

Smokin'
Hot

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

GABBI
GLINES

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Hot*

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ABBI
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Excerpt from Prologue

One

Acknowledgments

To my daughter, Annabelle. You finally got your Saxon story.

I

“Surprises are foolish things. The pleasure is not enhanced, and the inconvenience is often considerable.”

—Jane Austen



ONE

SAXON

This wasn't me. I pressed against my temples with my thumbs and groaned. How had I become this? Hungover with a naked woman asleep in my hotel bed. Where had I even met her? Fuck, last night was all scrambled up in my head.

My phone started ringing, and I winced, reaching for it beside my pillow. Squinting, I looked at the screen. It was Gage. When had we split up from him last night, and why had I decided going off with freaking Kye and Mattia was a good idea?

"Yeah," I said into the phone. Even the sound of my own voice was painful.

Gage's chuckle made me scowl. "Sounds like Kye made sure to break you in good."

I grunted.

“We are meeting with Liam and Micah in two hours at Devil’s. Be ready.”

Fuck, my head hurt.

“Okay,” I replied.

Another amused laugh from Gage, and then the line went dead.

The woman in the bed made some noises, and I glanced back at her to see she was stretching. Her tits were the biggest I’d ever seen in person, and there was no way those were real. They reminded me of two basketballs, just sitting there perfectly on her chest. I shook my head, disgusted with myself, and stood up.

“You leaving me?” she asked.

I paused and tried to figure out what the hell I was supposed to do with her now. Hell, I didn’t even know her name. Had I asked? I barely remembered bringing her back here. The three used condoms on the floor were a fucking relief. At least I had been careful.

“I got work,” I said, hoping that sent her away.

“Yeah, at the club. You’re taking me back with you,” she said.

What the fuck had I told her about the club? Shit!

I turned around and looked at her. Long dark brown hair with purple tips hung over her shoulders. Fake lashes, plump lips, and more makeup than was necessary. Was she a stripper?

I needed to call Kye. He’d gotten me into this. I should go bang on his hotel room door and hand her over to him. I would if I knew which room he was in. We weren’t even an hour from home. I should have gone back with Gage.

She moved to get off the bed, smiling at me like she thought we were about to go another round. Nope, sorry. I was sober now. I also felt like shit.

“What time do we need to leave?” she asked, walking over to me and sliding her hand over my bare chest.

“I need to leave soon. You should, uh ... I’ll get you an Uber.” That was nice enough.

She frowned. “An Uber? Why? We are going to the same place.”

I was confused. Why did she think she was going to a meeting at Devil’s? Did she work there?

“What?” I asked, wincing as the throbbing pain in my head got worse.

Her long, sharp, pointy nails, which had rhinestones on them, ran down my chest until her fingers wrapped around my cock. Even though my head felt like it was going to explode, my damn dick didn’t seem to mind. He wasn’t against the attention. She saw it harden from her touch, and her eyes lifted back to mine before she dropped down to her knees in front of me.

I watched her, battling with telling her to leave or letting her suck me off. When her lips wrapped around my cock, I decided I was going to let her finish this. Closing my eyes, I let my head fall back as she began to suck me like a pro. No girl I’d ever been with gave head like this. It was porn-worthy. When I hit the back of her throat and she didn’t even gag, I opened my eyes and stared down at her.

My dick wasn’t small. Fully erect, it was a solid ten inches. Yet her eyes didn’t even water. She swirled her tongue around it as she took me deep again and began making little moans of pleasure, as if she wanted this more than I did. She was going to get a mouthful if she kept this up. I’d give it to Kye—he knew how to pick up women.

I grabbed a handful of her hair and slammed her down hard on my dick to see if she could take it. She did—well. Her eyes lifted to mine, and she smiled before sucking me harder. Her nails bit into the front of my thighs as her cheeks hollowed out.

Closing my eyes again, I felt the pressure building in my balls.

“Fuck, that’s it,” I moaned. “Suck it hard.”

She was still making those hungry sounds, like she was starved for it. This was a fucking epic blow. My headache was forgotten. I shouted out as I began to shoot my release down her throat. She swallowed all of it, then began licking me clean.

Jesus Christ, she gave head like it was her fucking job.

That thought made me pause. Was it her job? Did I care? No, I didn’t care. That had been excellent.

Licking her lips, she stood up, slowly rubbing her tits against me as she did so. “You taste good,” she told me.

I started to say something when a knock on the door stopped me. I grabbed the sheet off the bed and wrapped it around me to go see if it was Kye here to take away the unknown female who had just sucked me dry. I swung open the door, and the words I was going to say to Kye froze, along with my entire body.

It wasn’t Kye.

It was Haisley fucking Slate.

It had been two months since I’d last seen her. Haisley had been with me when I got the call that her brother had abducted Levi’s girl, Aspen, from the hospital, where she volunteered. Haisley was the reason they found her so quickly

—because she used her phone to track her brother. And then, after all that shit, she'd still ghosted me. Blown me the fuck off.

She should have been at the hospital to volunteer that day instead of not showing up so she could be with me. I had admitted to Levi that I'd asked her to skip and spend the day with me. If she had been at the hospital, then Aspen wouldn't have been taken. I accepted all the blame. Still, she'd shut me out with one simple text.

This was a mistake. I don't want to see you anymore. Please leave me alone.

I'd texted her, called her, even gone by her trailer. Nothing.

I opened my mouth to ask her what the fuck she wanted when I noticed what she was wearing and the cart full of cleaning supplies, clean towels, and linens beside her. What the hell? Why was she working in a hotel in Gainesville? She didn't have a car to drive this far.

"Are you coming back?" the woman in my room called out.

I'd forgotten about her and the sheet around my waist.

"What are you doing here?" I blurted out, my headache now back with a vengeance.

Haisley's almond-shaped violet eyes, which had owned me, dropped to the floor. "I'll come back later," she mumbled and started to push the cart.

Let her go, Saxon, I told myself.

Then, I stepped out and grabbed her arm. "What are you doing here, Haisley?" I snapped at her.

I hated that she was here. That she was making me look at her. Reminding me how fucking gorgeous she was. How she'd made me feel shit I'd never

felt before, then just dropped me. Reminding me how easy I was to walk away from.

She turned back to me. “Working. I didn’t know.” She swallowed hard. “I wasn’t expecting to see you. Here. In there. I mean ...”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, which caused her tits to move, drawing my attention to them stretching the cheap fabric of her uniform. Had they gotten bigger, or was it just that her clothes didn’t fit right?

“This is where I work.”

I lifted my gaze from her chest and back to her eyes, and it felt like someone had kicked me in the gut. Dammit, her eyes were powerful. And I knew exactly how sweet she tasted. It still haunted my dreams.

“Sax, what is taking so long?” the woman from inside my room asked.

The way Haisley’s face paled as she looked past me, I knew the pro cocksucker was at the door behind me. Probably still naked. Fuck. Whatever. It didn’t matter. Haisley was the one who had hurt me. Not the other way around. I’d been in love with her. Admitting it sucked because it’d happened so fast, but it was true.

“I’m coming,” I said, tearing my eyes off the one girl I wished I’d never met, but couldn’t get out of my damn head.

Turning around, I walked back inside, shutting the door hard behind me.

“You know her?” she asked me.

“Not anymore,” I replied.



TWO

HAISLEY

Breathe. In and out. In and out.

I focused on the small spot staining the wall as I tried to calm myself. It wasn't as if I'd thought I'd never see him again. At some point, I was going to have to seek him out. But I had thought it would be on my time. When I was mentally ready ... prepared.

Not with him wrapped in a sheet with a gorgeous, naked woman in his room while I stood there in my uniform with my cleaning cart.

More breathing ... more breathing. That was what I needed.

But why was he in a hotel so close to home? I had never imagined seeing Saxon here. In all the many ways I had planned on what I would say to him and how I would say it, this hadn't been one of them.

If I had only known the future, would I have let myself be charmed by

Saxon Houston? Would I have gotten in that truck? Probably not. The day he'd pulled up behind me as I was walking home from my volunteer work at the hospital to offer me a ride had sent my world spinning off its axis. My life would never be the same.

Now, I was here. Basically homeless. Working this awful job. And pregnant.



TWO MONTHS AND TWO WEEKS AGO

My older brother, AJ, had forgotten to pick me up. Jerk. Why was he even home? He never stayed this long. He also didn't help with the bills, and he ate our food. He was the one who had offered to come get me. If I had known he wasn't coming, I could have gotten a ride from someone. Maybe even Aspen and her ride ... no. That dude made me nervous. He was too intense, and he looked ready to murder anyone who got too close to her. Must be nice. I'd never had any kind of protection in my life.

With guys, I was always having to protect myself. They seemed to want one thing from me, and I wasn't willing to give them that. When you were the second out of nine children, you didn't need birth control. Your daily life was birth control.

My mother worked twelve-hour shifts at Walmart six days a week, and on the seventh day, she cleaned houses. Five, to be exact.

When I wasn't working, I was cleaning the trailer we were all crammed into, making dinner, washing clothes, yelling at my younger brothers who did nothing to help, and putting out a fight—because when there were that many kids, someone was always fighting. During the school year, I helped with their homework, packed their lunches, did the grocery shopping. It was safe

to say, I was never having kids.

Only Vulcan and Vinn—the twelve-year-old twins—along with Thorn, the baby who was turning ten next week, had regular contact with their father. The rest of us either didn't know the man whose sperm had brought us into this world or he was in prison. My fifteen-year-old sister, Silver, only visited her dad in prison on his birthday every year. He was in for arson, theft, and attempted murder. He still had another ten years left to go.

AJ and I had been told we had the same dad, but we'd never met him. We were the results of an affair our mother had begun when she was eighteen. He was a married man, and she worked as a receptionist at his office. After AJ was born, he put her up for a while as his mistress, but when she told him about me, he accused her of getting pregnant on purpose and ended things.

Mom moved two states away to live with my aunt until she got pregnant with Jamaica—my eighteen-year-old sister—by my aunt's boyfriend.

Obviously, we were kicked out of my aunt's house when the paternity was revealed, and Mom then took up with a man she'd met in a bar where she was waitressing. That was Silver's dad. Cliff helped out some, but he went to prison when Silver was two.

After Cliff, Mom got pregnant with Salem, who would have been fourteen this past April. Salem never made it to the age of nine. Leukemia had taken her from us. We didn't know who her father was, and it still caused my chest to ache when I thought about how badly Salem had wanted to at least know his name before she died. It was something I didn't think I could ever forgive my mother for.

DJ, my thirteen-year-old brother, didn't know his dad either, but every year, he looked more and more like AJ. The resemblances weren't those that

they had gotten from our mother either. Then, of course, there was the fact that he was the only sibling I had with my eye color. Violet eyes weren't common. Especially our shade. I had started to think that my sperm donor had hooked up with Mom again and left her pregnant. She'd never admit it, but she wasn't ever going to give us the truth. The lies she fed us were all we would get.

Vulcan, Vinn, and Thorn were all from my mom's only marriage. It had lasted five years before Bobby Mills packed his bags and walked out of the door. I'd never been happier to see someone leave in my life. He still paid child support most of the time and came and got the three boys every other weekend. I made sure not to be there when he arrived. My stomach still turned when I thought of the past and the trauma he had caused both me and Jamaica. But especially Jamaica. She'd been younger and timid. His abuse was something that had changed her forever.

Stopping under a shade, I lifted the bottom of my shirt to wipe the sweat droplets from my face. I should have gotten some water before I started the six-mile walk to our trailer. My mouth felt like cotton. The hot Florida summer sun was relentless. Where was the random rain shower that seemed to come out of nowhere this time of year? I would gladly walk in that over this hellish heat. At least then, I could keep from dehydrating.

A truck slowed and pulled over behind me. Great, just what I needed. Some man trying to give me a ride. As if I was going to get in a truck with a stranger. Did I look stupid? Hello, sex trafficker.

I started walking away, taking a few steps, when a smooth, deep voice called out my name. I paused and turned back to the truck.

Saxon Houston.

He knew my name. I stared at him as he walked toward me. He was a year older than me, but every girl in town knew who he was. Him and Trev Hughes. They'd gone to the private high school for the elite while I'd gone to the one on the other side of town. Although, even at the public school, those two had been well known.

When he'd shown up that first day to pick up Aspen from the hospital, I'd never been more envious of another female in my life.

"You need a ride?" he asked me as he got closer. "It's fucking hot out here today."

Did I need a ride? In his truck? Oh my God. My clothes were sticking to me. I didn't even want to consider what my hair looked like. I was sure that I stunk.

"I, uh ..." I wanted to get in his truck more than I had wanted anything. Well, maybe not anything, but it was in the top five.

"I'm Saxon, a friend of Aspen's. I've seen you at the hospital the couple of times I've picked her up."

I smiled, trying not to laugh. Did he think there was a girl my age in this town that didn't know who he was? Surely, he was aware of his popularity.

"I know who you are," I replied.

He chuckled and looked kind of shy for a moment. "I wasn't sure. We definitely didn't go to school together. I'd know you if we had."

Was he flirting? No. He was just stating the obvious. Right? I was a mess. He was Saxon Houston. We were not remotely in the same league. He was also waiting on me to say something.

"I'm gross," I finally admitted. "I'm all sweaty and ..." I shrugged and

smiled, hoping he didn't think I was being rude.

The crooked grin that appeared on his face flashed dimples, and I felt my insides get all funny. Could he be any more beautiful?

"I broke in a horse all day. I can assure you, I smell worse."

The cowboy hat that sat on his head was tilted back, and his brown curls were peeking out from under it. I took in his white T-shirt, and it was dirty, as were his jeans. His face had distracted me so much that I hadn't noticed how the rest of him looked.

I doubted anything could make him smell bad. He was too pretty to stink. I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing at myself. No one was too pretty to stink. My head was all over the place with this guy.

"Um, well, if you don't mind. It's five more miles, and the first mile was hard enough," I admitted.

He frowned. "You were going to walk six fucking miles in this heat?" he asked, looking almost angry.

I shrugged. "My brother was supposed to get me. He didn't show."

Saxon nodded his head back to his truck. "Come on. I have cold bottled water and AC."

"Thanks," I said as I began walking toward the truck.

Saxon walked over to the passenger side and opened the door for me. No guy had ever opened a car door for me. This was one of those moments I would tuck away in my memory to never ever forget.

As the cool air started drying my sweat, I watched him jog around the front of the truck and climb inside the driver's side. He opened a middle compartment between our seats and pulled out a bottle of water, then handed

it to me. I sighed in relief as I took it from him.

“It’s nice and cold. I keep several here in the fridge in the summer,” he told me.

I glanced down at the fridge, realizing it was built into the truck. Jeez ... they put refrigerators in vehicles?

“Thanks,” I told him, opening the water and taking a long drink. My parched throat was instantly relieved.

After I drank almost half the bottle, I stopped gulping it down and turned to look at Saxon. He was staring at me with an odd look. His dimpled grin reappeared.

“I’ve got more if you need another one,” he said.

A small laugh escaped me. “I might.”

He shifted those brown eyes, which I could look at all day, from my face to the water bottle in my hand before pulling back onto the road. “You want to give me an address for the GPS or just tell me where to turn?”

I licked my lips and glanced at him. The muscles in his arms stretched the sleeves of his shirt. His tan was a deep golden color. Did he spend a lot of time at the beach, pool, or was he outside, working with horses a lot? I knew the Houstons did that whole racehorse life, but I never pictured Saxon doing manual labor. He was sexy, rich, and best friends with Trev Hughes. And it was common knowledge that Trev Hughes threw parties and lived a wild, free life. He didn’t do manual labor.

“I’ll tell you where to turn,” I said, glancing back at the road.

I didn’t need to ogle the guy and weird him out. He was being nice. That was all this was.

“So, tell me, since we didn’t go to school together, but you’re clearly my age or close to it, where did you go?”

I bit my bottom lip, not sure I wanted to engage in this questioning. I’d attended high school, but I’d ended up getting my GED because Mom needed me to work full-time. It was the same for AJ. Our income had been required to help out when we turned fifteen.

“Vanguard,” I finally replied, hoping he didn’t ask more questions.

“We played Vanguard in football,” he said, smirking at me.

I nodded. I was well aware. I had watched Saxon play my sophomore year. He was hard not to watch. It was one of the three football games I’d attended during high school.

“Did you win?” I asked, already knowing they had.

They’d always won. The game I had witnessed, Saxon had scored the winning touchdown. My crush on him had started that night.

He nodded his head, still grinning. “Which year? We won every year I played.”

I laughed, then took another drink of water. “Take the next left,” I told him.

He slowed and put on his blinker before turning.

“It’s another mile before you need to turn again.”

His brown eyes met mine again, and there was a gleam in them that made my heart flutter.

“Do you have a boyfriend? Seeing anyone?” he asked.

My pulse picked up its pace as I stared at him. Had he really asked me that?

I shook my head, then cleared my throat nervously. “No,” I replied.

I had no time to date. I taught eight yoga classes a week, cleaned six different houses a week, and volunteered at the hospital two days a week. The closest thing I'd come to a date was the nephew of my boss at the yoga center I worked at. He'd come to visit this summer and brought me coffee at work two mornings, but the few times he asked me out, I wasn't available. Sammy, another instructor—who was also a big ho—made it real clear how interested she was, and they'd dated the rest of the time he was in town.

“That might be the best news I've heard all damn week,” Saxon drawled with a sexy glint in his eye as he flashed that panty-melting smile at me.



THREE

HAISLEY

Three.

I closed my eyes and sighed.

Three used condoms in the trash.

At least he's using condoms, I thought bitterly as I emptied the bathroom trash from the room Saxon had now vacated.

He wasn't coming back. This room was to be cleaned for the next guest. I stared at the bed through the doorway of the bathroom, knowing I had to go back out there and try again.

My first attempt at stripping it had sent me running to the toilet to throw up. I wasn't sure if it was just because I did that a lot these days or if the smell of Saxon, mixed with the strong perfume the woman had been wearing, wafting from the sheets had been too much for me.

My emotions had been all over the place lately. I rarely had highs anymore, but the lows were becoming a regular thing.

If Milly, Silver's aunt, hadn't agreed to let me sleep on the sofa in her apartment until I could save up enough money to afford somewhere to live, I'd be living in a cardboard box. That was the only reason I was in Gainesville.

Milly's had been the only place I could go after Mom kicked me out.

When Mom had found out I was pregnant, she'd demanded to know whose it was. I refused to tell her, and she took my cell phone away from me. I finally told her, thinking she'd give me my cell phone back, but then she tried to force me to go demand money from the Houstons. There was no way I was doing that.

We battled for two days, and in the end, she gave me an ultimatum—abortion or be kicked out. I'd not expected that. I did a lot for the family. When I pointed out my income and all I did, Mom quickly told me a baby would take more money than I made for us and that she didn't want it there. Even while I packed my bags and tried to figure out where I was going to go, I kept thinking Mom would change her mind. She didn't.

While Jamaica was hysterical and crying over my being forced out, Silver called her father's only sibling and asked her if I could stay there for a little bit. Milly agreed, and I took my last paycheck from the yoga studio and the only cash I had left in my Venmo account from the two houses I had cleaned that week to get a bus ticket to Gainesville.

My brother AJ was no help, but he was also MIA. The last time I'd heard from him was a text, telling me he had to leave town. It was the day that he'd taken Aspen from the hospital and pissed off the freaking Mafia. I knew he

was alive, but the fact that he'd changed his phone number and completely disappeared was concerning. But then I'd learned a lot about my older brother that day. Things that should have been hard to believe, but unfortunately, none of it shocked me.

“Are you gonna change those sheets or glare at them?” a voice barked from the doorway.

I winced before looking at Shirley, the head of housekeeping. Her yellow hair, which clearly had come from a box, was wiry and thin, sticking up in random places, while her leathery skin stretched as she scowled at me.

“Sorry,” I replied and decided to breathe through my mouth and not my nose as I walked over to the bed and began to quickly take the sheets off it.

Images of Saxon and sex began to taunt me. Pushing those out of my mind was easier said than done. He was the first guy I'd trusted, the first guy to make me feel special, the guy I had given my virginity to, along with my heart. Somehow, he'd managed that in the span of two weeks. Along with knocking me up.

“When I hired you, it was because Milly said you were a good worker and not some prissy, spoiled ass. Don't make her a liar,” Shirley snarled before walking down to inspect the other rooms I had cleaned so far on this floor.

Focusing on my task and not giving Shirley anything else to complain about, I hurried to finish cleaning this room and get away from all memories of Saxon. Running into him here was just life tossing me more bad luck. It had been happening since I had been born. Starting with my mother. Sadly, for a short time, I had believed the powers that be had finally given me a break when Saxon walked into my world. The joke was on me.

Once I was finished, I stopped at the door and looked inside the room one

more time. It was an odd feeling. Seeing a place where the father of your unborn child had spent the night having a lot of sex with another woman.

All my life, I had promised myself I wouldn't become my mother. I would make smart choices. I wasn't having kids. One day, I'd own my own yoga studio and have a house in a nice neighborhood. Maybe a dog and a cat or both. A cute walkway lined with flowers. A tree in the yard with a swing on it for me to enjoy.

I never allowed myself to think about love or marriage. Watching my mother make one mistake after another with men had been enough to show me that love was a myth. That knowledge saved me from being stupid in high school. While other girls were worried about dating, boys, sex, I was worried about getting out of the life I had been born into.

All it had taken was one guy with brown eyes, dimples, and a sexy grin to snatch away my good sense.

