself up at the kitchen table with my laptop to study.

When I dropped out of college during my junior year, I figured that maybe I'd go back one day when the children were older. But I never expected that I'd be a single mom while doing it. I had thought that Thad would be there to help with the kids so I would have more time to focus on my studies, at least on the weekends when he wasn't busy with patients. Instead, I was entirely on my own.

It wasn't unusual for him to bail on his weekends with Benjamin and Madison, which drove me up the wall because I hated to see the disappointment on their beautiful faces. It had gotten to the point where I didn't mention he was supposed to have visitation with them and just let it be a surprise if he actually showed up.

Since I couldn't count on my ex to have our children on his weekends, I tried to get all of my studying done during the week. With Madison in full-day kindergarten, I had five hours to myself each day. It was just enough time for me to manage nine credit hours this semester as I adjusted to going back to school. Luckily, I only needed eighteen more to finish my degree after this semester.

The timing was perfect because I had another year and a half of alimony payments, so I should have my degree in hand a few months before my monthly budget took a serious dive. Hopefully, that would be long enough for me to find a job that would pay well enough to support the kids on my own. Although Thad still had to pay child support until Benjamin and Madison were older, he'd proven that I couldn't depend on that with how often he'd taken me to court over the past year and a half to try to get his payments reduced.

The only reason he hadn't been successful was because my lawyer refused to back down from him. I thanked my lucky stars for the day that Franklin Moore talked his grandson into taking my case. Ryland had done a great job when my ex-husband had blindsided me almost two years ago.

My cell phone rang, and it was as if my thoughts had conjured him up because Ryland's name flashed on the screen. I really liked my lawyer, but it had gotten to the point about a year or so ago where I got an empty feeling in the pit of my stomach whenever he called.

Since I hadn't been expecting to hear from him anytime soon, my entire body tensed as I accepted the call.

"Hey, Eloise. It's Ryland Moore."

Not wanting him to ever think I wasn't happy to hear from him, I forced a smile into my voice as I replied, "Good morning, Ryland. How are you?"

"Fantastic. You?"

My eyes widened at his response. Unless he'd just squashed one of Thad's ridiculous requests, Ryland usually sounded like he was spitting mad when he called. Not that I blamed him since he had to put up with my ex's crap almost as often as I did. "Not nearly as good as you, but I don't have too many complaints."

"You never do, Eloise. That's one of the things I respect the most about you. How you've never really griped about everything your ex has put you through."

My breath caught in my throat at his compliment. My parents had told me they were proud of how I'd kept a brave face on for the kids, but it meant more coming from someone who I wasn't related to and who had a front-row seat to the mess that had been my divorce. "Thank you, but I didn't have a choice. Benjamin and Madison were counting on me to muddle through."

"You know as well as I do that there are parents who don't put their kids first when they're going through a divorce."

I snorted. "Yeah, unfortunately, I know that all too well."

"Which is why you deserve a break."

I wasn't sure where he was going with this. My brows drew together as I asked, "What kind of break?"

"You like animals, right?"

"You better not be trying to tell me that you're giving the kids a dog." I'd given Ryland access to Benjamin's and Madison's therapy notes, and my son hadn't been shy about complaining over his lack of a pet. We'd been talking about getting them a puppy for Christmas right before Thad dropped his bombshell on me, and Benjamin had been sorely disappointed when I'd had to sit him down and explain how getting a dog would have to wait a little while. "No matter how much unconditional love a dog would give us, I'm not in a place to handle being responsible for another living being. Not even a plant."

"The break I'm talking about is a part-time job with flexible hours and an understanding boss."

I'd hoped to have a job by now, but working around the kids' school and the classes I was taking didn't leave me much time during the day. And a night job didn't make sense because I'd end up spending everything I made on day care. Finding a job like he'd just described was nearly impossible, but if anyone could accomplish it, my money was on Ryland. "That sounds more like a miracle to me."

"Nah, all it took was a simple conversation with one of my cousins."

Being part of the founding family of Mooreville definitely had its perks, one of which was living in a place full of people who loved and supported you. The Moore family was huge, and their brood had been growing by leaps and bounds lately.

Shortly after his billionaire cousin moved to town, he promptly fell in love with a single mom, got married, and had a baby. Then the cousin who was a general contractor met an Olympic speed skater who was also a huge social media influencer when she moved to town, and he swept her off her feet even more quickly. It didn't take too long before Ryland followed in their footsteps, talking Waverly into marrying him in even less time than his cousins did with their wives—which was quite the feat, considering they'd started out on opposite sides of a court case.

I was still a relative newcomer to Mooreville since I'd only moved here three and a half years ago, and I'd barely made any friends since I'd spent the past nineteen months focused on helping my children navigate the divorce. But I'd still heard all the gossip—and there was quite a bit of it since the Moore men were a popular topic around town—when Ryland and his cousins had fallen for their women.

Although I hadn't met his cousin who was a veterinarian, it was easy to guess who he was talking about since he'd mentioned animals. Or it could just be wishful thinking since I'd seen him around town and thought he was the hottest of the Moore men.

"What kind of help does he need? I've never worked in an office before, and I'm definitely not qualified to work with animals, no matter how much I like them. And I wouldn't be able to give him very many hours if I wanted to keep up with my classes, which I really need to do. He'd probably be better off hiring someone else."

"Stop talking yourself out of the job and give Finn a call." He rattled off a number, and I put him on speaker so I could type it into my phone as a new contact. "The clinic is growing faster than he expected, and he can use

however much help you can give him. And he'll give you a glowing recommendation when you're ready to job hunt after finishing your degree."

No matter how nervous I was about being in over my head by taking a job at Finn Moore's vet clinic, it was an offer I couldn't refuse.

3

FINN

A few days passed before Eloise finally called me, but I used the time to get things in order for her new position. At first, I'd agreed because Waverly was the one who'd asked, and I'd been sympathetic to Eloise's situation. But as I'd worked on her job description and talked to my staff, I realized I needed the help just as much as she needed the job.

I wasn't the only one feeling the strain of my growing practice. Meghan, my vet assistant, was putting in extra time whenever I took a call out to one of the local farms. And Joshua, my receptionist, was slacking on his studies because he was doing extra paperwork to take some of the load off me.

They'd practically danced around the waiting room when I told them I was thinking about bringing in someone part-time. I felt like an ass for not noticing the strain they'd been under, but I was also relieved because they were looking forward to the help so much that they were going to be extra welcoming to Eloise.

I figured she would probably be nervous about starting her first real job. Especially while also going back to college and sending her youngest child to kindergarten. That was a lot of change to handle all at once, even more so after going through what sounded like a messy divorce based on the little information Waverly had shared with me. I wanted her transition here to be as smooth as possible.

Pulling me out of my thoughts, Joshua popped his head into my office and asked, "When does the new girl get here?"

"You're jumping the gun." I shook my head with a laugh at his enthusiasm. "She's not the new girl yet. And we shouldn't even be calling her

a girl at all. She's three years older than you and the mother of two."

"Good point." He pursed his lips as he tilted his head to the side. "But I thought you said you weren't bothering with interviews because Eloise already had the job."

"The position is hers if she wants it, but she kept calling our meeting today an interview when we spoke on the phone. So I don't think it's quite sank in for her yet," I explained.

"Gotcha." He nodded and shot me a grin. "Then I guess I'd better try not to tackle-hug her as soon as she walks in the door. I wouldn't want to scare the newest member of our team off before she's accepted the job."

I knew Joshua was joking, but that didn't stop me from being hit by an irrational surge of jealousy over the thought of him hugging Eloise. Gritting my teeth, I muttered, "Yeah, good call."

"I'll let you know when she arrives." Luckily, Joshua didn't seem to notice my reaction because his smile didn't dim before he turned to head back to his desk.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I took a few deep breaths. I needed to pull myself together before Eloise arrived, or I'd be the one scaring her off before she agreed to come work for me, and that was the last thing I wanted to do.

A few minutes later, Joshua buzzed the intercom on my desk phone to say, "Your one o'clock appointment is here."

"Great, I'll be out in a second."

I refused to acknowledge the excitement in my veins as anything other than anticipation over hiring my newest team member. But I was smacked in my face with reality when I walked into the reception area and found Eloise bent over at the waist to pet a dog who had arrived early for their appointment. Her pert ass was the first thing I spotted, and the urge to reach out and pat one of the rounded globes was strong enough that I fisted my hands at my sides. Then I clenched them tight enough that my knuckles whitened when I noticed Rocky's owner staring down the front of her blouse.

Clearing my throat to get Jim's attention, I glared at him as the beautiful single mom straightened and shot me a shy smile. "Sorry, I got distracted by this cutie."

Jim smirked until Eloise reached down to scratch behind Rocky's ear. Then I was smiling because he was conceited enough to think she'd been referring to him when it was obvious she'd been talking about his two-year-

old boxer. “No worries, I get distracted by the cuteness of my patients all the time.”

“We all do,” Joshua agreed, circling his desk to crouch next to Rocky. Stroking the dog’s back, he tilted his head to smile up at Eloise. “It’s one of the best perks of the job...all the unconditional love from our patients.”

Tucking her hands in the pockets of her black pants, she murmured, “I’ll definitely keep that in mind.”

Jim perked up at her response, and I gripped Eloise’s elbow to guide her to my office before he could ask the question I saw in his eyes. Hiring her took on a new level of complexity as I wondered how many of my patient’s owners were going to try to hit on her. With how often women pulled that shit with me, I had a feeling it was going to be way more often than I’d appreciate.

“Sorry about that,” I muttered as I circled my desk while she got settled on one of the guest chairs.

She tilted her head to the side and pursed those plush lips of hers. “I don’t understand. For what?”

Her pretty green eyes filled with confusion, and I realized there was a good chance she didn’t know Jim was interested in her as more than my potential employee. I sure as fuck wasn’t going to be the one who pointed it out to her, so I went with a bullshit—but equally true—reply. “The hecticness that is my waiting room.”

“Don’t apologize for that.” She beamed a smile at me that made her even more beautiful. “It’s a lucky thing for me that your clinic is so busy, or else you wouldn’t be looking for extra help.”

“I like how you think.”

Her cheeks turned pink at my compliment. “Thanks, always looking for the silver lining is probably one of my best character traits when it comes to working with a team.”

It also made her even more attractive, especially since she had every reason to be a pessimist after her divorce. “The rest of my team tends to have a positive outlook as well, so you’ll fit right in.”

“I should warn you that I have zero office experience. I was only a junior in college when I had Benjamin, and I was supposed to do an internship the next semester, but that obviously didn’t happen. And my availability is tricky since I have primary custody of my children. I can’t start too early because I need to drop them off at school first, and I can’t work too late because I need

to pick them up in the afternoon. Plus, I'm taking college classes online so I can finally finish my degree. This semester, they're all asynchronous, so I don't have to be online at a specific time for lectures or anything. But there will be a couple times when I have to log in for an exam during the day. And it might change next semester, depending on how the classes I need are offered." She bit her bottom lip and shook her head. "Sorry, I tend to babble when I'm nervous."

"There's no need for you to be anxious." I aimed a reassuring smile at her. "You came with one of the best recommendations out there."

"From Ryland?"

"Nah, his better half." I chuckled. "Waverly had good things to say about you, but Ryland remained tight-lipped. He mumbled something about attorney-client privilege, but she mentioned that the woman who does her hair is a neighbor of yours."

"Charlene means well, but she's a bit of a blabbermouth." She rolled her eyes with a shrug. "It works for her, though, since the flow of gossip in her shop is one of the things that makes her the most popular hairdresser in Mooreville."

"If your hair is any indication of her skills, I can see why so many women go to her."

She blushed again at my compliment, but this time, she ducked her head and fiddled with the sleeve of her blouse. Her voice was soft as she replied, "Thanks."

We'd delved into territory that clearly made her uncomfortable, so I guided the conversation back to the reason she was here. "Joshua wants to become a vet tech. Bringing in some extra help will give him time to study, but his classes are at night, so your schedule would be as flexible as you'd like."

Her pretty green eyes widened. "You created a whole position so that one of your employees can go back to school?"

Her question put me in a tough spot. Although I'd been considering bringing in extra help for Joshua before Waverly told me about Ellie's situation, knowing that I could help her out of a jam had made the decision easy. "Joshua isn't just any employee. He's been with me since he graduated with his associates degree five years ago. Plus, when he's licensed as a vet tech, he's going to be a huge help around here. So there's something in it for me, too."

She shook her head with a laugh. “You can try to act like you’re being selfish, but I have too much experience with an egotistical man to fall for it.”

Realizing what she said, she pressed her lips together, her cheeks filling with a pretty color. Leaning forward, I held her gaze as I murmured, “The only person who should be embarrassed is your ex. Not you.”

“I can’t believe how nice you’re being. After everything your family has done for me…” She sniffled, twisting her hands in her lap. I struggled to remain in my seat while she pulled herself back together. “I can’t begin to thank you all enough.”

“I can think of one way.” I nudged the new employee paperwork toward her. “You could help me out by accepting the job.”

“Well, I guess if you put it that way…” She reached for the stack of papers. “Count me in.”

“Welcome to the team, Eloise.”

“Please call me Ellie,” she requested.

“And I’m Finn. Only the patients call me Dr. Moore,” I explained.

“When would you like me to start, Finn?”

“Does tomorrow work for you?” I was only half joking, but the panicked look in her eyes had me adding, “If not, that’s no problem. We’re ready for you whenever you figure out your schedule.”

“Okay, phew. I can definitely do that.” She flashed me a shy smile. “I’ll talk to the kids tonight and double-check to make sure I don’t have any big assignments or tests due. If all goes well, my first day could be Friday if that works for you. That way, I’ll have the weekend to smooth over any issues with the kids if the transition doesn’t go well. Not that I’m expecting there to be a problem since they’ll both be at school while I’m here. But at their age, you never can tell how they’re going to react to change, no matter how small.”

I appreciated how she put her children first, no matter the circumstances. “You’re a good mom.”

She shrugged off my compliment. “Yeah, well, they make it easy because they’re such great kids.”

“Hopefully, I’ll get to meet them one day.”

Little did I know that day was going to come a whole lot sooner than either of us expected.

4

ELLIE

I was half a mile from the elementary school when I heard a thump from the front of my car, followed by the vibration of the wheel beneath my hands. Then the sound changed to an unmistakable flapping that let me know one of my tires had gone flat.

“You have to be freaking kidding me,” I muttered as I carefully steered the car toward the side of the road.

“Freaking,” Madison chirped from the back seat.

So much for hoping I’d been quiet enough for little ears not to hear me. I needed to be more careful since my daughter was at the stage where she repeated anything even remotely bad that she heard.

Twisting around in my seat with a sigh, I met her smiling gaze. “That’s not something you should repeat, sweetie. It’s an adult word.”

“Fine,” she huffed, her shoulders slumping.

“What’s wrong, Mommy?” Benjamin asked, his brows drawing together. “Why aren’t we going anymore?”

“I need to check, but I think there’s a problem with one of the tires,” I explained as I unbuckled my seat belt. “Keep an eye on your sister for me. Make sure she doesn’t wriggle out of her car seat to try to come out and help me.”

Madison giggled, pulling her hands away from the buckle that she’d already been tugging at. “I no gonna.”

“You better not, sweetie.” I wagged my finger at her. “Or else you’re going to get all the time-outs and no dessert.”

Her lips curved down in an adorable pout. “I no like time-out.”

“And you love vanilla ice cream with sprinkles, which was what we’re having after dinner tonight. So keep that in mind while I check on the tire,” I warned.

Benjamin beamed a sweet smile at me. “I gots her, Mommy.”

I leaned forward to give his brown hair a quick ruffle and then blew kisses at both of my babies. “It won’t take me long. I’ll be right back.”

I twisted back around and flung my car door open, cringing at the squeak it made. Although my ex was forced by the court to pay me child support and alimony, I hadn’t wanted to spend money on a new car until I found a job and wouldn’t have to dip into my meager savings account for the monthly payments. If more than just a tire needed to be repaired or replaced, at least I was working at the animal clinic now...assuming I didn’t get fired for being late on my first day.

Rounding the front of my car, my shoulders slumped when I spotted the fully deflated tire on the passenger side. Driving any farther on it was out of the question since it would damage the wheel, so any hope I had of this being taken care of quickly was gone.

I took several deep breaths as I walked back to the curb and along the side of my car to open the door on Benjamin’s side. “Sorry, kiddos. I’m not going to be able to drive you the rest of the way to school.”

“Dat’s okay, Mommy.” Madison leaned forward so she could smile at me. “Daddy can do it.”

My daughter was still a daddy’s girl, even though my ex had let her down more times than I could count since he moved out. I only hoped that today would be different. “Good idea, sweetie. I’ll give him a call now to see if he can come grab you guys, but he might be in a meeting already. If so, we’ll figure something else out.”

“We can walk,” Benjamin mumbled, his lips pinched together as he crossed his thin arms over his chest.

“I know you could, buddy. But it’s a long way to go for your sister and me.” I ruffled his hair, hoping to ease some of his tension. “So hold on just a little longer while I figure this out.”

“Uh-huh.”

The flat look that had recently started to appear in his dark eyes whenever his dad came up in conversation worried me. I’d sent both the kids to see a children’s therapist when Thad moved out, but it had been almost a year since their last appointment. With how inconsistent their dad had become

with his visitation, I probably needed to get them in to see her again. Or at least Benjamin since he seemed to be struggling with the situation.

First, I needed to get them to school and my car back in working condition. Gently shutting the door, I yanked my cell phone out of my pocket and turned away from the car as I pulled up Thad's number. I didn't want the kids to overhear our conversation, so I took a few steps until I was on the sidewalk next to where I was parked. Then I tapped against the screen to make the call. After five ringtones, I was starting to think that he was going to let me go to voicemail, but he finally answered.

"What do you need, Ellie?"

"I got a flat tire on my way to school with the kids. Could you stop by and pick them up while I wait for a tow truck?"

"I'm not supposed to have them until next weekend."

His reminder wasn't necessary. I knew our children's schedule better than him since I had them most of the time. "I know, but I was hoping you'd be able to help get them to school so they aren't stuck waiting in the car when they'd be happier at school."

"You haven't given me much notice. They're supposed to be there in fifteen minutes."

I rolled my eyes over how ridiculous his response was. "I had no way of knowing that I'd get a flat tire this morning. How in the world could I have given you a heads-up?"

"You know what I meant, Ellie," he snapped. "If you were driving something halfway decent, then maybe this wouldn't have happened."

I slowly but forcibly expelled my breath as I tried to stop my head from metaphorically exploding. "I can't afford a new car right now, which you darn well know."

"With all of the money I give you each month, I don't know any such thing," he denied. "But hey, you said you wanted to drive that thing until the wheels fell off, so I guess you got your wish."

"It wasn't a wish," I hissed, squeezing the bridge of my nose between my fingers. "The only reason I said that was because I knew how much you wanted the Mercedes. Trading in my car wouldn't have given us the down payment that we needed."

It was a decision I deeply regretted since we broke up less than a year later. Since the judge awarded us each the vehicle we were already driving, I wouldn't have been stuck with one that was on its last legs if I'd been a little

more selfish back then.

To add insult to injury, he had already replaced the Mercedes with a newer model. Just like he'd done with me.

"This is all beside the point," he huffed. "Back to your original question...no, I cannot come and take the kids to school. I have a patient waiting for me. You'll have to figure something else out."

"Thanks for nothing," I muttered before stabbing my finger against the screen to end the call.

After checking to make sure the kids were still okay in the back seat, I pulled up the number for the animal clinic. My hands were shaking as I pressed the phone to my ear. I expected to end up in voicemail since the office wasn't open yet, but my boss answered after only three rings.

"Moore Animal Clinic, how can I help you?"

"Um...yes, hello. This is Ellie Nedderman, your new administrative assistant. I really hate to do this on my first day—or any day really—but I'm going to be late. I planned to head straight to the clinic after dropping the kids off so I'd be there early, but I got a flat tire. Now I need to call a tow truck and hope the driver will be okay with taking them to school on the way to the auto shop."

My nervous habit was getting the better of me, and I had to bite my lip to stop myself from saying anything else before he had a chance to respond.

"Are you guys okay?"

I bit my lip again, this time because he asked the question that should have been the first thing Thad said when I told him what happened. I didn't expect him to be worried about my well-being after how he treated me during—and before—the breakup. But he should have at least been concerned about his children.

"Yeah, I pulled over, and the kids are happy in the back seat for now."

"Good, that's what's important. Don't worry about being late to work. Focus on your children, we'll be fine."

"Thank you," I whispered. "Bye."

Pulling myself together, I pasted on a smile as I turned back to the car and climbed into the driver's seat. "Okay, kiddos. Unfortunately, Daddy is stuck at work, so you're going to be a smidge late to school. But the good news is that this is going to turn out to be quite the adventure since you'll get to ride in a big ole tow truck."

"Really?" Benjamin gasped, his eyes widening. "Fun!"

“Yay! Fun!” Madison screeched, clapping her hands as she loudly echoed her brother.

“Fun, right,” I muttered while I leaned over to reach for the tote bag I kept on the floor in front of the passenger seat to grab their mess-free coloring kits. “It might be a little while, though. So how about you draw me a picture of something you can see out the window? I’ll put them up on the fridge when we get home after school.”

Knowing that would keep them busy for only so long, I quickly pulled up the information for a local tow truck company and gave them a call. I was disappointed to discover that I’d been right about the wait, but I didn’t want to make the kids worry, so I stayed upbeat as I hung up. “How are those pictures coming along?”

“Awesome, Mommy.” Madison turned her plastic travel case toward me so that I could see the paper clipped to the front.

“Very pretty, sweetie.”

Just as Benjamin showed me his drawing of a green dinosaur, there was a tap on my window.

“Dr. Moore,” I gasped, my eyes widening as my head jerked toward the sound. Rolling down the window, I asked, “What are you doing here?”

“I distinctly remember telling you to call me Finn,” he corrected with a smile that probably dropped panties wherever he went. With his tall, athletic build, thick, dark hair, short-trimmed beard and mustache, and dark eyes framed by impossibly long lashes, he was much too attractive for his own good. And mine, too.

“Okay...what are you doing here, Finn?”

“I didn’t want you and the kids to be stuck waiting for a tow truck, so I’m here to help.” He glanced toward the back seat and gave them a little wave.

Although his explanation stunned me, some of the tension in my muscles drained at his words. I wasn’t used to thoughtful men since Thad was the only guy I’d ever been with and he was the polar opposite of a considerate partner. Maybe if he hadn’t been my high school sweetheart, I would have realized that sooner and saved myself a whole lot of anguish over how our breakup happened. Being dumped for a younger woman when you were only twenty-six packed a heck of a hit to my self-esteem.

“How did you find me?” I’d been on hold with the tow truck company for a while, but nowhere near long enough for him to leave the office and roam the streets of Mooreville while looking for me.

“Your address was on your application, and you mentioned that you still had to drop the kids off before coming into the clinic.” He jerked his chin toward the SUV that was now parked in front of me. “It wasn’t hard to backtrack from the school until I spotted your car.”

My brows drew together. “But how did you know what I drive? I didn’t put that on my application.”

“Remember when Ryland and Waverly were having their new sign put up at their office, and he was teasing her about maybe being pregnant?” I nodded. “I was with them and saw you after you’d taken the kids out for ice cream and helped them into the car.”

“I love ice cream,” Madison volunteered. “Can we get some?”

Finn aiming that smile of his at my daughter did more than make me want to drop my panties; it had my ovaries close to bursting.

“The ice cream shop isn’t open yet, but maybe your mom will bring you into the clinic someday soon, and I can take you all for a scoop then.”

“Pweeeease, Mommy. Can we?” Madison begged.

“Are you the animal doctor Mommy tolded us about?” Benjamin asked. “Can I see the doggies?”

“Being around sick animals is a big responsibility, so your mom and I would need to talk about it first.”

I was impressed by how he deferred to me both times without making me out to be the bad guy if the answer was no. And how quickly my children forgot about their riding in a tow truck. But I still felt as though my day was spiraling even more out of my control. “I’d like to get in at least my first day in the office before we plan ice cream outings and visits with the dogs.”

“The clinic doesn’t open until nine. We have plenty of time to drop your kids off at school and get there before my first patient arrives. Then we’ll come back during lunch, and I’ll change out the flat for your spare. Once that’s done, you can drive your car over to Hank’s so he can see if the tire is repairable or if it needs to be replaced.”

His solution didn’t just save me time, it also meant I wouldn’t have to pay for a tow. But it felt weird that my new boss was doing so much for me. “I couldn’t possibly ask you to do that.”

“You’re not asking. I’m offering.” Pulling on the door handle, he swung it open and gestured for me to get out of the car. “And it won’t take me long to change the tire. Fifteen minutes, maybe twenty if one of the lug nuts is stuck.”

I darted a glance at my trunk, my brows drawing together. “I don’t even know if I have everything you’d need.”

“As long as you have a spare back there, we’ll be fine. I have everything else. Pop the trunk so I can check,” he requested. “While I’m doing that, you can load the kids into my SUV so we can get going.”

“But I already called for a tow.”

He cast me a knowing look. “How long did they say it would take?”

“An hour or two,” I mumbled.

“Then I’m sure they won’t mind if you call back to let them know you found another solution that doesn’t require you and the kids to sit around waiting for them.”

“Probably not,” I reluctantly agreed, twisting in my seat to look at my children. “Okay, kiddos. Dr. Moore is going to help me drop you two off at school, and then I should be fine to pick you up at the end of the day. Get unbuckled and grab your backpacks while I load your car seats into his SUV.”

Benjamin and Madison happily went along with the plan, chattering about visiting me at work so they could play with the animals before getting ice cream. It made me realize that seeing where I worked was probably a good idea since I’d always been home with them until now. Hopefully, I could put them off for a little bit while I adjusted to my new role, even if only until next week.

The drive to their school went by quickly, with Finn waiting in his SUV while I walked them inside since they were late. Luckily, the clinic was only another few minutes away since I felt awkward when it was just the two of us in his vehicle.

“Thank you so much for coming to rescue us,” I murmured as he pulled out of the school parking lot.

“It wasn’t that big of a deal.”

Thinking about how Thad handled my call, I disagreed, “No, it really was.”

Catching his sideways glance out of the corner of my eye, I turned to look out the window. The last thing I wanted to do at the moment was explain how much of a jerk my ex was to my new hot boss. Luckily, Finn was insightful enough to catch my hint and remained quiet for the rest of the drive. Oddly enough, the silence was less awkward. Almost comfortable in a way.

When we got to the clinic, two cars were in the back of the lot near where

Finn parked his SUV. Meghan was probably in back cleaning the kennels and taking care of the animals who'd been boarded overnight, but Joshua was waiting behind the reception desk when Finn opened the door and gestured for me to go ahead of him.

"Hey, boss." He lifted a sticky note. "Thanks for the heads-up that you ran out to help Ellie. I would've wondered why the front door was unlocked with no sign of you inside."

Finn moved past me to head toward his office as he explained, "I figured you couldn't miss my note if I stuck it to the door."

"Good call." Joshua's gaze slid to me. "Everything okay with your car?"

I wasn't going to start my first day by complaining about the things that were wrong with my car, especially not with how my morning had gone so far. "Yeah, I just had a flat tire. Finn said we'd head back during lunch so he could swap it out for the spare, and then I'll be able to drive my car to the auto shop."

"I'm not surprised Finn rescued you." Joshua beamed an approving smile at Finn's retreating back. "He really is the best boss ever."

For a moment, I had let myself believe that I hadn't been imagining the flirtatious vibe from Finn. That he'd come searching for me because he saw me as something more than just his new employee. But Joshua's words were the splash of cold water I needed to get my head straight again.

Finn Moore was a handsome, single veterinarian from the town's founding family. I wouldn't be surprised to discover women in Mooreville got pets just to have an excuse to come see him. He could have anyone he wanted. There was no way he was interested in me, a recently divorced mom with two young children who was still trying to pull her life together.

Finn was my boss and nothing more. I needed to remember that.

One of the best perks of living in your hometown was that it was never difficult to get a home-cooked meal you didn't have to make yourself. My mom loved feeding her boys just as much now as she had when we were teenagers, but it was unusual for all three of us to be at her table these days since Logan was away for college.

He'd decided to come home this weekend, so our grandparents joined us for dinner this Friday night. They'd been here last week and normally only came once a month since they also did family dinners with my aunts and uncles, plus hosted everyone. But they hadn't seen Logan since he left for his senior year, so they'd tweaked their calendar.

Our mom had gone all out, making all of my baby brother's favorite dishes. My stomach was full of meatloaf, mashed potatoes, peas, and yeast rolls by the time I leaned back in my chair. "You outdid yourself, Mom."

"Mmm, so good," Logan mumbled before shoving another forkful of mashed potatoes in his mouth.

Catching Rigden's gaze across the table, I rolled my eyes and shook my head. The kid was eating as though he hadn't gotten a decent meal in a long time. Since he was the best cook out of the three of us and had a full kitchen at his off-campus apartment, I knew he wasn't starving. There was also the fact that he'd bulked up a ton since I last saw him only a couple of months ago.

"I thought college students were supposed to gain fifteen pounds at the start of their freshman year, not their last?" my older brother teased.

Logan shrugged. "Been hitting the gym more."

“Leave your brother alone,” Mom chided. “He’s still a growing boy, and I think he looks great.”

“Of course you do.” I elbowed Logan in the side. “He’s your favorite.”

She wagged her finger at me. “You know darn well that I don’t have favorites. I love all of my boys equally.”

Rigden shook his head with a chuckle. “I’m thirty-four years old, Mom. Hardly a boy anymore.”

In unison with our mom, my brothers and I said, “It doesn’t matter how old you are, you’ll always be my baby.”

“Exactly so,” my grandmother agreed with a nod before getting up. Before she headed toward the kitchen, she patted my dad on his shoulder. “Even when they’re grown up with babies and grandbabies of their own.”

“Grandbabies,” Mom sighed. “If only my boys would get around to giving me some to spoil.”

“Don’t look at me,” Logan muttered around his third serving of meatloaf. “The last thing I need to do is knock some girl up when I haven’t even finished college yet.”

“Neither had I when I got pregnant with your brother,” she pointed out. “Technically, Rigden got a jump start on college since I had him in my belly while I finished my last semester.”

“I remember how scared you two were to tell us the news.” Grandpa leaned across the table to pat my mom’s hand. “But everything turned out just the way we told you.”

She beamed a smile at him. “Only because we had Katherine’s and your support.”

“Always,” my grandmother murmured as she returned with a freshly baked pie in each hand.

Mom shook her head with a laugh. “You don’t even know what we were talking about.”

“It doesn’t matter. Family is family.”

Being close to the people who mattered most to me was another perk to living in Mooreville. It was also why I’d been happy for my cousin Baxter when he’d decided to move here after his brother died fighting a fire in New York City. I’d hated that he only had his parents to lean on while he was grieving, especially since they’d never struck me as particularly warm people on their rare visits to see the family.

After the pie was demolished and my brothers and I cleared the table, I

wandered out to the back porch. I was only outside for a few minutes when my grandfather joined me.

Leaning his elbows against the wooden railing, he stared out at the backyard. “I heard you came to Eloise Nedderman’s rescue the other day when she got a flat tire.”

“Yeah, it was her first day, and when she called to let me know she was going to be late, she mentioned a tow truck. It didn’t seem right to leave her stranded there when it was just as easy for me to go pick her up.” I raked my fingers through my hair. “I was going to take her back to help her with the tire at lunchtime, but I got called out on another large animal emergency. So I called Hank and got him to send someone to take care of it for her.”

“I’m glad you hired her. I like that she has someone looking out for her.” He’d said much the same at dinner last week when I’d told everyone that Ellie would be helping out at the clinic. “Was the tire repairable?”

I nodded. “Yup, she picked up a nail, so he was able to patch it.”

“Glad to hear it.” He clapped me on the back. “I’ll have to give Hank my gratitude the next time I see him.”

“Don’t be surprised when he tells you it was no big deal,” I muttered.

Grandpa cocked his head to the side, his brows drawing together. “That doesn’t sound like something Hank would say.”

“You know how much he likes a good deal.”

His chin jutted out as his eyes narrowed. “He better not have overcharged Eloise just because he had to send someone out to look at the damn tire.”

“No worries there,” I reassured him. “I bartered with him instead—house calls for Earl for a year instead of bringing him into the office.”

The tension left my grandfather’s body, and he laughed softly. “I can’t believe that ornery cat is still alive.”

“You’re telling me.” I twisted my arm so he could see my elbow. “I still have the scar from the first time he brought Earl into the clinic. He hates riding in the car so much, I probably should’ve switched to house visits long ago for him. It would’ve saved me from being scratched many times over.”

“Yet it took helping Eloise out for you to make that offer,” he murmured.

I shrugged. “The tire needed to be taken care of, and I couldn’t see her being okay with me paying for it. This way, I was able to tell her that Hank owed me a favor and I didn’t pay a penny for the repair. It’s a win-win all around.”

“Like I said before, I appreciate that you’re looking out for her. It’s a

shame that your grandmother and I haven't seen her in so long. She stopped coming to church when news of the divorce started spreading around town." He shook his head with a sigh. "Not that I blame the poor girl, considering the crap her husband put her through. Plus, I think she only started coming because she was lonely except for her kids."

"Ex-husband," I corrected without thinking.

My grandfather tilted his head to the side and studied me with narrowed eyes. "I'm well aware he's no longer her husband, Finn. Which you know. So now I have to wonder why you were so quick to point out that the jerk is her ex."

I raked my fingers through my hair as I considered how much of my jumbled feelings I wanted to share. Even though I'd known there was chemistry between Ellie and me before I hired her, I'd thought it would be easier to fight the pull while she was working with me. But the past week had proven me wrong.

Finally, I confessed, "I'm attracted to her."

"I see." He searched my face before nodding. "Just remember, she comes as a package deal with her children."

My back straightened as I shot him a glare. "I know that and would never do anything to hurt Benjamin or Madison. But the point is moot since she's my employee. Nothing is going to happen between us."

"Mm-hmm." He padded over to the sliding glass door and paused to look at me over his shoulder. "One thing's for sure. Your mom would spoil those kids rotten if she ever got her hands on them. It'd probably get her to lay off on all the bellyaching over her lack of grandchildren. At least for a little while."

6

ELLIE

The last thing I expected on my first Saturday morning after starting my new job was to be woken up by pounding on the door at seven thirty. The sun had barely risen in the sky, but that didn't seem to bother whoever was rude enough to come calling this early.

"Crap," I muttered, scrambling out of bed when they knocked again.

Benjamin and Madison had been worn out last night, but they'd still stayed up to watch a movie with me after we devoured a cheese pizza. It'd been a treat to celebrate how great the week had gone at Finn's clinic, as well as a thank you to the kids for handling the change so well.

It was also an excellent way for me to increase the odds that I'd be able to sleep in this morning. Except now someone was ruining that plan, and if they didn't stop that pounding, they were going to wake up my children too. Then I'd have to deal with them being cranky all day because they didn't get enough sleep and thought they were too old for naps. From what my parents told me, I'd have to wait until they were teenagers before they discovered how awesome it was to get some much-needed rest in the middle of the day.

Grateful that I'd taken to going to bed in pajama pants and a T-shirt after my ex walked out—instead of the nighties he'd preferred me in—I hurried downstairs. My eyes widened in shock when I flung open the front door and found Thad standing on my doorstep. "What in the world are you doing here at this time of morning? You know the kids don't usually get up this early except for when they have to go to school, and it isn't even your weekend with them."

"I think the real question is why the fuck is another man dropping my

kids off at school,” he hissed. “And why the hell did I have to hear about it from someone else last night?”

“You have got to be kidding me,” I muttered, grabbing his arm to pull him inside the house so my neighbors couldn’t hear what we were saying. I’d hated being the center of gossip when Thad left me and through the divorce. The last thing I wanted was to give them something else to talk about. “Get in here.”

When the door closed behind him, I pressed a finger to my lips and gestured for him to follow me into the kitchen. Then I marched over to the coffee maker and popped in a pod so I could get some much-needed caffeine.

“Are you going to offer me one, too?”

I glared at my ex-husband over my shoulder. “Nope.”

“Seriously?” He walked to the end of the counter and pressed his palms onto the hard surface. “I’m still paying the mortgage on this house. The least you can do is make me a damn coffee.”

Turning to face him, I planted my fists on my hips as I wondered yet again what had happened to the man I’d fallen in love with in college. Back then, if someone had talked to me like this, he would’ve been the first person to put them in their place. “This isn’t your home anymore, Thad. You’re not even an invited guest this morning. And you’re not paying the mortgage... you’re paying court-ordered child support and alimony. Which you keep trying to get lowered, so don’t sit in my home and complain about me not being a gracious hostess.”

“Whatever,” he grumbled. “I didn’t come here to listen to your crap.”

“No, from what little you’ve said so far, you came storming over here just because you heard some rumor about my boss dropping the kids off after I got a flat tire.” I held up my palm when it looked as though he was going to say something and added, “If that makes you angry, you only have yourself to blame. Finn wouldn’t have needed to help me get the kids to school if you’d come when I called you.”

Thad ignored my completely valid point and echoed, “Your boss?”

“I guess the rumor mill left some details out.” I grabbed my coffee and lifted the mug to my lips to hide my grin before I took a sip.

“You got a job?”

Turning back toward him, I quirked a brow. “Haven't you been telling me to do just that ever since you walked out?”

“Yeah, but working for Finn Moore?”

He gave up the right to have an opinion about what I did with my life when he bailed on our marriage in the worst way possible, but I figured it didn't hurt to give him a little rope since it'll just prove how wrong he was. "Is there something wrong with him that I should know about?"

"No," he begrudgingly admitted. "It's just that you don't have any experience in a veterinary clinic. What is he having you do?"

I shook my head with a laugh, but it held no humor. "That's rich, coming from you."

His brows drew together. "What do you mean?"

I wondered, yet again, how he'd been smart enough to make it through dental school. "Penny just finished her associates degree when you hired her to be your receptionist. She'd never worked in an office before either, but that didn't seem to be a problem."

"That's different," he huffed. "You know why she got the job. My dad wanted to give her a chance because she was a friend of the family."

His explanation was the same as he'd given me three years ago, except I wasn't the same naive wife as I'd been back then. Now I didn't believe a word of it because he'd proven himself to be incapable of telling the truth when it really mattered. "Mm-hmm, I'm sure the fact that you wanted to sleep with her had nothing to do with the decision."

"Nothing happened between us for months."

"It doesn't really matter." The timeline of their affair was still a little murky, but I'd reached the point of not caring about the details long ago. "My point is that if Penny was qualified to be the full-time receptionist at your dental practice, then I'm more than capable of fulfilling my duties as part-time help for Finn."

Yet again, he skipped over the important part of what I'd said and asked, "You're on a first-name basis with your new boss?"

Setting my coffee mug on the counter, I heaved a deep sigh. "Not that it's any of your business, but all of his employees are. He's a good guy, and you should be thrilled that the mother of your children landed a job working for him, especially since he's letting me set my schedule around the kids. Instead, you're angry about it."

"If you'd bothered to tell me—"

"Nope. You don't get to do that," I interrupted, lifting my hand up, palm facing him. "Not when you're the one who insisted that we limit our communication to stuff about the kids."

“Are you really going to stand there and try to tell me that you getting a job has nothing to do with our children?” he scoffed. “Were you just never going to tell me?”

“Since they’re at school while I’m at the clinic, I figured the news could wait until I saw you in person when you picked them up next weekend.”

With how often he skipped out on his visitation, I mentally patted myself on the back for not saying *if* instead. Unfortunately, Thad didn’t seem to have the same appreciation for my restraint. “Next time something like this comes up, I’d like to hear it from you instead of my mother.”

“I’ll be sure to let you know the next time I accept a job offer,” I conceded.

“You should also have your lawyer call mine to discuss how your income will impact my alimony and child support payments.”

My patience with him officially ran out. Not that I had much to begin with.

“That’s not going to happen. If you want to bother the judge again over the six to seven hundred dollars I’ll be taking home a month from my part-time job, that’s on you.” I jerked my chin toward the front of the house. “And on that note, I think it’s time for you to go.”

He rolled his eyes, and I pressed my lips together so I wouldn’t say something I would regret later. No matter how much I’d come to wonder how I’d ever fallen for him in the first place, he was still the father of my children and would be in my life forever.

The house was still quiet as I followed him through the living room. Although Benjamin and Madison could use a couple more hours of sleep, they hadn’t seen their dad in far too long. Shoving my irritation with him to the side for the good of my children, I offered, “Want me to get the kids up so you can take them out for breakfast?”

He shook his head. “I can’t. I’m meeting my dad at the golf course for an eight thirty tee time.”

He didn’t even ask me to tell them that he loved them before he left, which left me feeling so angry that I had no hope of falling back asleep. But I refused to let him ruin what was supposed to have been a restful morning, so I climbed back in bed and pulled out my e-reader.

Reading an office romance where the heroine fell for her sexy boss probably wasn’t my best choice, considering how often I’d caught myself ogling Finn this past week. Or dreamed of him. But the story quickly pulled

me in, and I managed to get halfway through before I heard Madison's little footsteps in the hallway.

Setting the device on my bedside table, I patted the mattress when she came running into my room. "Come give me some cuddles."

"Cuddles, yay!" Racing across the floor, she climbed up and threw her arms around me.

Benjamin wasn't far behind her, but his mind was on food, so he stopped in the doorway and asked, "What's for breakfast?"

"How about cold pizza?" I suggested with a grin.

His eyes widened as they lit up. "Can we really?"

"Sure, we have enough left over." I slid off the mattress, tugging my daughter along with me. "This morning can be part two of our celebration of my new job."

"Awesome!" He did a little dance, then stopped to look up at me with his hands pressed together. "Then can we go see the doggies?"

"I'm not working today, remember?"

"Uh-huh." He nodded. "But if you're with us, we'll be extra 'sponsible, like your boss said."

It took me a moment to realize he was talking about Finn's response about seeing the dogs on the day I'd had the flat tire. He'd seemed fine with the idea of me bringing them in for a visit, and there was an adoption open house today. Although I knew I was setting myself up for endless begging from the kids when they learned that people got to take the animals home with them, I found myself agreeing. "Good point. I guess we're going to see some dogs today."

Foster open houses were my favorite days at work. I loved being there for that moment when an animal found their forever home, watching as a person fell in love with their new pet. As much as I'd wanted to share that experience with Ellie, I'd understood that working on the weekend when she had her kids was a no-go for her. Her dedication to them only made her more attractive to me.

I hadn't expected to see her until she came into the office on Monday, so when I heard Meghan call out, "Hey, Ellie," my head jerked up. I was surprised to find her standing there with Benjamin and Madison, huge grins on the kids' faces as they stared at a litter of puppies wrestling each other in a playpen a few feet in front of them.

As I walked over to greet them, Ellie gave me an awkward wave. "I hope we won't be in your way."

"We wanted to see the doggies," Benjamin added.

Crouching down so I was eye level with the boy, I murmured, "You picked the perfect time to stop by. I have three puppies who've been hoping to find someone to play with."

"Really?" His eyes widened, and he tilted his head back to ask his mom, "Can we play with the puppies?"

"You betcha," Ellie agreed before guiding her children over to the playpen. "But you have to be very gentle. They're still babies."

"Baby doggies," Madison breathed, going up on her toes to peer inside at them.

Ellie stroked her fingers through her daughter's hair. "Yup, so we're

going to be extra careful. Right?”

Madison nodded. “Uh-huh.”

Benjamin puffed out his little chest and looked up at me. “Mom’s gonna help us be ’sponsible.”

“Sounds like the perfect plan to me.” Straightening to my full height, I flashed a grin at Ellie. “Your mom has already met the puppies, but how about I introduce you?”

“Yay! Puppies,” Madison screeched.

Benjamin looked up at his mom with wide eyes. “You play with puppies at work?”

Pressing her lips together, Ellie shook her head. “I really wish I did, but no.”

“That’s my job,” Meghan announced.

“Whoa,” Benjamin breathed. “I wanna be you when I grow up.”

Meghan squatted down with a laugh. “Playing with the puppies and kittens is the best part of what I do, but you should know that I also clean up a lot of pee and poop.”

Benjamin’s nose wrinkled. “Eww.”

“Yeah, I figured you’d say that.” She ruffled his hair as she straightened. “My little boy loves playing with our kitties at home, but not so much helping with the litter box.”

“Can I see kitties too?” Madison asked as Ellie led her into the puppy play area.

“As long as it’s okay with your mom.” I pointed toward the other side of the room where I had set up several cat tunnels. “We have five domestic longhair kittens out playing today.”

Madison clapped her hands before plopping down on her butt. The puppies swarmed around her, one of them climbing onto her lap and making her giggle. I picked up the other two and waited until Benjamin sat beside his sister to place one of the squirming bundles of energy on his lap.

Scratching under the chin of the puppy I was still holding, I said, “This one is Charlie. Benjamin has Duke, and Madison is holding Bella.”

“So soft,” Madison whispered, staring at Bella in awe.

Ellie knelt next to her and stroked the puppy’s back. “You’re right. Since she’s just a baby, she’s softer than other dogs.”

“How come?” Benjamin asked, a wrinkle popping up in the middle of his brow.

“The coat of fluffy fur that puppies are born with helps regulate their body temperature,” I explained. “When they get older, it will grow into their adult coat, which is normally thicker and stiffer.”

“I’m kinda like a puppy.” Benjamin ran his fingers through his hair with a grin. “Cause my hair is getting darker.”

“It sure is, sweetie,” Ellie agreed. “Thicker too. Just like your sister.”

The little boy snickered. “Yeah, she used to be bald.”

“Did not,” Madison denied.

Benjamin nodded and insisted, “Did too when you were born. It’s in your baby pictures.”

“No arguing, or else we’re going to have to head back home for time-outs,” Ellie warned.

The threat stopped them in their tracks, and they both focused on the puppies. Meghan stepped away to help a couple who came in to look at a two-year-old boxer dropped off a few weeks ago. The poor guy had been abandoned by his family because they were moving to Indianapolis and said they couldn’t find an apartment that would allow him on the lease.

The situation was all around fucked up because breed bans shouldn’t even be a thing since they didn’t do shit to improve public safety. And people needed to stop taking the easy way out when keeping their pet became complicated. It exasperated me to no end how quickly some people were willing to give up an animal to make their lives easier. Even though I gave them a list of complexes that allowed boxers—which had only taken me half an hour of searching online—the family had still insisted on leaving their dog behind when they left Mooreville.

“They look really interested in Oliver,” Ellie whispered, her gaze locked on the boxer wagging his stubby tail as the woman stroked his back.

I was thrilled to see how the couple interacted with our newest rescue resident. At eighty pounds and full of energy, not to mention the bad rap his breed got, placing Oliver would be difficult. He needed owners who were prepared to give him a lot of exercise, and the high-end running shoes the guy was wearing gave me hope that it would be a good match. “Keep your fingers crossed.”

Lifting her hands, Ellie was adorable as she did just that, adding, “You can’t see it, but my toes are too.”

“I’ll do the same.” I tapped my foot on the ground with a wink, making her giggle.

“Me too.” Madison stuck her tongue out as she tried to get her fingers crossed, smiling up at her mom when she reached over to help.

“Why’re you doing that?” Benjamin asked.

His sister shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Ellie leaned forward and whispered, “Because we’re hoping that the big dog over there just found his forever home with that man and woman.”

“Forever home?” the boy echoed, tilting his head to the side.

“Dr. Moore helps dogs and cats find families when they don’t have one,” she explained. “They stay here at the clinic until he finds the right people to take them home.”

“Can we take him home?” Benjamin turned pleading eyes on his mom. “I love him, and he wants to live wif us.”

At Ellie’s panicked look, I intervened to buy her some time. “Sorry, buddy. These puppies aren’t quite old enough to find their forever home yet.”

“That’s right.” Ellie flashed me a grateful smile. “Remember how I said they’re still babies?”

“Yeah.” Benjamin heaved a deep sigh, his shoulders slumping.

“But you know what we can do?” Ellie asked, getting to her feet and reaching a hand down to each of her kids to help them up. “Go play with the kitties.”

Her distraction worked perfectly. Their excitement over seeing new animals helped ease the disappointment over not being able to take a puppy home. And crossing our fingers and toes also worked since the couple who came in to meet Oliver turned out to be perfect for him. Joshua helped them fill out the paperwork and took their picture to post to the website before they headed out to his new home.

When Ellie and the kids were ready to leave, I walked them to the door. “I think you guys are my good luck charm.”

“How so?” she asked, tilting her head to the side.

“We beat our Saturday adoption event record today.” I smiled down at Benjamin and Madison. “Probably because you two did such a great job playing with the cats and dogs. You made the day more fun than usual, and it really paid off for our rescues. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Benjamin puffed out his chest and beamed a smile at me.

“Welcome,” Madison echoed as she tugged on her mom’s hand.

Ellie bent down to pick up her daughter and settled her on her hip. “I’m

glad we weren't in the way."

"Definitely not. You're welcome back whenever you'd like," I offered, hoping that she'd make this a regular thing. And not just because today had been so successful—I liked that I didn't have to wait until Monday to see her again.

"Oooh, can we come back tomorrow, Mommy?" Benjamin pleaded.

Ellie shook her head. "Sorry, but they only do this on Saturdays, kiddo."