Shaking my head at my own stupidity, I closed the door and pushed my cart to the next room. I knocked twice and waited. No one said anything. I tried again, just to be sure. My daily cleaning list said this room wasn't checking out today. They'd be here for another night or they were keeping the room for the day. If that was the case, they could still be in there and I wanted to be sure it was empty before going inside.

Slowly, I tested the door, pushing it open, then called out, "Hello," before I waited again.

Silence.

Satisfied that the room was vacant, I propped the door open and got my trash bag to go inside and begin cleaning up whatever mess was here first. I paused and groaned. There were two condoms on the floor and three that I

could see on the bed. Yuck. At least Saxon had used the trash can. This was one of the worst parts of cleaning hotel rooms. I hadn't even known people just tossed used condoms on the floor when they were done. I mean, really, who did that?

"Sorry, sugar, don't let me interrupt you. I just came back for something," a deep drawl said behind me.

Startled, I dropped the condom I had been trying to pick up with a clothespin and spun around. His eyes widened in surprise when he recognized me. My heart slammed against my chest. I had met him once, and it was a day that still gave me nightmares. Glancing down at the condoms I still had to pick up, I had my answer to who did something like this. Figured. Lifting my eyes back to meet his, I gave the tattooed blond guy a tight smile.

I didn't know his name. He hadn't introduced himself when he came with Aspen's guy, Levi, to "speak" to me, which was what Levi said to me as I stepped out of my trailer that day.

It wasn't speaking. It was threatening.

Speaking had consisted of me walking down the stairs and closer to his expensive black car before something was wrapped around my mouth, gagging me.

This was the guy who had done it and then jerked me back against his chest while telling me that they weren't going to hurt me. And they hadn't hurt me. They'd just terrified me while holding a gun against my spine.

His eyes shifted to the used condoms, then back to me, and he gave me an apologetic grin. "I should've tossed those in the trash," he told me.

If I didn't know what he was capable of, I'd probably respond with, *You think?* in a sarcastic tone.

But seeing as he had gagged me, put a gun to my back, and held me while Levi warned me to end all contact with Saxon, I wasn't going to piss him off.

When I had nodded with tears streaming down my face, I was sure I wouldn't live to see another day. However, they had let me go, and as they drove away, I'd realized I'd peed on myself before walking back inside and going to the bathroom to fall apart.

"Haisley," he said my name, and I stopped breathing.

Would he believe that I hadn't come here, looking for Saxon? Would I even get a chance to explain? Or was he going to pull a gun on me and use it this time?

Knowing I had to say something, I blurted, "I work here. I didn't come looking for Saxon!"

He smirked. "Guess that explains Saxon's shit mood. He must have seen you before we left."

I shifted my feet, nervously glancing at his hands to make sure a gun hadn't appeared in them before responding. "He was still in his room when I went to clean it. I had no idea he was here. I've been working here for three weeks—you can check my records with the hotel. I don't even live in Ocala anymore. I've kept my distance from him."

"Why did you move to Gainesville? I remember you had a shit ton of younger siblings to take care of," he asked me, looking more curious than anything.

Oh, because my mom kicked me out for getting knocked up and she already has too many kids shoved in a three-bedroom trailer as it is.

Yeah, I wasn't telling him that. I couldn't trust that they wouldn't kill me if they knew I was pregnant with Saxon's baby. In fact, I was almost positive

Levi would have no issue with making me disappear—forever.

“My mom decided it was time for me to move out. The trailer is cramped. I’m an adult.” That wasn’t a complete lie.

He frowned. “Your brother is in Orlando. Why didn’t you go there?”

A laugh bubbled out of me. Of course they knew where AJ was. I should be surprised they hadn’t been tracking me too. Just to keep me away from Saxon.

“I haven’t spoken to AJ in two months. Good to know where he is.”

The guy was still frowning. “Who do you live with? You don’t live alone, do you?”

Was this guy worried about where I lived? Seriously? He’d threatened me with a gun.

“I live with my younger sister’s aunt,” I replied. At least for now.

Her boyfriend had been getting friendlier, and I wasn’t sure how much longer I was going to be able to stay there.

“I’ll toss the condoms,” he said, walking over to pick up his mess.

I stepped back, still holding the garbage bag as he grabbed the ones off the floor. He turned to me and winked as he dropped them in the bag. Then, he went to the bed and jerked back the covers to make sure he retrieved all the used ones on the bed.

I’d been wrong. There were four on the bed. Jeez, had he been up all night?

“Busy night?” The words came out before I could stop them. I slapped my hand over my mouth, horrified that I had spoken my thought aloud.

He grinned at me. Thankfully, he wasn’t angry about my remark. “There were two of us and one of her.”

He seemed amused. That was a good sign.

“Her vagina must be sore,” I added, hoping to get another smile and then ease myself out of this room alive.

A bark of laughter startled me, and he flicked his tongue ring.

“Her ass and throat took some of the pounding too,” he told me. “I had some personal frustration to burn off.”

I felt my face heat up. This time, I bit my tongue to keep from blurting out some other stupid remark. I’d been lucky so far, but at any time, this man could put a gun to my head. I wasn’t sure what might make him snap.

“I thought it was the face and body. I’ll admit, you’re a head-turner, but there are plenty of hot pieces of ass out there. But I think I get it now. I can see why he got so fucked up over you. You remind me of someone... special to me.”

“What?” slipped right on out of my lips before I could think that through.

The guy stepped closer to me. “You’ve got a personality under all that other shit. It’s sassy. There’s a little wildcat in there. I respect it.”

Was he flirting with me? He couldn’t be. I was on their shit list. The *you aren’t allowed near anyone who is ours* list. The *we don’t trust you* list.

They’d made sure I understood that any contact I had with Saxon would be crossing a line I wouldn’t return from.

“This wildcat prefers not to piss off the big bad wolf. So, I’ll let you finish up in here, and I can start on another room. I’ll come back when you’re done,” I told him, tying the bag up as I headed for the door, my heart racing as fear coiled in my gut.

“Who is the big bad wolf?” he asked me.

I paused, then glanced back at him over my shoulder. “You held a gun to my back,” I reminded him, thinking maybe I shouldn’t have said anything at all.

His laughter was low and deep. I watched as he rubbed his jaw, and I noticed he had tattoos on his fingers too. He looked at me through his lashes with his head slightly tilted down.

“It’s a fucking shame,” he finally said.

“What?” I asked nervously.

He sighed. “That you’re AJ’s sister. Because I think you’re exactly what Sax needs.”

I swallowed hard and quickly left the room, not stopping until I was safely on another floor and locked in an empty room. Leaning against a wall, I slid down and pulled my knees up to my chest. I began to focus on my breathing to get through the building panic attack. I could control it normally. I just had to breathe.



FOUR

SAXON

Gage sat back on the leather sofa in Liam Walsh's office, smoking a cigar, smirking at me. He was enjoying this. I had gotten trashed and taken home a stripper who also did adult movies. We'd used condoms, but I was sure as hell getting checked as soon as we got back to Ocala.

"Echo, huh? You gonna see her again?" Gage asked me.

"No," was my immediate response.

"Did all three of you take one of Liam's girls to the hotel?" Levi asked as he sat across from me, frowning.

"Kye and Mattia shared one," I muttered.

That one had talked non-fucking-stop on the ride over here. At least Echo wasn't that annoying. She'd just kept touching me. I felt like I needed a damn shower.

“Surprised Kye didn’t rope you into his threesome instead of Mattia.” Gage smirked.

“Spanking asses with belts isn’t my thing, and neither is seeing another guy’s dick near the girl I’m trying to fuck.”

There was a lot in my life that had changed over the past six months, but that part was mine to control. I wasn’t letting the family completely transform me.

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it,” Gage drawled. “Not that I want that anymore but every single guy needs to have a taste of it. Just once.”

Levi let out a short laugh. “You’d fucking murder a man if he got his dick near Shiloh.”

Gage took the cigar from his clamped teeth. “I’d murder a man for thinking about Shiloh and his dick in the same sentence.”

“Just not my thing,” I grumbled. My head was still pounding. Why did he have to keep talking?

“Where the fuck is Liam?” Levi asked, standing back up and walking over to the liquor cabinet. “It’s Thanksgiving tomorrow, and Aspen is giddy about that shit. I need to get home.”

“Had an issue at one of his clubs in Miami last night. He’s on his way. Besides, Kye isn’t here yet. Left his wallet in the hotel room,” Gage told him. “The women are all cooking and baking. Well, except my woman. She’s just there, looking pretty.”

I dropped my head and rubbed my temples some more. That seemed to be the only relief I could get. I wasn’t touching a drop of alcohol for weeks. This was hell. I should have stuck with a couple of beers.

The door opened, and I lifted my head to see a guy with dreadlocks, covered in tattoos, wearing a leather vest thing—they called it a cut or some shit—walk into the room. Not Liam. Not Kye.

Jesus, I was ready to get this over with so we could leave.

Why couldn't I have gone with Blaise, Trev, and Huck to fucking Kentucky to buy a horse? I knew more about horses than Trev did. They were already home, and here we were, still dealing with this shit.

“Tex,” Levi greeted the man. I'd heard of him. He was one of Liam's strong arms.

“Liam said to tell you he was five minutes out. Y'all want me to have the kitchen bring up some food?”

“Sounds good. I'm starving.” Levi was always hungry.

The guy nodded and started to leave when Kye filled the doorway. He nodded at Tex and stepped inside. His gaze swung over to me, and then he grinned.

What the fuck was he up to now? It was his fault I had this headache and had woken up in bed with Echo.

“Funny thing happened,” he said, glancing over in Gage and Levi's direction before looking back at me. “I went back to my room to get my wallet, but the maid was already there, cleaning my room ...” He trailed off, waiting for my reaction.

Fucking hell. Of course he had gone back and seen Haisley there. I had been trying to forget that encounter. I glared at him. There was no point in bringing this up other than to annoy me.

“You were surprised this morning, too, and didn't even tell us,” Kye added.

“It wasn’t important.” My words came out in a snarl.

Kye crossed his arms over his chest and raised his brows at me. “Really? You spent weeks fucking sulking like a bitch over Haisley Slate, and she showed up at your door in that tight little maid uniform, and it wasn’t important?”

“Haisley was at the hotel?” Levi’s tone made it clear he was pissed.

What the fuck did it matter to him? This wasn’t his business.

“Seems she moved to Gainesville three weeks ago. Her momma had kicked her out. Too many kids in the house. I did a quick check with hotel management before I left to make sure she wasn’t lying. Her story checked out.”

Kye’s immediate defense of her rubbed me the wrong way. The fact that her mom had kicked her out didn’t sit well in my stomach though. Not that I should care. At fucking all.

“You talked to her then? Got all this out of her?” Levi asked him.

Kye nodded. “She was trying to clean up our used condoms off the floor with a clothespin. I made small talk and handled the mess for her.”

I winced. I didn’t care that she had been cleaning up used condoms or that she’d likely seen the ones I’d picked up and tossed in the trash. Didn’t matter. She wasn’t my concern.

“Where is she living?” Levi asked.

Kye shrugged. “I didn’t get stalkerish. Although she is a fucking hot package.”

My chest got tight as I fisted my hands in my lap.

“You should have asked. Seems off to me.” Levi had an angry expression

as he glared at Kye.

Was he asking for Aspen? Did she want to know? Why else would he give a shit? I didn't. Not anymore.

Unable to just sit there, I stood up and walked over to the pool table. I didn't want to think about Haisley. It was going to mess me up.

She had gotten under my skin, made me feel shit, made me think I was going to get the girl I wanted this time. Then—*bam*—she shut me out. When I went to her trailer, she wouldn't come to the door. Her kid brother told me if I didn't leave, he was calling the cops. She stopped showing up at the hospital. She'd just disappeared.

“After seeing her again and really getting a good look at her, I get why Echo didn't seem to do anything for you until you were wasted last night. Haisley is fucking prime-A pussy—”

My hand slammed down on the pool table. “SHUT UP!” I shouted. My head felt like it was going to split open.

“That's enough. We have business to handle,” Levi said.

I didn't look back at any of them. I couldn't. It felt like they would be able to see the torment in my eyes. Thinking about her pussy wasn't something I could handle. I hated Kye for even bringing it up. He was right though. That girl had fucking ruined me, and I despised her for it.

Getting her out of my dreams was the worst part. I couldn't control my mind when I slept at night.

I couldn't shut down the memories. Two weeks was all we'd had, but somehow, she'd wrecked me in that amount of time.



TWO MONTHS AND ONE WEEK AGO

My mood soured as I pulled up outside the run-down trailer Haisley lived in.

When I'd brought her home last week, it had been like a fucking punch in the gut to see this was where she lived. I didn't know her then. Just that she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. I had wanted to take her home with me and away from this.

Five dates later, and that desire was getting stronger. Every damn time I had to leave her here, I hated it.

The door to the trailer opened, and she stepped out, looking like a fucking dream. My distaste for where she lived was forgotten when her eyes met mine and a smile curled her lips.

Silky, long jet-black hair draped over one of her bare shoulders. The orange halter top showed off way too much skin. Smooth, fucking perfect olive skin. My eyes dropped to her stomach before traveling down to the short, faded denim skirt she was wearing. Legs for fucking days, then a pair of black Converse. Damn, she took sexy to a whole new level. The small duffel bag in her hand made me even more ready to get her in this truck.

I stepped out to go open the passenger side for her and take her bag. Opening doors for women was something that I'd been raised to do, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't doing it to touch her and inhale that coconut scent that clung to her. It drove me crazy.

As I stood in front of the door, she made her way to me. My eyes were fucking glued to her every move. When she stopped a few feet from me, I raised my eyebrows.

"You're gonna have to get closer than that to get in the truck," I teased her.

Her long, dark lashes lowered as a shy smile touched her lips. She took a

few more steps until I could reach out and grab her waist to pull her up against me. Her mouth slightly parted as she let out a small gasp. I was fascinated with her lower lip. It was fuller than the top. I wanted to suck on it like I had last night.

Lowering my head, I ran my nose up her neck and inhaled that sweet scent. Her body shivered. Closing my eyes, I forced myself to stop before I had her pressed up against my truck with my hands all over her, right here for everyone to see. I reached for the bag and took it from her hand.

“Get in the truck,” I whispered against her ear, then stepped back and held her hand as she climbed up.

My eyes devoured her toned legs and round ass until she was settled in the seat. Winking at her, I tossed her bag in the backseat, then closed the door and headed to get back in the driver’s seat.

I turned my head to look at her before backing out of the dirt road that went between the fifteen trailers on this piece of overgrown property.

“You look beautiful,” I told her.

She gently bit that fat bottom lip of hers, and I wanted to groan. I watched, unable to look away while she let it pop free from her perfect white teeth.

“Thank you,” she replied softly.

After dropping her off that first day, I’d asked her out. I’d taken her to ride horses at our stables twice, we’d gone to the movies, we’d gone canoeing, I’d taken her to several of my favorite restaurants—all within seven days’ time. We’d seen each other every day, except yesterday. She’d worked thirteen hours, cleaning houses, and since her mom was working a night shift, she had to go home to cook dinner for her siblings.

We talked on the phone from eleven that night until three this morning.

When I'd had to be at the stables at six with only three hours sleep, I still hadn't regretted it. Hearing her voice was better than nothing.

"I put my swimsuit on under my clothes—that is, if we're still swimming," she told me.

My gaze traveled over her again, and the fact that her bikini was strapless had my mind going to places I wasn't sure she was ready for yet.

"We are," I replied, shifting my attention back to turning the truck around and pulling back onto the main road.

"I can't believe you've never been to the springs. We've got so many around here." Although I wasn't taking her to the springs that I used to spend time at. There would be too many people there. I didn't want to share her, and the idea of her wearing a bikini in front of other guys didn't sit well with me.

"I don't typically have fun," she replied. "This week ... with you, has been new for me."

We had already discussed her lack of a social life, and I got that she had to work to help her family, but, damn, how had some guy not made her a priority yet? I liked knowing I was giving her a break from a life that, so far, sounded like fucking hell. I also loved making her smile.

A pleased expression tugged at my lips, and I tried not to grin like a damn fool, thinking about what I had planned for tonight. It had taken some work, but I'd managed to make it happen. If I could have just asked Blaise to make a call, it would have been simpler, but I wasn't ready to tell anyone about Haisley. Even if I no longer had to worry about Trev Hughes, my best friend, taking all her attention from me. He might as well be fucking married. Trev's days of flirting were over. The guy was in love. Which made that threat one I

didn't have to consider. But I still wanted time with just her. No one else. No questions. Nothing.

“Did you decide which springs we are going to?” she asked.

Last night, I'd still been trying to pull this off, so I hadn't told her where yet. This afternoon, I'd gotten the all clear from a friend of my dad's who had helped me. Camping at Ocala National Forest wasn't difficult if you had a reservation. However, I hadn't wanted to use the regular campground for tonight or the overpopulated springs that closed too early. Getting to put up a tent somewhere, unauthorized, and using smaller, less populated springs after it was closed had taken some work.

“Yes,” was the only answer I gave her.

She laughed. It was a fucking musical sound that I was getting addicted to. “Are you going to tell me?”

I shook my head.

More laughter. “Okay, I guess I'll have to trust you.”

I glanced over at her. “It's a little late to be thinking about trusting me. You agreed to go camping overnight with me. If you didn't trust me, then that would have been a bad decision on your part.”

She shrugged. “Maybe I was foolishly blinded by the way you look.”

This time, I laughed. “The way I look, huh?”

“Don't act like you aren't aware of how you look, Saxon. We might not have gone to the same high school, but even girls at my school knew who you were.”

She'd admitted this before, and it had honestly surprised me. I expected everyone to know Trev. He was the son of the wealthiest, most powerful man

in the southeast, probably the entire South. But I hadn't expected her to know who I was.

"I'm thinking that had nothing to do with my looks, but who I was associated with," I told her.

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever. You know you're beautiful."

"Beautiful?"

Those insane violet eyes locked on mine. "Sexy, handsome, gorgeous—pick a word. Whatever description you like best."

Damn, this girl.

I turned my eyes back to the road. "Exactly how sexy?" I asked, unable to help myself.

"Do you need your ego boosted?" she teased.

I smirked, flicking my gaze back to hers. "No. I just like knowing you think I'm sexy."

She dropped her gaze and started biting that bottom lip again.

"Haisley." My voice sounded deeper when I said her name. "Stop biting your lip. All I can think about is how bad I want to suck on it again."

Releasing it from her teeth, she shot her eyes back up to look at me. The flush on her cheeks told me all I needed to know. She wanted me too.



FIVE

HAISLEY

The past two weeks, I'd been on edge, afraid of my shadow, thinking Levi would come for me and follow through with his threat. But I hadn't seen any of them. Except when I slept at night. Most of the time, Saxon appeared in my dreams. Those were times I didn't want to wake up. It was the nightmares Levi and the blonde tattooed guy appeared in when I woke up in a cold sweat and on the verge of a panic attack.

Today was the first time I could relax and believed I was safe. They weren't coming for me. It was a relief.

After getting off work, I bought a box of spaghetti noodles from the dollar store on my walk to Milly's apartment. Thankfully, her apartment was only one mile from the hotel. At least the December weather was bearable.

Once I arrived, the apartment was empty. I was always nervous that Milly wouldn't be there, but Rog, her boyfriend, would be. He looked at me in

ways that made me uncomfortable. With both of them being gone, I changed out of my scratchy uniform and into something comfortable, then went to make my dinner. I was tempted to boil the entire box of noodles and eat them all. I was starving, but I needed this box to feed me for at least four meals.

While I waited on the noodles to boil, I pulled out the number I'd taken from the Roommate Wanted poster on the bulletin board outside. The apartment was a two-bedroom with three other people already living in it. Which made the rent affordable, but I would be sleeping on a sofa bed in the living room. The other two rooms were taken, although for one hundred more dollars, I could share a room with a guy. I was fine with the sofa bed.

I intended to call them tonight when Milly got home and I could borrow her phone. She was ready for me to move out. She'd made that very clear. I wasn't sure if she wanted privacy with Rog or if she'd noticed his odd behavior with me. The way he watched me all the time and the inappropriate comments he made. I was thinking that was probably the main reason she wanted me out.

The noodles finished cooking, and I drained them, then moved them to a bowl. My stomach growled with anticipation. I twirled the noodles around my fork before lifting it to my mouth and taking a bite. Chewing slowly and not eating too fast helped with hunger pains. I'd learned that trick years ago when Mom was tight on money and there were too many of us to feed. Also, drinking a lot of water helped. I reached for my glass and drank until it was empty before standing to go fill it up some more.

The apartment door opened as I was walking over to the sink. Milly walked in the door, smiling brightly. She was normally moody, so seeing her happy was a change.

“Good day?” I asked.

She tossed her purse on the small round table that stood between the living room and kitchen area. “Rog is taking me out tomorrow night to a fancy restaurant with linen napkins, chandeliers, and shit. His company is hosting a Christmas party for them. I’m going to eat lobster!”

Milly walked over and looked at the bowl of noodles I’d left on the coffee table. “You know you need to eat more than that. You’re pregnant.”

I filled my glass with water. “I bought a jar of peanut butter last week. This week, it’s noodles. I’ll balance it out.”

Milly shook her head. “You need to give this kid up for adoption if you’re not going to get an abortion. You can’t even feed yourself properly. How the fuck do you think you can feed a kid? And get it diapers and all that shit babies need?”

The panic was creeping back in. I didn’t need to hear someone else remind me that I couldn’t afford a baby. It made it real. Not just a fear I could brush off.

“At least tell the father. Even if he’s a loser, you can get some kind of help from him.”

The words had almost tumbled out of me two weeks ago when he opened that door and looked at me. The fear of what Levi would do to me if he found out kept me silent. Then, the naked woman standing behind him helped seal my lips closed. He had moved on from me easily enough. Other than showing up at the trailer once, he let me go without much of a fight. I should be thankful since I didn’t want to die. But deep down, it had hurt right up until I saw those two pink lines. That was another level of fear that had pushed all other emotions aside.

“I can handle it. I’m saving money. By the time the baby comes, I’ll be ready.”

Milly walked over to the fridge and pulled out a box of leftover pizza. “Here, eat a slice of this at least. Noodles aren’t enough.”

My mouth watered as I thought about pizza. How long had it been since I’d had something more than bread, noodles, or peanut butter? Two months. That was how long. I looked at the box, then back at Milly. She’d been very verbal about her food being off-limits while I was here. She was giving me a place to crash and helping me get a job, as a favor to Silver. But she wasn’t going to feed me.

“Go ahead,” she said. “Eat a damn slice. But just one. The other one is my dinner.”

“You’re sure?” I asked, wanting to grab a slice and shove it in my mouth.

“Yes. Get a slice before I change my damn mind.” She opened it, and my stomach growled at the sight of veggies and meat that covered the slices. “Don’t eat it fast though. It will probably just come back up. You barely eat anything, and your stomach is the size of a fucking pea by now.”

I reached in and took a slice of the old pizza. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” she replied, closing the lid.

Unable to wait, I took a bite and fought back the moan of pleasure even if it was cold. It was more than I’d had since my mother had tossed me out. My thoughts went to the last slice of pizza I’d had, and I wished I could just forget it. All of it. Every moment.



TWO MONTHS AND ONE WEEK AGO

“Sausage, bacon, and mushrooms, right?” Saxon asked me as he pulled out a large black cooler from the back of his truck.

“Uh, is this a pizza question?”

Last night, we’d talked on the phone for hours. He’d asked me about my favorite pizza, and I’d told him. But we were currently in the woods at a large tent he’d apparently put up earlier. There was no pizza around here.

“Do you like those toppings on something else?” he teased.

Unable not to smile when I thought about the night ahead and getting to be with Saxon alone, like this, I shrugged. “Maybe. I mean, it sounds like something that would be good on a hot dog or maybe smothered tots.”

He paused, then nodded. “Fuck. You’re right. That sounds good. But, yeah, I’m talking about pizza.”

Setting down the cooler, he opened it and pulled out a box of pizza from a place in town I’d never been to, but I recognized the name. It was popular.

“Come with me,” he said.

I walked over and fell into step beside him as he led me down a small path that opened up to what I assumed was the springs. Stepping onto a small deck that overlooked the crystal-clear water, he set the pizza down, then lowered himself, dangling his legs off the edge. I did the same and leaned forward to stare down at the smooth rocks beneath the water.

“It’s so pretty,” I said in awe. I’d never seen water this clear.

“Mineral springs,” he said to me, opening the box of pizza and taking out a slice. “Hungry?”

He held the slice out to me, and it was surprisingly still warm. The cheese was melting off the side, and I could see the heat rising from it.

“Yes, thank you,” I told him, taking the pizza and inhaling. I loved that smell.

At home, I made whatever frozen boxed pizza was on sale that week, or we made bread pizza with slices of stale white bread, sauce, and cheese. They definitely didn’t compare to this.

We ate in silence for a few minutes, and I enjoyed yet another delicious meal, thanks to Saxon. This week, he’d taken me to several restaurants. Each one seemed better than the last. However, this pizza, sitting out here, in a setting this breathtaking, alone with Saxon, made this one my favorite.

“That good, huh?” he asked in an amused tone.

Had I said that out loud?

Saxon reached over and brushed his thumb over my bottom lip, then stuck it in his mouth and sucked. When he pulled it out, his eyes were still watching me. “I like the little noises you’re making. Please keep eating.”

I swallowed the bite in my mouth. “I don’t make noises.” At least, I hoped not.

He leaned closer to me and pressed his lips against mine. “Yeah, you do.”

Was he teasing me? I started to say more when he reached for my half-eaten slice and set it down on the box, then cupped the side of my face with one hand while leaning in to kiss me again.

Kissing Saxon had become my favorite thing in the world. No one had ever kissed me the way he did. Somehow, without words, he made me feel special and cherished. My body hummed with pleasure while my heart raced. Everything about him was perfect.



SIX

SAXON

Watching the female jockey who had ridden Rig in the Breeders' Cup last month, I understood why my dad had replaced Manuel. Although Manuel was the one who had ridden Rig in the Kentucky Turf Cup, which got him into this year's Breeders' Cup. I'd been against his changing jockeys that close to the race, but this was business, and Allegra Grace was good. Better than good. She was possibly the best right now with the exception of Tony Hurst, but he had been on Hughes Farms' Phantom. And they'd won. But Rig and Allegra had come in second.

Allegra was coming out to ride Rig every few weeks to keep their relationship up. I knew we would be using her again on Rig, and she wanted the win. It was in her blood. She craved it.

Allegra walked Rig over to the fence where I stood. She was tiny, but then she was a jockey. She might be five foot with her riding boots on. I doubted

she weighed more than a hundred pounds. I knew under her riding helmet, she had light-brown hair with blonde streaks from being in the sun all the time. I liked her light-blue eyes the most. Well, that and her riding abilities.

“Saxon Houston, is the rumor true?” she asked, smiling as she pulled off her helmet, then shook her shoulder-length hair.

Another thing I knew about Allegra was that she was a flirt. I leaned on the fence and studied her. She had the cute thing going. Heart-shaped lips, perky and tiny nose, big blue eyes.

“What rumor?” I asked.

“That you’re available,” she replied with a grin that showed she had a dimple in her right cheek.

“Have been for a while,” I replied.

“You had a gorgeous brunette on your arm at the Breeders’ Cup.”

Declan. Mom had invited her. I’d been forced to deal with her.

“She’s an ex who won’t go away,” I explained. “You and Rig look good.” I changed the subject. “Think you two can bring home first place if we get him into one of the derby races?”

She cocked an eyebrow as if I had asked her a ridiculous question. “You doubt me?”

I didn’t point out that Phantom and Hurst, who had more wins under his belt than her, would more than likely be competition.

I shrugged instead. “Just asking.”

She nodded. “I know I can. Hughes might have the most wins and be known for their champions, but Phantom has nothing on Rig. Hurst got lucky. He won’t be next time.”

I liked her outlook. I wasn't so sure Rig was the better horse. I'd watched Hurst and Phantom on that track at the Breeders' Cup. I was willing to admit they were an equal match. It had been a very close end.

"So, you down here to watch me ride your horse, or are you down here just to check me out?" she asked, looking completely sure of herself.

I doubted Allegra had been shy a day in her life.

"My horse," I replied, then smiled. "But you were an added bonus." Not that she needed her ego stroked any more. But I could use a distraction, and Allegra seemed to be hinting.

"Race is months away. We'll be seeing a lot of each other," she pointed out, looking pleased about that fact.

"Yeah, we will," I started to say more when Levi's car pulled up to the stables.

I turned to see if he was headed toward me or up to the house. Dad had gone inside an hour ago to get ready for a business meeting this evening at the Hugheses'.

Levi's gaze locked on mine, and I glanced back at Allegra.

"I'll, uh, see you later," I told her, then headed toward Levi.

This couldn't be good. Normally, he'd call or text, and my phone was in my pocket. There had been no text or call.

"What's up?" I asked, already concerned by the scowl on his face.

"Did you fuck Haisley Slate?" he asked me point-blank.

What the hell? I stared at him, not sure why this was his business and why he looked pissed off about it. He knew I'd dated her for two weeks. I'd come clean about all that, and then she'd cut me out of her life like it had all meant

nothing. Not one damn thing.

“Please tell me you wore a goddamn condom,” he growled.

This conversation was going in a direction I didn’t like.

“You want details on my sex life?” I asked.

Levi grabbed the front of my shirt and shook me as his eyes bored into mine. “Did you fuck her bare?!” he demanded.

What was wrong with him? Jesus!

“I used condoms!” I shouted, backing away from him.

Levi was typically calm until he wasn’t. Then, he was fucking insane.

“Every time?”

He was looking at me as if he could detect any lie that came out of my mouth. If I hadn’t already lied to him once and gotten away with it, then I’d believe he could. Telling him that I’d pressured Haisley to skip work at the hospital to spend the day with me had seemed vital to protecting her. I wasn’t positive she’d not known AJ had planned to take Aspen. All I had known was I couldn’t let her pay for her hand in it if she had. But there was no reason to lie now.

“For the most part. Why does this matter? I’ve been checked. I’m clean.”

“Goddammit, Sax!” he roared and ran his hand through his hair.

I watched him as he took a deep breath, and the niggling feeling I was getting about this entire conversation wasn’t good.

“Why?” I demanded, needing to be told something to stop my imagination from taking over.

“I decided to do a check on her. See if she was in Gainesville because of her brother and make sure his ass wasn’t trying to get closer to Ocala. What I

found out was, she's living in a dumpy-as-hell apartment, walking to that hotel to work every day, and she's been to an OB-GYN and has a prescription for prenatal vitamins."

I shook my head. "I pulled out. It's someone else's."

She hadn't been a virgin. She had been tight as fucking hell. I'd never fucked anyone that tight, but I wasn't the one who had taken her virginity. She could have fucked someone else after me. Or before me. Both scenarios shouldn't bother me but they did.

"You sure? Because pulling out isn't birth control. Tell me you're not that stupid!"

My palms were sweating. I couldn't be one hundred percent sure I had gotten out of her in time. We'd been caught up in the moment. She'd felt good. Too good.

"She would have told me. She was right there in front of me two weeks ago. She'd have said something."

Levi shook his head and let out a hard laugh. "You think? Because I doubt it."

I needed to think. Work this through. I'd go talk to her. Get a paternity test done. They could do that when she was pregnant. Right? Fuck, I didn't know shit about pregnant women. Or babies. This was not my kid. She had dropped me so fucking fast. The fact that she could have dated me just to get close to me and allow her brother to take Aspen bothered me. I'd thought it more than once and I knew Levi had considered it. That's why I'd lied to him before. If I had meant something to her, she wouldn't have been able to drop me like she had. How did I know she wasn't fucking someone else at that time?

Levi shook his head. "I'm not saying shit to anyone. You decide what to

do, then go talk to Blaise. He'll be the one to make the final call on this."

I didn't want to be a dad. Fuck, I was twenty-one years old, and Haisley couldn't be trusted.

"It's not mine."

Levi scowled. "I fucking hope not."

"I'll call her," I finally said.

"You can't. She doesn't have a phone."

"Yes, she does."

"Not anymore."

Fuck.

"Okay, then text me her address."

"No. If you want to contact her, then you take it to Blaise."

I threw up my hands, frustrated. "Why? This isn't family business." I shouldn't have to get permission to contact Haisley.

"We don't know she wasn't helping her brother. The way shit went down leaves it up to question. She could have gotten close to you because he'd asked her to. AJ could have given her a text or something, wanting us to find them. It was fucking clear he hadn't known what Gina would do. He was furious with Gina after he realized she'd used him. No matter, he'd still taken Aspen. He can't be trusted, and neither can Haisley."

Levi's reason pissed me off. Even though I thought I'd been used by Haisley, I didn't like the way it sounded when someone else said it.

"Whatever," I said as acid burned my throat. "I don't care. The baby isn't mine."

Levi studied me for a moment. “Probably not. But next time, wear a fucking condom when you sink your dick in a cunt.”

I didn’t say anything, only grunted once.

“She’s trouble,” he reminded me.

I nodded.

I didn’t stand there and watch Levi walk back to his truck. I turned and went back to the fence, where I’d left Allegra. I needed a distraction. Something to get my head off Haisley and the fact that she was fucking pregnant. I just hoped this petite jockey could do the trick.



SEVEN

HAISLEY

Two things to be thankful for this morning: it was seventy degrees with a breeze on my mile walk to the hotel, and one of my new roommates had given me her leftover fried rice from last night to eat this morning for breakfast. I was trying to make a habit of doing this every day on my walk—pick two things to be happy about. It would help me not think so much about the future. The stress wasn't good for the baby. At least, that was what I'd heard on an episode of *Friends*.

I rummaged through my bag to make sure I had my name tag. I didn't remember where I had put it yesterday. My memory had been sporadic lately. I wondered if that was a pregnancy thing. If I wrote down my questions, I would remember to ask them at my next appointment with whatever doctor I saw.

I'd been able to get Medicaid easily enough, but finding an OB-GYN

willing to see me with Medicaid as a new patient had been a struggle. The clinic I had found wasn't typical, and I felt like they were herding patients in and out as quickly as possible. I doubted they'd be real happy if I started asking a lot of questions.

A wave of nausea hit me, and I paused. Uh-oh. Rice was not going to be fun, coming back up. The thought of it didn't help matters. I was close enough to the parking lot of the hotel to walk over to the fence and lean up against it.

Deep, slow breaths. I would not vomit. I would not vomit.

A cold sweat broke out on my forehead.

"What's wrong?" an achingly familiar voice caused my head to snap up.

Looking into Saxon Houston's brown eyes, I didn't have time to decide if he was really here or not before I had to turn and puke in the small patch of grass beside me. I heard him curse, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to laugh or cry. Another wave, and more fried rice reappeared. It was a shame. I loved fried rice, but there was no way I could ever eat it again.

When I was sure I was done, I grabbed my bag to get out a tissue to wipe my face. He was still there, watching me like I was a freak. I refused to look at him as I dug around, pulled one out, and stood up straight, wiping my mouth.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, my eyes barely looking at him before I shifted to look toward the hotel.

He had probably had another wild night of sex. Just my luck, he had chosen the place I worked to be his sex pad.

"Doesn't matter. I have to go, or I'll be late for work," I said and took a step when Saxon moved in front of me.

“You’re not going to work today,” he informed me.

I glared up at him. He was the reason I was vomiting, living on a sofa bed in an apartment with strangers since Milly had been determined I get out of her place, working at a hotel where he liked to have sexcapades. Him!

“Yes, I am.” I tried to step around him, and he moved with me, continuing to block me.

Starting to panic—because if I was late to clock in, then I could get fired—I shoved at his chest with both my hands, but he didn’t budge.

“MOVE!” I shouted at him.

“I spoke to your manager. You have the day off. Calm down.”

“I don’t want the day off! I need the money. Who do you think you are, speaking to my manager?”

Why was he so freaking beautiful? It wasn’t fair.

“The paternity test is more important. Wouldn’t you agree?”

His words shut down anything I had been about to say. He knew. Oh God. He knew.

“What paternity test?” My question came out as a whisper.

“The one I scheduled to see if the baby is mine.” He said it so matter-of-factly. As if he were speaking to a stranger about the weather.

“I don’t need a test,” I told him.

“I do.”

“I’m not pregnant,” I lied.

“I’m not here to listen to more of your lies, Haisley. I need to know if the baby is mine.”

My lies? I hadn't lied to him. I had broken things off with him in a very brutal way, but my actions had been forced upon me by *his friends*. I wasn't a liar though.

"Fine. But this is pointless. I'm not getting an abortion." I held my shoulders back and stood as tall as I could as I looked up at him, determined not to let him see my fear.

He frowned. "I'm not asking you to. I am simply here to find out who the father is. I can't trust the words that come out of your mouth. So, I need proof."

God, he was infuriating. I'd slept with him not once, but three times. I'd been completely infatuated with him. And all along, he was in the Mafia. Never telling me. Making me believe he was this great guy. Not someone who killed and did God knew what else. I wasn't very informed on Mafia business. Maybe I should be since I was having a kid whose father was a part of it. If there was a liar here, then it was him.

"Why? I didn't ask for anything from you. I didn't come tell you. I didn't make any demands at all. Why do you need to know?"

He shrugged. He actually shrugged, as if he didn't know. I was pregnant, and he was shrugging.

Asshole. GOD! How had I been so blind?

Oh, right ... he was too damn pretty, and I was an idiot.

"My truck is this way," he informed me. "Let's go."

I didn't move. "I don't have money for this. Medicaid isn't going to cover a paternity test."

He looked at me as if he were bored. That stung. I didn't want to admit it,

but it was painful. Being near him was painful.

“I’m the one who scheduled it. I am paying for it. Now, let’s go.”

“What are they going to do? Will it hurt the baby?” I asked, not moving in his direction.

He looked annoyed. I did not care. I wasn’t doing this if it was something that would hurt my baby.

“They take your blood, swab my cheek, and we have results back in about a week,” he replied.

That was it? They could tell that easily?

I stood there for a moment more, then finally gave in because it was clear Saxon wasn’t going to let it go. I knew the baby was his. He was the only guy I’d ever slept with. Of course, I hadn’t told him that because then I’d have had to tell him why there was no hymen to break through. My past wasn’t something I shared easily—or at all.

I hoped he had to pay a lot for this stupid test.

He didn’t open the truck door for me, but walked around and climbed inside the driver’s side. I’d been in this truck many times, and each time, he’d opened my door. The guy who had been interested in me was gone. In his place was this guy. The one who believed the worst in me. I was tired of being discarded by people in my life. My biological father, whoever he was; my brother, who hadn’t even tried to get in touch with me; my mom. And although I had shut Saxon out, having him treat me this way felt like being discarded.

Sitting inside the truck, I buckled up and stared out the window. The last time I’d been in here wasn’t pleasant either. Or at least, it hadn’t ended that way. It had been traumatic. Now it was just silent.

Saxon turned on the radio, and country music filled the silence. I rested my head on the seat, closing my eyes. The past week, I had started getting tired all the time. Yesterday, when I'd been making up a bed at the hotel, I had fought the urge to just crawl into it and close my eyes. Just for a minute. I didn't, of course, but I'd wanted to so bad.

"You've lost weight."

Saxon's words stopped me from the pull of sleep. I opened my eyes back up and stared out the window.

"If you want to keep the baby, then you need to take care of it. Starving yourself isn't taking care of it. You also have dark circles under your eyes."

If I wasn't afraid he'd pull some hidden gun out and shoot me between the eyes, I'd hit him across the face with my bag.

Breathe. In and out. In and out. Do not yell at him and punch him in the nose. Remain calm.

"I'm not starving myself. If I could afford to eat more, then I would." My words were clipped, but at least I hadn't shouted them.

He didn't respond.

"What are you going to do when you find out this baby is yours?" I asked him, turning my head to look at him.

"IF it is mine, then I'll take that step when it gets here."

I laughed, although there was no humor in the sound. "You might think I'm a liar, but I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this is your baby. So, maybe you could tell me what you're thinking because I'm not asking for your help. I don't intend to let you force me to abort it or allow you take it from me. I won't give it up for adoption. If you try and make me, I'll ... I'll

... disappear.”

How I would disappear, I wasn't sure, but if he pushed me, then I'd run away. Somewhere.

“You want a baby at twenty?” he asked me, his tone hard.

“Yes, I do.”

“Why? You can't even afford to feed yourself. How the fuck are you gonna feed a kid?”

My stomach churned at the reminder that I had no clue how I was going to do this. He was rubbing it in my face that I hadn't been born into a family of wealth and power. How had I thought this guy was something different? He was as nasty and cruel as the men who had walked in and out of my mom's life. I didn't want to ever trust another man for as long as I lived.

“I'll worry about that.” Props to me for not sounding as scared as I felt.

“That's a real mature response, Haisley. You'll make a great mom.”

The sarcasm in his words twisted my gut.

I sat up straight and fisted my hands in my lap. He was not going to make me blow up and start yelling at him. I didn't know if the baby could hear me yelling, but if it could, then that wasn't good for it. At least it didn't sound like it was good for it.

“Do not ever tell me what is mature and what isn't while you have been given everything in life, live in a nice, big house, and have racehorses and a fancy stable and an expensive truck. You know nothing about maturity. I've been taking care of kids since I was five years old. I've been making them meals, helping them get dressed, feeding babies bottles in the middle of the night, bathing them, changing diapers. Since I was FIVE. I didn't have a

childhood, Saxon. I was treated like a grown-up before I started first grade. You have no right to judge what I can and cannot do. Because I have fed eight kids with only ten dollars more times than you can count. When I say I will handle it, then I will.”

I was shaking. These were things I’d never shared with him during the two weeks of our whirlwind fling. Sure, he had known that a lot was expected of me, but he’d had no clue just how deep it went. No idea what I’d lived through.

He didn’t apologize. He said nothing. Not one more word. I didn’t close my eyes again because the exhaustion was now being chased away by the fury inside my chest.

When the truck pulled into the parking deck of the private hospital, I wanted to laugh. We were getting a paternity test at a hospital that I’d never step foot in again. My baby wouldn’t be born here. There was no OB-GYN here that accepted Medicaid.

Once we were parked, I swung open my door and jumped down out of his truck. I would take a bus from here. I wasn’t getting back in there with him. Ever.



EIGHT

HAISLEY

I knew I had exactly three minutes and about forty-five seconds before the hot water was gone. I rinsed out the cheap conditioner from my hair while washing off the soap from my body at the same time. If my hair were shorter, this would be easier. I knew the last minute and fifteen seconds of my shower was going to be cold. I never could get it all down in under five minutes.

The blast of ice made me squeal as I continued to rinse my hair. Quickly, I turned in a circle, pulling my arms up to my chest as I got the rest of the suds off my skin. Once I was done, I quickly shut off the water and grabbed my one towel. I had bought it at the dollar store, but hadn't gotten a washcloth. That was a luxury. I just used my hands. I dried my hair the best I could, then wrapped the towel around me. The bathroom was so small that you could sit on the toilet and brush your teeth over the sink at the same time. Putting on clothes in here was almost impossible. But my roommates, Max and Sherry,

were both here, so there was no dressing in my bedroom, which was also the living room.