"Next Saturday?" he asked.

Ellie pressed her lips together as she took a slow, deep breath through her nose. Then she answered, "You might be with your daddy next weekend, but maybe the Saturday after that. Okay?"

"Uh-huh," Benjamin muttered.

"I better get these two home." Madison rested her cheek against Ellie's shoulder, sleepy eyes so much like her mom's slowly blinking. "It's been such a fun afternoon, they might even N-A-P after the excitement wears off."

"I know how to spell that word," Benjamin grumbled, glaring up at his mom.

"But your sister doesn't." She winked at him. "So it's our little secret."

His lips curved up, and he walked onto the sidewalk as I held the door open. "Thanks for coming."

Ellie flashed me a smile over her shoulder. "See you on Monday."

"Don't be surprised if Joshua leaves a bunch of adoption paperwork for you to finish up," I warned.

"I look forward to playing my part in their forever homes."

I watched them cross the parking lot to her crappy car and waited until she'd pulled out of the parking lot to let the door close. Feeling Meghan's stare, I turned to find her standing with arms crossed against her chest and her brows drawn together. "What?"

She shook her head. "I've helped with a lot of the adoption days here, and that's the first time I've ever seen you talk someone out of taking an animal home with them. Normally, you're pushing our strays on anyone and everyone."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm a mom." She jerked her chin toward the puppy playpen. "You'd have to be a lot farther away than that for me not to be able to hear what you said to Benjamin when he asked about taking a puppy home."

"Okay, but I don't *push*," I denied.

“If you think they’ll take good care of an animal, you absolutely do,” she disagreed with a laugh. “That’s how Waverly ended up with Wiggles just last month.”

“Fine,” I huffed. “Maybe I push a little, but only when someone is a perfect match for one of our rescues. And as much as Benjamin and Madison would love on one of those puppies, it’s Ellie’s call if she wants to take on another responsibility right now. She’s already got a lot going on.”

“You’re not going to get any arguments from me there.” Meghan held her hands up in a gesture of surrender. “I’m lucky enough to have Roger around to help me with Tony and Luna, and I still won’t let you talk me into taking another cat home because my plate is pretty full.”

“Even though Tony won’t help you with the litter box,” I teased.

She shrugged with a grin. “That’s what I have Roger for.”

Her husband would do just about anything for her, and she was head over heels for him. Which made him the perfect distraction from her asking any more questions about Ellie. Meghan was a great vet assistant, but she was also nosy as hell. I needed to be more careful around her...before she realized how attracted I was to her new coworker.

8

ELLIE

It was only my second week at the first job I'd had in years, and I couldn't stop myself from wondering if my boss's beard would leave marks on my face if we kissed. Or my inner thighs.

Stray thoughts like that made it hard to concentrate, especially when he leaned his perfect butt against the side of my desk and stared down at me with his gorgeous dark eyes.

Heat filled my cheeks as I cleared my throat and asked, "Sorry, my mind wandered. Could you repeat that?"

His lips curved into a grin that had butterflies swirling in my belly. "I just wanted to check in and make sure you didn't have any questions for me about putting the adoption paperwork from this weekend into the computer system."

"Nope." I shook my head, hoping it would clear the dirty thoughts circling in my brain. "Joshua walked through it with me before he left to study."

"Good." His smile widened. "And no issues with my notes on the patients I've seen so far this morning?"

"Not even the ones you wrote down instead of typing them into your tablet."

"I know I should do better with that. My only excuse is that a lot of my clinical rotations were done on paper-based medical record systems, so when I'm feeling rushed, I tend to go old-school with pen and paper again." He tapped the stack of folders in front of me. "You didn't have any problems reading my handwriting? It's Joshua's number one complaint when I dump

these on his desk.”

Having spent an hour transferring visit notes to patient records, I understood Joshua’s complaint. “It kind of resembles a chicken scratch, but I’ve been able to make the notes out so far.”

“I wish I could say that isn’t a fair description, but I sadly cannot.” His deep chuckle sent a delicious shiver down my spine. “Please don’t hesitate to ask if you run into something that you can’t decipher on your own.”

“I’ll be sure to let you know,” I promised.

“I guess I’d better for my next round of patients now that there’s only ten minutes left of our lunch break. I’m sure my one o’clock appointment will come knocking on the door soon.” He glanced at the insulated carrier I’d brought with me. “Cute lunch box.”

The heat in my cheeks deepened. “Dinosaurs are apparently not cool enough for second grade, but I figured you guys would appreciate them.”

“You were right.” He straightened, jerking his thumb over his shoulder toward the front door. “I don’t treat a lot of reptiles, but if someone walks in here with a dinosaur, do me a favor and jump them to the front of the line.”

“No way. I’ve seen those movies way too many times. You’ll be stuck listening to my screams as I run to my car while you figure out what to do about the dinosaur.”

“I might not be a paleontologist, but you can be sure I’d protect you from a rogue dinosaur just the same.” His laughter trailed him as he strode toward his office.

“I bet I know where your mind wandered to,” Meghan murmured after the door shut behind him.

“Pardon?” I asked, not sure what she was talking about.

“You told Finn that your mind had wandered when you asked him to repeat his offer to help you with the computer system. And I practically had to bite my tongue to hold back my retort until he was gone because I didn’t want to embarrass you,” she explained as she tucked her purse back into the bottom drawer of her desk. “You know...there isn’t a rule against office romances.”

I jerked my gaze away from the door to Finn’s office and pretended that I didn’t know exactly who she was talking about. “Joshua is a sweet kid, but he’s not my type.”

Meghan laughed and shook her head. “That ‘sweet kid’ is only a year younger than you.”

“It’s amazing how much older motherhood makes you feel.”

“You’re preaching to the choir on that.” Her knowing look made it obvious that I wasn’t fooling her. She knew I was trying to divert the conversation away from my attraction to our boss. Which she proved when she added, “But we both know he wasn’t who I was talking about.”

I realized there was no use trying to bluff my way through this conversation when she’d clearly caught onto my attraction to our boss, and my shoulders slumped. “Am I that obvious?”

“Nope,” she assured me. “It took me until today to notice the sparks flying, and I’m a woman with a keen eye who has spent hours around the two of you.”

My gaze darted toward Finn’s door as I considered the possibility that the chemistry I was feeling wasn’t one-sided. “Sparks?”

“Combustible ones.” She dropped onto her chair with a nod and rolled it closer to me. “Seriously, watching you two circle each other is even better than enjoying my soap operas in the break room while we’re closed. I might have to change up my normal lunch routine and eat out here instead if you guys are going to keep giving me a show like that.”

One of the perks of working at the clinic was that Finn shut down for an hour every afternoon for lunch. It gave all of us the chance to eat without worrying about people and their pets waiting for us in the lobby. Although I tended to scarf down my food quickly so I could get some work done since Finn insisted on paying me for the full five hours I was at the clinic.

We even had a pharmaceutical sales rep who brought in a catered meal on Friday while they pitched a different brand of heartworm medication with flea and tick prevention to Finn. They’d brought in so much food that I’d had enough for dinner with the kids when he insisted that Meghan, Joshua, and I take the leftovers home. Benjamin and Madison had been impressed by the idea of a six-foot sub sandwich, and when I looked online to see how much they cost at Walmart, I decided I had the perfect menu for his seventh birthday in a few months.

“I hadn’t realized we were circling each other. I thought it was all on my side,” I confessed. “But it doesn’t matter because I can’t start anything with him, even if he really was interested in me like that.”

Meghan slumped in her chair with a heavy sigh. “Did you miss the part where I said there isn’t a rule against office romances here?”

“There are so many reasons that I don’t know where to begin.” Ticking

off a finger for each point, I listed, “I’ve only been divorced for almost two years, plus my ex likes to yank my chain on a regular basis by dragging me to court to try to get his child support and alimony lessened. I have two young children who need pretty much all of my time and attention because my ex doesn’t come close to pulling his weight. I’m already trying to juggle being a single mom with going back to school and my new part-time job here, so adding a guy into the mix would just be another ball in the air that I would probably drop. Except maybe if he was really into house or car repairs because both of those are falling apart around me, and my parents are in Florida so my dad can’t help with any of it.”

“Okay, I have to concede—you’re dealing with a lot right now.” She reached over to pat my knee. “Feel free to tell me to mind my own business, but I was wondering why you didn’t buy a house in Stuart when you moved back home?”

“Even though our education was good enough to earn both of us a college scholarship, my ex convinced me the schools in Mooreville were better.” How I wished that I’d questioned his logic back then instead of just accepting his explanation while thinking how wonderful it was that he was so concerned about Benjamin’s and Madison’s education when they weren’t even old enough to go to school yet.

“Why do I feel as though there was a ‘but’ in there?”

I heaved a deep sigh. “But...it turns out that Thad didn’t want me back in Stuart because he worried I’d hear the gossip more easily. He figured if we lived thirty minutes away, there was less risk of me finding out what he was up to when I thought he was networking to build his half of his dad’s practice.”

“Ouch.” Meghan cringed. “I take it that was just an excuse.”

“Apparently, when I couldn’t come back with him for a visit to look at houses because Madison had an ear infection, his dad asked him to sit in on the interview with their new dental hygienist. It was more of a formality since she was the daughter of their closest friends, but Thad didn’t know her well since she’s seven years younger than him, so his dad wanted to make sure they got along before he hired her.”

“Oh crap,” she breathed, a knowing look in her eyes.

“Yeah, they got along a little too well.” The knot in my belly was all about his betrayal. What little love I’d still had for Thad after finding out he’d cheated on me had died with his disregard for our children in the aftermath.

“And she wasn’t thrilled with the idea of me popping in to bring him lunch since they liked to use that time for an afternoon quickie. Yet another reason my darling husband didn’t want me to live in Stuart.”

Her head jerked back in shock. “Yikes. He wasn’t worried about his dad finding out? I mean, he was married with kids, and she’s the daughter of a friend of the family, younger than him, and technically his employee too, right?”

“You’d think that would’ve bothered him, but nope.” I shook my head. “And it turned out that he hadn’t needed to be afraid of what his dad would do once he discovered what had been going on right under his nose. He loved the idea of them being a couple.”

“But...but...you’re the mother of his grandchildren,” she sputtered, her eyes widening. “And it’s not as if he didn’t know you. You and your ex were high school sweethearts, right?”

“Yup.” I let the P pop at the end as I considered the real reason I was so hesitant to act on my attraction to Finn. “I thought I knew Thad so well, but he left me hesitant to trust my judgment when it comes to guys because I couldn’t have been more wrong about him if I tried. And his parents’ support of his awful decisions gave me another reason to question people’s motives. They’ve known me since I was fifteen, supported our decision to get married when we found out I was pregnant with Benjamin, and were friends with my parents for years. But none of that mattered when they found out that they could have Penny for a daughter-in-law instead. Not even how badly their grandchildren were hurt by the entire mess.”

“I’m not one to swear while I’m at work.” She leaned forward and hissed, “But fuck them.”

Her instantaneous defense of me was such a relief that I felt tears sting my eyes. Since I’d only moved to Stuart the summer before my freshman year and started dating Thad a month after school started, I didn’t have much time to make close friends before I graduated. And dropping out of college during my third year hadn’t helped me develop long-lasting relationships with any of the girls I’d hung out with there either. “That’s nothing I haven’t thought to myself hundreds of times in the past couple of years.”

She shook her head. “If Tony pulled something like that, I’d slap him upside the head and invite his poor wife and kids into our home.”

“Your son is only in first grade. You have a long way to go before you need to worry about your daughter-in-law’s well-being.” I laughed, picturing

her cute little boy who her husband had brought in after school to bring her flowers last week.

“Yeah, but you know what I mean.”

Finn’s next client knocked on the glass door as her dog lifted his leg to pee on the curb. As I walked over, I agreed, “I do.”

Before I let them in, Meghan added, “Don’t forget that you were still a kid yourself when you fell for your ex. You’re older and wiser now. Give yourself some grace for choosing wrong when you were a teenager. And if you can’t do that, trust my instincts. I have excellent taste in men, and I say that you couldn’t do much better than Finn Moore.”

She’d definitely given me something to think about.

After hiring Ellie, I'd learned something new about myself...I was apparently a glutton for punishment. Every single morning since she'd started, I found myself waiting for the moment she walked through the door just so I could see what outfit she'd chosen to torture me with that day.

I'd finally broken down yesterday and reminded her that our dress code was informal, but she still showed up today in a skirt that hugged her perfect curves. Following her into the break room, I couldn't stop staring at her ass as she bent over to put her adorable dinosaur lunch box in the fridge.

She straightened, and I took a step toward her.

"Hey, boss." Meghan grabbed my arm to pull me toward my office. "I have a question for you."

Tearing my gaze away from Ellie, I mumbled, "Okay."

When she had me out of earshot, she hissed, "You weren't going to tell her again that she could dress down at work, right?"

I'd assumed she wanted to talk about one of the rescues or a patient who was coming in today, so it took me a moment to understand what she said. "Maybe?"

"You can't do that. No dress code doesn't mean that we all have to wear scrubs or jeans. You and I do because it makes sense since we're taking care of animals all day. Joshua does it because he likes being casual, and it makes sense anyway because he'll be working with us in the back soon enough, once he gets far enough into his training." She jerked her chin toward the break room. "But Ellie spends her time here at the front desk. If she wants to dress up a little, it does no harm. And you harping on her about it will only

hurt.”

“Hurt?” I echoed softly, not liking the possibility of making Ellie feel bad when I brought the dress code up yesterday.

“Yes, hurt,” she insisted with a nod. “She’s a single mom who was betrayed by her ex in the worst way possible. Wearing cute outfits probably gives her a boost to her self-confidence.”

Clenching my fists at my sides as I thought about how much I’d like to punch her ex-husband, I muttered, “She’d be gorgeous no matter what she wears to work.”

“Yeah, I kinda already got the impression you’d say something like that.” Before I had the chance to backtrack, she added, “But have you considered the possibility that she doesn’t have money to spend on scrubs and maybe doesn’t own enough pairs of jeans to change them up each day? The skirts might be her best option for more than one reason.”

“Shit.” I raked my fingers through my hair, mentally kicking myself for not thinking about that potential issue before I opened my big mouth. The last thing I wanted was for Ellie to feel uncomfortable.

“Don’t beat yourself up too much.” Meghan patted me on the shoulder. “You’re a guy, so you’re going to mess up from time to time.”

Rolling my eyes, I shook my head. “I’m going to tell Roger you said that the next time he stops in.”

She shrugged. “As if I don’t already point it out to him whenever he messes up.”

“Good point.”

I was glad that our conversation had taken a different turn because Ellie popped her head in the doorway to announce, “Your first patient of the day is here.”

Shooing Meghan out of my office, I beamed a smile at Ellie. “Great, please send them in.”

The morning went quickly, with back-to-back appointments that kept me too busy to say anything to Ellie that wasn’t related to my patients. My last examination went over by thirty minutes, so I only had enough time to scarf down my lunch before pulling up the records for my one o’clock. Rufus was a ten-year-old basset hound whose owner had inherited him after his father passed away.

I had always thought John was a good guy, and I respected how he’d taken his dad’s beloved pet into his home when needed. But he quickly

jumped to the top of my shit list when Ellie let him into the clinic a few minutes early.

“Well, hello there,” he murmured. “I didn’t realize Finn had hired someone new, let alone someone as beautiful as you.”

“Oh...um...thank you, officer. I just started last Monday.”

I strode out of my office and realized the bastard was in uniform while flirting with my newest employee. He usually scheduled Rufus’s appointments for when he wasn’t on duty, but this visit had been last minute, so he must have run home to pick the dog up in the middle of his patrol shift.

“Never thought I’d say this, but I suppose I should be glad that Rufus is off his food.” John patted the top of his dog’s head. “Or else I wouldn’t have come in again until his next checkup, and that’s not for another six months. Which is entirely too long to go without meeting you.”

“Quit hassling Ellie and bring Rufus back so I can take a look at him,” I directed, pulling John’s attention away from her and earning me a curious look from him and a confused one from her.

John followed me to the exam room, but not before saying, “I’ll see you after Finn figures out what’s wrong with this poor guy.”

“I’ll be here.” Ellie’s cheeks were a pretty pink color, making me wonder if she’d enjoyed John’s attention, while I hoped it was because she was reacting to me instead.

“So that’s how it is?” John asked, leaning his hip against the exam table after lifting Rufus onto the flat surface.

I grabbed my stethoscope from the counter. “How what is?”

He shook his head with a low laugh. “You can act as though you don’t know what I’m talking about as much as you’d like, but we both know you just peed around your pretty receptionist to warn me away from her.”

I ignored his taunt as I started Rufus’s exam. It didn’t take long for me to discover a likely cause of the problem. “He has some dental decay that could be causing discomfort when he chews. I can run some additional tests to rule out other potential causes, or you can try soaking his kibble, switching to wet food, or mixing in some pumpkin to see if that gets him back to eating again.”

John scratched under Rufus’s chin. “Damn, now that you mention it, he’s not been up for playing tug lately either. I bet it’s because his teeth have been bothering him.”

“Then switching his food is your best bet.” I pulled up a note from a visit

five years ago and scanned the information. “Your dad gave him canned pumpkin when he had a bout of viral gastroenteritis, and he took to it without any issues.”

He helped the basset hound off the table. “That’s easy enough to do. I’ll stop by the grocery store later to pick some up.”

“Good boy.” I crouched down and gave the dog a soft treat that wouldn’t hurt his mouth. He snatched it off my palm and barked after he swallowed. “You might want to get some of these too.”

“I can do that,” John agreed, leading Rufus toward the door. “Does your receptionist know where I can buy them?”

I slammed my palm against the hard surface before he went to open it. “Don’t use Ellie to push my buttons. She deserves better than that.”

His eyes narrowed as he scanned my expression. “What if I’m not doing it just to get a rise out of you? Would you be cool with me asking your pretty receptionist out on a date because she seems sweet, and I’d like to get to know her better?”

“Then you should probably do something about whatever is going on between the two of you. Before someone else steps in and steals her right out from under your nose,” he warned.

Giving him a curt nod as the only acknowledgment to his advice, I stepped to the side so he could leave the exam room. But I followed close to keep an eye on how he acted around Ellie. As she handed him his receipt, I thought I had overreacted. Then the cocky bastard had to go and prove me wrong.

“It was nice to meet you, Ellie.” John shot me a mischievous look before heading toward the exit. “If your boss doesn’t take good care of you, let me know, and I’ll step in.”

“What in the world?” Ellie breathed, her brows drawing together as she tilted her head back to look up at me. “I swear, I didn’t say anything to make him think you were treating me badly, let alone enough that I’d need to call a cop for help. I barely said hello to the man. I am so sorry. Should I go after him and explain that he has nothing to worry about?”

Before Ellie could jump out of her seat to come to my defense, I clamped my hand on her shoulder. “Don’t pay him any attention. John likes to think he’s funny when he’s not.”

“I don’t see what was supposed to be so funny about that,” she grumbled.

“Well, I—” Stepping back so I was outside of Ellie’s line of sight, I

shook my head at Meghan, warning her not to finish that thought. “Think he’s a good pet owner but could use a lot of help in the sense of humor department.”

My little display of jealousy had ruined any hope I’d had of hiding my attraction to Ellie from Meghan. The woman was too astute for my own good when it came to this delicate situation. Which she proved barely twenty minutes later, after my next patient left, and she cornered me in the exam room.

Wagging her finger at me, she ordered, “You need to pull up your big boy pants and ask Ellie out.”

Not bothering to deny the obvious, I groaned, “I can’t. She works for me, and she needs this job. I can’t risk making her not feel safe here. She deserves better than that.”

“I agree with you on part of that. Ellie is awesome and deserves only the best. Especially after all the shit her ex put her through.” She poked her finger against my chest. “Which is why I’m telling you to ask her out. You’re the best man I know besides Roger, and you would never do anything to make her feel unsafe around you.”

I shook my head. “You don’t know how she’ll react if I ask her out. That alone could make me being her boss awkward for her, no matter how much I assure her that I’d never take it out on her if she turned me down.”

“I’m not going to betray her confidence, so all I can say is...just trust me. You won’t regret it.”

Meghan’s words played over and over in my head for the next couple of days as I wondered what Ellie might’ve said about me to warrant that kind of advice. The doubts she’d planted were starting to whittle away at my determination to keep my hands off the woman who I was coming to realize would be hard to let go of if she ever let me close.

ELLIE

I was so excited by how well my second week at work had gone—and busy thinking about my sexy boss—that I almost forgot this was supposed to be Thad’s weekend with the kids until he knocked on the door at five. Pulling it open, I shouted over my shoulder, “Hurry up and get ready. Your dad is here to pick you up!”

“Daddy,” Madison squealed, running into the living room from the kitchen to throw herself into Thad’s arms. “I missed you so much.”

“I missed you too, sweetie pie.” Thad brushed a kiss against the top of her head and set her on her feet. “How about you go get whatever stuffed animal you’d like to bring to my house while I talk to your mommy?”

“Otay,” she quickly agreed, racing up the steps to her bedroom.

“Honey Bunny.” His brows drew together, and there was no hint of recognition in his brown eyes. So I explained, “That’s the name of the stuffed animal she went to grab. It’s been her favorite for three years, ever since she got it in her Easter basket when she was two.”

“Oh, yeah, right. Of course.” He nodded. “Honey Bunny.”

“Do you have any special plans with the kids?” I asked, wondering if I should pack some of their other favorite things even though they had fully stocked rooms at his house.

“What I do with them on my weekends is none of your concern. I’m their father. I’m more than capable of taking care of them.”

“I wasn’t asking because I doubted your ability—”

My words were cut off by the loud honking of a car. Peering around him, I spotted his Mercedes in my driveway and recognized the blonde in the front

seat.

“You brought Penny with you to pick them up?” I snapped, clenching my fists so tightly that my nails pricked the skin of my palms. “Seriously?”

“It’s been almost two years,” he scoffed. “You need to come to terms with the fact that she’s a part of my life after all this time.”

One of the upsides to him bailing on his weekends with the kids so often was that I hadn’t needed to worry about them spending much time with his former mistress turned girlfriend. Except for when he had them on a holiday and his parents had Penny and her family over too.

“If we count all the time you two were sneaking around behind my back, it’s been a heck of a lot longer than two years,” I hissed, lowering my voice so the kids couldn’t hear me. “But that’s not why I’m upset. Madison wasn’t exaggerating when she said she missed you. You haven’t seen them in weeks, and I’m sure they’d appreciate some one-on-one time with their dad.”

“Shit.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “I’ll figure something out, okay?”

“You better. Because Benjamin isn’t going to give you the same kind of greeting our daughter just did. He’s two years older and all too aware of how many promises to them that you’ve broken,” I warned.

He stepped closer, getting almost nose to nose with me. “You’d better not be turning my kids against me, Ellie.”

“I wouldn’t need to, even if it’s what I wanted, which it isn’t.” My laugh was full of bitterness. “You’re doing a fine job of it all on your own.”

“I have Honey Bunny,” Madison cried as she raced downstairs.

“Where’s your brother?” I asked.

“Gettin’ his stupid video game thingy that he never wants to share with me,” she grumbled.

I crouched down to her eye level. “It’s not stupid just because he likes it. And he doesn’t have to share because you broke his old one, remember?”

Her bottom lip puffed out. “Yeah, but I didn’t mean to.”

“I know.” I kissed the tip of her nose. “That’s why I didn’t make you pay for the new one out of your piggy bank.”

“I no have enough money in there, silly Mommy.” She giggled and shook her head.

“Then I guess it’s a good thing it was just an accident.” I straightened and looked over her shoulder as Benjamin came down the stairs at a much slower pace. “You all set, buddy?”

“I guess,” he sighed.

“I got those popsicles you like,” Thad said. “The red, white, and blue ones that look like rockets.”

“I don’t like them anymore,” Benjamin muttered. “The ice cream cones with the chocolate in the bottom are my favorite now.”

Thad looked at me, and I offered, “I’ll take a picture of the box and text it to you.”

“Thanks.”

“C’mon, Daddy,” Madison tugged on his hand. “Let’s go,”

Watching Thad get them buckled into their car seats in the back while Penny glared at me from the front passenger side just about killed me. I wasn’t sure what the girl had against me when she was the one who stole my husband, but as long as she didn’t upset my kids, I was fine with pretending I didn’t hate her.

I pasted a smile on my face and waved until I couldn’t see the car anymore. Then I went inside, grabbed a bottle of wine, and poured myself a large glass. I didn’t feel like cooking for just myself, so I made the dino-shaped nuggets and macaroni and cheese I’d been planning to make for the kids. As far as comfort food went, it did the job. Especially since I drank another glass of wine to wash the meal down.

Then I went upstairs and took a bubble bath...while polishing off the other two glasses in the bottle. The rest of the night was a bit of a blur, but at least I didn’t have far to go to crawl into bed.

I woke up the next morning with a headache from drinking too much wine—one glass seemed to be my limit nowadays. So guzzling down a whole bottle hadn’t been my best idea.

To add insult to injury, I hadn’t even slept in since it wasn’t even seven thirty yet. The thought of spending the weekend in this too-quiet house had me pulling the blanket over my head with a groan. But ten minutes later, I was still wide awake.

Rolling over, I grabbed my phone off the bedside table and scrolled through social media. That distracted me for a few minutes, and then an ad for today’s adoption event at the clinic popped up on my timeline. Remembering how much fun we had playing with the animals last weekend, I rolled off my mattress to pad into the bathroom. Then I took a quick shower and got ready to head out, only stopping in the kitchen to gulp down a cup of coffee with a few ibuprofen and a piece of dry toast.

I was a mess as I drove to the clinic, but when I pulled into the parking lot and saw him through the windows lining the front, a part of me eased. In the two weeks since I'd started working for Finn, this place had become a safe zone for me. I'd grown confident in my tasks and enjoyed the people I worked with. Especially my boss.

When I walked inside and realized it was just the two of us, I finally admitted—at least to myself—that Finn was the reason I'd come to the clinic today. I'd thought that spending some time with him would help pull me out of my funk, and I'd been right. Just seeing his sweet smile and kind eyes lessened the blow of missing my children. He was the best distraction in the world, with or without the puppies.

And when those dark eyes of his filled with concern, and he asked, "What's wrong?" I couldn't hold my pain quietly inside any longer.

"Thad picked the kids up last night with the woman he cheated on me with in the car, and Benjamin was not happy about going. It's just all such a mess, and I miss them so much. I don't know what to do with myself."

Finn moved close and pulled me against his chest. "It's okay, Ellie."

"But it's not." I sniffled, shaking my head as tears streamed down my cheeks, soaking his shirt. "Nothing has been okay in a long time, and I don't know how I can fix this for me or my kids."

"How about you start by crying it out?" he suggested, stroking his palm down my spine. "I used to be horrified by my mom's tears until she sat me down one day and explained that sometimes a person needs a good cry to get the bad feelings out of their system. That it's the only way to purge it all so you can start fresh."

"Your mom is so smart," I sobbed, burying my face against his chest as I cried.

"The smartest person I know."

That was the last thing he murmured that I understood. Everything else was a blur while I bawled my eyes out until I felt as though I'd wrung myself dry. I hadn't let myself cry like that since the night Thad had told me he wanted a divorce. I'd put on a brave face for my children, and I hadn't felt safe enough to let it drop until now. Until Finn sheltered me in his arms and helped me purge so much of my anger, sadness, and frustration.

When my tears finally stopped, I took a step back and whispered, "Thank you."

"It was my honor." He brushed some of the wetness off my cheeks with

his thumbs. “If you ever need a shoulder to cry on in the future, I hope you’ll come to me.”

FINN

Ellie's expression was so tortured that I couldn't stand it. Without stopping to think about the potential repercussions, I closed the distance between us and pressed my lips against hers, kissing her with an intensity that didn't surprise me, considering how often I'd thought about it before now.

Ellie sighed and melted against me, her arms sliding around my neck, fingers fluttering at the collar of my shirt before burrowing in my hair. I slid my arms around her waist and clasped her hips, pulling our bodies closer until I could feel every subtle shudder of her body, every hitch of breath, every fiber of her muscles contracting and releasing in pleasure.

She tasted like coffee with a hint of mint, and I drank her in until she pulled away for another breath filled with the same tension that flowed through my veins. A current of electricity we both seemed to want to discharge by tugging at each other's clothes like we were in a bedroom, rather than my veterinary practice.

Hungry for more, I locked my arms around her waist, holding her close, and swept my tongue across her bottom lip, silently asking permission for more. Ellie opened for me instantly with a soft moan of encouragement. I kissed her, slow and deep, savoring the sweet taste of her on my tongue.

Her phone chimed in her back pocket, and she groaned. Reluctantly, I broke our kiss and pulled back, sucking in a ragged breath as I rested my forehead against hers.

Ellie shifted her weight uncomfortably, glancing at me. "I need to get that."

"Since your ex actually has the kids this morning, I'm assuming you need

to make sure it isn't an emergency," I replied as smoothly as I could, not wanting her to feel like she had to choose between spending time with me and checking on the welfare of her children. I would never, ever make her choose between me and her kids.

"As much as I don't want to check my phone at this particular moment, you're right. I need to."

I nodded and moved to step back, but Ellie gripped the front of my shirt and shook her head. "No. Stay, please?"

"Of course. Whatever you need, I'm here for you."

"Thanks, Finn." Ellie turned slightly in my arms, resting her cheek against my chest, then she pulled her phone out of her back pocket to check her texts.

"Seriously?" She snorted, tipping her head back to look up at me and rolling her eyes. "My ex seriously just sent me a message to ask me how to make our children toaster waffles. I honestly don't know how he managed to get through dental school. The directions are on the back of the box, for Pete's sake."

"Is he for real?" I raised my eyebrows, finding it hard to believe that a grown man was too stupid to follow the directions on the back of a box of toaster waffles. Then again, that same man was idiotic enough to leave Ellie for a younger woman. When I put his lack of intelligence in that context, it wasn't terribly difficult to think of the guy as a bottom-of-the-barrel mouth-breather who overslept and stayed home on the day God handed out brains.

Shaking her head, Ellie tapped out a text telling him that the directions were on the back of the box, then pocketed her phone and faced me again, wrapping her arms around my waist.

"Now... where were we?"

"I believe I was enjoying the hell out of kissing the living daylights out of you. Did you want to pick up where we left off when we were interrupted?"

"Mmm...yes, please." Ellie pushed up on her tiptoes, lightly brushing her lips against mine.

I pulled back a little and dropped a kiss on the tip of her nose before looking her in the eye. "Before we go any further, though, I want to make something perfectly clear."

Ellie's eyes flew open wide, and her nostrils flared. The look was a familiar one I'd seen many times, but usually on my patients. Nervousness edging toward panic. I dipped my head and kissed her again until I felt the

tension leave her body, then rested my forehead against hers and tried to catch my breath.

“What I meant is that I want this—I want you. But I don’t want to take advantage of you when you feel upset or vulnerable. And I want to make sure that you know your job is safe, no matter what happens between us.”

The corners of Ellie’s lips tipped up in a small smile, and she nodded. “It’s sweet that you’re worried about not taking advantage of me, Finn. Just the fact that you’re worried about it tells me everything I need to know right now.”

“You sure, baby?” *Holy shit.* Did I just call her baby? I’d never really used endearments like that with any women in my past, but it just slipped out.

Ellie’s lips parted in surprise, and her cheeks flushed a delightful pink. She nodded wordlessly, gripping the front of my shirt and pulling me to her. “Positive.”

“Good girl.” I dipped my head and kissed her again, harder and deeper. She moaned and arched against me. Gripping her waist, I lifted her and stalked into one of the back rooms to set her down on the exam table, rumbling out a growl of approval when she hooked her legs around my waist.

I let myself get lost in the delectable sensation of her tongue dancing with mine and her fingers tangling in my hair. After a couple of minutes, Ellie squirmed impatiently, and I smiled against her lips, letting my fingers trace a path down from where I’d been cupping her face, trailing across her shoulders and arms. Then I snaked my hands around her waist and let my fingers slip under her shirt to tease the sensitive skin of her sides, just above her waistband, the touch hovering somewhere between a tickle and a caress.

“Do you want more, baby?”

“Yes. Please.” Ellie’s gasp was ragged, and she squirmed again, her hips bucking against mine.

I pulled her to me, lowering her down from the table and turning her so her back was pressed against me as I traced my fingers along the line of her waistband.

“Do you promise to tell me if I take things too far for you?”

“I promise, Finn.” Ellie whimpered, inadvertently grinding against me with an impatient little wiggle that made my cock throb and my balls ache with need. But this morning wasn’t about me and what I wanted from her. It was about Ellie and making her feel good.

I slipped my hand inside her pants, finding the waistband of her panties

and slipping my hand inside them to cup her mound. Ellie's eyes fluttered closed with a moan, and her head fell back against my chest as I cupped her sex and slipped my fingers between her hot, slick folds.

"You're so wet, baby." I gripped her hip with my free hand, holding her tightly against me so she could feel just how hard she was making me while I coated my fingers with her pussy juices.

"Yes." Ellie bit her lip, her cheeks turning pink with a deep flush. "For you."

Holy shit. She was so heart-stoppingly perfect, it was hard to think straight around her. It was difficult to remember that I intended to make this morning solely about her pleasure. It would be so easy to get carried away and indulge in more than I intended to right now, but I wouldn't allow myself to do that. Not today. This was all about Ellie.

I couldn't resist dipping my fingers inside her, feeling the way she clenched around them as I pumped the digits in and out, torturously slow. I groaned and kissed her neck, loving the feel of her in my arms.

"You feel so good, baby. Do you like this?" Once my fingers were completely coated, I slowly dragged them up and massaged her clit in slow, luxurious circles, watching her every move, learning how she responded to my touch.

"Yes," Ellie whimpered, leaning into me hard, rolling her hips and grinding against me in a way that was surely designed to test my resolve and tempt fate. "I love it."

Thoroughly enjoying myself, I took my time fingering her, alternating between massaging her clit and filling her with my fingers. She squirmed and writhed under my touch, arching and panting as I savored her pleasure, pushing her closer and closer to her much-needed release with every passing moment.

"Are you going to come for me, baby?"

"Uh-huh." Ellie moaned, her hips writhing and bucking to meet my fingers. "I'm so close already, Finn."

"Good girl." I dipped my head and kissed her, massaging her clit with my thumb while I curled my fingers inside her to hit her G-spot, too. I was hell-bent and determined to make Ellie come so hard she'd forget her own name, at least for a few minutes.

When she shrieked like a banshee and reached out to grip the exam table on either side in a white-knuckled grip, I knew I had her.

“That’s right, baby. Come for me, just like that. Let me know how good I just made you feel.”

Still moaning and shaking, Ellie collapsed against my chest, her knees going weak. I caught her with a satisfied chuckle and kissed her neck.

“Oh my gosh,” Ellie panted and clung to my shoulders, still flushed and shaking. “This is so embarrassing. Jeez. I can’t believe I came that hard that quickly.”

She turned crimson and covered her face. With my free hand, I pried her fingers away from her face and stared down into her wide eyes.

“Can I tell you a secret?” I crooked my finger at her, coaxing her closer and lowering my voice as if I was imparting one of life’s great mysteries. “There’s nothing for you to be embarrassed about, baby. You coming for me like that—being so responsive to my touch—that was literally the hottest thing I’ve ever seen in my entire life.”

“Really?” She flushed a deeper red, shaking her head as though she didn’t believe me.

“Scout’s honor.” I kissed her hard, making sure to drive my point home. “I don’t make a habit of giving empty compliments, Ellie.”

Underscoring my point, I gave her sweet, dripping wet pussy one final caress just for emphasis. Then I raised my fingers to my lips, making damn sure she watched me as I started licking and sucking her pussy juices off my fingers, savoring every last drop.

“I’ll tell you another secret, too. You are, without a doubt, the sweetest thing I’ve ever tasted.”

Ellie moaned and pressed her thighs together with a shiver and sighed. “I’m pretty sure *that* is the hottest thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”

I smiled and chuckled, pressing a kiss to the back of her neck. “I’m sure I can think of a few things that are sexier than that.”

“Mm-hmm.” Ellie giggled. “You’re full of it.”

“Baby, you’re going to be the death of me.” I groaned into her neck, running my hands down her sides, enjoying the feel of her soft skin under my fingertips. Ellie shivered and relaxed against me, resting her head against my shoulder. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her close. “Now that I’ve gotten a taste of you, I’m not going to be able to resist any longer.”

“Mmm.” Ellie opened her eyes, kissing my neck. “You’re going to have to when Meghan gets here.”

“Don’t remind me,” I grumbled, shaking my head. I didn’t want to think

about the adoption event due to start in half an hour or anything besides the gorgeous woman finally in my arms.

I dipped my head, kissing her again, wondering if we had time for me to go down on her before anyone else showed up. She tasted so damned good; I couldn't get enough.

I broke our kiss, my question on the tip of my tongue, and then the chime over the front door announcing Meghan's arrival stopped me cold.

ELLIE

“Is that Ellie’s car parked out front?” Meghan called as she walked into the clinic. “Did she bring the kids to play with the animals again today? I should call Roger so he can bring Tony over. I’d love for them to meet.”

My cheeks filled with heat as I adjusted my pants and shirt, glancing down to make sure my clothes looked normal. Then I smoothed my fingers through my hair, and Finn chuckled. “Don’t worry. You look great, as always.”

I wasn’t sure what Meghan thought when she walked into the exam room, but we must not have looked as though we’d just been up to no good since she beamed a smile at Finn. “You’re right, she does.”

“You do too. I love that top.”

The compliment earned me a smile as well, and then her gaze scanned the room. “No Benjamin and Madison?”

I shook my head. “No, they’re with their dad this weekend.”

“Ah, gotcha.” She wrapped her fingers around my wrist and tugged me away from Finn. “Come help me get everything set up. I can keep you busy enough that you won’t have time to think about anything until you’re sitting on the floor, covered by puppies. Then you won’t be sad because that’s just impossible when you’re surrounded by unconditional love wrapped in tiny, furry bodies.”

Glancing over my shoulder at Finn while she pulled me out of the room, I beamed a smile at him. “You should give her a raise.”

“He absolutely should,” she agreed. “I’m a great employee and I give the best advice.”

Finn chuckled as he followed us. “That you do.”

“Do me a favor and tell Roger that the next time you see him,” she requested with a laugh.

“Hell no.” He shook his head. “I’m not getting in the middle of your marriage squabbles. I’ll leave the relationship meddling to other more qualified people.”

“Hmph.” Meghan snorted. “I guess I can’t argue with that when I’m one of those people.”

I would have wondered what they were talking about, except Meghan did as promised and gave me a list of tasks that kept me busy for the next hour. Then she nudged me into the puppy area with Charlie, Duke, and Bella. I played with them for three hours, laughing at their antics and enjoying all the cuddles. Time flew by, and before I knew it, the adoption event was over.

Getting to my feet, I dusted the fur off my leggings. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t much help today.”

“Wrong.” Meghan plopped a stack of papers on my desk. “Finn was right about you being his lucky charm. We only had one less adoption this week, and we managed to find a home for Stewie.”

“Really?” The Chihuahua had been with his foster family for three months, and he’d stayed at the clinic for a couple of months before that. He was five years old and only had three legs, so Finn had warned me that he would be a tough placement.

“Yup,” Finn confirmed with a huge grin. “One of my mother’s friends came in to adopt him.”

“That is so awesome.”

“Between all the forever homes we found today and yesterday being payday, I think we should go out and celebrate,” Meghan suggested when we were done putting everything away and the most adorable puppies in town were picked up by the woman fostering them.

“I’m all for celebrating so many happy adoptions, but it’s too soon for my first payday.”

Finn’s brows drew together. “You didn’t get your paycheck yesterday?”

“You paid me already? Seriously?” I pulled my phone out of my pocket to pull up my banking app. When I logged into my account, I found that my first week’s pay had been deposited. “I didn’t even look since I didn’t think I’d been here long enough.”

“This is awesome.” I grinned at Meghan. “You’re right. We should

celebrate.”

“I wish I could join you, but I have to head over to the Thompson farm to check on one of their horses.” Finn heaved a deep sigh. “Celebrate for me.”

“Will do, boss man,” Meghan agreed, going over to her desk to pull out her purse.

I realized I’d dropped mine in the exam room when I first arrived and cried all over Finn. “Hold on a second, I need to grab my stuff.”

Finn followed me, pressing my back against the wall when we were out of Meghan’s sight. “You have no idea how much I wish I had a partner who could handle the large animal visits. I hate that our time together was interrupted earlier and now I have to leave.”

“It’s okay,” I reassured him with a smile. “I need to take care of a bunch of errands I’ve been putting off anyway. Running around town is a whole lot easier without the kids.”

“Before you go, I want you to know. We can go as fast or as slow as you want, Ellie. No pressure.” Meghan called my name. “And no rush. We can talk about it later since you have a late lunch to get to.”

Going up on my toes, I brushed my lips against his. “Thank you for turning my awful day into an amazing one.”

His fingers clenched against my hips, but then he let go and patted my butt. It sent a sensual thrill through my system, but I tried to look normal as I walked out to the parking lot with Meghan. I found out that I hadn’t done a good job of hiding anything when we got to the local Mexican restaurant and were seated at a booth in the back. After the server set down our chips, salsa, and margaritas, she leaned over the table and whispered, “So what in the heck happened between you and Finn right before I got to the clinic?”

Lifting my drink to my mouth, I mumbled, “Nothing.”

She let me take a sip before she scoffed, “Your messy hair and pink cheeks beg to differ.”

“I was upset when I got there and cried on Finn’s shoulder,” I admitted.

“And then...” she prodded, circling her hand in the air to let me know she wanted more.

“Why does there have to be anything else to the story?”

She took a sip of her margarita, staring at me as she licked some salt off the rim. “Because you had a hazy look in your eyes that can come from drinking a bunch of these...or a really good orgasm.”

“Oh my gosh,” I gasped. “I can’t believe you just said that.”

She quirked a brow. "Being shocking doesn't make it any less true."

"That's fair." I took another sip of my margarita. "All I'll say is that I didn't have anything to drink earlier, so the hazy look in my eyes wasn't from that."

"I knew it." She slapped her palm against the top of the table. "I don't need any details, except to know that you're happy."

"Last night was awful, and this morning sucked. But then I went to the clinic, and Finn turned my day around. In more ways than one." I laughed softly as I flicked some of the salt on the rim of my glass into my drink. "So yeah, I didn't think it was possible less than twenty-four hours ago, but I'm good. And I'll be even better tomorrow night when the kids come home."

Meghan reached out and patted my hand. "You're a strong woman, Ellie."

Her compliment warmed my chest more than the tequila in my drink. "You don't think it's a bad idea to start something with my boss?"

"Nope." She shook her head as she dipped a chip in the salsa. "If I did, I wouldn't have told Finn that he should ask you out."

I suddenly understood their conversation from earlier a whole lot better. "So that's what you meant when you said you give great advice and you're qualified to meddle in people's relationships. You gave him a nudge about me?"

"Same way I did with you." She beamed a smile at me. "Then I sat back and let nature take its course. With as hot as the chemistry is between you two, something was bound to happen sooner or later. I'm just glad it was sooner because you both deserve happiness. Even though it means that I'm probably going to have to start watching my soaps during lunch again, now that the whole will they or won't they thing has been resolved."

"Nothing's been settled between us," I pointed out. "We just had a... moment. It could be the only one we get."

"With the way he devoured you with his eyes, I highly doubt today is the end of whatever is happening with you two," she argued, rubbing her hands together. "But I guess my favorite live show won't have its finale until you figure it all out."

I threw a chip at her. "You're awful. You know that, right?"

"Awfully awesome? Sure." She nodded, popping the chip into her mouth.

Although I wasn't about to admit it out loud when she was already patting herself on the back enough for all of us, Meghan was awesome. And I was

glad that I'd gotten the chance to get to know her. I'd been missing this kind of camaraderie in my life for too long, but no more. "Remember how you mentioned that you'd like for our kids to meet? We should set up a playdate sometime soon."

"Absolutely," she agreed. "I bet Tony, Benjamin, and Madison will be thick as thieves in no time at all."

If her son was anything like their mom, my children would be lucky to call him their friend.

FINN

Ellie tried to call me on Saturday, but I had still been on the Thompson's farm, and cell reception was spotty out there so I'd missed it. Then when I called her back, she was out running her errands and didn't hear the phone ring. We went back and forth playing phone tag like that all weekend, and I started to worry that I'd let things get too far out of hand in the exam room, and she was having second thoughts.

I hadn't meant to do anything more than kiss her, but my fierce need for her had quickly spiraled out of control. My only saving grace was that I'd managed to give to her without taking. Although, seeing her come for me and tasting her wetness had been fucking amazing.

But we'd barely been able to talk since then, and my biggest fear was that Ellie had been freaking out even though she'd seemed fine when she left with Meghan.

Any chance I had of checking in with her flew out the window when her children came home on Sunday evening, and she sent me a text to let me know she couldn't talk until she came into the office today. That worried me even more, except her follow-up message a few minutes later explained that the transition back home tended to be rough, which made sense with everything Benjamin and Madison had gone through because of their dad.

I loved how determined she was to smooth things over for her children as much as she could, but I hated that her ex had put her in a position where she had to. And I missed her more than I thought possible after knowing her for such a short time. Which was why I bribed Meghan with a gift card to one of her favorite restaurants if she headed out for lunch today.

With Joshua at his study group, I had Ellie all to myself. And I fully intended to make good use of the hour I'd arranged for us to have.

"C'mon." I tugged her to her feet. "I have a surprise for you."

"Where did Meghan go?" Ellie asked as I led her into my office. "She never leaves for lunch."

"I may have lured her to a lunch spot she loves so we could have a little privacy." When she just blinked up at me without saying anything, I added, "I hope that's okay. I didn't do it because I expect something like what happened on Saturday morning. I just wanted to spend some time with you without any distractions. And since that's hard to come by with both of our hectic schedules, I thought this was a simple solution."

"It's more than okay." She beamed a smile at me. "I really appreciate that you're not afraid to show how much you want to spend time with me. It's easy to say things, but putting a plan into motion means so much more."

I got her settled in one of the chairs in front of my desk. "Quality time and acts of service tend to be my love languages, so you can count on a lot more of this."

"Why do I feel as though there's a story behind you knowing the five love languages?" She peered up at me, quirking a brow.

"Probably because there is." I pointed at the brown paper bags on my desk. "But let's get started on our lunch before I start telling it, so the food doesn't get cold."

"You brought me lunch, too?"

Her surprise hit me in the chest. Getting food for us was such a small gesture, and she should've been used to stuff like it. Knowing she wasn't just made me more determined to do more for her. "You mentioned last week that you love the pasta Bolognese at Trattoria, so I ordered from there."

"I...you..." She shook her head, a stunned expression on her pretty face. "I can't believe you went to all this trouble just because of a random chat I had with Meghan about our favorite food."

"All it took was a phone call." I pulled the containers out of the bags and spread them out on the top of the desk, flipping them open to figure out which dish was hers. "And that conversation came in handy in more ways than one. I never would've known Meghan's weakness for brisket sandwiches if I hadn't walked by while you two were having lunch that day."

"Is that where she's at now?"

I nodded. "Yup."

“I bet that counts as an act of service too.”

I pointed at the to-go container I set on the desk in front of her. “Eat, then we can talk.”

“With my favorite dish in front of me, you don’t have to tell me twice.”

I’d never thought that watching a woman eat could be a major turn-on, but the sounds Ellie made as she dug into her pasta made me rock hard. Dropping onto the chair next to her, I opened my lasagna and started to eat too. When we were about halfway done, she leaned back in her chair and patted her belly. “I’m not sure I could eat another bite. I used to get the lunch portion even when I went for dinner because their servings are so generous.”

“I wanted you to have some leftovers.” Getting up, I circled my desk and lifted another bag off my chair. “I figured you could enjoy your time with the kids tonight a little more if you didn’t have to worry about making dinner at the end of a long day.”

She looked up at me with wide eyes, sucking in a quick breath. “You got food for Benjamin and Madison too?”

“Yeah, I figured cheese pizzas were a safe choice for them.” After putting the lid back on her container of pasta, I set it on top of the other boxes in the bag. “But I also did a couple of orders of spaghetti from the kids’ menu with the sauce on the side, just in case they like that better.”

She reached up to tangle her hand with mine. “I don’t even know what to say, except for thank you.”

“That’s more than enough.” I leaned forward to brush my lips against hers before tossing my empty container in the trash and sitting back down. “After the text you sent about needing time with the kids because of how tough it is when they come back home, I was worried about you guys. There wasn’t anything I could do to help last night, but then when I was calling Trattoria with the lunch order, inspiration struck.”

“My favorite meal for lunch was already a heck of a treat since I don’t eat out that often anymore, and when I do, it’s usually just fast food when the kids deserve something special. I really appreciate you thinking to include them even though they’re not here.” The smile she aimed my way was shy, but that didn’t make its effect on me any less powerful. “I’ve never really thought about what my love language was, but I’m so touched by your thoughtfulness that I’d have to say receiving acts of kindness is a big one for me. I just never really got to experience it like this before.”

Yet another reason I wanted to punch her ex. He’d had her for more than

a decade, and from the small things she'd shared so far, it sounded as though he'd never treated her right in all that time. "I hate that for you."