A banging on the door startled me, and I jumped.

“Haisley!” Sherry called my name.

“Yes?” I asked, tugging the cotton T-shirt dress down over my still-slightly-damp body.

“You have a visitor,” she replied.

I stared at the closed door. No one knew where I lived. I had no one to visit me.

“Who?” I asked cautiously.

“Don’t know, but he’s fucking hot,” she drawled. “You’d better hurry, or I’m gonna show him a good time.”

It had been five days since the paternity test. Not a week yet. But it had to be him. He’d be able to find my address, wouldn’t he? Didn’t the Mafia have access to that kind of thing?

We hadn’t said one word to each other after we arrived at the hospital for the testing until it came time to leave. I told him I would take the bus and left when we were done. He didn’t argue. He was as glad to be rid of me as I was him. There had been no mention of what would happen when the results came back.

I continued to dry my hair with the towel, then brushed through it a few times before finally opening the door and stepping out into the hallway. There was always the chance AJ had found me. He’d be able to do that easily enough. Silver could have told him I was with Milly, who would have sent him here.

Walking into the living room, I found Sherry giggling and smiling at Saxon, who didn't look very impressed. His tight smile didn't meet his eyes. I stood there, unsure of what to say, when his gaze swung to mine, and I saw his jaw clench. I didn't know why he had to look so angry about seeing me. He was the one who had come here. To my apartment. What had he expected?

"Verdict's in, I guess," I said as casually as I could.

He stared at me briefly, then looked over at my bag that sat in the corner of the living room. It was the same one I'd taken camping.

"Get your things," he said with a scowl now on his face.

Was he serious?

"Why?" Although I had a feeling I knew why, but that didn't mean I was going to just do it.

"Don't make a scene out of this, Haisley. Get your things. We're leaving."

"NO. You're leaving. I live here."

Sherry's eyes were going from me to Saxon with a look of fascination. This would no doubt entertain her for days. She'd not let it go. I would have to hear her retell it over and over.

"You're going with me. Back to my house. At least until the baby is born. You need decent health insurance and prenatal care. Don't be difficult. You want to keep the baby, then at least do what is best for it."

"Do you have a gun?" I asked him.

He frowned. "Why?"

"Because I want to throw something hard at your head, but I need to be sure you won't shoot me." I was almost shouting. Almost.

“What’s going on?” Max asked, stepping out of his bedroom with his spiky black-and-blue hair all over the place, like he’d just woken up.

“Be quiet!” Sherry told him. “This is just getting good.”

I sighed and crossed my arms over my chest.

“If you don’t get your shit, I am going to grab what I know is yours and carry it and you out of here, kicking and screaming if I have to,” Saxon warned me.

“Who the fuck are you?” Max asked him.

Saxon turned his gaze to Max, then back to me. “Start moving, Haisley.”

“Do you seriously think I’m going to move in with you? Then, what? The baby is born, and you snatch it away from me and kick me out? I don’t think so, Saxon.”

“I’m not taking the baby from you. I am taking responsibility. It’s my baby too. I don’t want you starving it by not being able to eat enough and walking to work and cleaning hotel rooms. Goddammit! Just get your stuff, and let’s go. Why do you make everything so fucking difficult?”

Sherry stood up then and looked at me with her mouth agape. “That is your baby daddy? Are you shitting me right now? Jesus God Almighty, why are you arguing with him? Do you need glasses, girl?”

“Shut up, Sherry. Not everyone thinks with their pussy. She doesn’t want to go,” Max yelled at her.

Sherry rolled her eyes. “Give it up, Max. Do you see this man? He’s fucking hot, and, dude, she is pregnant. Get that through your head. She’s all long hair and pretty eyes and big tits right now, but she’s gonna be big and pregnant soon. Besides, she’s not into you.”

This just got weirdly awkward. I hadn't known Max was into me. In fact, I had kinda thought he wasn't into girls.

Saxon stalked over to my bag and jerked it up, and then he started toward me. I backed up, but he kept advancing.

Holding up both hands, I tried to stop him. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" he snapped.

"Don't touch her," Max shouted, coming up behind him.

Saxon's eyes flared before he spun around, and in one swift move, he pulled a gun from under his shirt and pointed it at Max.

"What the fuck?!" Max shouted.

"Oh my shit!" Sherry squealed.

"Saxon." I said his name as calmly as I could. My heart was racing as I stood there.

Max had gone pale, and Sherry was frozen with a look of horror on her face.

"Haisley is leaving with me. If you would kindly back the fuck up, I'd appreciate it." His voice was so polite, as if he wasn't pointing a pistol at my roommate.

He slid it back into the hidden holster at his back, then turned to look at me. "Let's go."

"Let me get my other bag," I said softly, afraid to raise my voice.

He might have spoken as if he wasn't angry, but the rage in his eyes was unmistakable. I didn't know this Saxon. If I had, I was positive I would not be pregnant right now. This Saxon scared me. I didn't want this to be the father of my baby.

“Haisley, I can call the cops,” Max said.

“Shut up, you idiot!” Sherry hissed at him.

I shook my head and picked up my other bag. “No. It’s fine. I should go. I’m sorry,” I said to both of them, then turned to walk over to Saxon, who opened the door, watching me closely.

“You have my number,” Max called out.

“Fucking shut up!” Sherry threw a shoe at him this time.

I said nothing.

Saxon nodded at both of them as if he had been there for a friendly visit, then closed the door. I let out a sigh of relief. He hadn’t hurt them.

He took the other bag from my hand. “This way,” he said, then began walking, expecting me to follow.

I didn’t have on sleeves, and the night air was cold. I’d left my toiletries and towel in the bathroom, but there was no way I was going to ask him to let me go get it. My heart was racing as I thought about the fact that I couldn’t get away from him. I was going to have to live with him.

What about his parents? Didn’t they live there? He was just going to move me into their house?

This time, he opened the passenger door for me and tossed my two bags into the backseat, then stepped back to let me in. I climbed in, and he closed the door behind me. To think I had sworn I’d never get in this truck again. I was angry that he had the power to make me do it.

When he was inside and buckled, I looked over at him. “I have a job. I need to tell them something. I can’t just *not* show up.”

“You can call and let them know.” He cranked the truck.

“I don’t have a phone.”

“I’m going to get you one.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am.”

“I didn’t ask you for help.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re getting it.”

I let out a frustrated groan and stared out the window. He’d actually pulled a gun on Max. Saxon, with his beautiful face, his dimples, and his curls. He didn’t look like a guy who would even own a gun. Knowing he was in the Mafia was one thing. Seeing it was very different. Levi and Kye looked like they could be dangerous. But not Saxon.

“How far along are you?”

“Can you turn on the heat?” I asked him, shivering.

He muttered a curse. “If you had on more clothes, you wouldn’t be cold. Don’t you have a coat?”

“I wasn’t expecting to be forced out of my apartment. And no. This is Florida. I don’t have a coat.”

“It’s December. Even in Florida, you need a fucking coat. At least most nights.”

I had left the coat I used with Silver. She needed one to walk to the school bus in. The one she’d used last year was small then, and this year, it didn’t zip over her boobs.

“How far along are you?” he asked again.

“What? You don’t know that from all your resources?”

He sighed. "Are you going to remain difficult through this entire thing?"

He was forcing me to move in with him. He'd accused me of not taking care of myself properly. He had pulled a gun on my roommate. Did he expect me to be warm and bubbly?

"Nine weeks," I muttered.

"When was the last time you saw a doctor?"

I didn't look at him as I continued to stare out the window. "At six weeks."

"Do you have a preference for a male or female doctor?"

He was being very thorough. Who had told him what to ask? He couldn't have come up with all this on his own.

"Female." The idea of a man down there bothered me.

"When did you find out?"

"When I missed my period," I replied. Wasn't that how most girls found out?

"Did you test the day you missed or ..."

I finally turned to look at him. "I'm never late. When I was two days late, I tested. Why are you asking me all this? Do you honestly care?"

The hand he had on the steering wheel tightened. I could see his knuckles turn white. Saxon had anger issues. How had I missed that? Oh yeah, I'd only known him for two weeks.

"It's my baby too," he said through clenched teeth.

"Yes, but you didn't want me to keep it."

"I never said that. You assumed."

"You said I couldn't afford a baby."

His jaw worked back and forth, like he was grinding his teeth. I would point out that it was bad for his teeth, but there was that gun to worry about. One never knew what would set him off.

“All that matters at this point is, you’re pregnant, and it’s mine. I’m going to make sure you and the baby are given the proper care.”

“You’re not worried that paternity test could be wrong?” Although I knew it wasn’t.

“No.”

“It’s that accurate?”

He glanced at me. “It is when it’s ninety-nine-point-nine percent accurate.”

The fact that seemed to piss him off made me smile. I couldn’t help it. I knew it was his, but since I was apparently a liar, he couldn’t trust me. Maybe it was me being petty, but I felt like I had won.

“Why are you smiling?”

I shrugged. “Because I like being vindicated.”

He didn’t say anything more, and I laid my head back on the seat. The warmth from the heater felt wonderful. It didn’t take long for my eyes to grow heavy, and I welcomed the sleep. I’d worked a ten-hour shift today. Country music started playing, but it felt far away as I drifted off.



NINE

SAXON

It was almost ten when I pulled the truck up to the stables. Haisley had slept the rest of the drive. The dark circles under her eyes weren't just from lack of nutrition. She was exhausted. That sure didn't seem to dull her fire though.

She stretched, and my eyes dropped down to her chest. When she'd walked out in that short cotton dress with no fucking bra today, it had taken all my willpower not to look at her tits. I was also guilty of looking at them and her legs, all stretched out and bare, while she slept on the drive home. When she yawned, my eyes snapped back up to her face just as she opened them.

"We're here," I said before opening my truck door and getting out.

Getting her inside the house without my mom seeing us was important.

I'd wanted to wait until I knew the baby was mine before talking to my parents. However, when I received the call that the baby was mine, I didn't

take the time to talk to anyone. The thought of Haisley walking to that damn hotel and cleaning rooms became more than I could handle. Getting her out of that apartment and here, safe, had been my only concern.

Being back here, with her, I now had to worry about telling my mom. There were a few times this week I'd found my dad frowning at me. Something told me that he knew and he was waiting on me to tell him. It was Mom that I was worried about. She wasn't going to take this well. Once it was clear that Gypsi Parker was with Trev, my mom had turned her attention back to Declan Delamore, my ex. She was not going to handle it well when she found out I was having a kid with someone like Haisley. Her family had no power and no wealth. She didn't even have somewhere decent to live. She'd been kicked out. This was my mom's worst nightmare.

I grabbed Haisley's bags from the truck and started for the stable house, not checking to see if Haisley was following me. Hearing the truck door close behind me assured me she wasn't just sitting in the truck. I unlocked the front door and pushed it open before finally looking back to see where she was. She was looking over at the stables. This wasn't her first time here. I'd brought her to ride twice. Standing there, remembering those times, wasn't good for her. We would never be like that again. She had killed that when she ended things like she had.

"Hurry. It's late, and I didn't get to sleep on the ride home like you did." My snarky words made me want to wince, but I didn't show it on my face. This was for the best. For us and the baby.

She turned her gaze to me, but I didn't wait to see the reaction on her face. I headed inside the house and then took my first right into the bedroom that would be hers. Dropping her bags on the bench that sat at the end of the bed, I let out a sigh.

This was a fucking mess. How had I been so damn stupid? I'd dated Declan for years, and not once had we had a pregnancy scare. Why? Because I hadn't fucked her without a condom. Even though she had an IUD, I never went in her bare.

Angry at my lack of self-control and where it had put us, I spun around to see Haisley standing at the doorway. She was pale and too damn thin. That just pissed me off more.

"Bathroom is through that door," I told her, nodding to the doorway to the right of the bed.

She stepped inside the room, her gaze roaming over the rustic full-size bed that looked like it belonged in a cabin in the mountains. It was a small room with the basics, but it was a hell of a lot better than that fucking sofa bed she'd been sleeping on. Her roommate, Sherry, had been very informative in the short amount of time I'd had to listen to her talk. I walked past Haisley to get out of the room. I needed a shower and sleep.

"Where are we?" she asked.

I stopped and looked back at her. "Stable house. The stable manager normally lives here, but our current one moved out a month ago, and I moved in." Then, I started for my room again.

"Thanks," she called out to me.

I didn't turn back to look at her. I simply nodded, then continued across the open living and kitchen area to the master bedroom. Tomorrow was going to fucking suck. My mom would not handle this gracefully.

Getting caught up in the moment sure as hell came with a price. If I could go back and do it differently, I would. For starters, I would have picked her up that day when she was walking home, taken her home, and left it at that. I

couldn't go back though. Life didn't work that way.



TWO MONTHS AGO

Haisley in a bikini was something worthy of a centerfold. I hadn't been able to take my eyes off her when she took off her clothes and revealed the turquoise strip of fabric barely covering her tits. I'd fucking held my breath the first time she turned around, waiting to see how much of her ass was on display. Just enough to drive a man insane.

"The water isn't hot, but it's refreshing. Not cold, but slightly warm," she said, smiling as she ran her hand over the crystal-clear water. "And it's so pretty. It's like a pool with green stuff on the bottom."

I decided not to tell her that, among that, grass eels were often found. "It's tape grass, and the temperature is probably around eighty-four degrees today," I told her instead.

She lifted her gaze from the water to meet mine. "You know a lot about it."

I shrugged. "Grew up coming to the springs around here."

"So, you aren't a Boy Scout?" she asked teasingly.

I laughed. The idea of me getting to participate in Boy Scouts was comical. That wasn't something the family thought we needed in our training.

"No, afraid not."

Her gaze locked on the water again, and I wondered if she'd seen some shadow in the deeper end. She closed the distance between us, and her eyes went wide as she looked back up at me. "Is there fish in here?"

I smirked, reaching out and sliding a hand over her waist. "There's nothing to be scared of," I assured her.

Her sharp intake of breath as I pulled her against my chest until her lush, full tits were pressed against me told me I'd distracted her. Reaching up, I cupped her face and ran the pad of my thumb over her cheekbone. It was perfect, like the rest of her. I had yet to find one imperfection on her body. It seemed unfair to the rest of the female population for someone like her to exist.

"There are creatures in this water." Her words sounded breathless as she dropped her gaze to my mouth. "And you're trying to distract me."

I grinned, leaning down and brushing my lips against hers. "Is it working?" I whispered.

"Mmhmm," she replied, slipping her hands around my neck and pressing into me.

Her mouth opened under mine, and I dived in, hungry to taste her. Kissing Haisley had become my favorite thing lately. She made sexy little sounds and tasted like sweet lemon. It was unique and addictive, just like she was.

I moved my hand at her waist down to her ass and slid the tips of my fingers into the fabric before squeezing the cheek I held. She lifted her knee and slid it up the side of my leg. It was an invitation I wasn't turning down. My hand slid further down until my fingers brushed her open slit.

"AH!" Haisley cried out, moving her hands to my biceps and gripping me.

I watched her as I slowly began to pump my middle finger inside of her. Those insane eyes of hers widened as she stared up at me.

"You like that?" I asked, my voice deep and husky-sounding, even to my own ears.

She nodded, breathing hard.

I added another finger and continued to gently move in and out before tracing a path to her clit and rubbing it. Her knees buckled, and her forehead fell against my chest.

“Oh!” she moaned, rocking against my touch.

My dick throbbed in my swim trunks as I felt her pulse against my fingers. With my other hand, I untied the back of her bikini and pulled it off her, then tossed it to the closest patch of grass before lowering my head to run my tongue around one of her hard nipples, then sucking it into my mouth.

“Saxon!” she cried out, opening her legs even more and moving against me.

When her center met my erection, she let out a low, needy sound that made my dick leak.

I kissed the spot beneath her ear. “What do you want?” I asked her, holding back my groan from the sheer pleasure of her grinding against my cock.

Her response was more pressing and moving so that the friction of my hard length rubbed against her needy pussy.

I trailed kisses down her neck. “I don’t have a condom in my swim trunks.”

She let out a pained sound and clung to me. Fucking hell, she was making this hard. My control was slipping with every sexy sound she made. Did she not realize how irresistible she was? A guy was only so strong.

Need began to overpower all other thoughts, and I tugged her bottoms down until she lifted her leg one at a time and let me take them off her. She was naked, in my arms, with nothing but the crystal-clear water lapping against her, caused by our movements. I was sure that in this lifetime, I would never see anything or anyone more beautiful than Haisley at this moment.

Backing her up against the side of the springs, I covered her mouth with mine, growling as she began to frantically flick her tongue against mine. Opening her legs, she wrapped them around me. I didn't give a flying fuck about a condom anymore. Shoving my shorts down, I freed my hard cock and stroked it once, pressing the tip against her entrance.

Haisley's eyes dropped to watch me before she lifted her hips and pushed so that the head slid inside of her.

"Fuuuck," I groaned as the snug little cunt squeezed around the head of my dick.

I thrust hard until I was fully deep inside of her pussy. Jesus, she was insanely tight. This felt too damn good. Wet, hot velvet was the only way I could describe it.

If I died today, I would die the luckiest man on the fucking planet.



TEN

HAISLEY

When I had climbed in bed last night, I'd thought sleep would be hard. However, once my body hit the softest sheets and sank into the most comfortable mattress I'd ever experienced, I'd fallen into such a deep sleep that when I woke up, I forgot where I was. After my moment of panic, I relaxed and stared at the room in the daylight.

It was the nicest room I had ever been in. A dresser sat against one wall across the room with a lamp on it. Beside it was a tall piece of furniture—I wasn't sure what it was called, but I thought maybe it was for hanging clothes in.

Sitting up, I swung my legs over and slid down from the high bed until my feet sank into the soft, thick rug. As angry as I had been about Saxon coming and demanding I leave with him yesterday, I couldn't work up enough annoyance with him this morning. I hadn't slept that soundly in ... maybe

ever. I listened for any sounds that meant Saxon was awake, but the house was silent.

Walking over to the bathroom, I turned on the light and stepped inside. It wasn't much bigger than the bathroom at the apartment, but it was my own private bathroom. There were two towels hanging on a rack beside the toilet. The shower in the corner had shampoo and conditioner, along with a bar of soap on the built-in shelf.

A door slammed somewhere in the house, causing me to jump, startled. The loud knock on the bedroom door was followed by Saxon calling my name. Turning, I went back into the room and over to the bedroom door to open it.

Saxon's scowl met me. "Get dressed. We have to go to the main house. I told Mom I needed to talk to her." He paused and flicked his gaze past me into the room. "Wear something nice."

I had to meet his mother. Now. This morning. My stomach turned, and nausea hit me.

"Don't wear anything slutty," he added.

I managed to nod and closed the door without replying. Once it clicked shut, I turned and rushed back to the bathroom, making it to the toilet before I heaved. My stomach was empty, I realized as I heaved again and nothing came up. A cold sweat covered my body, and I leaned against the wall, feeling light-headed.

When was the last time I'd eaten?

"What can I do?" Saxon sounded tense.

I hadn't realized he'd come into the room.

I closed my eyes, wanting to lie back down, and tried to muster up enough energy to stand up. I was going to need a shower. I just didn't know if I could take one without passing out.

"Haisley?" Saxon said, reminding me that he had asked me something.

Oh, yes, what could he do? Not get me pregnant—that was what he could have done.

"Nothing," I whispered, keeping my eyes closed as I pressed my cheek against the wall.

"There is nothing there. You dry-heaved. When was the last time you ate?"

I took a slow, deep breath. "I don't remember. Yesterday sometime."

"That's fucking great. Why did you decide to keep the baby if you're gonna fucking starve it?"

His angry tone made me flinch. I couldn't defend myself. I didn't have the energy.

"I'm going to make you something to eat, and you're gonna eat all of it," he told me. "Get up and put something on other than that fucking shirt, then come to the kitchen."

I listened as he stalked away, clearly pissed off. I wanted to slap his face—no, I wanted to punch him in the nose. I just couldn't manage that at the moment. I was having to focus on standing up.

Once I was in front of the mirror, I turned on the water and splashed my face with cold water. It felt so good that I did it again before turning off the faucet and staring at my reflection. My cheekbones stood out more than normal, and the dark circles under my eyes made my face seem as if it belonged on someone else. I didn't even see myself anymore. The girl in the

mirror was terrifying.

Unable to keep looking at what I'd become, I turned and walked back into the bedroom to find something to change into. The shirt I'd slept in had belonged to AJ when he was in high school. It was faded and worn, but it was soft. I didn't own pajamas. I never had. Clearly, my lack of those annoyed Saxon.

Pulling out a pair of knit shorts and a tank top, I changed, careful not to move too fast and lose my balance. I still felt out of sorts. Once I was changed, I made my way into the open area of the house and found Saxon putting a plate on the counter in front of a stool.

He glanced at me, and his disapproval at my clothing was clear in his eyes. What had he wanted me to do, get dressed and ready to see his mother before I came to eat? I tried to ignore him and turned my attention to the food. A slice of toast with butter melting on it, scrambled eggs, sliced strawberries, mixed with blackberries, and a glass of milk. Even on a good week, I'd never had a breakfast like this. Typically, it was toast with peanut butter or a cup of yogurt when things were going well. When they weren't, I normally skipped breakfast so the younger kids had enough food.

"It's healthy. Eat it." Saxon's tone was annoyed. "That's regular milk. If you need another kind, I can get it from the house."

"Thank you. This is good," I replied, not looking at him as I walked over to the stool and sat down.

The fact that he thought I would be picky with what kind of milk I drank proved how little he knew me. Yet, that being so, we'd still managed to have sex three times.