"It wasn't all bad, but we've talked enough about my past for now." She gently nudged my shoe with hers. "What I want to know is how you learned all the love language stuff. We're done eating, so it's time to spill."

It was my turn to duck my head, and if I wasn't mistaken, I actually blushed. Raking my fingers through my hair, I mumbled, "My youngest brother is still in college. He took a psychology class last spring, and when he came home for the summer, he told my mom that he appreciated how she was always giving us words of affirmation. Of course, she wanted to know where he came up with that. And it snowballed from there, with her having all of us take an online quiz so she'd know what our love language is and could make sure she was giving us what we need."

"That's so sweet."

"Just don't ever tell Logan that." I shook my head with a laugh. "Rigden and I gave him such a hard time over the whole thing."

"What are your brothers like? I don't think I've ever met either of them."

"Logan is the stereotypical baby of the family, which isn't that shocking, considering he's more than a decade younger than me." I thought about my baby brother's recent visit back home and wondered if something was going on with him that prompted it. "He's only twenty-one and still thinks the world revolves around him, but our parents did a good job making sure he wasn't too spoiled."

She tilted her head to the side with a grin. "If you're that much older than him, weren't you the baby of the family during your formative years?"

"You've got me there," I conceded. "And that's something Rigden likes to remind me of, just like the big brother that he is."

"How much of a gap is there between you two?" she wanted to know.

"Two years. He's thirty-four to my thirty-two."

She nodded. "That's how far apart Benjamin and Madison are. I can only hope they'll be as close as you and Rigden are when they grow up."

"From what I've seen of your kids, you don't have to worry," I reassured her, jolted by the wild thought that if things worked out between us how I was starting to hope for...then it was possible that she'd end up with a third child who would also fit the same gap as my siblings. One who'd be mine. I had to clear the lump in my throat before I could add, "Madison trails Benjamin the same way I did with Rigden when we were younger. And your

son is just as patient with her as my brother was with me. You're doing a great job with them."

"He's the one who owns the distillery?" she asked, tapping her finger against her chin. "At least I think that's what your grandmother told me a while back."

With as small as Mooreville was, it always surprised me how newcomers didn't know everyone. After living here for almost four years, I would've expected Ellie to have met most of my family, but then I remembered what my dad had said about how she'd started going to his church because she was lonely.

Needing to touch her, even if it was in no way sexual, I reached out to wrap my hand around hers. When she twisted her wrist so our palms were pressed together, something settled inside me. "Yeah, he's really made a name for himself. Especially with his rye whiskey. It's spicier than most people expect, and he's even won a couple of awards for it."

"That's awesome. A successful businessman, a veterinarian, and a college student who taught his brothers about love languages," she teased, her pretty green eyes full of mirth. "Your parents have to be quite proud."

"They definitely are," I confirmed with a rueful chuckle. "Although my mom would be much happier if any or all of us settled down and gave her grandchildren. Even Logan, and he's too young to think about becoming a father."

"You should give him more credit. I was only twenty-one when I got pregnant with Benjamin," she pointed out with a grimace.

The last thing I wanted was for Ellie to think I was judging her. "And I'm sure you were way more mature than he is."

"Knowing you're responsible for a tiny life growing inside you has a way of making you grow up fast." She laughed softly, shaking her head. "Although I bet your brother has more experience with dating than I did back then, so at least he's got that going for him."

Considering her ex had been her high school sweetheart and I was fairly certain she hadn't been with anyone since him, that was a fair bet. "He's had a few girlfriends, but I don't think there's anyone special in his life right now."

"I should probably warn you that I might be awful at the whole dating thing, if that's where this is headed," she confessed.

I squeezed her hand, wanting her to feel how much I meant what I was

about to say. “If I get to make the call, then it’s absolutely the direction we’re going in.”

“I...um...I’d like that.”

“I haven’t been able to get you out of my head since Saturday.” Scooting my chair closer to hers now that she’d given me the green light, I traced my finger over her knee. “The sounds you made when you came. How fucking gorgeous you looked. And how sweet you tasted on my fingers.”

ELLIE

Heat rushed to the tops of my cheeks as his words registered. I stared down at my lap for a moment before looking up and meeting his intense gaze.

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it, either. To be honest, I don’t have a whole lot of experience.” My eyes went back to my lap, not able to look him in the eyes as I admitted something so deeply personal. “But that was one of the best orgasms I have ever had. My ex never made me feel like that, not even once.”

“Baby, there are so many things I want to do to you, what happened the last time I had the pleasure of tasting you was barely a start.”

His words sent a rush of heat through me, and before I thought to hold back, my gaze snapped up to meet his. “Like what?” I asked, the words falling from my lips without a thought.

“So many things.” He gave me a wicked smile. “But this isn’t just about what I want. It’s about what you want. So tell me, what do you want?”

“I...” I didn’t know how to answer that question. So many things ran through my mind, all of them wildly inappropriate things I definitely shouldn’t be thinking about my boss. And certainly not when we were at work even though no one else was in the building. “I’m not sure.”

“That can’t be true.” He licked his lips and leaned back in this chair. “Since we sat down in here, I’ve been picturing all the things I could do to you if you were spread out on this desk for me.”

My cheeks must’ve been bright red with how hot I felt them burning. Just the thought of being spread out on Finn’s desk was enough to send my mind spiraling.

“Tell me.” The words sounded breathy, even to my own ears.

“No.” Finn set the bag filled with the containers holding my dinner for tonight onto the floor next to my chair.

Shame and disappointment burned through my body. He was just being polite, and I had read too much into things. A man like Finn could get anyone. Why would he want a woman with kids? One whose ex-husband had left her for a younger woman?

“I would rather show you.”

His words instantly pulled me out of my panicky self-doubt, and I jerked my head up, blinking at him in confusion.

“What?”

“If it’s what you want too, I would rather show you what I’ve been fantasizing about. I want you spread out on my desk, wet and wanting. Let me show you how a real man should treat such a beautiful woman.”

“I’m not—”

“No.” Finn interrupted me, a determined set to his jaw as I tried to brush off his compliment. Getting to his feet, he strode over to the door and slammed it shut. Then he came back and held out his hand to me. “You’re a beautiful woman, Ellie. Let me show you what you deserve.”

“Okay.” I slid my palm against his, and he pulled me to my feet before pressing his lips to mine. His tongue teased my bottom lip until I opened to him. He deepened the kiss while he pulled me to the other side of the desk and pressed my butt against the edge. He broke the kiss long enough to pull me up to perch me on the hard surface.

“Lunch was good, baby, but now I want this sweet pussy for dessert.”

“Yes.” I gasped as heat spread through my veins and started pooling deep in my core. I loved the way he kissed me, how he looked at me. It made me feel desirable, like someone wanted me, curves and all.

His lips trailed from my mouth down to my neck while his hands roamed by body, making me ache for him. When he squeezed my nipple through my shirt, I let out a little whine. I needed more.

“Don’t worry baby, I got you.” He whispered in my ear, and he pulled my blouse up and over my head, throwing it to the side. My bra followed quickly after. “I’m going to make you feel so fucking good.”

His lips were on my breasts almost instantly.

Kissing.

Biting.

Licking.

Teasing.

As he drove me wild, his hands slid down to my skirt and pulled it up over my hips. Then he pressed me back so I was lying on the desk. His hands slid from my ankles, up my calves, and finally to my inner thighs before ghosting over my damp core, pulling soft moans from my body. Every little touch sent electricity running through my veins and heat flushed on my cheeks and in my core.

He kissed down my stomach before sitting back in his chair, his fingers sliding over my clit and then to my hips, hooking under the waistband of my panties. Bracing my heels on the desk, I lifted up so he could slide the damp lace down my legs before stashing my panties in his desk drawer.

“I want you to be my good girl and spread these beautiful thighs for me. I need to know if you taste just as sweet now as you did when I licked your wetness from my fingers.”

The heat from my cheeks spread down my bare chest as I opened my legs, giving him the perfect view of my wet, throbbing pussy.

“Fuck, you are so beautiful.” His words were hushed as though he didn’t even mean to say them out loud. Wrapping his arms around my thighs, he pulled me to the edge of the desk before licking a slow, delicious line from my entrance up to my clit, pausing at my throbbing bundle of nerves to suck on it before going back to feasting on my pussy. I had never felt anything this amazing. His mouth moved slowly, like he was savoring my arousal, as if I really did taste as good as he said.

Pleasure shot through my entire body, and I had to bite my lip to stop my moans from spilling out and chanting his name over and over.

“Ellie, fuck. You taste so good, even sweeter than last time. Let me hear you, baby. There’s no one else in the office. I want to hear how good I make you feel.”

When he slid a finger inside me and refocused his attention on my clit, my back arched off the desk. Moans started falling from my lips as he brought me closer to coming.

“Finn, please.”

“Please what?” he asked before refocusing his attention on my clit.

“Make me come.” The words were hard to say, but once I got that out, it was easier to confess, “I want to come for you.”

“Then be my good girl and come for me.” He moved his fingers faster,

bending them farther, hitting my G-spot over and over again. It wasn't long until my back arched so hard, I lifted off the desk and barely contained a scream. He held his tongue to my clit as I pulsed around his fingers.

While I panted on the desk, he sat back in his seat. I could hear fabric rustling, and I went to sit up, thinking he would want me to return the favor.

“Don't you dare get off that desk.” His voice was low and firm.

“Shouldn't I...”

“The only thing I need you to do is say yes. That you'll let me make you come on my cock. I want to feel your tight pussy come around me, but only if you're ready. If not, you can watch me come all over your pretty tits.”

“Yes.” Even though I'd already come, I needed him so badly, I wanted to feel him inside me. I propped myself up on my elbows so I could see him. I watched as he pulled a foil packet out of his wallet. Then dropped his pants to the floor.

His cock was huge, so thick and long, with a bead of precome formed on the tip. I ran my tongue over my lips. I had never really enjoyed sucking my ex's cock before, but he didn't look like that, and he had never made me feel so alive, so unabashedly wanted. I had an urge to drop to my knees now and taste his pleasure, to feel on my lips what affect my body had on him.

Finn must have seen the look on my face because he let out a deep chuckle. “Don't worry, baby, there will be plenty of time for that later.” He started rolling the condom down his shaft. “I can't wait to have your soft lips around me, but right now I need to feel your pussy. The first time I come with you, I want it to be with your tight heat wrapped around me. Lie back for me, baby.”

I did as he asked, lying back so my hair hung over the opposite edge of the desk. He lifted my ankles, placing them on his shoulders. Then he started stroking my sensitive clit again with his thumb as he pressed his cock against my entrance. He pushed in a little, and my breath hitched. He was barely inside me at all, and I could already feel the intense stretch.

Paying close attention to my reaction, he rubbed my clit faster while sinking in slowly. He was so big, stretching me in the most amazing way possible. Once he was fully seated inside me, I felt so full—complete in a way I had never known before.

“You're so damn tight, baby,” he grunted.

I opened my eyes to see his lips parted slightly as he panted. His dark eyes blazed with desire. They were locked on my face as he moved a little, as

though he was testing what I could take. Seeing if I was ready.

I tightened my muscles around him, and he groaned, his eyes sliding closed. When they opened again, I nodded, and he started thrusting inside me. Slow and gentle at first, making sure that he wasn't going to hurt me. But the more he moved, the wetter I became...and the more I wanted.

"This is so much better than I could've ever imagined." His words came out halting and broken.

"Feels so good." I moaned as wave after wave of pleasure assaulted me. "But I need more."

He gritted his teeth before rubbing my clit with his thumb again, starting to move faster, thrusting deeper inside me. Deeper than I ever thought possible. "Come for me again, Ellie. Do it, be my good girl, and come for me again."

The words "my good girl" were enough to send me over the edge. My legs dropped to wrap around his waist as he leaned over the desk, taking my nipple in his mouth and biting gently as I came again for him. He moved faster, chasing his own pleasure until coming with a groan muffled by my breast pressed into his mouth.

We stayed there for a long moment, panting, and I enjoyed the feeling of having him against me, even though he was still mostly clothed.

"That was—" My words were cut off by the chime on his phone.

"Shit. Lunch is over. Meghan will be back any minute." His words were spoken softly against my neck, where he placed a sweet, lingering kiss. But it was like a bucket of ice water had been dropped on me.

I had just had sex with my boss. On his desk, technically during the workday. What was wrong with me?

He got up, and I tried to cover as much as possible with my hands as I scrambled for my clothes.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have... we shouldn't have."

"Ellie, stop."

"This is a place of business where other people..."

"Ellie, stop." His voice was more demanding, and I stopped to look at him. He held out my shirt and bra for me with a satisfied smile on his face. "Take these, my bathroom is right there. Take your time, clean up, and then we can finish the day. Together."

I nodded while taking my clothes.

"And baby, don't ever be sorry for that. It was amazing." He gave me a

wink as he opened the bathroom door for me. Staring at my dazed expression in the mirror, I couldn't help but agree. And I hoped there was a lot more like that in my future.

FINN

Ellie and I hadn't been able to catch more than a few minutes alone—and steal a few kisses—since our lunch on Monday afternoon, and it drove me up the wall. Something had to give, and it was lucky for me that my veterinarian assistant was a budding matchmaker because she gave me the perfect opportunity to take Ellie out on a proper date a week and a half later.

“Can I borrow Benjamin and Madison tonight?” she asked as Ellie was getting ready to leave to pick up her kids from school.

Her brows drew together as she stared at her coworker in confusion. “Borrow them?”

“Yeah, Tony wants to go to that new bounce house place, and I thought if he had a couple of friends to play with, he might not wear his dad and me out quite so much,” Meghan explained. “Then I remembered how well they got along together at the adoption event on Saturday and hoped that you'd let me bring them with. We're going to stop at McDonald's afterward for a quick bite to eat, so you'd have a few hours to yourself in exchange for letting me use your children to distract my energetic son from the fact that Roger and I aren't jumping with him the whole time.”

For the third weekend in a row, I'd had record-breaking adoptions, proving yet again that Ellie was my good luck charm. She wasn't aware of the effect she had on people, but she brightened moods wherever she went. And her kids were downright adorable, especially when they giggled while playing with the puppies. Adding Tony to the mix last weekend had only added to the fun since the three kids had gotten along great.

“Oh...um...I could just come with you?” Ellie suggested.

“Or you could go out and have some fun of your own.” Meghan jerked her chin toward me. “Since our boss is practically frothing at the mouth over the chance to have you all to himself for a few hours tonight.”

Ellie’s head swung toward me, her eyes widening. “You are?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way since I’m not a drooler like Rufus,” I joked. “But I would love to take you on a date tonight.”

“Then I guess I’ll see if Benjamin and Madison are okay with the plan.” She shook her head with a laugh. “Okay, I just realized how ridiculous that sounded after I said it out loud. I can’t imagine either of them not jumping at the offer of a playdate with Tony...pun intended.”

She called as soon as she got home to let us know the plan was a go, and I set everything in motion to make our first official date as special as I could in the short time that I had. By the time I met her downtown after she dropped the kids off at Meghan’s house, I felt good about how the next couple of hours would go.

Ellie looked adorably confused as I led her down the sidewalk toward Skylar’s shop. “I thought Leaves & Pages was only open during the daytime?”

“It is,” I confirmed with a grin. “But I have an in with the owner since she’s married to my cousin Baxter. And I was able to talk her into doing something special for our first date.”

A pretty blush filled her cheeks. “I guess this is our first, isn’t it? As hard as that is to believe, considering...”

“I could take a page from Baxter’s book and count the adoption events and lunch in my office as dates if you’d prefer.” I chuckled as I pulled the key to the shop out of my pocket. Opening the door, I explained, “Baxter kept bringing her cappuccinos while he was trying to get her to agree to go out with him and counted them all as dates, as well as their first lunch together which was all about business. But he didn’t let her in on the secret until they went on a picnic after she finally caved.”

She smiled up at me as I held the door open for her. “The Moore men seem to have persistence in common, then.”

“And we can be romantic when we find the right woman.” I swept my arm in the direction of the table for two that was set with a white tablecloth, candles, and two silver-domed plates, with a bottle of red wine in the middle that had already been uncorked so it could breathe.

“Wow,” she breathed, her eyes going wide. “This is so beautiful.”

“Yet it’s still not nearly as much as you deserve.”

“You say the sweetest things,” she sighed.

Settling my palm on her lower back, I guided her over to the table and helped her onto one of the chairs. “Only because they’re true.”

“You’re very convincing.” She traced her fingers over the tines of the fork in front of her. “I’m starting to believe you might be right.”

I was determined to get her to see her the way I did, but I knew it might be slow going. So I accepted the small victory and focused on enjoying the time we’d been able to steal tonight.

Circling the table, I lifted the dome off the plates as I sat down. “It isn’t pasta Bolognese from Trattoria, but I didn’t want you to think I was a one-trick pony.”

“It looks fantastic.” Lifting her fork, she took a bite of the spaghetti and let out a little hum of pleasure that hit me in the cock. “And tastes even better.”

“I’m glad you like it.” I twirled some of the noodles onto my fork. “I have a limited repertoire in the kitchen. This is one of the few recipes of my mom’s that I’ve mastered.”

She paused with her fork in midair, her eyes going wide. “You set all of this up *and* made dinner?”

“Yup, but I cheated because I already had the meatballs in my freezer,” I admitted.

“Please tell me that you’re for real because sometimes you do stuff that makes me wonder if you’re too good to be true.”

I reached across the table to hold her hand, staring deep into her eyes as I swore, “You can count on me, baby. I’m in this the same as you are.”

“I just...it’s hard to remember that sometimes,” she confessed. “I don’t want you to pay for Thad’s mistakes, but this is scary.”

Hoping to lighten the mood, I murmured, “When you have doubts, just remind yourself that I would be risking life and limb if I was just playing a game with you.”

Tilting her head to the side, she asked, “How so?”

“My grandfather would be the first to hand me my ass, quickly followed by Ryland. And Waverley. Then my mom.” I shook my head with a laugh. “If anything was left of me after all of that, my dad would jump in too. To impress my mom and knock some sense into me.”

“But they’re your family,” she protested, a wrinkle popping up in the

middle of her forehead.

“Which is why they would be the first to call me on my shit.” I shrugged. “That’s what family does.”

Her lips curved down, and she heaved a deep sigh. “That hasn’t been my experience with my in-laws, but from what I’ve seen with your grandfather and your cousin when he was representing me in the divorce—and how you’ve been with me—I can tell that the Moores are different from what I’m used to. In the very best way possible.”

“You’re safe with me. With us,” I promised.

“You’re starting to make a believer out of me.”

“Good.” I squeezed her hand before picking up my fork. “Now eat your dinner so we have plenty of time to enjoy our dessert.”

Her gaze turned heated as she licked her lips. “Dessert?”

“Fuck, you have no idea how much I wish it was that kind of dessert.” I shifted in my seat to relieve some of the pressure from my hard-on pushing against my zipper. “But I promised Skylar that I wouldn’t do anything that would put her food safety certificate at risk, and the things I’d like to do to you would definitely leave a mark.”

She shivered, goose bumps popping up along her arms. “I suppose we should behave ourselves then.”

“You gotta help me out here, Ellie,” I groaned, pressing my palm down on my lap to adjust myself before I ended up with a permanent zipper mark on my cock. “Keeping my hands off you is hard as fuck. Literally.”

Her giggle filled the air as she lifted her hands in a gesture of surrender. “I’ll try to be good.”

The rest of our date passed by too quickly for my liking, and it wasn’t long before I was following her car to make sure she got home safely. Meghan was due to drop off the kids soon, but I still followed her up the steps to drop her off at the door like my mom expected of her sons.

“Thanks for a wonderful night.”

“It was my pleasure.” Gripping her hips, I pulled her closer. “And so is this.”

Crashing my lips down on hers, I took advantage of her surprised gasp to slide my tongue in her mouth. She pressed her curvy body against mine as she lost herself in my kiss, and her reaction spurred me on to deepen the contact. Our tongues tangled together until my need for her pounded in my veins.

The last thing I wanted to do was leave Ellie, but I needed her to know that my intentions toward her were serious. So I tore my mouth from hers and took a couple of deep breaths before stepping away. “Good night, Ellie.”

“What?” She blinked up at me, her pretty green eyes hazy with desire. “You’re just going to kiss me senseless and walk away?”

I tapped my watch. “The kids are going to be back soon, so unfortunately, yes.”

“We still have a few minutes to ourselves,” she protested, stroking her palms up my shirt. “Enough time to get one more kiss.”

I loved how she blossomed as we got to know each other better, her shyness and uncertainty taking a back seat the more we spent time together. “Whatever you want, baby.”

I lowered my head to capture her mouth beneath mine, my tongue licking against the seam of her lips, demanding entrance. Cupping the back of her head, I devoured her mouth until we were both breathless. Only then did I rip my lips from hers, just in the nick of time since the lights of Meghan’s minivan illuminated the driveway as she pulled in.

I knew that it was too early for her children to know we were dating, so I took a step back before they piled out of the vehicle. Then I helped Meghan take their booster seats out while Benjamin and Madison chattered to their mom about all of the fun they’d had during their playdate with Tony.

“I owe you one,” I murmured after circling the car to hold the driver’s side door open for her.

Meghan grinned up at me as she slid into the seat. “I wasn’t joking about how much I appreciated having them with us tonight, but I’ll still take your IOU since I bet you enjoyed just as much. If not more.”

There was no denying how right she was, so I just shut the door with a smile and waved as she backed out of the driveway.

“Thank you,” Ellie called, her hands on Benjamin’s and Madison’s shoulders as they echoed her thanks.

When Meghan was out of sight, the boy turned to me and asked, “Did you bring one of the puppies over to play with us?”

“Sorry, buddy.” I shook my head with a chuckle. “I don’t have any animals with me tonight.”

“Darn,” he mumbled, his shoulders drooping.

Ellie gently poked him in the side. “But it’s still nice to see Dr. Moore, right?”

Benjamin shot me a sheepish grin. “It is.”

“And with that, I better get them inside so they can settle down a little before it’s time for bed.”

It was still early days for Ellie and me, but I couldn’t help but look forward to a day in the future when I could walk through the doors with them.

ELLIE

V ideo calling my mom wasn't the same as sitting across from her at the kitchen table, but it was the best that I could do since they moved to Florida a year after I came back to Indiana. My parents had me when they were in their forties, and they'd been more than ready to retire to a state where it didn't get ice cold during the winter. Or snow.

I'd been so happy for them back then...before my world came crumbling down. They'd come up to visit while I struggled through the early days of my marriage ending, but they couldn't stay in Mooreville forever when they'd built a life for themselves down in Florida.

I thought the distance meant that my mom wouldn't be able to stick her nose in my budding relationship with Finn, but she proved me wrong as soon as she picked up.

"What's this I hear about you dating your new boss?"

"You know better than to listen to gossip, Mama," I chided, wagging my finger at the screen of my phone.

She didn't look the least bit repentant as she quirked a brow. "How else am I supposed to know what's going on in my girl's life when she doesn't tell me anything?"

"For starters, you can wait for me to tell you."

She huffed out a breath. "You know me better than that."

"I do." I shook my head with a laugh. "Which was why I was calling to ask for your advice about Finn."

"Really?" She clapped her hands, bouncing on her seat. "Tell me all about the handsome veterinarian who's caught my daughter's fancy."

Her excitement made it easy to share what had been going on between us without the racier details. Although, judging by the knowing look in her green eyes, she had already guessed some of it.

“It sounds as though he treats you well.”

“He does, Mama,” I confirmed with a smile. “The kids, too. Whenever he does something thoughtful for him, it melts my heart.”

“You have no idea how happy I am to hear that, Ellie. I was so afraid that after what happened with Thad, you were going to be too afraid to try again. That you were going to close off your heart to anyone except your family. And I didn’t want that for you.”

Her concern was valid since that’s exactly what I’d done for the past couple of years. “Something about Finn is just impossible to resist.”

“I owe him my gratitude for helping to bring my baby girl back to life.” She pressed her fingers against her lips, kissing the tips before tapping them against the screen. “You were always full of so much joy and mischief as a child. Seeing that spark diminish without being able to do anything to stop it was difficult to watch.”

As a mother whose son was struggling, I understood her pain. “I’m sorry I put you through that.”

“Don’t be, dear. You owe me no apologies. What happened wasn’t your fault, and I’m so proud of how you handled it all.”

I’d heard her say the same before, but I’d never been in a place to truly take it in before. “Thank you. It was your voice in my head that helped me keep a brave face throughout it all. Which is why I need your advice now.”

“I only have these words of wisdom for you now, my dear. Be bold.” She leaned closer to her camera, her gaze locked on mine through the screen. “You’ve already faced the worst with everything that went down with Thad. You hit rock bottom and came out of it all with grace. What do you have to lose?”