"You can't wear that to meet my mom," he informed me.

“I wasn’t going to,” I replied, picking up the toast and taking a bite.

If he was going to continue to stand there and glare at me, it was going to ruin my first good breakfast. I chewed slowly, not wanting to get sick and throw the food back up. I had seen myself in the mirror. I knew I looked bad and that the baby needed me to eat.

Saxon’s footsteps told me he was leaving the room. Sighing in relief, I relaxed and began to enjoy the meal. Berries were my favorite. They would have them at the yoga studio sometimes for the employees, along with yogurt and granola.

Thankfully, Saxon didn’t return while I finished eating. I managed to get it all down without feeling like I was going to throw up. After washing my plate and glass, I went back to the bedroom to decide on something to wear. The dizziness was gone, and I could focus.

When I had lived at home, I’d shared clothes with Jamaica and Silver. I wasn’t able to take a lot with me because they had both needed the clothes. My options were very limited.

Pulling out the one dress I had brought with me, simply because my boobs were bigger than my sisters’ and going to get bigger with this pregnancy, I held it up and studied it. I didn’t think it looked slutty. It was a pretty blue, long, and flowy. I liked the boho look of it. It was either this or the black leggings and oversize off-the-shoulder hot-pink shirt I normally wore with it. The leggings were faded, so I decided the dress was the better of the two. I wasn’t showing at all yet. The only thing that had grown on me were my boobs. Everything else had gotten smaller from the lack of food.

Once I was dressed, I tried to do something to make my face look better. With what little makeup I had, I concealed the darkness under my eyes and

gave my cheeks some color. Lip gloss seemed to draw attention to my mouth, so I added it, hoping to distract from the rest. I brushed my hair, thankful that it at least had a nice shine to it. I figured that was from the prenatal vitamins I'd been taking.

Standing back, I studied myself again in the mirror and decided this was the best I could do. If Saxon had an issue with it, then he could tell me what he wanted me to change into. I had to face it—living here would be better for the baby. With his resources, I could have a much healthier pregnancy.

But did Levi know I was here? He had to know, right? All of them. That terrified me. I didn't know what they thought about me having Saxon's baby. What if they intended to take it from me? Even if Saxon said he wasn't going to. Could I really run from these people? Or would they find me wherever I went?

There was AJ. If I could find a way to get in touch with him, then he could get me and the baby out when the time came. But would he? I doubted it. He was going to be pissed at me for getting pregnant. Probably accuse me of being like Mom. Besides, I didn't know how to find him.

Two sharp knocks on my door.

"We need to go," Saxon barked at me.

I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply. I was going to be okay. This would be okay. It had to be.



ELEVEN

SAXON

She looked like a fucking angel, and it made me furious. Jerking my eyes off her, I stalked toward the door. Even too thin, undernourished, and nauseated, she could make a man weak in the goddamn knees. I opened the door with a little more force than was necessary, but I was angry. I couldn't help it. I did not want to look at Haisley and be attracted to her, but was that possible? We had to live in the same house for however long. I hadn't thought past the baby's birth. I sure as hell wasn't going to play house with her.

I refused to make eye contact with her, but I could tell she was watching me nervously. She should be nervous. My mom wasn't going to like her or the fact that she was pregnant with my kid. This was going to go badly. I was mentally ready for it, and she needed to be too.

"This isn't going to be easy. Be ready for it. My mom won't like you. She will be upset about all of it," I warned her as she fell into step beside me.

“Are you nervous?” she asked me.

I glanced at her before I could stop myself. Those damn eyes were watching me with a worried frown. I either had to stop looking at her or get immune to her if I was going to survive her a second time.

“No. I know what to expect.” I stared up at the house as we made our way closer to it.

“What about your dad?” she asked then.

“I’m pretty sure he knows. He’s just waiting on me to tell them.”

“How does he know?”

“Blaise knows. The family knows. My dad is family. I’m sure Blaise told him.”

“The family? As in the Mafia?”

I nodded my head, but said nothing more.

“Is that how you found out? About the pregnancy? Did they ... tell you?”

Again, I nodded.

She let out a sigh. It sounded defeated. If that upset her, then she needed to toughen up. Her baby’s father was in deep, and I would be for the rest of my life. She would always be connected to us because of that fact. She would have no secrets.

“I guess I should be grateful they told you instead of killing me,” she whispered.

I couldn’t help myself. I looked at her again. “Don’t be so dramatic.”

She raised her eyebrows at me as if I was the one who had said something stupid. “That’s not dramatic. It’s a plausible concern.”

I shook my head. “There’s a lot you don’t know.”

“Oh, wow,” she breathed.

I glanced at her, frowning, and realized she was looking at the house. It was fully decorated for Christmas. My mom hired a company to decorate for the holidays, and it was always over the top.

“I’ve never seen anything like this. Well, except on TV,” she said, still taking in all the decorations.

Wreaths on every window, garland, and other festive shit. There were even two Christmas trees—one on each side of the front door.

“Yeah, she likes Christmas,” I said and kept walking.

She didn’t say anything else as we climbed the steps, and I opened the front door to the house I’d grown up in. I waved a hand for her to enter, and then I followed her inside. I could smell the cinnamon scent that wafted throughout the house. The Christmas party that they hosted was later this week. I had forgotten with Haisley and the pregnancy thing taking up all my thoughts.

I heard my mom’s high heels against the hardwood floor before she appeared in the entryway of the house. She paused when she saw Haisley. I watched her take in Haisley before turning her unsure smile toward me. I could see the questions in her eyes already. When I had told her I needed to talk to her this morning, I hadn’t mentioned that I would be bringing someone with me. Especially a girl.

“Mom, this is Haisley Slate,” I told her.

Mom continued to look confused as she turned her attention back to Haisley. “I see,” was all she said. “I, uh, thought you needed to talk to me about something.”

She was rattled already, and I hadn't even told her yet.

"Can we go to the living room?" I asked her.

Her eyes glanced warily at Haisley, and then she nodded. "Of course."

When she turned to walk toward the hallway that led to the living room, I nodded my head at Haisley to follow her. Even with the makeup, Haisley had gone pale. This might end up being worse than I'd imagined.

Mom walked over and sat down in one of the high-back chairs and crossed her legs as she waited for us to take a seat. I motioned for Haisley to sit down on the sofa across from Mom, and I sat down beside her.

The tight smile on my mother's face was getting worse. "I'm assuming this is about me inviting Declan to the Christmas party," she said, looking at me.

Shit. I hadn't known she'd invited Declan. She needed to let that go. Even if there hadn't been Haisley, Declan and I were done. Long over.

"Not exactly," I replied, then cleared my throat. "I met Haisley a few months ago. She volunteered at the hospital with Aspen. We hit it off. Dated awhile."

My mom's gaze was now locked on Haisley. "I see. And you've been dating her for how long, and I am just now meeting her?"

I had to rip the Band-Aid off. Get this over with and face it. "Haisley is pregnant. It's mine. I had a paternity test done."

Mom shot up out of her chair, and her gaze swung to me. "How? Pregnant? What?" She shook her head, clearly in denial. "Saxon, this can't be right. You aren't the kind of boy that does something so ... so reckless. I don't see how this could have happened. And you're sure it's yours?"

I couldn't look at Haisley. She was just going to have to deal with this. I

could only worry about one of them at a time. “Yes. It’s mine. I chose to have unprotected sex. The paternity test was done by our people. There is no question.”

Mom covered her mouth with one hand, staring at me as if I were insane. “So, they know?” she asked me.

I knew she meant Garrett, Blaise, the rest of the family.

I nodded. “Levi is who informed me she was pregnant.”

Mom’s gaze swung back to Haisley. “Why didn’t she tell you?”

I sighed. “We ended things two months ago.”

“And she wasn’t going to tell you?” she asked, horrified.

“Eventually,” I said, although I wasn’t so sure. “Look, she knows who we are. She knows about us. She’s the reason we found Aspen when she was taken. Haisley tracked her brother’s phone.” I stopped then, realizing that maybe I shouldn’t have made that connection just yet for her.

Mom pointed at Haisley. “Her brother is the man who took Aspen?”

“Yes. But Haisley helped save Aspen.”

Mom began to pace back and forth. “I don’t understand. You ended things. There are no feelings there, clearly, but she’s pregnant. You had unprotected sex with some girl you barely knew. It’s the holidays. We have family and friends coming.”

Of course, leave it to Mom to mention the holidays when we were talking about a life. One I’d helped create.

“Mom, there were feelings.” I fucking hated admitting that. “They just weren’t enough.”

Mom threw up both her hands as she stopped and looked at me. “So, what?”

You're going to be a dad? Please tell me you aren't getting married."

I shook my head. "No. We aren't getting married. But Haisley needs somewhere to live, and she's going to stay with me until the baby is born. I'll help her get a place of her own after, and then I don't know. We haven't made it that far. But, yeah, I intend to see my kid."

"She can't get an abortion? Or there is adoption. Why does she need somewhere to live? Where are her parents?"

I glanced at Haisley then, and her eyes locked with mine. As much as I didn't like her, as angry as I was for how she had fucking dumped me, we were a team when it came to this ... or the baby. It was ours. We were all the kid had.

"No abortion. As for adoption, we are keeping the baby. Haisley wants the baby." I turned to look back at my mom.

"But do you want to be a dad?" my mother shot back at me.

No, I didn't. But what the hell difference did that make? I had made a baby, and its mom wanted to keep it. I didn't like the idea of abortion either, but I hadn't been against adoption. Haisley was though. And right now, I was the only person she had on her side. Even if she didn't deserve me.

"This is our decision," I told her. "I didn't come here to ask for your opinion. The decision has been made. I came to tell you. I'm sure Dad already knows, although he hasn't said anything to me yet."

Mom stood there, staring at me. She looked heartbroken, and I hated that. I had never put that look on her face before, and knowing I was the cause of it now hurt. But I had made a mistake, and I had to own up to it. This was what being a man was. She had to understand that.

"Fine," she said tightly. "You're right. You got yourself into this mess, and

you are responsible for it.”

I stood up, and Haisley followed my lead.

“What do your parents think about this?” she asked Haisley then.

I wanted to answer for her and get her out of here, but she needed to do this. If she was going to eventually earn my mom’s respect, she had to start by speaking for herself.

“I don’t know my father, and my mother thinks that I should have aborted the baby or demanded money from y’all. I refused to do either, so she kicked me out.”

“So, you came running to who? Levi? Or Blaise? Who did you tell about this so that Saxon would be forced to accept it?”

“Mom—”

“I didn’t tell anyone. I don’t know how Saxon found out, but he came to me.”

Mom said nothing else to her. She shifted her gaze back to me. “You’ll regret this. But if you think having her live with you is what needs to be done, it’s your choice.” Then, she turned and left the room.

When she was gone and her footsteps faded away up the stairs, I looked at Haisley. “That went about how I’d expected.”

Haisley’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“I thought she might yell more,” I admitted.

“Can we leave?”

“Yeah,” I replied and led her back to the front door. I glanced at the garland that Mom had hanging on the banisters. “The Christmas party should be fun.”

Haisley glanced up at me. “Do I have to come to that?”

If I had to be here, she did too.

I nodded. “Yeah, you do.”

“This is the nicest dress I own, Saxon. I don’t have the appropriate thing to wear to something like that.”

I hadn’t thought of that, but if she was going to carry my baby, then she’d be expected to show up at some things with me. At least where the family was concerned.

“I’ll make sure you have something to wear.”

Her shoulders sagged as I opened the door and let her walk out before me. My eyes went to her silky, long black hair, and I fought the urge to run my fingers through it. Tightening my grip on the handle, I closed the door behind me.



TWELVE

HAISLEY

I pulled out the lemon pound cake from the oven and set it on a rack to cool beside the chocolate chip cookies I had also made. After I had cleaned the house, I had started baking. Sitting here alone wasn't something I was used to. I was either working or dealing with a trailer full of kids. The silence was hard to adjust to.

Glancing at the clock, I saw it was after seven. Saxon had left me here when we got back from meeting with his mother and gone to work. That had been at ten thirty. I hadn't seen him since. It wasn't that I expected him to check on me or come back to see me. I just hadn't known I would be stuck in this house, alone, all day. There was only so much cleaning that could be done.

Maybe I could call the yoga studio and get my job back. That would give me somewhere to go and interaction with other people. First, I'd need a

phone to call them and transportation to work and back. If Saxon returned before I went to bed, I'd ask him about it.

I waited until eight before making a salad from the vegetables in the fridge, and then I pan-grilled some chicken and diced it up to toss on top. Taking my meal and a glass of milk, I went to sit on the sofa and turn on the television. I had only taken a few bites when the front door opened. I swung my gaze over, expecting to see Saxon, when a gorgeous brunette sauntered inside like she lived here. Her hands were carrying two large bags, and I could see garland and festive stuff peeking out of the top of it.

Her eyes locked on me, and they narrowed. I could tell by the short skirt and halter top she was wearing that she'd come here in hopes of finding Saxon.

"Who are you?" she snapped at me.

"Haisley," I replied, not sure what to say to her.

She clearly came here enough that she felt comfortable walking inside without knocking.

"Where is Saxon?"

I shrugged.

She dropped the bags by her feet and placed a perfectly manicured hand on her hip. The bracelet on her wrist flashed as the light from the lamp hit the diamonds. "If you don't know where he is, then why are you in his house?"

How did I answer her? And should I?

"Declan." Saxon's voice entered the house as he walked up behind her. "I see you let yourself in and you brought shit with you."

My eyes drank him in. Holy crap, why did he have to look like that? The

cowboy hat, jeans, and boots did it for me. Especially when he was dirty from work. Although it was dark outside. What had he been doing in the dark?

“I came to decorate. We need to get you a tree up,” she said, her eyes now turned to him.

“No thanks. I’ve got plans.”

“With her?” she asked, glaring at me. “Why didn’t I know you were seeing someone else?”

Saxon took off his hat and tossed it onto the table. “I’m not. Declan, this is Haisley. She’s pregnant with my kid. Haisley, this is Declan, my ex-girlfriend.” He sounded so casual as he walked past me and toward the kitchen.

Declan’s mouth fell open as she stared at him. “Are you joking right now? Because that isn’t funny!”

“Damn,” Saxon said. “You made cookies and cake.”

I turned to look at him over my shoulder. “I got bored.”

He picked up a cookie and took a bite. “I hope you get bored a lot.”

I didn’t. We had to talk about that, but right now, he had an angry female glaring at him.

“Saxon!” she shouted.

He sighed. “What, Declan?”

“You said she was pregnant with your kid!” She was pointing at me now.

“She is. I fucked her without a condom a couple of times. Now, she’s pregnant with my kid. What part of that do you not understand?”

If it wasn’t me he was talking about, then I would have laughed.

“You fucked her without a condom? Why would you do that?”

I took a bite of my salad, wishing I were anywhere but here.

“Because it felt good. Do you seriously want the details?”

“Saxon, we need to talk. Alone,” she said tightly.

I reached for my milk and started to stand.

“Sit down and eat, Haisley.” Saxon’s tone wasn’t so calm now.

I sat back down and said nothing.

“I’ve got to shower, change, and head over to Trev’s. I don’t have time for your shit, Declan,” Saxon said to her.

“You are going to talk to me,” she demanded.

“Whatever,” he replied. “Talk while I get ready.”

She followed him into his bedroom, and the door closed behind her. I listened as the lock clicked into place. The fact that my stomach suddenly knotted up wasn’t good. I shouldn’t care that a girl who looked like she belonged in his world—with all her long, wavy brown hair, expensive clothes, designer heels, and perfect nails—was in his bedroom while he was taking a shower.

But I did. I cared a lot. My chest hurt, and my salad no longer tasted good. I picked up my glass of milk and finished it, then stood and went to clean up the kitchen. Not wanting to see either of them when they exited the room or hear anything going on in there, I worked quickly.

When I was safely in my room, I sank down on the bed with a groan. This was only day one, and it was already hard. How was I going to survive this for seven more months? His mom clearly hated me. Declan was the girl his mother had invited to the Christmas party, which meant she might be his ex,

but she wasn't out of the picture.

Had I been a fling while they were on a breakup or something? I closed my eyes and fell back on the bed.

Voices entered the living room again, and I opened my eyes to stare at the ceiling fan while I listened to them talk. I couldn't make out their words, but Declan seemed to have calmed down. I was sure Saxon had helped with that.

There was a knock at my door.

"I'm heading out," Saxon told me through the closed door.

Great, he was going out.

"Okay," I replied.

He said nothing more. He didn't ask if I wanted to go anywhere. How I was feeling. Nothing. Just footsteps, Declan's laughter, and the front door closing.

I missed my family. My sisters and brothers. Even my mom. Tears burned my eyes, and I let them roll down the sides of my face as I continued to watch the ceiling fan turn.

I wanted to go home.



THIRTEEN

SAXON

I heard her bedroom door open as I poured my coffee. I hadn't made her breakfast this morning, but after seeing the baking she had done yesterday, I figured she could handle it on her own. Plus, I wanted to get the fuck out of here so I didn't have to look at her. The less I was around her, the better.

But I also wasn't going to be a complete ass.

I said, "Good morning," as I turned to look at her before leaving.

Joke was on me, it would seem.

She had on what looked like a red sports bra and a pair of matching leggings. I coughed, unable to cover up the fact that I'd just gotten strangled on my coffee. Fucking hell, did she have to dress like that? Wasn't it enough that she was so beautiful that it hurt? Did she have to remind me how incredible her body was too? I didn't need a damn reminder. It was burned in

my brain.

“Good morning. I, uh, wanted to talk to you before you left this morning.”

Great. She wanted to talk. So, I had to look at her more. Listen to her more. Watch that damn mouth of hers move.

“Do you need clothes?” I asked her.

She frowned and shook her head. “No.”

“Then, where is your shirt? It’s sixty degrees outside.”

She glanced down at that excuse for a top, then back up at me, and smiled. Jesus, I wished she wouldn’t do that. Her smile was dangerous.

“This is my shirt. It’s what I wear for yoga.”

Of course. She had to be basically naked while she bent her body in all those ways meant to taunt a man.

“Is yoga safe for the baby?” I asked.

She nodded. “Most moves. There are some that will have to be modified. Where I used to work had a pregnancy yoga class. I taught it several times. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I’d like to call and see if I could get my job back there. I miss it, and staying here alone all day ... well, I am going to go crazy. I need human interaction.”

I shook my head. I wasn’t sure why, but I did it instantly. I didn’t want her going and doing that shit half naked while pregnant with my baby.

“Are you serious? I can’t just stay here all the time. It’s lonely.”

The house was so spotless that you could eat off the floor, and she’d also baked. I had noticed all of it. She’d been trying to occupy her time.

“I don’t want you working.” Although I had no real reason why. Yoga wasn’t cleaning hotel rooms.

She closed her eyes and sighed, then opened them again. “Please, Saxon. I need to interact with people. It isn’t healthy for me to just stay in this house all day.”

She was right. It wasn’t. I was trying to stay the fuck away from her, so that left her alone.

“Okay. Fine.”

Her eyes lit up, and it was impossible to look away from. This was a good thing. She would be gone during the day. I wouldn’t have to see her face. Those eyes.

“Really?”

I nodded.

“I need to borrow a phone so I can call them and ask.” She paused and bit her bottom lip. “Also, I will need a ride. It’s a bit of a walk.”

Right. She couldn’t walk there. I’d be in the car with her twice a day.

“Someone there might be able to give me a lift sometimes,” she said.

The hopefulness in her voice was more than I could take. I had to get out of here. Away from her.

“Fine. Make the call.” I handed her my phone. I needed to get her a new phone. “I’ll give you a ride when you need one or find someone who can.”

I had plenty of guys who worked at the stables who could do it. I just wasn’t sure I wanted any of them in the truck with her. Especially when she was dressed like that.

She was beaming as she took my phone and dialed the number. I took my coffee and walked to my bedroom, needing some distance from her. That coconut scent that clung to her reminded me of being buried deep inside her.

I adjusted my dick in my jeans, frustrated with myself. We were starting day two, and I was already hard from smelling her. Yeah, she needed a damn job, and I needed to fuck someone. Someone who wasn't Declan.

“Thank you!”

I heard her excited tone and sighed. She was going back to the yoga studio. I could tell without her even telling me. It was probably good for her pregnancy and the baby. She'd get her exercise, and I wouldn't have to see her do it.

I walked back into the living room, and she held my phone out to me.

“They want me tomorrow morning at six for the early bird class. Is that okay?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“Great. Thanks. Um, do you mind if I move some things around in the living room while I do a refresher on pregnancy yoga? I'll move it all back.”

Sure, do all that shit in my living room with your ass in the air and legs wide open. My imagination doesn't need any fucking help.

“I'll move it. You don't need to move anything heavy,” I replied.

“Okay,” she said softly. “And, Saxon, thank you. Really. I appreciate it.”

I made the mistake of looking at her. The emotion in her eyes had me aching to stalk over to her, grab her face, and thrust my tongue into her mouth just to get a taste. I knew how sweet it was. I knew how she made those sounds that drove me crazy.

I had to get the hell out of here.

I moved everything back for her, then grabbed my coffee and left without a word. I was afraid she'd say something that would make me crack. I had to

remember that she couldn't be trusted. She was pregnant and vulnerable. When she hadn't been, she had tossed me aside. She hadn't wanted me.

Haisley had made it clear I wasn't what she wanted. Something I should be fucking used to by now. Declan seemed to be the one girl who wanted me and just me. It was why I'd stayed with her so long. With her, I got the girl. Problem was, I never wanted her.

No, the girls I wanted always wanted someone else. Haisley had been like the others, except she'd been heartless. Not even giving me a reason why. My attraction to her was my problem. I would deal with it.

Trev was walking toward the house when I stepped outside.

"Slacker," he called out to me. "Look at you, lying up in the house past seven."

I rolled my eyes. "I was dealing with shit."

"Is that what you're calling it these days? I much prefer the term *fucking*."

"There is no fucking going on in that house. Trust me."

Trev chuckled as he walked beside me to the stables. "Why the hell not? You knocked her up already. You might as well get the benefits of fucking without protection or fear of pregnancy. Besides, aren't pregnant women, like, horny and shit?"

Were they horny? Hell, I didn't know, and why did he?

"Shut up," I growled at him.

He had my thoughts going in directions they didn't belong.

"Whatever. You make no sense. You had a thing for her, and now, she's back, carrying your kid, living in your house. You got her. Enjoy it."

He would never understand. He didn't have to knock up a girl to get her.

Gypsi had been fucking in love with him moments after meeting him. It was all over her face. She didn't care that he was an asshole. She had wanted him anyway. He knew what unconditional love was. The girl he had fallen in love with was crazy about him.

“Is it because she's not blonde?” he asked me.

I glared at him. “What?” I asked.

He shrugged. “You have a thing for blondes.”

“No, I don't.”

“Uh, yeah, you do.”

“Declan isn't a blonde.”

Trev laughed. “And you never had a thing for her. She just sucks your dick like a whore.”

“I don't care about the hair color.”

“Okay, cool. I believe you. I saw how messed up you got when Haisley broke things off. She's nowhere near a blonde. That hair is black.”

“It's raven,” I corrected him before I could stop myself.

“What?”

“Her hair. It's raven.”

“Oh. See, there you go. Being all romantic and shit. It's not black; it's raven. Go talk to her with sweet stuff like that, and she'll be naked and in your lap in seconds.”

Not an image I needed!

“Shut up, Trev!”

He stepped into the office with me. “I'm just trying to help.”

“You’re not.”

“She’s gonna have your baby, which is so fucking weird to even say. You having a kid. I mean, I would expect this from me, but you. Never. Anyway, she’s gonna have your kid. She will be your baby momma. She’s hot. I mean, not as hot as Gypsi, but that’s a bar no one can reach. However, I don’t see why you don’t get over her breaking things off with you and fuck the hell out of her. Enjoy it. Let me tell you, once you get a taste of a smoking hot woman you have feelings for and they also happen to be a nympho ...” He paused and grinned. “It’s like you’ve died and gone to fucking heaven. And you know we aren’t getting anywhere near the real pearly gates. They’ve got a level of hell for us all.”

I reached for the paperwork on the newest purchase Dad had made. I was done talking about this with Trev. He meant well, but he had no clue how different the situation was.

“I’ve got work to do. Did you come here to ask about my sex life, or did you need something else?”

He smirked. “She’s got you all twisted up.”

“TREV!” I warned.

“Fine. Stay angry and horny. It’s your call. The reason I’m here is that Dad is taking Fawn to some Christmas town in Vermont she wants to visit. While they’re gone, Gypsi wants to have a Christmas party. A casual one. Not like the one Dad hosts on Christmas Eve. This one would be more our speed. It’s tonight at seven.”

Why did everyone have to throw so many fucking parties?

“Okay,” I replied.

“She also wants Haisley to come. She wants to meet her.”

I shook my head. “No. We aren’t a couple. I’m not bringing her. I’ll take her to the main parties, where she’ll be expected, but not to this.”

“Aspen wants to see her. Levi knows about the party.”

Fucking hell. I slammed my palm down on the table. “And Levi now wants me to bring her to a party with my friends? Like he didn’t tell me to stay away from her?”

Trev shrugged. “She’s carrying your kid now. Things are different. Plus, whatever Aspen wants, he gives her.”

“Dammit!” I shoved off from the desk and stalked for the door. “She won’t want to come. We make her nervous.”

“Then, all the more reason for her to come. Meet our women. Realize we’re not a bunch of insane, murdering psychos.”

I stopped and looked at him. “Is Levi gonna be there?”

He nodded.

“Are you?”

He nodded.

“Is Gage?”

“Yeah, we’re all gonna be there.”

I held up a finger. “Insane.” I held up another. “Murderer.” Then, I held up a third one. “Psycho. Seems like all three will be there.”

Trev frowned at me. “Levi’s the insane one, Gage is the psycho ... are you saying I’m a murderer?”

This time, I shrugged.

“Sax, the bastard was stalking and terrorizing Gypsi. He had hurt her.

Abused her.”

He had still tortured the man with a knife and enjoyed it.

“One day, you’ll know what it feels like, and I can’t wait to have a front-row seat to your switch getting flipped. Until then, oh, holy one, bring your baby mamma to my house tonight.”

I said nothing as he turned and walked back out to his Bentayga. Damn him for putting me in a corner. I didn’t want to have her in that part of my life. She’d invaded every other place. I needed something that she hadn’t touched.



FOURTEEN

HAISLEY

The door opened as I was holding a dolphin pose. Heavy footsteps vibrated on the floor, but I held still. If Saxon had forgotten something, there was no reason for me to stop or talk to him.

“Jesus,” he muttered, stopping so that I could see his boots. “Can you get up from that for a minute?”

Slowly, I stood and turned to look at him. His eyes went to my boobs, then snapped back up to meet my eyes. I watched his jaw tense as the muscles in his neck flexed. Oh, that was not good for me. The area between my legs that had gotten me into this mess tingled. I had to cover a gasp with a cough—it had hit so hard. Lately, I’d been waking up achy, as if I had been having sex dreams.

“I, uh, didn’t know you would still be doing that,” he said, his eyes glancing back at my chest again before he looked away. “So, anyway, Trev

came by, and his girlfriend is having a party tonight. Aspen will be there. They want you to come.” He cut his eyes back at me.

Trev Hughes. The Mafia boss’s son. Um, I wasn’t sure I wanted to do that. Even if it was to see Aspen. Did Levi know and that other guy? I chewed on my bottom lip nervously. This was a bad idea.

“I don’t think Levi would want me there. Or Blaise.”

Saxon’s eyes were on my mouth this time. The thing that was doing to my body was not good. It was slightly embarrassing. I needed to cross my legs to get some relief.

“Yeah, they know. Aspen wants you there, and Levi does whatever she asks. As for Blaise, he has no issue with you.”

I wanted to laugh. I’d beg to differ. They had a major issue with me.

“Does Levi do whatever Aspen wants mean I’m in danger if I don’t go?”

Saxon frowned. “You’re not in danger from Levi or anyone. You’re with me.”

I didn’t know the Mafia hierarchy, but I was pretty sure Levi outranked Saxon. He was older and terrifying.

“Are you sure about that?”

He nodded. “Positive.”

“But do you want me to go?” Because I doubted he did. It was clear he wanted to stay away from me if he could.

“Yes.”

He was lying.

“You’re a bad liar,” I replied.

“We can’t all be as talented at it as you.”

Ouch. He could have slapped me, and it wouldn’t have hurt as bad. I’d thought we had called some truce or something. But he was still taking swings. Maybe I had made that up in my head.

“I’ll stay here. Thanks for the invite,” I replied and started to walk toward my room.

I wasn’t sure if I would burst into tears or not. Controlling that was difficult with my hormones going crazy.

“Haisley, wait.” Saxon moved to stand in my way. “I’m sorry.”

I took a step to the side to get around him, and his hand wrapped around my arm. I stilled. Why did that simple touch make my body feel like it had been hit by a jolt of electricity?

“I shouldn’t have said that. Will you forgive me?”

Crap, this was too much. He was close, the smell of leather and pine was invading my senses, and his hand was on me.

Do not cry. Do not cry.

“I want you to go.” His voice dropped, and I shivered.

I couldn’t look at him. I stared at the floor. “Okay.”

“Are you about to cry?” he asked me, turning toward me.

I shook my head.

“Then, look at me.”

I shook my head again.

He took my chin and lifted it. I took a deep breath and tried to look as normal as I could as my eyes met his. But seeing the concern in his gaze

made my eyes burn.

“I didn’t mean to make you cry.” His voice was gentle. Too gentle.

A tear broke free and slid down my face. “It’s just pregnancy hormones,” I whispered.

His thumb brushed the tear away.

“Don’t be sweet,” I warned him. “I can’t stop crying if you are.”

He frowned. “Why?”

I swallowed hard against the knot in my throat. “It’s just been a while since I’ve had sweet. I was finally adjusting to having no one care. Don’t act like you do. I’ll fall apart.”

“Fuck,” he muttered and pulled me against his chest.

His arms wrapped around me, and the tears I had warned him about broke free as I began to sob. He held my head against his chest gently with his hand.

I gripped at his shirt, knowing I shouldn’t be doing this and that I would regret it later, and I let all the sadness out. Missing my family, missing having people around who loved me and wanted me there. Being alone and having no one while I faced a future I had no clue how I was going to handle. But more than that, I cried because I had been in love with this man and been forced to let him go. Make him hate me. Just like life seemed to hate me.

“I do care, Haisley. You’re not alone in this. You’re here because I care.”

His words only made me cry harder. He was what I had imagined as my perfect man. He fit all the categories. The two weeks we had spent together were the happiest of my life. Sure, he was in the Mafia, and that had not been on my list, but that was the only thing.

His lips brushed against my temple, and goose bumps covered my skin. I had to get control over myself. He ran a hand over my back and stopped as it touched bare skin. I sniffled as the crying eased. Something else was taking its place. The need to be close to him in another way made me tremble.

Saxon's hands fell away, and he stepped back, leaving me there cold again. "I, uh, have a meeting I need to get to. We need to leave at seven. I ..." He glanced at the door. "I gotta go."

I watched as he took long strides to the door, wrapping my arms around my waist. He left without a backward glance, and I sank down onto the sofa, pulling my legs underneath me.

"Yeah, Saxon, I am alone," I whispered to no one.



When Saxon had returned to the house to get ready for the party, I had been in my bathroom. The awkwardness didn't begin until I stepped out of the bedroom and he turned to look at me from where he was standing, watching the television. His arms were crossed over his chest. He was dressed in a light-blue button-down shirt, a pair of faded jeans, and a cleaner pair of cowboy boots. He didn't say anything after looking at me. He turned off the television, then put the remote down on the coffee table.

I hadn't been sure if my blue jean miniskirt and the red sweater that bared both my shoulders was appropriate, but seeing that he was wearing jeans, I felt relieved. I wanted to ask if what I had on was okay, but I worried that he'd think I was asking for a compliment.

"Ready?" he asked me, flashing a smile my way before heading for the door.

“Not really,” I replied, following him.

He looked back at me. “It’s going to be fine. You’ll see.”

I wanted to trust him, but with these people, I couldn’t be so sure. He held the door open for me, and I walked outside ahead of him. The cool night air hit me, and I shivered.

“Wait a minute,” Saxon said, turning and walking back inside.

I stood there, wrapping my arms around myself to keep warm.

When he reappeared, he was holding a brown leather jacket. “Here,” he said to me, holding it open. “Put this on.”

“What about you?” I asked.

He smirked. “I’m a man. I can handle the fifties. Put it on.”

I slid one arm in as he held it, then the other. He let go and walked around me toward his truck. The scent of leather and pine wrapped around me, reminding me of how I’d loved this smell when Saxon used to hold me and kiss me.

I made my way to the truck and realized he’d walked to my side and was opening the door. He was being nice. Could I handle that? Would my heart be able to deal with this?

Trying to make light of the situation, I smiled up at him. “You bring me a coat and open my car door. Not sure what to think of this.”

His gaze dropped to my shoes, then back up at me. “I figured with those heels, you’d need help getting in. I don’t need you falling. You’re carrying my baby.”

A smirk touched his lips, and I felt it tingle every nerve in my body.

I placed my hand in his, and he helped me up into the truck. Sitting back, I

realized I wasn't nervous about the party so much anymore. He'd distracted me. Had that been his plan?

Shifting in my seat, I crossed my legs as he sat down in the driver's side. I didn't miss the way his eyes went to my legs before quickly looking away. Smiling to myself, I decided these were my new favorite shoes.

"I've only been to one Christmas party. It was at the yoga studio where I work," I told him.

"They like their Christmas parties here. This one, then the one Mom has here, and Garrett will have one on Christmas Eve."

"That must be nice to have grown up with all the decorations and parties."

He shrugged. "When I was younger, I guess. It gets annoying now."

"How can it be annoying? Everything at your parents' house was magical—well, the decorations. Your mom hates me, and there is nothing magical about it."

He cut his eyes at me. "How did you celebrate Christmas, growing up?"

I sighed and shook my head. "We didn't."

He turned his head to look at me fully this time. "Are you Jewish?"

I laughed at that. "No. We didn't celebrate Hanukkah either."

"Is your mom just against the holiday?"

Oh, to have grown up in his world and not realize that, without money, Christmas was a struggle.

"Mom told us that Santa was a made-up thing that parents told their kids. Since she struggled to keep a roof over our heads, she couldn't afford to buy us gifts or put up a tree or decorations. So, she chose not to celebrate it at all. We rarely had a television back then, so we didn't watch Christmas movies.

Other than hearing other kids talk about it at school and the school parties in the classroom, we didn't know much about the holiday."

Saxon was quiet for a moment. I wondered if I'd been too honest with him.

"Fuck, Haisley. That's just sad."

I shrugged. "It's life. We didn't live in a box on the side of the street, and we had food to eat. There are those who had less than us."

We drove in silence for a few minutes, and then he turned, and we went under a massive arch that said Hughes Farm on it. I gasped, sitting up straight. Twinkling white lights covered everything. They even hung from trees. It was incredible.

"Oh my God," I whispered, trying to take it all in. How many lights were there, and how long had this taken to do? "Look! They have Christmas trees outside! And is that one at the stables? The horses even have a tree!"

When Saxon pulled up to the house, he parked behind another car in the large circular drive. Christmas trees decorated in silver and white lined the steps on both sides leading up to the house. There had to be over forty trees just outside, and they were all fully decorated. Not just covered in lights.

"Prepare yourself. The inside is just as insane," Saxon told me, opening his door.

I quickly opened mine, ready to jump down and see everything up close. Pausing, I listened as holiday music played from speakers.

My eyes went to the front of the mansion. Wreaths covered the windows, and trees were lit up in almost every window.

"It's like a winter wonderland but in Florida," I said as Saxon appeared in front of me.

“Give me your hand before you break your leg,” he said as his fingers wrapped around my wrist.

He helped me down, and I went back to looking at the decorations. We walked up the stairs, and I realized there were presents under the bajllion trees we passed. Surely, those weren’t real presents.

“They always go all out, but this year, it’s a little more over the top than usual,” Saxon said beside me. “Garrett fell in love, and his fiancée wanted a Christmas wedding. They’re getting married here on Christmas Day. Also, just so you don’t get confused by the stepsibling jokes you’re going to hear tonight, Trev’s girlfriend, Gypsi, is about to become his stepsister. The guys like to tease him about it. Although he doesn’t seem to care.”

That had to be a good story.

“I’d like to know how that happened.”

Saxon grinned. “I’ll give you the details sometime.”

When we reached the door, I realized Saxon’s hand was on my lower back. I’d been so caught up in everything around me that I hadn’t noticed. I did now though. My entire body did. He pressed the doorbell, and I could hear the “Carol of the Bells” play.

“Is that their doorbell?” I asked, amazed.

He nodded.

The door swung open, and a stunning blonde smiled warmly at Saxon, then turned to me. She was wearing a red dress that hugged her curves, and her platinum hair hung in curls around her shoulders.

Stepping forward, she held out her hand to me. “I’m Gypsi, and I am so glad you came.”

I placed my hand in hers, and she used both her hands to gently squeeze mine before turning back to Saxon.

“Wow,” she said her eyes wide. “She’s gorgeous.”

Me? I glanced at Saxon then, and he was blushing. Why was he blushing?

He cleared his throat. “Yeah,” he agreed, but it didn’t seem very believable.

“Sax! You’re here.” Trev Hughes, who I recognized immediately, stepped into the entryway. “And you brought Haisley.”

He was smiling brightly and looked genuinely happy that I was here. That was a relief.

“Haisley’s here?” I heard Aspen call out, and then she came walking through the same entrance Trev had.

Her eyes lit up when she saw me. Seeing a familiar face among all these people felt good. Even if her boyfriend scared me to death.

“Why don’t we make our way to the great room?” Saxon said. “Y’all can all talk to Haisley in there, and I can get a drink.”

Aspen came up to me and hugged me. “It’s so good to see you,” she said, then lowered her voice. “And I want all the details on this baby.”

When she pulled back, she looked up at Saxon. “I trust you’re treating her right.”

He nodded, but the smile on his face said he wasn’t so sure.

“He’s been great,” I assured her.

The doorbell played “Jingle Bells” this time, and Gypsi turned to look back at the door. “Y’all go ahead. I’ll get it.”

“I’ll see you in a bit. I’m supposed to be getting the caterer to bring more

tequila to the bartender outside,” Aspen told me.

I nodded as she turned to leave.

Saxon placed his hand on my back again, and we followed the others toward the sound of talking, music, and laughter. This was the overwhelming part. Being here and knowing that these people, the majority of them—the men, to be exact—didn’t like me. They didn’t trust me because of AJ.

“The girl who got Sax to break a rule,” a male voice called out.

I looked to see a guy who looked more like a model than a member of the Mafia. Maybe one of those handsome quarterbacks who had that all-American smile.

“It’s good to know even you can break for the right pus—”

“Gage, do not finish that sentence,” a woman with dark hair and the bluest eyes I’d ever seen interrupted him as she wrapped her arm around his.

His smirk softened as he looked down at her. “What, sweet baby?” he drawled, reaching up to run his knuckle over her bottom lip. “I was just congratulating him on being a little bad.”

The woman rolled her eyes, then bit his finger.

“Keep that shit up and see what happens,” he warned her in a way that made her eyes flare.

I felt like we were being voyeurs at this point.

She swung her blue eyes back to me. “It’s nice to meet you finally.” She smiled. “I’m Shiloh. This is Gage. I apologize for anything he says in advance. He has no filter.”

“You mean, he has no morals,” Saxon replied.

Gage grinned. “How can I when you got them all?”

Saxon chuckled.

“Come with me,” Shiloh said. “I’ll introduce you to the other girls.”

I glanced up at Saxon, and he nodded. He was probably glad to get rid of me. I followed Shiloh out the door onto a back patio unlike any I had ever seen. There were several levels to it, a massive fireplace, more Christmas trees, lights, and decorations.

“Okay, so Aspen didn’t exaggerate,” a female said.

I turned to see a brunette with big brown eyes, and in the green dress she was wearing, I noticed she had the perfect hourglass figure.

“I’m Trinity,” she informed me. “Aspen and I live in the same house. At least for now. Levi is having a house built for them. Anyway, she said you were the kind of stunning that was intimidating.”

She had? I’d been told I was pretty a lot in my life, but hearing people in this world—with their money, power, and beauty—considered me intimidating was laughable.

“Thank you,” I replied, feeling unsure of what to say. “It’s nice to meet you,” I added, feeling awkward.

Trinity smiled. “We’re all glad you’re here.”

So far, it felt like they were at least. I’d yet to see Levi or the blonde tattooed guy. Those were the two I was most worried about.

“Oh good! You made it out here,” Aspen said, walking toward me.

“Maddy and Blaise just got here,” Gypsi announced as she walked outside. “Everyone has arrived. I can come out here with y’all now.”

Okay, and Blaise. Maybe I was scared about meeting him too. He was the boss.

Gypsi walked over and picked up a glass from the bartender who had already fixed her something. Then, she turned to me. “I am going to speak for all of us when I say, we want to hear all about what went down with you and Saxon.”

Trinity laughed. “Leave it to Gypsi to get to the point.”

“I was going to ask. She just beat me to it,” Shiloh admitted.

“We should wait on Maddy though,” Trinity said.

They all nodded as Aspen sat down and patted the spot beside her on a white leather sofa. Which was outside. Who put white leather furniture outside?

I took a seat, and the others all found places to sit with the elaborate options.

Shiloh looked up and waved at someone. “Come on! We are waiting on you to get the *Saxon being a daddy* details.”

I glanced back, and there was another beautiful blonde.

She was smiling as she walked our way. “Sorry we are late. Cree wasn’t being cooperative about giving us a night away.”

“Cree is their little boy,” Aspen whispered.

Maddy stopped, her eyes landing on me, and a slow smile curled across her lips. For some reason, I felt as if I had done something to please her. She didn’t look like someone who would be married to a future Mafia boss. She looked young, innocent, and kind of perfect.

“I like this,” she said, nodding at me. “I like it a lot.” She walked over and sat down across from me, then crossed her legs. “Have you met Declan yet? Because if not, I want to be there when she gets a look at you.”

Trinity laughed, and Gypsi joined her.

“I’ve met her,” I admit.

Maddy sighed. “I hate that I missed that. She probably freaked out.”

I lifted one shoulder. “She wasn’t thrilled.”

They all started laughing then.

Maddy’s eyes seemed to dance with amusement. “You’re perfect for Sax.”

This was awkward. They clearly had the wrong idea.

“Oh, well, Saxon doesn’t like me much. We had a ... bad end to things. He’s not happy about me being pregnant. I am only here because he feels like it’s his responsibility to help me. This isn’t a ... I mean, we aren’t together.”

Trinity leaned forward. “So, he’s rude all the time? Or he runs hot and cold?”

I had to think about it. “He’s not rude. Just annoyed, but, no, not all the time.”

“I give it a month,” she said, leaning back in her seat.