My pulse raced as I thought about the power Finn already had over me. “My heart?”

“If you’re already worried about losing it to him, then you definitely need to give Finn the chance to show you that he’ll treasure your heart like your father does with mine.” She pressed her hand against her chest. “The man you’ve described to me sounds as though he’s more than worth the risk. Take a chance on the beautiful life you could build together. For you and the kids.”

Getting my mom’s blessing alleviated some of the lingering doubts I had

about what was happening between Finn and me. Trusting my own judgment was hard after how wrong I'd been about Thad, but Meghan had been right when she said that I'd been young when I fell for him. I was more cautious now. Older and wiser.

And I knew what I wanted—Finn.

Ever since he took me out on our first official date and left me on my doorstep with only a kiss—no matter how amazing it was—I couldn't stop thinking about having sex with him. I knew he was trying to make sure that I understood he was serious about building a relationship with me, but I wanted more orgasms like the one he'd given me on his desk. And the exam table.

We really needed to try a bed the next time around. I could only imagine how mind-blowing the orgasms would be if we had more room to work with.

Which was why I was taking my mom's advice to heart. I was going to be bold tonight. From the outfit I chose for our date to telling Finn what I needed from him if he tried dropping me off at home again with nothing more than a kiss. Especially since I had the whole house to myself for the weekend again since Thad had picked the kids up for his weekend an hour ago. Without Penny in the front seat this time, which gave me hope that he'd actually taken my concern for the kids to heart.

So much had changed in a short time for me. Only two weeks ago, I had been devastated enough by the idea of a weekend alone that I'd drunk an entire bottle of wine. But this time, I had a date with Finn to look forward to...without a children-imposed curfew.

I took a long shower, being sure to shave and exfoliate so my skin was extra soft. Then I selected a set of matching bra and panties that I hadn't worn in years. The pretty pink color was feminine and pretty. And the way the lace cupped my breasts made me feel sexy.

After putting them on, I padded into my walk-in closet to dig out a dress from the back. It was something my mom had convinced me to buy a few years ago, but I'd never worn it. The plunging neckline was more daring than what I normally wore, but it matched my bold mood.

I slipped the dress over my head and stood in front of the mirror, turning from side to side to study my image. With my glowing skin and curves that Finn wasn't shy about appreciating, I finally saw myself the way he did. It had been years since I'd felt this confident—more than I was willing to admit.

I had a lot of regrets, but my relationship with Thad wasn't one of them because then I wouldn't have Benjamin and Madison. And I wouldn't give them up for anything. But I was thrilled to finally be rediscovering myself after years of dimming my light for a man who hadn't deserved it.

Finn made the extra effort even more worthwhile when his gaze raked down my body after I answered the door. "Damn, you look gorgeous."

It was impossible to miss the masculine appreciation—and heat—in his dark eyes.

"I hope this is okay for wherever you're taking me."

"You're so fucking sexy in that dress, it's almost a shame that nobody else is going to see it," he rasped, leaning down to brush his mouth against mine.

I bit my bottom lip. "They aren't?"

"Nope." He tugged my lip free with his thumb before swiping it over the tender flesh. "I know the weekends without Benjamin and Madison are hard for you, so I thought you might prefer to have dinner at my house."

This man was so darn thoughtful, it was no wonder he was more than halfway to stealing my heart. "That sounds like the perfect plan to me."

"You may want to withhold that judgment until after you see if my ability to make a steak and baked potato is as decent as my spaghetti and meatballs." Holding his arm out to me, he added, "Especially since my dad is the one who taught me to grill, and his skills in the kitchen are questionable. It was a good thing my mom knew how to cook, or else my brothers and I might have starved when we were growing up."

I shouldn't have been surprised that it turned out that he seriously downplayed his ability to grill. Pushing my empty plate away an hour later, I patted my stomach. "That was delicious."

"Only because you like your steak well done." He shook his head with a deep laugh. "My mom would have complained that it was too tough."

"I promise not to tattle on you if I meet her."

"When," he corrected.

My breath caught in my chest at the seriousness in his tone. Once again, Finn had no problem showing me that we were in this together. That I was safe with him—my heart and my body.

It helped settle my nerves as I got to my feet and held my hand out to him. Sliding his palm against mine, he stood and looked down at me with curiosity shining from his dark eyes. Taking a deep breath, I blurted, "I hope

you didn't make anything for dessert this time. Because what I want is you."

"I did, but it'll keep." He swept me into his arms. "And even if it wouldn't, I sure as fuck wouldn't give a damn with you in my bed."

FINN

Cradling Ellie against my chest, I pressed a kiss against her temple and carried her upstairs to my bedroom. I looked forward to having her in my bed, where she belonged. It had been a long week, and I missed her like hell whenever we weren't together.

When I got to the top of the stairs, I murmured, "I would like nothing more than to strip this pretty dress from your sexy body, but if you're not ready for that, I'll understand."

Ellie bit her lip again and smiled softly at me, her eyes shining. "You're so sweet, Finn. I love that about you." She tilted her head to one side, a mischievous smile creeping up on her face. "But I'm looking forward to enjoying my night in with you, in every way possible."

I curled one hand around the nape of Ellie's neck and pressed a kiss to her forehead. How was she so cute and drop-dead sexy at the same time? That shouldn't even be possible, but somehow, she pulled it off. "You're incredible, baby, and if you'll let me, I'd like to spend all night showing you just how amazing I think you are."

Ellie laughed softly and wrapped her arms around my waist. "I think that can be arranged."

I grinned and kissed her, my hands already wandering to the bottom of her skirt to inch the soft material a little higher up her thigh. I wanted nothing more than to spend the night worshipping her body, making her feel alive and cherished. I had a feeling Ellie needed that as much as I did.

Striding into my room, I set her on her feet and lifted her dress over her head, discarding it on the floor, my eyes roaming appreciatively over her

body. She wore a lacy pink bra that did nothing to hide her erect nipples from my gaze, and the matching panties barely covered her pussy.

I ached to touch her, to taste her, but I forced myself to take things slow. This was about Ellie, not me.

I sat her down on the edge of the bed and kneeled before her, gently pushing her legs apart so I could settle between them. I cupped her face in my hands and kissed her softly, our mouths moving together in perfect harmony as we explored one another. Ellie sighed into my mouth and ran her fingers through my hair, gripping tight as she pulled me closer.

When we finally broke apart for air, both of us panted with big smiles on our faces. "This is so good," Ellie whispered, leaning forward so the tip of her nose brushed against mine for a second.

"I'm just getting started, baby." Rocking back on my heels, I looked her up and down, memorizing the sight of her at that moment. I loved that she was wearing lacy pink panties that matched her bra, but I had no intention of leaving either of them on for very long.

"Like what you see?"

"You know I do, baby. You're stunning." I gripped her panties at the hips and peeled those off, too, casting them aside. "Now spread your legs for me, baby. Let me see that pretty, perfect pussy."

Ellie bit her lip and complied, parting her thighs and leaning back on both hands as she spread her legs wide, giving me a dizzying view of her glistening pink folds.

I loved the way she looked down at me, an expression of mingled sweet innocence and needy desire on her face. She was practically glowing, her cheeks flushed, eyes heavy-lidded, her lips swollen from my kisses, and her perfect tits clad in pink lace.

"Good girl." My words came out in a husky rasp, thick with aching need. Ellie was everything I wanted, everything I dreamed about, and she was all mine tonight.

For a long moment, I just admired the sight of her. But my cock grew harder by the second, straining against my pants. I groaned and sat back on my heels, my dick twitching in my pants and my balls already tight with the need to release. I needed to feel her. To smell her. To taste her.

Kneeling between her thighs, I spread them farther apart and leaned in to press my face against the sweet folds of her pussy, inhaling her scent. She smelled delicious, and I hadn't even taken a single taste yet. Not tonight,

anyway. I couldn't wait to taste her sweetness again.

"Mm, you're so wet, baby," I whispered, pressing butterfly kisses to the soft, sensitive skin of her right knee and then her left, moving slowly up her thighs until my mouth settled directly over her pussy.

Licking my lips, I darted out my tongue and dragged it over her clit, groaning at the taste of her. She was so sweet, so fucking good. I couldn't get enough.

Ellie moaned and whimpered beneath me, her fingers tangling in my hair as she urged me on with soft words of encouragement. "Yes, baby, yes," she panted. "Oh my, yes."

I flicked my tongue over her clit again, teasing it before pressing a firm kiss right on top of the sensitive nub and then sliding two fingers deep inside her wetness. I wanted to make sure she was nice and ready for me when I finally slid my cock into that tight little pussy; I wanted to feel how hot and wet she was around me as I fucked her hard and fast.

Moving my mouth back up to Ellie's clit, I began working it in earnest now, flicking and sucking as she thrashed underneath me.

Ellie sighed and rocked her hips, practically begging me to taste every single inch of her. I grinned against her warm folds, sucking her clit hard before sliding my tongue up the length of her sex. She tasted sweet and tangy, and her sounds just fueled the fire burning inside me even hotter.

I moved faster now, lapping eagerly at her pussy as my fingers pumped in and out of the tight heat of her dripping wet pussy. She was moaning in earnest, rocking back and forth on my face as I fucked her with two fingers while licking and sucking at her clit.

"Finn," Ellie gasped out suddenly, "I want to taste you, too."

I hummed against her clit in agreement before lifting my head from between her thighs so I could grin up at her wickedly.

"As long as I can still keep my mouth on you, fuck yes." Quickly stripping out of my clothes, I joined her on the bed, lying on my back and tugging at Ellie's waist until she shifted so she was straddling my face. Then I gripped her hips and buried my face in her sweet pussy, determined to push her over the edge and make her come, even as she leaned forward and wrapped her lips around my cock.

We worked together, like we had done this a million times before, even though this was the first time. I had thought about this, fantasized about it so often, but experiencing the real thing was so much better than I ever could

have imagined.

I loved the way Ellie felt on my tongue and the way she worked my cock, how she moaned and groaned as she sucked me off and rode my face. She was so fucking good, so hot and tight, that it didn't take me long to get perilously close to coming.

I reached up and gave her hair a gentle tug. "You better slow down with that if you want tonight to last, baby. I have plans for this sweet pussy of yours that don't involve me coming quite this soon."

Ellie backed off her pace, sliding her sweet mouth up and down my shaft torturously slow, now. My balls throbbed, but I smiled.

"Good girl. You're doing perfect, baby. Keep going just like that."

I sucked greedily at her clit, desperately trying to make her come before I went off in her mouth. But she was relentless, bobbing her head and sucking me hard, trying to swallow me down as I worked her clit with my tongue. Ellie clenched around my fingers, and I could feel her body trembling as she climbed higher and higher, her whimpers growing louder until finally she was coming, screaming my name and writhing on top of me, her pussy clenching and quivering.

"Fuck, yes," I moaned, holding her hips still while she rode out her orgasm on my face, rocking back and forth and grinding her clit against my tongue as her body convulsed and quivered.

When she finally came back down, she crawled off me and lay down on the bed, panting hard. I was still rock hard and aching for her, but I forced myself to take my time. This was about what Ellie wanted, and I needed her to feel good.

"Thank you, baby," I whispered, gently rolling her onto her side so I could spoon up behind her and press my cock against her slick, wet slit. I groaned at how good it felt to have my cock slide against her bare pussy. "Fuck, you feel so good."

"I want you inside me." Ellie whined, pressing back against me and trying to grind down on my cock.

"Not yet, baby." I held her hips still, clenching my jaw as I fought against the urge to shove my cock into her tight little pussy and fuck her hard, fast, and deep. "We've got all night for that."

"But Finn," she whispered. "I need you. So badly."

"I know, baby," I replied, gently licking her earlobe and nibbling it between my teeth. "But tonight is all about you, okay? I'll give you whatever

you want. Just tell me what you need, Ellie.”

“I need you inside me.” She moaned, rocking back against me, my cock sliding hard against her clit. “Please, Finn.”

“Mm, that’s a good girl.” I flattened my palm against her stomach, holding her still while I kissed her neck and nibbled at her ear. “Tell me exactly how you want me.”

“Hard and fast,” Ellie replied, moaning and writhing against me as I continued to rub against her. “And I want it deep. So deep, Finn.”

“Yeah?” I growled against her neck, my cock aching. “You want me to fuck you hard, deep, and fast? Without anything between us, like we talked about?”

“Mm-hmm,” she moaned, pressing her ass back against me. “I just need you, Finn. I need all of you.”

I swallowed hard, trying to force myself to take it slow and easy, but it was almost impossible. I wanted this so much, and I wanted it now. I couldn’t wait another second; I had to have her.

Reaching down, I slid the head of my cock up and down her slick folds, teasing us both for a few more moments.

“Fuck, baby, you’re so wet for me,” I whispered in her ear, gripping my cock in my fist and giving it a few hard, fast strokes. “I can’t wait until I’m deep inside you.”

Ellie moaned and rocked back on my cock, working it between her pussy lips until finally I couldn’t wait another moment. Wrapping my arm around her waist, I pulled her tight against me and thrust my hips upward, sliding my cock deep inside her with one long, smooth stroke. I groaned at the feel of her tight pussy wrapped around my cock as I buried myself balls deep inside her. I’d never gone bare before. Never felt anything like the heat of her pussy scorching my shaft.

“Is that what you wanted, baby?” I asked, my voice tight with lust.

“Yes,” she whimpered, grinding her hips against me. “It’s so deep, Finn. So good.”

“I told you I’d give you whatever you wanted,” I replied, rocking against her, sliding my cock in and out of her.

“Harder, please.” Ellie moaned, rocking back against me and meeting my thrusts with her own.

“You want it hard, baby?” I growled, thrusting into her faster.

“Oh yes,” Ellie moaned. “Hard, Finn. Please.”

I thrust into her deep and fast, my cock sliding in and out of her wet pussy with ease. I could feel her body tensing, could hear her gasping for breath as she got closer and closer to her orgasm. I could feel it on the edge of my fingertips as I pounded into her, sliding my cock in and out of her in long, deep strokes.

“Finn,” Ellie cried out, her body trembling against me. “I’m gonna come.”

“Good girl,” I panted, grinding against her as I slid my cock deep, grinding the base of my cock up against her clit.

I reached down and gripped her hair, tugging her head back so I could whisper in her ear. “Come for me, baby. I want to feel you squeeze my cock while you scream my name.”

“Oh my god, Finn!” Ellie jerked and shuddered, her pussy clenching and quivering as she gave me exactly what I’d demanded.

I held her tight as she came, grinding against her as her body spasmed with pleasure. “Fuck yes, baby,” I moaned, sliding my cock in and out of her wet pussy as she came. I could feel my own orgasm barreling down on me, but I wanted to make this last, driven by my desire to make her come again before I finally let myself go.

“Don’t stop,” Ellie moaned, grinding against me, her pussy spasming and clenching around my cock. “I want you to come for me, too.”

“I can’t last long, baby.” I panted. “I’m so close.” I groaned as I felt my balls tighten up and my cock began to throb in her sweet little pussy. “Fuck, baby, you feel so good.”

“Come for me, Finn,” Ellie begged, rocking back against me. “I want you to come for me.”

I slammed into her with one last, deep thrust, burying myself to the hilt in her sweet little pussy. I felt her stifle a scream with the back of her hand as her pussy throbbed and clenched around me, and it was the sexiest fucking thing I’d ever seen.

I gripped her hips, holding her tight as I came, pulsing out my orgasm deep inside her as she quivered and shook. I came so hard, I could’ve sworn that I saw stars.

“You are so fucking sexy, Ellie,” I growled in her ear. “I can’t get enough of you.”

“Mm, we’re just getting started, aren’t we?” Ellie murmured, rolling over to face me with a satisfied smile.

I kissed her, feeling my cock twitch inside her tight little pussy as I tasted her on my tongue.

“Absolutely.”

I rolled onto my back, tugging Ellie on top of me, not wanting to ever let her go. The feel of her soft, warm body cradled against mine was so amazing that I wanted to just lay there and never move. Never have to worry about anything ever again.

“I’m nowhere near done with you tonight,” I mused, wrapping my arms around her. “Hope you’re ready to be so sore you’ll feel me whenever you move tomorrow.”

“You’re going to wear me out by the time the morning comes, aren’t you?” Ellie asked, cuddling against me and kissing my chest.

“I’m gonna do my best, so rest up now while you still can,” I replied, kissing the top of her head and sighing contentedly as we passed out in each other’s arms.

ELLIE

Waking up with Finn's warm body wrapped around mine was a great way to start the day. I didn't want to compare him to my ex, but Thad had never been a cuddler since he complained that I ran too hot. That didn't seem to bother Finn in the least.

Whenever I'd rolled away from him during the night, he'd dragged me back to his side. And I might've done it a couple of extra times because he tended to follow that up by taking me again.

Turning toward him so that I could check if he was awake, I winced at the tenderness between my legs.

"Did we overdo it last night?" he rasped, gliding his palm down my spine to cup my butt.

"Maybe a little." I pressed my thighs together and confessed, "I'm definitely going to feel you whenever I move today."

He brushed a kiss against my temple. "Shit, I'm sorry, baby."

"You told me what you were going to do, and I was an eager participant," I reminded him.

"Yeah, but I hate the idea of you being in pain."

"I wouldn't call it pain, just an acute awareness of exactly where you've been," I corrected.

"When you put it like that, I'll try not to feel guilty." He slid off the mattress and padded toward the en suite bathroom. "But first, I'm going to run you a nice, hot bath. It'll help ease your sore muscles."

"That sounds wonderful," I readily agreed.

Bending low to peck my lips, he instructed, "Give me a minute to get

everything ready.”

I watched his butt clench as he strode into the bathroom, and then I pulled a pillow over my face to muffle my girlish squeal. I didn't care if I was a twenty-eight-year-old mother of two. If an occasion ever called for a reaction like that, it was this one. My night with Finn had exceeded my wildest expectations, and I'd done a lot of fantasizing about him since we'd met, so that was saying a lot.

He padded back into the room and tugged on a pair of boxer briefs before coming back over and stretching a hand out to me. “C'mon, baby.”

Before Finn had worshipped my body, I would've tried to use the sheet to cover up before I stood. But any doubts I might have had about how much he enjoyed my curves hadn't survived under all of the kissing, licking, and sucking that he'd done to just about every inch of my skin. So I slid my palm against his and let him help me out of bed.

Spotting the bottle of bubble bath on the edge of the tub in the same scent as my shampoo and conditioner, I let out a happy sigh. “You're going to spoil me.”

“I don't see the problem.”

After I climbed into the hot, sudsy water, I smiled up at him. “You wouldn't, but I want to make sure you know that I appreciate every thing you do for me.”

“Of course, I do, baby.” He crouched down so we were at eye level. “You've never hesitated to express your gratitude, even over things that are so small, no verbal thanks are needed.”

“Maybe words of affirmation are my love language,” I murmured, hinting at my feelings for him since that four-letter word held new meaning for me now that I'd fallen hard for Finn.

“Well, keep them coming if that makes you happy.” He stood and flashed me a smile. “But just know that I'm good with physical affection as a form of gratitude if you'd prefer to give me kisses instead.”

“I'll definitely keep that in mind.”

I laughed as he winked at me and turned to leave the room. Then I enjoyed the simple pleasure of an unhurried bubble bath, something I hadn't experienced in far too long. Only the scent of bacon that drifted upstairs about half an hour later was enough to pull me from the tub.

Stepping out, I moaned when I wrapped an oversized towel around my body and found it still slightly warm. Lifting the fluffy material to my nose, I

breathed in the scent of fabric softener and realized that when Finn had returned to hang it on the rod next to the tub, he'd gotten it straight from the dryer. I wasn't sure what I'd done to deserve a man like him, but I thanked my lucky stars that he was in my life. And vowed to do whatever I could to make him as happy as he made me.

Tossing on one of his T-shirts and a pair of sweatpants—that I had to roll three times at the waist so they didn't slide down to my knees—I followed the delicious scent down to the kitchen. Finn was dressed in a pair of sweatpants that were an exact match to the ones I'd put on, but they looked a heck of a lot better on him.

At least, that was what I thought until he glanced over his shoulder, and his heated gaze swept down my body. “Damn, I really like the look of you in my clothes.”

“They're more than a little big on me, but I figured this was better than my dress since it's in a wrinkled pile on your floor.”

“Shit, I should've tossed it in the dryer for you.”

“That was a nice touch with the towel.” I took the tongs out of his hand and bumped him out of the way. “But what you should've done is put on a shirt before you splatter your gorgeous chest with bacon grease.”

“You like my chest?” he murmured, wrapping his arms around my waist and tugging my back against him to nuzzle my neck.

I tilted my head to the side to give him better access. “It should be obvious after last night that I more than like all of you.”

“Was that what all the moaning was about?” he teased, nipping my shoulder before heading over to the toaster to butter the bread that just popped up.

“That and all the clever things you can do with your mouth and fingers.”

He winked at me over his shoulder. “Don't forget my cock.”

My cheeks heated as I admitted, “Since I can still feel you even after my soak in your tub, I'm definitely not going to anytime soon.”

“Hopefully, that won't interfere with your enjoyment of the puppies and kittens at the adoption event today.”

I waved off his concern before I started moving the bacon on a paper towel-lined plate. “I'm sure I'll be fine.”

We finished making breakfast and wolfed down the scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast in no time at all. Then we poured the rest of the coffee into a couple of travel tumblers and headed over to my house so I could change

before we went to the clinic.

I only felt a twinge a few times as I sat on the floor with the puppies, but I almost bawled my eyes out when someone came in and wanted to adopt Charlie. Although getting a dog, especially a puppy, would be highly impractical right now, I'd gotten close with this litter. And the kids loved them so much. It was bittersweet to see him get his forever home.

Plus, it would cause all sorts of questions from Benjamin since he was bound to realize the puppies-were-too-young-to-come-home-with-us excuse no longer applied.

After everyone left and we finished cleaning up, Finn pulled me close and kissed the top of my head. "The best choice I ever made was hiring you."

"How many adoptions went through?" I mumbled against his chest.

"Five." He stepped back and grinned down at me. "At this rate, I won't have any animals in foster homes next month. In all the time I've owned my practice, that's never happened."

"Shh." I pressed my finger against his lips. "You're going to jinx us."

"Even if no more adoptions go through for the rest of the month, we still have way fewer rescues on the books than usual."

I dropped my head against his chest. "I can't believe someone adopted Charlie."

"Yeah, the puppies are the hardest to let go of." His lungs expanded as he heaved a deep sigh. "They're just so damn cute. But even saying goodbye to him, it was a good day, right?"

I nodded. "The only thing that would've made it better was if Benjamin and Madison were with us."

"I can tell how much it's driving you crazy, being away from the kids." He pulled me in for a tight hug. "Do you want to send a text to your ex and offer to go pick them up early? I know it's technically still his weekend until tomorrow evening, but it never hurts to ask. The worst that can happen is that he says no."

I bit my lip, staggered by his offer. "You'd cut short our time alone together because you can tell how badly being away from the kids bothers me?"

He kissed my cheek, nuzzling into the side of my neck as he murmured, "Without hesitation."

Butterflies swirled in my belly as I swallowed down the lump of emotion in my throat. "You really mean that, don't you?"

When he pulled away from me, he looked down into my eyes as I stared up at him. “I understand that you’re a mom before all else, baby, and that’s one of the many things I appreciate about you the most. How you show your children that they’re loved with every decision you make and everything you do.”

Falling for Finn was so different from when I’d dated Thad back in high school. Not only was I older and hopefully wiser, but I also had two little hearts to think about too, not just my own. And they were the most important thing in my life.

Benjamin and Madison’s hearts had already been badly bruised by my divorce and their father’s lack of attention in the time since he’d moved out. But as each day with Finn passed, I started to believe more and more that he’d fight by my side to keep my children safe if it ever came down to it. And that knowledge only made me fall for him even more.

FINN

The date I had planned for tonight was much less romantic than the others I'd had with Ellie, but in many ways, it was a fuck of a lot more important. Although I had met her children several times, we'd never done anything with just the four of us before. That would all change in a few minutes when I picked them up to take everyone out for pizza and ice cream.

Things were going great between Ellie and me, but I knew this was a hurdle I had to successfully pass if I wanted anything serious with her. Which I did.

I was so nervous about how the night would go that I had to unclench my fingers to release the steering wheel of my SUV after I pulled into her driveway. Climbing out of the vehicle, I wiped my palms against my jeans before I made my way toward their front porch.

Some of my worry lessened when Benjamin flung the door open before I could ring the bell, looking over his shoulder as he yelled, "Dr. Finn is here!"

"Dr. Finn," Madison squealed as she raced to the door. "Are we gonna have pizza?"

"Yup," I confirmed with a smile.

"Awesome," Benjamin breathed.

"Yeah, awesome," Madison agreed.