“No way! Two weeks! Saxon is a softy,” Gypsi replied.

“I’m going with two months. He can be so serious,” Shiloh said.

Maddy smirked and put her drink to her lips. “One week. Tops.”

I looked at each one of them, trying to understand what they were talking about. I turned to Aspen. She smiled at me.

“When Saxon will crack,” she said.

“Crack?” I asked.

“Yeah, when he won’t be able to continue being annoyed and gives in to the fact that he wants you.”

The conversation moved to the upcoming wedding, and I was thankful the focus was off me. I enjoyed listening to them and watching their friendships. I'd never had something like this in my life, and I knew that this was only temporary for me too. Getting attached to them would be harder when it was time for me to go. But for the moment, I let myself pretend I could be a part of their world. Thinking about the fact that these women were married to men in the Mafia was odd. They were all so normal. Nothing dark or twisted in them.

"You enjoying yourself, baby?" a deep voice asked, and Aspen lifted her head to look up at Levi, who had come up behind her.

"Yes," she replied, standing and stepping into his arms.

He didn't seem so terrifying when he was holding Aspen with that look of complete devotion in his eyes. Still, my heart rate picked up, and I twisted my hands nervously in my lap.

Did he know I was here? Yes, of course he knew. These men told each other everything.

"How are you feeling, Haisley?" Levi asked me then, causing my head to snap back up and look at him.

I swallowed and managed a smile. "Good, thanks." It sounded more like a squeak.

"What did you do to her, Levi? It's normally Gage who terrifies people," Trinity asked, sounding surprised.

"Nothing. It's just all the ... stuff that happened with Aspen. I feel guilty by association, I guess," I told her.

I didn't want to cause any issues. I knew my being here was something that Levi didn't want, but was accepting for Aspen's and possibly Saxon's sake.

“No one blames you,” Aspen assured me.

My gaze flicked to Levi’s before dropping. If she only knew how wrong she was.

“If Levi gets to break up the girl party out here, then I get my woman too,” Gage announced as he walked outside.

Shiloh stood and made her way to him. The way he was looking at her with clear adoration in his eyes made me blush. These men with their females were intense. I’d never been around anything like this.

“Why don’t we all go inside? The fire is warmer in there,” Gypsi suggested, standing.

I followed behind Trinity as everyone made their way inside. Some stopping to get drinks, others laughing or making jokes about the way Gage was clearly groping Shiloh.

I stood, unsure of what to do as the rest of the party paired up. Saxon had a drink in his hand, standing over by the fire, talking to Trev, as Gypsi approached them. They appeared to be in a serious conversation until Trev saw her, and his expression turned into a pleased grin.

He reached out and tugged her to him, openly kissing her, forgetting whatever he had been saying to Saxon. I watched as Saxon’s gaze scanned the room until he found me, and then he left the couple and came in my direction. I still didn’t see the blond guy anywhere. Perhaps he wasn’t here. That would ease my mind if he wasn’t.

“Having a good time?” Saxon asked me, then took a drink from the glass in his hand.

His brown eyes, outlined by thick black lashes, distracted me for a

moment, and I almost forgot the question.

Trying to snap myself out of the daze he'd suddenly put me in, I nodded. "Yes, everyone is really nice."

He seemed uncomfortable for a moment, then glanced over toward the area where two massive caramel-colored leather sofas sat, facing each other, with a long marble table between them and wide cream-colored velvet chairs at each end. A man who looked like a Viking or perhaps a brick wall was lounging in one of those chairs. A cigar was between his teeth. He held out a hand to someone, and I watched as Trinity walked over and slipped her hand in his before he tugged her onto his lap.

Wow. So, that was who Trinity belonged to. And by the way his large hand rested on her leg possessively, she clearly belonged to him. The rings on their hands also told me they were married.

"Let's go sit," Saxon said.

I nodded, then followed him as he went over to the sofa facing the wall and sat down. I took the seat beside him. The others began to make their way over and began taking up the rest of the sofas. When I saw Maddy smiling up at a man who had his hand around her waist, speaking in a low voice as he leaned closer to her, I wasn't surprised to see the oldest Hughes was as handsome as the youngest one was.

When Blaise Hughes turned to look in this direction, his eyes locked on mine, and he nodded his head once. Then, he went over to take the other chair before placing Maddy in his lap, much like the Viking had done to Trinity. I didn't continue to watch them. Blaise was intimidating. His presence seemed to command respect. It was odd how that worked.

Shiloh and Gage sat across from us, and although she wasn't in his lap, his

arm was around her, and she was curled up close to his side.

Gage looked at Saxon and smirked. “Heard Melanie didn’t take the news well,” he drawled.

Saxon sighed and shook his head.

“At least she’ll stop inviting Declan to things now,” Trev replied as he sank down on the sofa beside them, pulling Gypsi down as close to him as she could get while she giggled. “Crazy bitch has been everywhere lately. I thought we’d gotten rid of her for good, then—*bam*—she was back. Like the plague.”

“Trev!” Gypsi scolded him, placing a hand on his chest.

“What? You don’t know her. She’s not a nice person. Is she, Maddy?” Trev replied.

Maddy shook her head. “I can’t say I’m a fan,” she replied.

“I’d rather not go down memory lane,” Blaise replied, then took a sip from his glass.

That comment and the look he gave the others made me even more curious. What had happened with Saxon and Maddy? I looked at her and suddenly felt even more out of my league. Had she once liked Saxon? My stomach felt sick. I couldn’t compare to someone like that.

“Understood,” Gage replied with an evil grin. “We can talk about the fact that these two are about to be related.” His gaze was on Trev then.

Trev smirked. “You can try to piss me off, but I don’t care. It just means she can’t fucking get rid of me. I got her locked down.”

Gypsi leaned close and whispered something to him that caused a smile meant only for her to curl on his lips. I dropped my hands to my lap, not

wanting to be caught looking at any of them. They all seemed to be so wrapped up in each other and openly affectionate that it was hard not to be envious of it all.

What did that feel like? The connection, feeling safe, loved, like there was someone you could always turn to. You'd never be alone. No matter what life threw at you, they would be there, ready to hold you.

"Where's Kye?" the Viking asked.

Kye had to be the blond guy. He was the one that was missing.

"Genesis," Levi replied, sounding annoyed.

"Again?" Gage's tone was as put off as Levi's had been.

"Yeah. She called a couple of hours ago. He ran out of the house like the pussy he is," Levi told them.

"He stayed drunk for a fucking week when she got engaged." The Viking was scowling as he said it.

"His ass stayed drunk because she's not his best friend. That is bullshit. It's always been bullshit. You can't be best friends with a woman. You get that close, and then you're fucking. She gets feelings and shit. You can't tell me they've not fucked." Gage seemed put out by it all.

"I don't think they've fucked. If they had, he'd have killed the fiancé by now," Levi pointed out.

"They've been friends since they were kids," Saxon said beside me. "Maybe that's all it is. They'd have been more by now if they had feelings for each other."

"He got trashed and didn't sober up for seven damn days when he found out they were engaged. Remember he missed the Breeders Cup?" Trev

replied.

“Yeah, that was off, I admit,” Saxon agreed.

“Why the fuck are we analyzing Kye’s relationship?” Blaise asked.

“Because it’s annoying the shit out of the ones who have to live with him,” Levi replied.

“I think he loves her. I feel bad for him,” Aspen said softly.

“If he does, then we have some serious shit in the near future to deal with,” the Viking sighed.

“I need to get our house finished before that shit goes down. I don’t want to deal with his ass daily if he goes off the deep end,” Levi said.

Trinity laughed. “So, you’re gonna leave Huck and I to deal with him going off the deep end?”

“No, baby. He goes apeshit, and I’ll kick his ass out,” the Viking who I now knew was named Huck replied.

“Fuck, can we talk about something else?” Blaise asked.

“Fine, boss. Let’s talk about the fact that Garrett is going into semi-retirement in one week. It’ll all start to change. You ready for that?” Gage asked.

Trev laughed. “Shit. He was born ready.”

They went on talking about things I hadn’t expected them to discuss in front of me. Family stuff. I realized they didn’t just go out and kill people. They owned hotels, a casino, a hospital, a racing track. They loaned money to important people. It was something much bigger than what I’d thought.

Finally, Saxon stood up, then looked down at me. “It’s getting late. Haisley and I’ve got to be up early,” he said.

“Yeah, I’m ready for you all to leave. We got this house to ourselves tonight, and I want to take advantage of it,” Trev told everyone.

“Fuck, let us get out of here before she gets to biting you and shit,” Gage drawled, standing up and taking Shiloh with him. “Crazy fucker and his kinks.” He smirked at Trev as he said it.

Everyone got their coats and headed for the door while they said their goodbyes. They were all going to be at Saxon’s parents’ in a few nights, it seemed. The other women mentioned seeing me then and how much they’d enjoyed me being here. When we left, I had an odd sense of belonging. Even if I didn’t feel that way with Saxon. With him, I was just a burden.



FIFTEEN

HAISLEY

When I walked out of the bedroom the next morning, I had a sweatshirt on over my top. I could tell by the chill in my room when I woke up that it was one of those rare cold mornings in Florida. I had given Saxon back his leather coat last night, and this was the best thing I had to keep me warm.

The sun wasn't up yet, but this time of year, it was closer to seven before sunrise. The living room was dark with only the light from the kitchen giving a warm glow. Saxon was standing at the bar, pouring a cup of coffee, and there was a plate with a cup of milk on the counter. He lifted his head, and his eyes met mine as I reached him.

“Good morning,” I said, hoping that we would continue this *getting along* thing.

“Morning. I made you something to eat before we go,” he said, nodding at the plate.

I looked down to see scrambled eggs, toast, and berries again. I knew he was only doing this for the baby's sake, but it still made me feel warm inside. "Thank you," I replied.

"I got a text this morning. I was able to get you an appointment with the OB-GYN Maddy uses. She's going to see you at four today. I'll pick you up from the studio, and we can go from there."

He had gotten me a doctor's appointment. We hadn't even talked about it since I had gotten here. Other than he wanted to get me proper medical care.

"Does, uh, she take Medicaid?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. But you're covered."

"How?"

"I handled it, Haisley. Don't worry about it. Dr. James is the best OB-GYN in the state. It's why Maddy used her."

The best OB-GYN lived in Ocala? I found that hard to believe.

"What hospital?" I asked him.

"She has private offices in Gainesville and Orlando. She works between the two."

Private offices? I wasn't sure I knew what that was exactly, but I focused on eating my food and stopped asking questions. This was a huge deal. I would have a doctor who would answer my questions, and I could call if I had any issues. No waiting in a packed room for hours to get five minutes with her.

"The dark circles under your eyes are gone," Saxon said, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I had noticed that in the mirror this morning. "Yeah, having proper food to

eat and a luxurious bed to sleep in will do that for you,” I replied, smiling at him.

“That bed isn’t luxurious,” he said.

I laughed and finished chewing my food, then said, “Maybe not to you, rich boy, but to me, that is five-star quality.”

I popped the last berry into my mouth, drank the rest of my milk, and took the half-eaten piece of toast with me before standing up. “We’d better go. I don’t want to be late.”

“It’s only five. You have plenty time.”

I shook my head. “I have to warm up and do stretches.”

He picked up his cup and nodded toward the door. “Okay, let’s go.”

We headed to the door, and when I opened it, the cold wind reminded me why I was wearing a sweatshirt.

“Shit. Wait,” Saxon replied and walked back to his bedroom.

I closed the door to keep the cold out. When he exited his room, he was holding a jean jacket with fleece lining.

“Here,” he said to me, opening it up. “Put this on.”

I didn’t argue. I liked wearing his coats and smelling him. It was as close as I was going to get to burying my face in his neck and inhaling.

“Thanks. You have a lot of coats.”

“Yeah. Just keep this one.”

I would rather he keep them and let me use them as I needed them. That way, they’d always smell like him. But I couldn’t say that, so I just said, “Thanks.”

We didn't talk much on the way to the yoga studio, and when we got there, he reminded me he'd pick me up at four. I was inside, hanging up his coat, when he finally pulled away, and I realized he had been making sure I got inside safely. When Saxon was thoughtful, it was hard not to let myself want more. Miss him. Wish I could have what we'd started over two months ago.



I was finishing up my last class of the day and had ten minutes before Saxon arrived to get me. There had been three one-hour breaks where I was free, and I'd gone to the acai bowl place across the street, taken a nap in the mediation room, and read up on my first trimester during those times. The prenatal yoga classes were popular, and now that I was back, they were offering two a day.

"It's good to see you back," a deep voice said.

I turned to see Trace, another instructor. He was tall with a lean, muscular build, and his classes were packed with women. Especially the cougars. They loved him. He kept his blond dreadlocks in a bun most of the time and had pale blue eyes. He was also cocky as hell.

"Thanks. It's good to be back," I replied as I rolled up my mat—or the one I used here. I didn't actually have my own mat.

"I might have to take a few prenatal classes if those are the only ones you're doing," he said.

I stood up and frowned at him. Was he flirting with me? Sure, he'd flirted with me in the past, but that was before I was pregnant. I had always turned him down when he asked me out too. The guy was a man -whore. He broke men's and women's hearts regularly.

“I’m doing prenatal because I’m pregnant,” I told him.

He tilted his head and grinned at me. “I figured. Your tits have always been nice, but, damn, Haisley, they’ve gotten huge.”

I felt my face heat up. I needed bigger tops. He was right. My boobs had gotten much bigger. I’d realized it today when I put on my yoga outfit. I only owned two, and both tops were too small.

“It’s a good thing. Don’t look so upset,” he said, walking closer to me. “You’ve even got more curves going on here,” he told me, placing a hand on my hip. “It’s rounder.” He lowered his voice.

I backed up away from his touch. “Uh, I have to go.”

“You’re gonna want to keep your fucking hands off her.” Saxon’s voice startled me.

My gaze swung to the doorway, and he was standing inside, glaring at Trace.

Oh crap. He couldn’t pull his gun out in here. I’d get fired.

I rushed around Trace and over to Saxon. His eyes hadn’t left Trace’s.

“This must be the baby daddy,” Trace replied, sounding amused.

He had no idea what he was doing. I wanted to yell at him to shut up, but I kept my eyes on Saxon, worried about that damn gun.

“It’s fine. He’s a flirt. He means nothing by it,” I told him, grabbing his arm. “Let’s go.”

Saxon dropped his gaze to me and then to my boobs. He inhaled sharply before his eyes shot back up to mine. “This fucking bra thing is too damn small,” he said through clenched teeth.

“I am aware of that. Pregnancy has upped my bra size.”

His eyes swung back over my shoulder to Trace, who I wished would leave. “Don’t touch her again. That’s the only warning you’ll get.”

Trace’s cocky laugh made me wince. He was an idiot. “I don’t have to force any female. They come after me.”

Saxon’s hand clamped down on my hip and held it firmly before his eyes came back to mine. “Get your things.”

I shook my head. “I’m not leaving you alone in here with him,” I whispered.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “If you’re protecting him, don’t.” The warning was clear.

“I’m not. I want to keep my job,” I whispered. “And if you pull out that gun, I will get fired.”

His hand tightened his grip on me. “Let’s go.”

Relieved, I nodded, and he moved his hand to my back and held it there as he walked with me out of the room. His entire body was rigid, and I could feel the anger rolling off him in waves as I got my coat and bag. We were almost to the door when Sammy walked out of the room across from us, and her eyes immediately widened when she saw Saxon.

“Saxon Houston?” she asked as a big smile spread across her face.

I wanted to slap her right then. I’d forgotten that Sammy had gone to the same high school as Saxon. She came from money. Ran in his circles.

“Sam,” he replied.

“What are you doing here?” She paused and realized that I was the one beside him. “With Haisley?” Her voice trailed off. It registered on her that quickly, and I saw the shock in her eyes. “No way. Oh shit. You’re who got

her pregnant?” she asked, looking back at Saxon.

“Yeah, and we have an appointment. We need to get going. Good to see you, Sam,” he replied and opened the door for me.

“You too!” she called out, but he didn’t look back.

He couldn’t get out of there fast enough. Was he embarrassed of me? The idea that he didn’t want people other than the family to know I was pregnant with his baby made my stomach sink. When we reached his truck, he opened the door and helped me up more forcefully than necessary before heading to the driver’s side.

I buckled and willed myself not to get emotional about this. I was so done with crying about crap. Especially since it always revolved around him. He slammed his door and gripped the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles turned white. The veins on his neck stood out, and his nostrils flared.

“Saxon?” I said his name softly, hoping he didn’t turn on me.

“You should have worn a shirt over that top,” he said, turning his head toward me.

“We are supposed to wear this. It’s part of the uniform,” I explained.

“Have you fucked him?” His question sounded like a snarl.

“Who? Trace?” I asked, horrified.

“Whoever the fuck that son of a bitch was in there, touching you.”

“God, no. He’s a slut.”

Saxon seemed to ease somewhat, but not completely. He wasn’t jealous. Right? This was just about the baby. Did he think I had sex a lot? Was that it? He thought he was having a kid with someone who had slept around?

I fisted my hands in my lap and decided this was one of those times I had

to be strong. I could do this without getting sick. He needed to know.

“I’ve only ever slept with you.”

“Haisley, don’t. I know what a virgin is.”

Closing my eyes tightly, I inhaled. I didn’t want to talk about this. “A hymen can be broken other ways.”

There was a moment of silence before he responded. “Sure. Yeah. I know it can. I don’t want to upset you or fight. I’m trying to get along with you,” Saxon replied, but I knew he didn’t believe me. He was just saying it to end the conversation.

I hated that he thought I was like my mom.

“When I was ten, my stepfather ... he did things to me and my sister. He stuck things in us. I think ... I think he probably did more to Jamaica. She was quieter. I fought back.” The sick bile in my throat as I said the words aloud for the first time to anyone burned. I wasn’t sure I could say more. I’d shocked myself by blurting it out.

The warmth of his hand covered mine, and I let out a small sob.

“You don’t have to say any more. I’m sorry. That’s hard to hear. I can’t imagine how hard it is to tell.”

The rawness in his voice undid me, and I let out another sob.

“Fuck,” he whispered, and his hand left me.

I felt the center between us move away and opened my eyes to see it gone.

“Come here.” Saxon pulled me over to him and held me.

I clung to him, desperate for the only affection I had known. Saxon was the first person who had shown me true affection. I hungered for it. When he offered it now, I wanted to hold on as long as I could. I never knew when I

would get it again. Or if this would be the last time.

His hand ran down over my hair as he pressed a kiss to my temple. “You give me a name, and I’ll kill him,” he said against my head.

I let out a strangled laugh, then shook my head. “He’s my three youngest siblings’ dad. They’re all boys, and he’s a good dad to them.”

Saxon tensed. “Is he still in that trailer?”

“No. He’s been gone for years.”

I could stay like this for hours, but I knew I had a doctor’s appointment. One I didn’t want to make us late for.

I pulled back and wiped at my face. “Sorry. I’ve never said that out loud to anyone before,” I told him.

He cupped my face and looked at me. “If you need to talk about it, I’ll listen.” He paused, and a pained look crossed his face. “I might end up killing him. But I’ll listen.”

I rubbed my cheeks with my palms and shook my head. “I’m fine. I swear. I just had to ... I didn’t want you to think I was like that. I mean, I had sex with you after seven days. That didn’t make me look good.” I forced a smile and moved off him and back over to my seat.

He let out a deep sigh, then started the truck. We rode in silence to the doctor’s office.

When he parked the truck, he looked at me. “You good?” he asked.

I nodded.

“I’ll help you down,” he said before climbing out of the truck and coming over to open my door.

He reached up and took my waist the way he used to do, then set me down.

He didn't hold me against him like he used to, but then I hadn't expected that. Instead, he let me go, stepped back, and closed the door, then clicked the fob in his hand to lock the car.

We made our way to the white coastal building that reminded me of an expensive beach home. Inside, everything was white and sea blue. The lady behind the desk looked to be in her late forties, but she still gave Saxon a long, appreciative once-over. It was annoying, but I couldn't blame her. He was in jeans and a fitted black sweater. The man was sexy.

"Haisley Slate?" the lady asked as we approached.

"Yes," I replied.

She smiled and handed me a clipboard with a pen. "We have most of your personal information, but we need your medical history filled out."

I took it and went to sit in one of the comfortable, plush chairs in the small waiting room.

Saxon took the seat across from me, and I focused on answering the questions to the best of my knowledge. When I was done, I started to stand up, but Saxon reached out and took it, then walked it back to the lady.

"You both can come on back," she told him.

I stood up, and we went through the door. A younger woman met us. She was petite with short, curly brown hair and wearing scrubs.

"Let's go ahead and weigh you," she said. "Then, we'll get a urine sample before heading back to the room."

I went to the scale and stepped on. I watched as it settled on one hundred eighteen pounds. That wasn't bad. I had worried I was under one fifteen. I was quickly gaining back the weight I'd lost with the food Saxon provided.

The milk was probably helping too.

She then checked my height. “Five-five and a half,” she announced then pointed to the restroom door. “When you’re done, go right down this hallway to room two,” she told me, then looked at Saxon. “You can go on in and wait for her there.”

He glanced at me before following the girl to the room. I handled the urine sample business, then hurried to room two. Saxon was standing with his arms crossed over his chest, looking at the stages of a baby’s growth in the womb that hung on the wall.

When he turned to look at me, he nodded his head to one of the pictures. “Our kid currently looks like an alien,” he said.

I went over to look at the pictures, and it surprised me how much it looked like a baby already. I had expected it to still look like a pea.

“It has toes,” I pointed out.