Ellie shot me an exasperated look as she joined us. "But no ice cream for dessert unless you promise me not to answer the door like that until I tell you that you're old enough."

"No ice cream?" Madison cried with a pout.

"I promise," Benjamin muttered. "Even when I know who's gonna be at

the door, I won't answer unless you say so."

"A little begrudging, but that works for me." Ellie ruffled his hair. "Let's grab your seats from the car so we can get going."

"That shouldn't be necessary." I gestured toward my SUV. "I grabbed a couple and stopped at the fire station on the way over so they could help me install them in the back seat."

Ellie's head jerked back, and she stared up at me with wide eyes. "You bought booster seats for your car?"

"Yup." Worried that I might have overstepped, I shoved my hands in my pockets as I explained, "I'm sorry. I thought it would make things easier if we didn't need to move them since we planned to take my vehicle."

Ellie beamed a smile at me. "You don't have anything to apologize for. That was very thoughtful of you."

After we led the kids to my SUV and I opened the door for her and Madison, she peered inside. "You even got the same brand that I have."

"I remembered from the day you got that flat tire."

"Putting your eagle eyes to good use yet again," she murmured approvingly.

"What're eagle eyes? Do you have to be a veter'naroon to get some? And where do you keep 'em?" Benjamin asked as I led him around to the other side of the SUV.

"It's just a fun way to say I'm observant," I explained. "Because I notice small details that others might not pay attention to."

"Cool."

"Dr. Finn?" I murmured after the vehicle doors were closed so the kids couldn't hear me.

"Yeah." Ellie grinned up at me. "I told the kids they could call you Finn, but Benjamin thinks you being a vet is too cool to drop off the doctor part. And Madison likes nothing better than to copy her big brother. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," I assured her, reaching out to open her door for her. "To borrow Benjamin's word...it's cool."

"Super cool," he agreed, even though he had no idea what his mom and I were talking about.

The kids told us about their day at school as I drove to the local pizza place, which was next door to the ice cream shop. Since it was only a little after five, we had the place almost to ourselves and were able to snag one of

the booths at the back of the dining room near the small arcade. After we placed our order, I dug a handful of quarters out of my pocket and handed them to Ellie. “I grabbed these in case the kids wanted to play some games while we wait for our food.”

“You really do think of everything.” She squeezed my thigh under the table, then beamed a smile at her children. “Can I trust you two to behave if I let you go play a couple of games without me?”

Benjamin and Madison nodded and replied in unison, “Uh-huh.”

She slid four quarters across the table to each of them. “This should be enough for two games. Once they’re gone, come back to see if the pizza is here.”

“Yay,” they cheered before rushing over to the game area.

Since we sat on the side of the booth facing the arcade, we could keep an eye on them while they played. “This is perfect. Thanks for suggesting we come here. And buying car seats for my kids. And the quarters.”

“It was my pleasure, baby.” This time, I was the one who squeezed her thigh under the table. “I hope you don’t think I’m trying to bribe them to like me. I know how important tonight is, and I wanted it to go as smoothly as possible. For all of us.”

“As long as you stick to small things like a couple of dollars in quarters, pizza, and ice cream, you don’t have to worry about overstepping.” She leaned into my side with a soft sigh. “And the booster seats don’t count because they’re a safety thing. I’ll rest a heck of a lot easier knowing that you could take them somewhere without the whole rigmarole of changing them over if need be.”

Warmth spread through my chest at her words. “Thank you for putting your trust in me.”

“Thank you for proving that my faith is so well deserved.”

Our moment was interrupted by the arrival of our drinks. Which was probably a good thing because it was damn difficult not to kiss her senseless right then and there. Instead, I just stared at her while she sipped her wine with a happy curve to her lips as she watched Benjamin and Madison play their games.

Five minutes later, they raced back over to our booth and climbed onto the bench opposite of us. Benjamin helped his sister pull her cup of milk closer so she could take a sip. Ellie beamed an approving smile at her son, and his little chest puffed out in pride.

I spotted the server coming over with our pizzas and announced, “Our food is here.”

Ellie pointed at the bathroom, which was to the left of the arcade. “Go wash up before we eat.”

“Okay, Mom.” Benjamin slid off the bench and waited for Madison before heading toward the restrooms.

The server set the two pizzas on the metal stands that lifted them off the table and asked, “Do you need anything else?”

“Not right now, thanks,” Ellie answered with a shake of her head. Then she turned to me when we were alone again. “How in the world did they make these so quickly?”

“You had mentioned once when we had pizza in the office how you never get to eat pepperoni anymore because the kids only like cheese. I figured it would be safe to order these ahead of time so Benjamin and Madison wouldn’t have to wait too long to eat.”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “You don’t have any secret children I don’t know about, do you?”

“No,” I drawled, wondering why she’d ask a question like that.

My confusion must’ve been obvious because she explained, “That was an experienced parent move.”

“Ahh, gotcha.” I shook my head with a laugh. “Sorry, no hidden children running around town. Not that I’d ever be able to keep a secret like that, even if I wanted to. My mom would shout it from the rooftops.”

“That’s right,” she murmured, placing two cheese slices on Benjamin’s plate and one on Madison’s. “You mentioned that she’s looking forward to having grandchildren.”

“Looking forward to is putting it mildly.” My gaze darted toward her children as they exited the restrooms. “Be prepared for the spoiling to commence when you’re ready for them to meet my family. I might be able to keep myself in line when it comes to them, but I have zero control over my mom.”

“You want to introduce us to your parents?” she whispered as the kids got closer.

Reaching under the table, I squeezed her leg. “Absolutely.”

“Holy heck,” she breathed, slumping against the back of the booth.

“Hadn’t thought about that yet?”

She shook her head. “Nope.”

“Thought about what?” Benjamin asked as they slid into the booth.

“How many pieces of pizza I’m going to eat tonight.” She looked up at me with a smile and added, “I think it’s going to be a lot because when good things are right there in front of you, you should reach out and grab them.”

Her words had an added layer that went over the kids’ heads, but it meant the world to me. The last girlfriend I’d introduced my parents to had been all the way back in college, and that had been out of necessity more than anything else because she’d insisted on it when they’d come to campus for a visit. That relationship fizzled out shortly after that, and I had promised myself that I wouldn’t bring anyone else around them unless I was serious about the relationship.

Introducing Ellie and her children to my parents was almost as important to me as tonight was for her. And it was a good thing I was ready for that step because word of us being a couple was bound to spread around town like wildfire.

ELLIE

D ating Finn was even better than I imagined. Each day we were together, he did something to make me fall a little harder for him. Sometimes it was as simple as the appreciative gleam in his eyes as he told me good morning. Or the way he kissed me goodbye, as though he couldn't wait until we were together again, even though we saw each other almost every single day.

And others, it was because he did something so unexpected that his thoughtfulness took my breath away.

"I'm taking a page from Meghan's book and arranging a playdate."

My brows drew together as I gawked at Finn. "Pardon?"

He gestured back and forth between my coworker and me. "You two could use a girls' night out. So I called Roger and let him know Meghan would be home late tonight. He said he's got Tony covered. And I'm more than happy to hang out with Benjamin and Madison at your place this evening. I've even arranged to pick up Duke and Bella from their foster family so I can bring them with us. I figured that should buy me at least an hour or two of distraction with the kids. Plus, I have my mom on speed dial if anything comes up."

"You set everything up so I could have a girls' night," I echoed softly, blinking up at him. "And you're going to bring the puppies to entertain my children while I'm out?"

"As long as you're okay with the plan, yes," he confirmed with a nod.

"Don't worry, boss. This is not the expression of an upset woman." Meghan gestured at my face with her hand. "It's stunned surprise because

you just earned all the boyfriend brownie points. And some husband points for Roger. Plus, the undying gratitude of her children since I'm sure they'll be thrilled to play with puppies tonight."

Finn peered down at me with narrowed eyes. "Is she right?"

"Uh-huh." I nodded, gulping down the sudden lump of emotion in my throat. "I'm getting used to how thoughtful you are, but this is just...amazing. I don't think I've ever really had a proper girls' night out since I was barely twenty-one when I got pregnant with Benjamin."

"You've spent the past couple of years making sure your children are okay. Pushed yourself to get your degree. Took a job with me. All so you can take care of them. You deserve some time to heal yourself, too. A girls night out is as good a start as any."

His reasoning blew me away almost as much as the gesture. I was in awe of how he saw me. But I also wanted to make sure he understood his impact on my life. "Don't get me wrong, I'm looking forward to tonight, but it isn't the start of me healing myself."

His brows drew together as he tilted his head to the side. "It's not?"

"Nope." I wrapped my arms around his neck. "I already took that first step when you held me in your arms as I cried. And after."

My cheeks heated as I darted a look at Meghan. She pressed her hands against her ears and whispered, "Earmuffs. I can't hear a thing."

I knew darn well that sound could still get through, but that didn't stop me from continuing since I knew she was fully on board with Finn and I being together. "I've healed more in the past month than I did in the almost two years since my marriage ended. Tonight will be fun but being with you—introducing you to my children as more than just my boss—are huge steps that I've already taken."

"You're absolutely right, baby." He brushed his lips against mine in a chaste kiss. "And I'm so fucking proud of you."

I couldn't remember another time when a man other than my father had said those words to me. "Thank you."

"Anything for you." He untangled my arms and stepped back. "But you'd better get going or else the rest of the women will get a head start on you two."

"Who else is joining us?"

Meghan beat me to the question I was about to ask, proving that I'd been right about how much she could hear.

“I mentioned what I was going to do to Ryland, and about ten minutes later, I got texts from Skylar, Vienna, and Waverly letting me know they booked a table at Sip & Swirl.”

“Sounds like a fun group to me.” Dropping her hands to her sides, she flashed me a sheepish smile. “Let’s go drink some wine and have lots of fun.”

“You’re sure you’re okay with bringing the kids back to my place and hanging out with them until I get home?” My gaze darted toward the employee break room, where I’d set them up with coloring books and crayons since Finn had asked if I could stop by right before the clinic closed. “They haven’t had dinner.”

“No worries, I’ll order a couple of pizzas.”

I had to remind myself that taking some time to have fun didn’t make me a bad mom. And that my children adored Finn...and the puppies. “Okay, I’ll go fill the kids in on the plan, and then I’ll head out for wine and gossip.”

“Just be sure to say good things about me,” he requested with a grin as he nudged me toward the break room.

I wasn’t the least bit surprised that Benjamin and Madison were excited to ride back to our house in Finn’s SUV, especially when they learned about their pit stop to pick up the puppies. And pizza for dinner.

I was able to head out the door without any fuss, leaving my car in the parking lot per Finn’s request. Meghan practically bounced in her seat with excitement as she drove us to the wine bar. Before we walked inside, she stopped me at the doorway. “Thank you so much for dating Finn.”

“Um...you’re welcome?” I appreciated her uniqueness but thanking me for going out with Finn was a little odd, even for her.

“You’re not the only one who’s benefited from his thoughtfulness,” she pointed out. “So far, I’ve gotten a gift card to my favorite barbecue place and a girls’ night out that I didn’t have to plan. I’m happy for you two, but I also selfishly hope you stay together forever because I wouldn’t mind if the perks keep coming my way.”

Her explanation was hilarious but also strangely sweet. “Get inside so we can enjoy tonight’s perk.”

“Yes, ma'am.” She yanked the door open, and we headed to the high-top table in the back where Skylar, Waverly, and Vienna were already seated.

After a quick round of introductions—I’d never met Vienna in person but had seen her speed skate on television—we ordered a couple of bottles of

wine and a charcuterie board that ended up being almost as big as our table. Which was a good thing because we would've been even more drunk by the end of the night if we hadn't tried to demolish all the snacks.

After the server poured our glasses—a sweet white for Skylar and Vienna and a rich red for Waverly, Meghan, and me—my lawyer's wife leaned close and demanded, "We need details. Spill the tea."

Meghan laughed as she raised her glass. "Just not the wine."

Vienna pointed at Waverly and Meghan. "That should be our tagline for our girls' night out."

"Spill the tea. Just not the wine," Skylar echoed with a nod. "I like it."

"I like anything that means we get to do this again. Soon," Meghan chimed in.

"Cheers to that." Skylar lifted her glass and we all followed suit, gently clinking them together over the middle of the table. "Just so long as we aren't spilling actual tea since that would be a horrible business decision considering I own Leaves & Pages."

"Good point. It's time to spill the metaphorical tea." Waverly speared me with her gaze. "I've been dying to know what's going on with you and Finn ever since he hired you."

"Oh my gosh," Meghan squealed, reaching over to high-five Waverly. "I almost forgot that you're the one who suggested Finn offer her a job. I think that makes us matchmaking partners because I did everything I could in the early days to throw these two together. The chemistry between them is fire."

"I'm not surprised since he could barely tear his gaze from her when she stopped outside our office one day a couple of months ago." She beamed a triumphant smile at me. "It's why I followed up with him about the job he mentioned that day...right after his cousin said he could use some help at his construction company. The poor guy didn't even know you, but he still got all growly over the possibility of you working for Jude."

I bit my bottom lip to stop myself from grinning like a love-sick fool. "He noticed me, even back then?"

"He sure did," she confirmed.

"The question is—did you notice him back?" Vienna asked.

I took a sip of my wine before I confessed, "I'll just put it this way...I don't remember there was another one of Ryland's cousins there, except for Finn."

"The Moore men pack one heck of a punch when they decide they want

you.” Skylar fanned herself.

“I heard all about Baxter’s pursuit of you from Finn.” I smiled at the woman who I felt a kinship of sorts with since we were both single moms with a former spouse who cheated.

Meghan rubbed her hands together. “Oooh, c’mon, spill.”

Time flew by as we gossiped about the men in our lives. I couldn’t remember when I’d laughed so much or felt such camaraderie with a group of women.

“We’ve been here for almost four hours.” Meghan heaved a deep sigh. “We should probably ask for the bill soon.”

“Too late, it’s already taken care of,” Skylar announced.

“No fair, we should’ve at least been able to argue over it,” Waverly complained with a mock scowl.

“That also wouldn’t be fair since you argue for a living,” Vienna pointed out.

“I get to pay since I needed tonight more desperately than any of you. I have one child that just left for college and a toddler at home.” Skylar finished her glass of wine. “Plus, my husband is a billionaire. So I can afford it.”

Meghan let out a low whistle. “I still can’t believe that’s billionaire with a B.”

“Tell me about it.” Skylar shook her head with a laugh.

“In that case”—Meghan gestured toward her half-empty glass—“it’s fine by me if you want to pay next time too.”

Her joke landed well, and we all started giggling. Except my breath caught in my throat when I looked up. I wasn’t expecting him to be here, but a huge smile spread across my face when I spotted Finn in the doorway. He made a beeline toward our table, and when he got close, I jumped off my stool and threw my arms around him. “I love you so much.”

FINN

Her declaration meant the world to me, but I didn't know if the words had slipped out because she'd had too much to drink or if she really intended to say them. Either way, now that it was out there, I couldn't stop myself from sharing my feelings as well. "I love you, too."

"Oh my gosh," Vienna breathed, her eyes going wide. "Do you think we all just witnessed the first time they said those three little words that mean so much?"

"Definitely," Meghan confirmed with a nod.

"How sweet," Skylar cried, dabbing at her cheeks.

Waverly proved how perceptive she was when she murmured, "Don't worry. The two glasses of wine she had might've loosened her lips, but she definitely means what she's saying."

Taking a step back, Ellie peered up at me with wide eyes. "Remember when I said I might be bad at the whole dating thing? This is probably an example of that since it's not exactly the most romantic way to share my feelings with you for the first time."

"You're wrong, baby." I cupped her cheeks with my palms, my heart feeling as though it was about to burst out of my chest with how happy I was. "Any time and any place you want to tell me that you love me is fucking perfect as far as I'm concerned."

"I love you," she whispered again.

I brushed my lips over hers. "I love you, too."

Swiping my thumbs over her cheeks, I brushed away a few stray tears. Then I captured her mouth in a deep kiss, not feeling the least bit

embarrassed when the women cheered us on. Although we hadn't been hiding our relationship, we had avoided public displays of affection for the most part. But knowing that I had Ellie's love changed everything. I wanted to shout from the rooftops that this amazing woman was mine.

"Aw, you guys are gonna make me cry, and then my makeup will be ruined." Meghan sniffled. "Trust me, nobody wants to see me with mascara streaking down my cheeks."

"Wait a second." Waverly's brows drew together as she tilted her head to the side. "What're you doing here?"

Ellie's eyes widened. "I can't believe I didn't think to ask until now. Who's home with Benjamin and Madison?"

"Ryland is camped out on your sofa, just in case one of them wakes up while I'm gone," I explained.

"I'm confused. Couldn't he have just dropped Ellie off on his way home with me?" Waverly asked, frowning when she peered over my shoulder and saw Dean striding into the wine bar behind me.

Meghan shook her head as she slid off her stool. "But then we would've missed out on all of the lovey-dovey stuff, which would've been a damn shame."

"Excellent point." Waverly waved her hand between Ellie and me. "Carry on."

Vienna stood and walked over to Dean, flinging her arm around his back as she leaned against his side. "Thanks for an awesome night."

"I can't take any of the credit, princess." My cousin jerked his chin toward me. "This was all Finn's doing."

"And we kinda just invited ourselves along," Skylar added.

"I'm so glad you did." Ellie stepped away from me to give each of the women a hug. "We need to make our 'Spill it. But not the wine.' nights a tradition."

Waverly pointed at me. "You're the man with the plan. Make it happen."

"Whatever Ellie wants," I agreed with a nod.

"Aw, that's so sweet," Vienna sighed.

"And true." Meghan circled her hand in the air. "As awesome as tonight was, Finn plans thoughtful stuff like this for Ellie all the time. The rest of our men could take lessons from him on how to earn all the brownie points."

"Hey, now. I'm plenty thoughtful," Dean griped.

Vienna nodded. "He really is. You should've seen how he proposed. He

rented a plane with a banner. It was so sweet.”

“I think it’s fair to say that all of the Moore men know how to be romantic when the time calls for it,” Skylar murmured with a dreamy look in her eyes. Then she grabbed her purse, and the other women followed suit. “Who’s driving me home so I can show Baxter my appreciation for watching Franklin tonight?”

“That’d be me since I’m headed in your direction,” Dean offered. “Waverly, you’re with us too.”

Meghan beamed a smile at us. “And I get to ride with the lovebirds.”

“Yup,” I confirmed as I pressed my hand against Ellie’s lower back to guide her toward the exit. “I even moved one of the booster seats so you don’t have to sit in the middle.”

Meghan gasped and cast an accusing glare at Ellie as she walked to the parking lot with us. “You didn’t tell me about the booster seats.”

“Finn does so many amazing things for me and the kids. It’s hard to keep up.” Ellie leaned into my touch. “Like tonight.”

I stood a little taller at her compliment, happy that my small gestures meant so much to her.

After helping Meghan into the SUV, I pressed Ellie’s back against the passenger door. “I hope you don’t mind that I asked Ryland to hang out at your house while I came to pick you up. I know I could’ve just sent him instead, but I wanted to be the one to drive you home.”

“Heck no, I don’t mind.” Ellie twined her arms around my neck. “I love that you came to pick me up. If you hadn’t, who knows how long it would’ve been before we shared how we felt about each other?”

“Not long.” I captured her mouth in another deep kiss.

She patted my chest. “And Ryland was a good choice since the kids are already comfortable with him.”

“Get a room already,” Dean called as he rolled his vehicle next to us.

“Or a whole house,” Vienna shouted from the passenger seat.

“Yeah, yeah. We’re going,” I grumbled, shaking my head as they pulled out of the parking lot.

Meghan gave me a thumbs-up as I helped Ellie into the front seat. Her excitement over how happy we were together was sweet, and I appreciated the friendship developing between the two women. Meghan wasn’t the kind of person who’d take shit from anyone, and Ellie could use more people like that at her back.

Not that I was worried about someone giving her a hard time when they'd have to go through me to get to her. The days of Ellie having to face her troubles on her own were gone. I wouldn't let her down the way her ex had. I knew how lucky I was that she'd fallen in love with me, and I wasn't going to do anything to risk our relationship. Ever.

ELLIE

I had never wanted anyone more in my life. The short drive back to my house must have taken only fifteen minutes, including dropping off Meghan at her place, but it felt like an eternity. It didn't help that while he was driving, Finn's hand was on my thigh and he was running his fingers on the seam of my jeans, getting closer and closer to my aching pussy without Meghan being aware from the back seat.

The second he pulled into the garage and turned off the SUV, he pulled my face to his in a scorching kiss. I couldn't wait any longer. I needed him now. I kissed him back, running my hands over his wide shoulders and firm chest. He felt so good.

This man was sexy as sin...and he loved me. All of me. Only me.

His hands ran over my back, one landing on my breast, and he started playing with my hardening nipples. My hands moved down, and I caressed his hard cock over his pants.

"Ellie, if we don't go inside now, I will take you in this car. While that might be fun, I can't guarantee that Ryland isn't going to hear us and come in here to see what's going on. And I promise that your bed will be much more comfortable."

"Crap," I muttered, my eyes going wide. "I can't believe I forgot your cousin is sitting on my couch right now."

His cell phone dinged with a notification, and he smirked at me after glancing at the screen. "Not anymore. Ryland just sent a text letting me know he saw us pull up and heard the garage door go up and down, so he's headed home. Benjamin and Madison are sound asleep in their beds."

“Thank goodness,” I sighed. “Your cousin is awesome, but it’s already going to be hard enough to sneak up to my room without waking the kids.”

Finn interlaced our fingers and lifted my hand to brush a kiss against my knuckles. “Are you sure you want me to spend the night at your place while they’re here? That’s a big step.”

I took a moment to consider my answer before nodding. “It’s a step I’m ready for, and so are Benjamin and Madison.”

His hand tightened around mine. “I love you so fucking much.”

I didn’t think I’d ever get used to hearing him share his feelings with me so openly, but I was looking forward to getting those three little words from him on a regular basis now that we’d broken the seal. And not biting them back when my heart was full. “I love you, too.”

We both got out of the car, but we didn’t even make it to the garage door before he was all over me again. His arms wrapped around me from behind, his fingers playing with my breasts, and his hard cock pressed against my ass. “One day very soon, I am going to bend you over the hood of my SUV and fuck you hard enough that your neighbors might call the police.”

His words made my knees go weak, and I had to grip his hand tightly as he nudged me into the house. Two steps into the kitchen, and he had pulled my shirt off, gripping it in his fist. By the time we made it to the staircase, my bra had disappeared, and his shirt was long gone.

The only sound was our panting as he used his mouth and free hand to drive me wild. They were all over my tits, squeezing, biting, making my pussy drip with need. He sucked one nipple into his mouth, making me moan and lace my fingers in his soft hair.

He bit down gently, then moved to the other side. After squeezing my butt, his hand moved between my legs to pet my pussy.

“Baby, I can feel how hot and wet you are for me.”

“I need you, now.” My words came out as a soft whine.

“Then get your sexy ass upstairs,” he growled, letting go of me.

I turned to quietly run up the stairs, and he stayed right behind me, his hands never leaving my body.

When we made it to my room, I shut the door behind us and flipped the lock so we wouldn’t have any surprise visitors at the wrong time. My bedroom was on the opposite end of the hallway from Benjamin and Madison, and luckily, I hadn’t heard a peep from either of them as we made our way upstairs.

I unzipped his fly and dropped to my knees, kissing the flat expanse of skin over his abdomen and making a path down to his gorgeous hard-on. His hands fisted in my hair, pulling me toward his dick.

“Be a good girl, and show me what you can do.”

My core clenched at the heat in his voice when he said “good girl.” I opened my mouth wide for him, sticking out my tongue and dragging it along the underside of his hard length from root to tip, watching as he sucked in a harsh breath as I did it again. His hands tightened in my hair—not enough to hurt but enough to tell me what he needed from me.

I wrapped my lips around the head of his dick and sucked. Nothing was sexier than his moan as I moved my lips over him, taking more and more of him deeper into my throat.

I moved slowly, savoring the clean salty taste of his precome and the way the muscles of his thighs tensed under my hands when I leaned against him. Then I sat back on my heels, sliding him out of my mouth with a pop, and moved to lick at his balls, making a broken moan escape from his lips before moving back to dragging my tongue over the sensitive skin of his head.

He gently pulled me back by my hair, taking his dick away from me before helping me stand up. “Baby, you keep doing that, and this will be over before it starts.”

“What if I want you to come in my mouth?” I asked, batting my eyes at him.

He growled, then pulled me in for another searing kiss while I undid the button on my jeans and let them fall to the ground.

“You first,” he said before picking me up and tossing me on the bed. I landed in a pile of blankets with a giggle, and he was on me in a second, burying his face between my thighs.

My giggle turned into moans as he lapped at my clit, making my head spin as waves of pleasure flowed over my body. He didn’t stop until my thighs shook, and I was a moaning mess. Then he slipped in two fingers and sent me over the edge.

“Again,” he growled, pushing his fingers faster, dragging them against my G-spot harder. His mouth went back to my sensitive clit, and he pulled another orgasm from my body. I wasn’t sure the first one had ended before he had me coming for him again. It was even more intense than the first one, leaving me shaking and aching for his dick.

I pulled my body away from him before he thought of doing that again.

Then I got to my knees on the bed and pulled his head to mine, kissing him, tasting my pleasure on his lips and tongue.

“I need you,” I said against his mouth.

“You have me.” He wrapped his arms around me, pulling my body against his before laying me on the bed.

The mood shifted from needy and desperate to calm and loving. He had me in his arms and didn’t need to rush. He knew as well as I that neither of us was going anywhere ever again. This wasn’t a quick expression of passion anymore. This was more. Maybe it always had been, and I just hadn’t been willing to admit it until now.

He kissed me again softly as I wrapped my legs around his waist. Then he pushed inside me in one long, fluid motion, filling me completely. I moaned his name as he rocked his hips into mine in slow, smooth movements.

Finn was in so deep, stretching me so perfectly, and I was in heaven. My entire body tingled with the pleasure he was giving me.

“I love you.” He gazed into my eyes as he continued to push into me.

“And I love you,” I said on a gasp. His eyes slid closed as though he was savoring my words.

“Say it again.”

“I love you,” I repeated as he started moving faster.

I kept saying those three little words until he thrust so hard and fast that all I could do was mumble incoherent moans of pleasure. The pressure in my core was building fast, ramping up for an intense orgasm that I knew only he could give me.

“Baby, you are such a good girl.” His voice came out in grunts. “And you’re all mine.”

“Yes, I’m all yours,” I whispered just before he changed the angle a bit and sent me flying over the edge. I screamed out my pleasure, pressing my mouth to his shoulder to muffle it a bit. He was right there with me, coming with a grunt and filling my pussy up. Then he collapsed on top of me and wrapped me in his arms before turning us both over so he was still buried inside me, but with me resting on top of him.

His heart hammered against his chest as I laid my head on his warm skin, enjoying the feeling of being in his arms.

I was finally exactly where I was meant to be—warm, loved, and happy with Finn.

FINN

Waking up at Ellie's house with the kids was a whirlwind of activity. She'd been right about Benjamin and Madison being ready for this step because they barely blinked at finding me in the kitchen, helping to make breakfast when they woke up. And I'd been right about how quickly word would spread about being a couple because my mom texted me when I was in the shower while Ellie did school drop-off.

Knowing it was better to head her off at the pass, I called her instead of sending a reply.

"Finn Elias Moore," she three-named me, letting me know that she wasn't happy with me. "Why am I the last one to hear that you're in a serious relationship?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Plenty of people don't know about Ellie and me yet, Mom."

"Your cousins must be in the loop since word around town is that Ellie went to the wine bar with Skylar, Waverly, and Vienna last night," she argued.

I winced at the speed at which the Mooreville grapevine worked. "It's barely eight o'clock in the morning, and you've already heard all that?"

"Yes, and I also now know that she works for you, has two children, and your grandfather thinks she's wonderful." She sniffled. "And that you told her you loved her before kissing her in front of an entire bar full of people."

"Grandpa is right. She really is wonderful. You're going to love her, Benjamin, and Madison."

"A boy and a girl," she whispered. "How sweet."

There was a pounding on the door, so I quickly pulled on my jeans. “I’m going to have to call you back later, Mom. Someone’s here, and they don’t sound happy. I want to take care of whoever it is before Ellie returns from dropping the kids off at school.”

When the knocking repeated, louder this time, I raced downstairs without bothering to put on a shirt first. Throwing open the door, I hissed, “What the fuck do you want?”

Her ex-husband puffed out his chest and tried to push past me. “Where’s Ellie?”

No way was I going to let him inside her house when she wasn’t here. Bracing myself, I widened my stance so he couldn’t get around me. “School starts in ten minutes. Where the hell do you think she is?”

His gaze dropped to my bare chest, and a muscle jumped in his jaw. “Go put a shirt on, for fuck’s sake. You shouldn’t be walking around my children’s home half naked.”

Although I didn’t owe him any explanations, I muttered, “I was fully dressed while they were here. I waited until after they left to hop in the shower.”

“After spending the night?” he hissed.

Ellie stomped up her front steps to face off against her ex. “That’s none of your business.”

I’d been so focused on him that I hadn’t even heard her pull into the driveway. But I sure as fuck wasn’t going to let her confront the jerk alone, so I stepped out onto the front porch and closed the door behind me. Moving to her side, I wrapped my arm around her back to let her know she had my full support.

“It absolutely is my business. You let him watch our kids without talking to me about it first,” he growled, planting his fists on his hips as he paced back and forth on the front porch.

Ellie heaved a deep sigh, her hand tightening on my arm as she nodded. “I did, and for that, I’m sorry. But only that.”

“They shouldn’t have even known about him before I did,” he argued.

“You don’t have a whole heck of a lot of room to complain, Thad. You introduced Penny to Benjamin and Madison before our divorce was final without saying a word to me about your decision,” she pointed out. “And that was a much more confusing time for the kids since they didn’t understand what our breakup meant yet.”

He raked his fingers through his hair. "Yeah, well...they have good reason to be confused now, too."

"I don't understand why you think that." Ellie shook her head. "Things have been going so well lately. You haven't missed a weekend with the kids, and that consistency has been really helpful, especially for Benjamin."

"I broke up with Penny," the bastard blurted, his angry gaze darting toward me. "And the kids know that I want to work on our marriage."

"What in the hell did you just say?" she hissed, stomping over to him to jab her finger against his chest. "Please tell me that you did not get our children's hopes up about their parents getting back together without so much as a conversation with me first? Because if you had bothered to talk to me about our marriage that officially ended almost two years ago but was over much longer than that, then I would have gladly explained to you that pigs will fly before I would so much as consider for even one minute getting back together with you."

I moved to stand at her side again, crossing my arms over my chest to stop myself from slugging the guy. "And as a veterinarian, I can confirm that's never going to happen."

"Butt out," Thad growled, his eyes narrowing. "What happens between my wife and me is none of your damn business."

"Ex-wife," I corrected, emphasizing the important part.

"If you'd do the right thing and back off, we could be together again," Thad insisted.

Ellie let out an exasperated huff. "That's never going to happen."

"That's not true," Thad denied, starting to look frantic with his wide eyes, red cheeks, and hair standing on edge. "You didn't even want to get divorced in the first place."

"For about five seconds until I found out you'd been cheating on me!" Ellie yelled.

Thad proved he was disconnected from reality when he said, "But Penny isn't an issue anymore. She moved out of my place, and she's not working for the practice. I'll never see her again, if that's what it takes."

"Just when I thought it wasn't possible, you go to a new low."

Thad's brows drew together. "What do you mean?"

"You came over here, all pissed off that I hadn't told you about Finn when I didn't even know that Penny had moved in with you."

"I'm sorry, but she's gone now."

Her ex wasn't truly listening to a word Ellie was saying, which made it hard as fuck to stand back and let her handle him.

"I'm stunned, actually." She shook her head with a laugh. "I would've thought you'd be thrilled that I found someone else before the three years of alimony payments are over. It wouldn't have surprised me in the least if you'd tried to push me down the aisle to Finn so you'd be let off the hook."

"I would never do that," Thad denied.

"How would it be any different from going in front of the judge over and over again with ridiculous excuses for why your payments should be reduced?" Ellie asked, jabbing her finger in the air. "Except that this would actually be successful."

"Because I don't want you to be someone else's wife," he yelled, his face getting redder. "You've always been mine."

"I was yours...until you threw me away." Ellie sounded exhausted as she heaved a deep sigh, and I pulled her against my side so she could lean against me. "The worst part is that you already knew you were going to cheat on me before we even moved back. That's why you had us buy the house in Mooreville instead of Stuart. You have nobody else to blame but yourself for the fact that I met Finn. I never would've been here if you hadn't tried hiding what was happening with Penny from the beginning. And I never would have taken the job at his clinic if I hadn't needed the extra money. Again, because of you."

I hated all the pain she'd gone through, but I was also grateful that the guy had been such an epic failure of a husband because it had brought Ellie to me. I'd happily spend every day of the rest of my life making up for his mistakes. I loved her that much.

"I didn't...I wasn't..." he sputtered.

"Please don't ruin the happiness I've finally managed to find after you did your best to destroy me," Ellie pleaded, a lone tear streaming down her cheek. "I'm not yours anymore, Thad. I'm Finn's now."

"Ellie, no," he cried, shaking his head.

"You heard her." I stepped between them and jerked my chin toward his car. "You made your play, as fucked up as it was, and Ellie shot you down. This is over. You need to leave."

"No, I'm staying here until she listens to reason and takes me back." He jabbed a finger at me. "You're the one who needs to go."

"You need to get used to me being around," I warned. "I love Ellie. She

loves me. I'm not going anywhere. Ever."

My words pushed him over the edge, and he shoved me, trying to get to Ellie. There was no way in hell that I would let that happen, so I pulled my arm back and landed a solid punch against his nose. Blood spurted from one of his nostrils, and he fell back onto his ass. "Fuck, I think you broke my nose."

Just when I thought things couldn't get worse, a police car pulled into the end of the driveway, and John climbed out. His gaze jumped between the three of us as he made his way to the front porch. "Good morning, Finn. Ellie. Is everything okay? We got a noise complaint from one of your neighbors."

"I want to press charges for assault." Thad pointed at his bloody nose. "He punched me for no reason."

"Actually, he had a great reason," Ellie argued, leaning against my side as she glared at her ex. "He was defending me, pure and simple. You wouldn't leave my home no matter how many times I asked."

"Sounds as though you're the one in the wrong here, sir." John approached Thad with his hand where his handcuffs were clipped to his belt. "If Ellie asked you to leave, then you need to get going."

Thad gestured at his face again. "What about my nose? Are you just going to ignore the fact that I have blood streaming from it?"

John shrugged. "I don't know you, but I do know Ellie, and I'm inclined to believe her version of events."

"What the fuck?" Thad gaped at Ellie. "Have you been with him too? When did you become such a slut?"

I clenched my fists at my sides. He earned a hell of a lot more than a punch to the nose with that insult, but landing myself in jail wouldn't do Ellie any good. Knowing that was the only thing holding me back.

ELLIE

I gnoring the fact that John was here in his official capacity as a police officer, I turned to Finn and growled, “Please, punch him again. Maybe it’ll knock some sense loose in his brain.”

“See,” Thad yelled, pointing at me with the hand that wasn’t holding his nose. “She just admitted to it.”

Finn shrugged. “I wasn’t going to deny it. Like Ellie said, I was simply defending my girlfriend from a trespasser.”

“Trespasser?” Thad squawked. “It’s my money that paid for this house!”

“Not this again,” I groaned, scrubbing my palms down my face.

“Again?” Finn muttered.

“He tried using the same argument on me when he showed up on my doorstep after he found out that you gave me a job and helped drop the kids off at school when I had the flat tire.”

Thad threw his hands up in the air. “Because that’s when everything started to go wrong!”

Feeling as though I was talking to our son instead of a grown-ass man, I asked, “What do you mean?”

“Penny got pissed that I was upset about you getting a job. She didn’t understand why I cared who you were working for or if your new boss gave Benjamin and Madison a ride to school.” Thad rolled his eyes as if it was ridiculous for a woman to expect her boyfriend to be over his ex-wife...even if she’d stolen him from her in the first place. “Then she complained about me having them for my weekends. And started talking about how we should have our own baby.”

None of what I knew about Penny was good, but this was much, much worse. “You let our children be around a woman who thought they were a nuisance? Have you lost your damn mind even more than you already had?”

“No.” He shook his head, his eyes full of sorrow. “Her acting like that finally woke me up to all of the mistakes I’ve made. So I sent her away for a spa weekend when I had them.”

“At least you did one thing right,” I muttered.

“But then Benjamin wanted to know where she was.” He heaved a deep sigh. “And I told him that he didn’t have to worry about Penny being around anymore. And that I was going to talk to you about it soon.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and tapped my foot against the floor of the porch. “Is that when you told them you wanted to work on our marriage? Because that’s fucked up, Thad. You can’t drag our children into a mess like that when I’ve finally gotten them to a good place after the last stunt you pulled destroyed their family.”

“I...uh...might’ve exaggerated a bit in the hope that you’d really listen to me.”

I narrowed my eyes. “With me? Or with them?”

“With you.” His gaze darted toward Finn, and he sighed again. “Benjamin thought that I already knew about you and Finn dating. So when I told him we would talk soon, he asked if Finn would be there too. I had kind of assumed that he would hope it meant we were getting back together, so his response threw me off.”

My son had not hidden how much he liked Finn, and I knew he was still upset with his father for missing so many weekends with him and Madison. But I never expected he would metaphorically twist the knife in his dad’s chest, intentionally or not. I was going to need to keep a close eye on him in the coming months to make sure he wasn’t putting on a brave face to protect me while he was struggling inside.

“Is that why you didn’t come over to talk to me until today?” I asked since it had been a week and a half since he’d dropped them off after his last visitation.

He raked his fingers through his hair. “Yeah, I heard about what happened at Sip & Swirl last night and lost my cool.”

“Okay, things seemed to have de-escalated.” John surveyed the three of us. “I’m assuming nobody wants to press charges for trespassing or assault?”

“Nah.” Thad squeezed the bridge of his nose. “I probably earned that

punch since I was being an ass.”

“Damn straight,” Finn grumbled.

My ex shot him a baleful look. “But it’s the only free shot you’ll ever get.”

“That’s enough.” Things were never going to be great between us again. There was too much water under that bridge. But we couldn’t keep going the way that we had been lately. It wasn’t good for any of us. “We all need to learn how to be on the same page, for Benjamin and Madison’s sake.”

“I’ll try, but it’s gonna take a while before I can be around you two,” Thad griped before stomping over to his car and peeling down the street.

I shook my head with a heartfelt sigh, not sure if I should laugh or cry after all of that. “I can’t believe he had the nerve to act like he’s the one whose feelings were hurt.”

“I can’t blame the guy for finally pulling his head out of his ass and realizing what he lost.” Finn pulled me against his chest to give me a hug.

“I don’t think that guy caught on to the fact that you already peed around Ellie.” John shook his head and chuckled. “Covered up any claim he might have had on her before.”

Everything that had just happened with Thad had left my brain whirling, but I was pretty sure I’d still remember something like that. “Peed on me?”

“Not on, *around*,” John corrected as though that would clear it all up for me.

“Ignore him,” Finn suggested. “Like I said before, John likes to think he’s funny. But he’s not.”

“Aw, c’mon,” John groaned. “You’re not going to cut me any slack after how I just helped get rid of her ex? Just because I flirted with your woman before you even claimed her?”

“You flirted with me?” I pointed at my chest. “When? Because I don’t remember anything like that happening.”

“When he came in to see why Rufus was off his food,” I muttered, glaring at the police officer.

“You’re a lucky guy.” John clapped Finn on the back. “Even before you made your move like I suggested, she only had eyes for you, man.”

I nodded as he headed back to his squad car. “He isn’t wrong about that. I thought about you way too often after that day on the sidewalk in front of Ryland and Waverly’s office.”

“And he’s also right about me being lucky.” Finn brushed his lips against

mine. “Because I jumped at the chance to hire you even though I knew how hard it would be to keep my hands off you.”

I trailed my finger down the middle of his chest. “It’s a good thing you don’t need to try anymore since you can touch me all you want.”

“Is the coast clear?” a woman called from the passenger seat of a car parked at the curb in front of my house.

“Shit,” Finn groaned. “What’re my parents doing here?”

“I can’t believe I’m meeting your mom and dad like this.” I tucked my hands in my pockets as my face heated. “They’re going to think I’m awful if they witnessed that whole mess with Thad.”

Finn pressed a finger against my chin to tilt my head back until I met his gaze. “My mom and dad aren’t going to judge you based on someone else’s actions.”

I hoped he was right because they had climbed out of the car and were headed our way. His mom shook her head with a sigh, waving her hand at Finn as she climbed my front steps. “Is there a reason you’re walking around outside without a shirt? I thought I taught you better than that.”

“From what I overheard, it sounded as though that was your ex?”

Reaching for Finn’s hand to grip it tightly, I nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“None of this ma’am business. It makes me feel old. Please call me Patty,” she offered.

His dad flashed me a smile that reminded me of Finn’s. “And I’m Bruce.”

“Mom, Dad,” Finn drawled, pulling me against his side and wrapping his arm around my back. “This is Ellie, my girlfriend.”

“I’m so sorry we’re meeting like this.” I grimaced. “I’m not sure what my ex was thinking, causing a ruckus like that.”

“No need to apologize,” she reassured me. “Smart women have been hoodwinked by men since the dawn of time.”

“I...um...thank you?” I stammered, stunned by her easy acceptance of what she’d witnessed with Thad.

She patted my hand with a smile. “At least you got two adorable children out of it.”

“I did, Benjamin and Madison.”

“And you’ve upgraded now that you’re with Finn.” She went up on her toes to give her son a kiss. “His father taught him how to be a good partner.”

“Only because you wouldn’t put up with anything less,” Bruce joked.

She elbowed him in the side. “Darn tootin’.”

“What’re you guys doing here?” Finn asked.

“It seemed as though something might be wrong when you ended our call so abruptly,” Patty explained.

“So she shoved me into the car and told me that we had to come over right away,” Bruce added.

“It turned out that I was right, didn’t it?” Patty asked with a shrug.

“Yes, dear,” Bruce sighed.

“When does school let out nowadays?” Patty asked, rubbing her hands together. “I can’t wait to meet Benjamin and Madison, too.”

“Not until two,” I answered.

“Darn.” Her shoulders slumped. “We have plans this afternoon, so I guess I’ll have to wait for another day. Unless you’d all like to come over for dinner tonight? I can make anything you want.”

I was touched by her offer and quickly accepted. “That would be lovely, but you don’t need to do anything special. The kids and I aren’t picky eaters.”

“It’s no trouble at all. Just ask Finn, I like to cook with my dinner guests in mind.”

Finn nodded. “I think she keeps a list of everyone’s favorite dishes so she knows what to make whenever we come over.”

“Except for my boys. Those I know by heart,” she boasted. Hooking her arm through Bruce’s, she tugged him back down the steps. “We’d better run over to the store for supplies. Send me a text so I know what to make. For dessert, too.”

As they climbed back into the car, I beamed a smile at Finn. “I think your mom likes me.”

“Of course she does, baby.” He tugged me inside the house and kicked the door shut behind us. “You’re quite likable, and we love each other.”

“Yeah, well,” I sighed. “I’m pretty sure Thad’s parents only tolerated me because they thought we wouldn’t stay together since we were so young when we started dating.”

“Then I guess it’s a good thing that my mom and dad are a fuck of a lot smarter than them.” His lips curved into a satisfied smirk. “And they raised me to treat people right, especially the ones I love.”

“Thank goodness for that.”

The highs and lows of the past day had left me reeling. So much had happened in such a short time. Finn and I had professed our love for each other. My ex-husband had tried to win me back and earned himself a bloody

nose for it. I had gotten myself a posse of girlfriends. My children were happy to see Finn at our house this morning, a major milestone in our relationship. And his parents had welcomed me to the Moore family with open arms.

Life with Finn would never be boring...and I wouldn't have it any other way.

EPILOGUE

FINN

Watching my beautiful wife walk across the stage to accept her diploma filled me with more pride than I'd felt when I received my doctorate in veterinary medicine. She had overcome so many obstacles to get where she was today. And none of it had dimmed her brightness.

Her parents and my family surrounded Benjamin, Madison, and me as we all surged to our feet to cheer Ellie on. We were louder than anyone else had been before her name was announced, which made her laugh and shake her head.

The rest of the ceremony went by painfully slow, but eventually, it was over, and we met her outside.

"Congratulations, baby."

"Thank you, honey." She beamed a smile at me, her skin practically glowing with happiness.

Benjamin gave her a hug, the top of his head already coming up to her shoulder after his most recent growth spurt. "Good job, Mom."

"You looked so pretty up there, Mommy," Madison complimented as she reached for her mom's hand.

Her mom pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I'm so proud of you, sweetie."

"Are you ready to put that accounting degree to good use?" Ryland asked. "Because Waverly and I are more than ready to hand the bookkeeping for the practice over to you."

"I could use help with mine, too," Jude chimed in.

"Same with me," Rigden added.

"Do you know how to do business plans?" Ethan wanted to know since

he'd been talking about opening another tattoo shop.

"As her husband, I get first dibs on her skills." I smiled down at her. "Right, baby?"

"Sure," she readily agreed. "But there's another project we need to work on first."

My brows drew together as I racked my brain, trying to figure out what she could be talking about. "There is?"

"Yup." She took my hand and placed it on her belly. "I'm pregnant."

My breath caught in my chest. "You're going to have my baby?"

"We're going to get a baby sister?" Madison squealed, jumping up and down.

"Or a brother," Benjamin chimed in with a grin.

"Another grandchild," my mom cried, clapping her hands.

Her mom murmured, "Such wonderful news."

"Holy shit, guys. Congratulations." Rigden clapped me on the back before hugging Ellie.

Everyone else took their turn wishing us well with the pregnancy. Once they finished, I pulled my wife close and murmured, "I can't believe you were able to keep this a secret from me until today."

"Since announcing pregnancies is a thing in your family, I thought it was the perfect time to share the news with you," Ellie teased, bringing up the fiasco that had happened last May when my little brother got his bachelor's degree.

"Yeah, this is a hell of a lot less shocking." I shook my head with a chuckle. "How far along are you?"

"Only five weeks." Ellie rested her hand over mine and squeezed. "I know I probably should've waited to tell everybody since it's early days yet, but I couldn't resist."

"The way you did it was perfect, baby. And it's not as though keeping a secret this big is even possible with my family," I reminded her.

"I know." Her lips curved into a satisfied smile. "That's one of the things I like best about them. Your family might be nosy and loud, but everyone is there for each other when you need them."

My dad brushed a kiss against her cheek. "That's what family is all about."

"I've got the kids," my mom assured us as she guided Benjamin and Madison over to Dad's car. "You two take your time. It'll be a little bit before

everything is ready for the party.”

“Maybe I can add something about the baby on the cake,” her mom muttered as she followed her dad over to their rental.

“I’ll take Duke for a walk,” Benjamin offered before he climbed into the back seat.

Since she had me around to help with the puppy, Ellie had finally caved when Benjamin had asked for about the hundredth time if we could adopt Duke. That hadn’t been happy about it since the puppy had been one more reason the kids preferred our house over his. But at least realizing how badly he’d fucked up with Ellie had prompted him to work on being a better father to Benjamin and Madison. It also helped that his new girlfriend was a lot nicer than his last. And he’d told his parents to keep their opinions about her to themselves if they weren’t happy about it.

Ellie waited until we were alone to ask, “You’re happy about the news, right?”

“Fucking thrilled, baby.” I captured her mouth in a deep kiss, pouring all my emotion into it.

When I finally lifted my head again, she pressed her fingers against her swollen lips with a sigh. “Good, because for a second there, I thought you looked a little disappointed when I told you that I was pregnant.”

“Remember when we first had lunch from Trattoria in my office?”

“Um, yeah. Of course.” Her cheeks filled with heat—which was so damn adorable considering how long we’d been together. “Considering what we did on your desk afterward, I’m never going to forget that day.”

“I just remembered a thought I had way back then about how, with Benjamin and Madison being two years apart, maybe you’d have a third who had the same gap as Logan and I do,” I explained.

She laughed and twined her arms around my neck. “You were thinking about knocking me up before we even had sex?”

“Right before our first time, yeah,” I admitted.

She rubbed her cheek against my chest. “No wonder I fell head over heels in love with you. You’re so damn sweet.”

“And sexy,” I growled.

“Very sexy,” she agreed. “Which is how I wound up pregnant already.”

“Hell yeah.”

She wagged her brows at me. “And you never know...our next baby might be eleven years younger than this one, and then you’d get that gap you

were hoping for. Or the one after that, even.”

Thinking about babies that were the perfect blend of the two of us, who would grow up with the best big brother and sister in the world, I murmured, “I like how your sharp as fuck brain works, baby.”

In the mood for another steamy romance with a boss hero in pursuit of the heroine who works for him? Read [Bare Your Soul!](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I absolutely adore reading—always have and always will. When I was growing up, my friends used to tease me when I would trail after them, trying to read and walk at the same time. If I have downtime, odds are you will find me reading or writing.

I am the mother of two wonderful sons who have inspired me to chase my dream of being an author. I want them to learn from me that you can live your dream as long as you are willing to work for it.

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