The door opened then, and a short woman with wiry red hair and glasses entered. She smiled at me. “Hello, Haisley. I’m Dr. James, but you can call me Bess. I’m not big on formalities. Now, you are ten weeks today, according to your last period. Is that correct?” she asked, looking at me from the chart in her hands.

“Yes,” I replied.

“We are technically supposed to hear the baby’s heartbeat with a Doppler. You just hit ten weeks so it could be difficult to find but we could try it, or we could take you to the room across the hall and listen to it via a vaginal ultrasound.”

A vaginal ultrasound sounded terrifying. I had no idea what that was, but it didn’t sound good.

I looked at Saxon nervously. “Uh, maybe we could try the Doppler first?” I asked.

She smiled and nodded. “Of course. Hop up, and we will give it a try.”

I climbed onto the table, and she had me lie back, then pulled up my shirt to expose my still-flat stomach. I realized I was nervous. What if she couldn’t find a heartbeat? I turned to look up at Saxon as she put something warm on my stomach. His eyes met mine, and I wondered if he was nervous, or maybe he would be relieved if there was no heartbeat. I didn’t want to think about that.

“This might take a few minutes,” the doctor said as she moved the Doppler around my stomach. The warm stuff she’d put on me before made it slide around easily. “Oh!” she said, smiling so brightly that I felt my heart slam into my chest.

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding.

“That’s it.”

The fast thudding suddenly became the most important thing in my life. My eyes filled with tears and blurred my vision as the sound filled the room. Saxon’s hand covered mine, and I turned my palm up to thread my fingers through his. He squeezed, and I looked up at him. There was an awed look on his face that made me want to laugh and cry at the same time. It was overwhelming.

“It’s a nice, strong one hundred sixty-two. That’s right where it needs to be,” she said, then reached over and handed me a tissue. “It’s emotional, hearing that sound. Especially the first time. I’ll step out, and you can undress from the waist down. Then, get back up here and cover up with this blanket.” She handed me a soft, folded cloth.

“Okay. Thank you,” I replied, taking it.

She went to the door, and I stood up.

“I’ll, uh, step out,” Saxon said before walking to the door.

If we were a regular expectant couple, he would sit in here while I changed, but we weren’t. I wouldn’t let it get me down. Not after hearing the heartbeat. My baby was okay. It had a strong heartbeat. I smiled the rest of the appointment. My chest was so full of joy that it ached.



SIXTEEN

SAXON

Trev sat down on a bale of hay and studied me for a moment. I'd called him because I needed to talk to someone. Taking Haisley to the yoga studio this morning after the shit that bastard pulled yesterday, touching her, had been fucking hard. Since coming back to the stables, I felt like I was going to crawl out of my skin. I couldn't focus. I wanted to go back to that damn studio and make sure everyone understood Haisley was off-limits. At least she had on a top that covered her tits today. Had I known she was going to wear a top that looked like the red one she'd worn at the house to do yoga, I'd have bought her bigger ones immediately. Not that the bigger size covered all I wanted them to. You could still see they were fucking big and bouncy and—

Dammit!

“So, y'all aren't fucking?” Trev asked again.

Why had I called him? Had I really thought he'd be helpful?

“NO! We aren't doing anything. She ended shit with me. Remember? Shut me out. Completely ghosted me.”

Trev nodded. “And now, she's pregnant with your baby, living in your house.”

I threw up my hands in frustration. “SO! That means I just go back to the way we were? She's knocked up, and I'm now in her life by force. She didn't want me in her life. Now, she has no fucking choice. I don't want to be a forced choice. I want to be someone's first choice. I want to be with someone who wants me,” I shouted.

I needed to calm down. This wasn't shit I wanted the entire stables to know about.

“You heard the heartbeat. It got to you,” Trev said.

Hell yeah, it had gotten to me. It had made my knees weak, and fuck if I hadn't been on the verge of crying. No one prepared you for that. Ever. No one told you that this foreign thing in a woman's body that you'd helped create would become real with that sound. SO fucking real. All I could think about was, I wanted them. I wanted both of them. I didn't want them to leave me. Ever. I wanted to be there for every moment that kid had in life. Not seeing it every other weekend or whatever bullshit arrangement we came up with.

“Forget about the past. You've got to let that shit go. Do you want her? Are you attracted to her?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes. Of course. Have you looked at her?”

Trev shrugged. “Dude, I can't see past Gypsi. Other women don't rank anymore.”

I sank down on the bench and dropped my head in my hands.

“It’s more than, is she hot? Do you want her? Would being with her be enough for you? Would she be it? The one who blinds you to all other females?”

Fuck. “Yeah,” I admitted.

“Then, you gotta put on that *good-guy charm* shit you are so good at. Make her want you the same way. Not because she’s your baby momma. Because you’re you. Fuck, if I hadn’t gotten my head on straight, you could have upped and snatched Gypsi from me. Then, I’d have had to kill my best friend. You got some powerful mojo, dude. You know the right things to say and do. You have that thoughtful, romantic shit perfected. Use it. Make her fall in love with you.”

I lifted my head to look at him. “I don’t know how to do it with her. There’s so much shit between us now. How would I even start? It’s like going backward.”

“I can’t believe you’re asking me, of all people, this.” Trev’s grin just pissed me off. “You’re the expert. But I suggest doing things for her she’d like. Don’t focus on the sexual part. Focus on the friendship part. It worked with Gypsi.”

This time, I laughed. “You did the friendship thing for maybe a week, and then you two were fucking like damn bunnies.”

Trev winked and stood up. “Because it works. She was in love with me so damn fast that she couldn’t get her panties off quick enough.”

I groaned. “I don’t want to hear about your sex life.”

“And I’m not about to give you details. Just think about something that

would make her happy and do it. Build on that. Show her the Saxon Houston charm, and she'll be climbing all over you in no time."

"I'm not trying to fuck her," I told him.

He smirked. "Yeah, you are. You want her love, but you also want between her legs. Don't try to lie to me. I know you too well."

He was right. I wanted my mouth on her tits and my dick buried in her so bad that I couldn't fucking see straight. But more than that, I wanted her to choose me. To want me. I guessed hell had frozen over because I was about to take advice from Trev.



Opening the door to the house, I stood back and let Haisley walk in first. I was nervous. I had been since I'd decided to do this. Try and charm her or whatever shit it was Trev had said I did well. She walked inside and took off the jean coat of mine she was wearing, then paused. Her eyes widened, and she looked at me, then started walking toward the living room.

The scent of pine from the tree I'd had cut down and brought in today had filled the entire house. It was hard to miss when you walked inside.

"Oh my God!" Haisley said with a squeal of delight. "It's huge!"

I followed her into the living room, where the ten-foot tree had been placed to the left of the fireplace that was rarely ever lit. She looked at me, smiling so damn big that my chest felt tight.

"I've never had a tree at Christmas. This is ... wow. It's incredible."

We hadn't even decorated it yet, and the way she was acting, it was already perfect. I couldn't imagine not ever having a tree at Christmas. I hadn't planned on getting one for the house since my parents had plenty to look at.

Truth was, I'd been in a funk since Haisley had shut me out, and the holidays hadn't meant much to me.

"It'll be better once we get those lights and decorations on it," I told her, pointing to the bags sitting across the room.

She looked at them, then back at me. "We?" she asked, her eyes dancing with excitement. "I get to help decorate it?"

Damn, she was going to kill me. Slowly rip my heart out and destroy me. More so than before. Because this time, I was getting to really know her. Be around her. Find out about her life, her past. I hoped Trev was right, and it wasn't me who ended up falling in love.

"I'm sure as hell not decorating this thing alone," I told her. "I bought the supplies for chocolate chip cookies and hot cocoa. We need to get those two things made and put on a cheesy-ass Christmas movie, and then we can start."

It was always the way Mom had us do it when I was a kid. She'd invite Trev over since whatever mom he had at that time hired people to do their trees. It hadn't been until I was a teenager and stopped wanting to participate that my mom began hiring people to do ours too.

Haisley sniffled, and I frowned, realizing her eyes were watering up.

She smiled, then laughed as she wiped at the tears. "Ignore me. I get emotional easy. It's the hormones."

Yep. I was fucked.

"Okay," she said brightly. "I'll start on the cookies. You find the Christmas movie. I have no preference. I've seen very few."

I watched her walk to the kitchen and took a moment to appreciate her

pregnant ass. It was fuller, and her hips seemed rounder. Tearing my eyes off her before I had a hard-on I couldn't hide, I went to get the remote.

“Do you prefer funny, romantic, traditional?” I asked her, flipping through the prime options.

“There are funny ones?” she asked.

“*Christmas Vacation* is the most-well-known funny one.”

“Then, let's do it.”

I rented it, then went to get the lights out of the bag and get those started since they took up so much time. I hadn't known if she would want white or colored lights, so I'd bought some that did both. You chose the speed and color with a remote.

“You want colored lights or white lights?” I asked her.

She frowned and stared at the tree. I could see the indecision on her face. This was a big deal for her. That fact alone made me want to put a damn tree in her room, on the porch, in the kitchen. Wherever the fuck I could find a place.

“You can do both. The ones I bought have a remote. You can do colored one day and white the next. Whatever you're in the mood for. Just decide on what you want tonight.”

Her eyes widened as she looked at me. “Really? They do that?”

I nodded, feeling like a fucking genius for buying them.

“Colored tonight!” she said, smiling.

“Will it overwhelm you if I ask if you want them steady, chasing, blinking, or twinkling?”

She narrowed her eyes as she looked at me. “Is that something we can

change too?”

“Yep.”

“Twinkling,” she said with a firm nod.

I plugged in the first strand and set her choices before starting to wrap them around the tree. I heard her laugh and glanced back to see that she was watching the television while putting dough on the cookie sheets. I tried not to keep looking at her, but it was hard every time she laughed. Eventually, I had the lights on, and the house smelled like pine and chocolate chip cookies.

“Do I need to do the hot cocoa?” I asked her, walking back to the kitchen area.

She shook her head. “I have it simmering now. The tree is beautiful,” she said, wistfully looking at it. “Where did you get the decorations?” she asked me.

“I went to Hobby Lobby,” I told her.

She grinned. “You went to Hobby Lobby and picked them out?”

I nodded. “Every last one.”

Her eyes softened as she laughed.

“What’s so funny? There were other men there.”

She pressed her lips together. “I’m sorry. It’s just ... I can’t picture you going into a store like that and buying Christmas decorations.”

I shrugged. “I’m secure enough in my masculinity.”

She looked back at the television, still smiling. “Trust me, I know.”

What did that mean? I wanted to ask, but I didn’t. I was afraid where it might lead, and right now, I was doing a pretty damn good job of making her happy.

“You bought a lot,” she said. “You must have been there for hours.”

It had taken me two hours. “It’ll be worth it.”

She smiled. “Have you ever seen that tree in New York City they light up on that television special in person?”

I nodded. “My mom used to make me go on her Christmas shopping trips in New York City when I was a kid. I finally stopped having to go when I was fourteen. She still goes though.”

Haisley laughed softly. “That used to be my dream. I saw it on television one time when I was young. That and Macy’s. I wanted to see Macy’s at Christmas. It looked magical. There was also some bear—maybe it was a commercial. I can’t remember exactly. I was young. But it was a stuffed Christmas bear with *Macy’s* on one foot and the year on the other. I asked AJ to write a letter to Santa for me because I wanted that bear. I thought I’d give it a try. I didn’t want to believe Mom that Santa didn’t exist. My friends at school said Santa came to visit them. I figured he hadn’t come to see us because we didn’t write him letters or go see him at the mall. AJ refused though, and I know that it was to save me the disappointment, but at the time, I was so mad at him.” She shook her head, smiling, but there was a sadness in her eyes that I wanted to make go away.

“I don’t know why I thought of that. I think it’s because this tree is so big. It’s like I’m getting my very own New York City tree.”

Next Christmas, she was going to stand in Rockefeller Center and see that tree herself. She was also going to see Macy’s and shop, explore, whatever the hell she wanted.

“Let’s go get the ornaments ready. We need to cut tags off,” she said, sounding so fucking thrilled that it made my chest ache.

Again with the pure elation on her face, she hurried over to the bags. I owed Trev one.



SEVENTEEN

HAISLEY

The man had just kidnapped his cousin's boss as a Christmas present. I stopped hanging the red balls to laugh.

This movie was hilarious.

"Don't drop it and cut yourself," Saxon said, grinning at me. "Put the breakable ones up before you double over in laughter."

"This move has the best one-liners," I replied, then turned to hang up the glass red ball.

We were almost done with all the ornaments that Saxon had bought. I still couldn't believe he'd done this. I wanted to believe he had done it for me, but I also didn't want to set myself up for disappointment.

"Feels like it's missing something," Saxon said, standing back and looking at the tree.

“Do you have popcorn?” I asked him. “That we can pop?”

He nodded. “I also have a needle and thread, assuming that’s what you’re thinking and not that you want to eat the popcorn.”

“That’s what I was thinking. We could make popcorn garland. Or I can if you’re tired of decorating.”

He frowned. “Me? Tired of decorating? Never. I’ll go get the popcorn started, and then we can pick another movie.”

He wasn’t trying to get out of it. He wanted to be here with me. I was afraid at any moment, I was going to wake up alone. This wasn’t like him. At least not the Saxon I’d known since he’d found out I was pregnant. What had changed? Was it hearing the baby’s heartbeat? Was that it? He was trying to build a friendship for the baby’s sake.

“You want some juice? Or milk?” he asked me.

I was currently working through this in my head. How would I handle just getting the friend side of Saxon? Not the relationship side? It was better than him disliking me, but was this because he liked being around me or just because of the baby? Ugh.

I looked over at him and realized I hadn’t answered him.

“I can fix it. You’re doing the popcorn,” I told him and walked to the kitchen.

He was still standing in front of the fridge when I got there. I watched him lean in and get a bottle of water. His bicep flexed, and why was I suddenly horny over his arm muscles? Jeez, this was getting worse every day.

He glanced at me. “I didn’t mind getting you something.”

My face felt flushed. Great. Now, I looked like I was thinking about sex.

“Um, no. It’s okay.” I forced a smile.

He moved back, his eyes still on me. “Are you okay?” he asked.

No. I want to lick your chest, along with other body parts. I am not okay.

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

He didn’t look convinced, but I was acting like a weirdo. I couldn’t blame him. Thankfully, he walked back over to the popcorn before I did something, like rub up against him. Definitely needed to get ahold of myself.

I concentrated on getting a glass and pouring some pineapple juice. Saxon put the popcorn into a large bowl and headed for the living room area. I took a long drink and watched him. He set it down, then picked up a remote.

“Still want a funny Christmas movie?” he asked me.

“I’ll let you pick,” I told him. “You did good with the last one.”

“Okay,” he replied, choosing a movie, then setting the remote down before turning back to me. “You gonna come help me string this?” he asked with a grin.

I poured more juice, then went over to the sofa, unsure if we were supposed to share the bowl. In that case, we would have to sit close together. Looking down at the sofa, I tried to decide what it was he wanted me to do.

“I only bite after midnight,” he said, and I realized he was watching me stand here like an idiot.

“In that case,” I replied, sitting down beside him.

He handed me a needle, already threaded, and put the bowl between us. I’d always wanted to do this. It was in a book our teacher had read to us one year during Christmas when I was a kid. We were going to do it as a class and hang it on the tree in our classroom. But the week they decorated, I came

down with the flu and missed it. When I'd gotten back to school, the entire room was decorated with colorful ornaments they had made and popcorn garland. I'd missed it all.

I turned my attention to the movie and was surprised that he had chosen this one. I'd heard of *Elf*. There was *Elf* stuff everywhere during the holidays.

I glanced over at him. "You like this movie?"

He shrugged. "The truth? Not really. But you will."

"What would you rather watch?" I asked him.

"*Die Hard*," he replied with a dimple in his cheek.

"Is that a Christmas movie?" I really loved his dimple.

"It's been debated for years. It happens at Christmas, so therefore, it is a Christmas movie."

I was too busy watching him that I jammed the needle in my finger and let out a startled cry. When I looked down at my finger, a small drop of blood formed. Crap. I was going to bleed on our popcorn.

Saxon moved the bowl and took my hand, then put my finger in his mouth and sucked. His tongue circled it, making me shiver. His eyes met mine, and he winked. I stared at him, speechless. He pulled it out and studied the tip that I had poked for a moment, then kissed it before standing up.

"I'll get a Band-Aid."

I sat there, frozen, my finger damp from Saxon's tongue. He had actually sucked blood from my finger, winked at me, and kissed it. Holy crap. That was hot. Had he meant for it to be hot? Was he purposely turning me on? Or was that more friendly Saxon stuff? Maybe he liked the taste of blood.

He was back, and this time, he went down on one knee in front of me as he

took my finger, dried it with a paper towel in his hand, then began to wrap the bandage around it. When he was finished, he let me go and moved back to his seat, picking up the garland he was working on like nothing had happened.

I blinked several times before finally managing to croak out, "Thank you."

He glanced over at me. "You're welcome." Then, he went back to watching the movie.

The next hour, we managed to finish the popcorn garland, get through over half of the movie, and hang it on the tree. I yawned, standing back to look at our work.

"It's perfect," I said, smiling.

"Not yet. We still have the angel to put at the top."

I looked around. "Where is it?"

"Not here yet. Hobby Lobby didn't have exactly what I wanted. I had to order one online. It'll be here in a couple of days."

He had taken the choosing of the angel seriously, apparently. There had to have been at least ten different ones at Hobby Lobby to choose from, but I didn't say anything. Another yawn hit me, and I covered my mouth.

"You need to get to bed. I'll clean up in here," he told me.

"No, I'll help." I started to go get the popcorn bowl.

Saxon's hand wrapped around my wrist. "Go to bed," he said.

I looked back at him. "I can help. It'll be quicker if I do."

He tugged on my wrist and pulled me closer to him. "You've had two early mornings."

"So have you," I pointed out.

“I’m not pregnant.”

I sighed, not liking the idea of him cleaning this by himself. Especially after he made tonight so much fun. “Thanks for tonight. This was the most fun I’ve ever had during the holidays.”

A smile curled his lips. “Good.”

His eyes dropped to my mouth, and I stopped breathing. Was he going to kiss me? If he did, would I end up crawling all over him?

When his eyes met mine again, he stepped back. “Good night, Haisley,” he said, then turned and began picking up the things we’d used.

“Good night,” I replied before going to my room.

I hurried inside and closed the door before leaning against it and closing my eyes. I had to stop making this into something it wasn’t. He was clearly trying to build a friendship between us since we would be coparenting. I was going to ruin it if I kept misinterpreting his kindness for more. I needed a cold shower. That was something I couldn’t help. My hormones were making me feel like this. I couldn’t shut my sexual desires off as much as I wished I could.

Straightening up, I made my way to the bathroom to get ready for bed. I was not going to let my attraction to Saxon ruin tonight. He’d been great. More than great. He’d given me one of my wishes. He might not have done it for me exactly, but it’d felt like it. That was the best Christmas present ever.



EIGHTEEN

HAISLEY

The Christmas party at Saxon's parents' house was tonight. It had been on my mind all day. I had nothing to wear. I still hadn't met his father, and I hadn't seen his mother but the one time. They wouldn't want me there. I shouldn't be going.

How did I explain this to Saxon without making him mad?

Last night, we had watched another Christmas movie while the lights twinkled white. He was trying so hard, and my telling him I didn't want to go to his parents' Christmas party felt wrong.

I put my yoga mat away and went to get my bag. Saxon wouldn't be here for two more hours, but I was done for the day. I had less classes on Friday. I hadn't told him because I didn't want him to have to leave work at the stables to come get me. Turning the corner, I ran into a hard chest and jumped back.

“I’m sorry.” My eyes locked with Saxon. “You’re here.”

He grinned. “I’m here.” he repeated.

“Oh.” I frowned. “Why?”

“Because you get off early today.”

I tilted my head to the side and studied him. “But I didn’t tell you that.”

He leaned close to my ear. “I make sure I know when you need me. Whether you tell me or not.”

His warm breath on my skin made me shiver. I was also one hundred percent sure my panties were wet.

He ran the back of his hand down my arm as he slowly moved back. “We need to go buy you a dress for tonight. And shoes. And jewelry.”

I blinked, and my arm continued to tingle after his hand was gone. “Okay,” I replied.

“Saxon, you’re here to pick her up again,” Sammy said, snapping me out of my lust-fueled haze. “Do you not drive, Haisley?” Her question, although asked nicely, was meant to be snarky.

I opened my mouth to explain I didn’t have a car when Saxon’s arm slid around my waist.

“She drives, but why should she when I’d rather drive her where she needs to be?”

And now, my leggings probably had a damp spot. Holy hell.

Sammy held a tight smile as she looked at me, then at him. “You always were the chivalrous one. Trev was the asshole.”

“Trev was just misunderstood,” Saxon replied, and then he looked down at me. “Let’s go shopping.”

I simply nodded. I'd dealt with mean girls my entire life. Never once had a guy like Saxon, one who ran in their circles, defended me. AJ, sure. He'd handled a few in the past, but not like Saxon. AJ only did it if he wasn't interested in getting in their pants.

I buckled myself in while Saxon walked around the truck to get in. He climbed inside and gave me a crooked grin as he reached over to take a box out of the glove compartment. His arm brushed my leg, and I held my breath, afraid I would make some embarrassing noise.

"This is for you," he said, placing the box in my lap.

I looked down at it. An iPhone. The newest one, and it was purple.

I lifted my eyes to meet his. "You got me a phone?" I asked.

He nodded. "You need one. I want you to be able to get in touch with me whenever you want. Leaving you at work and not being able to check in on you also drives me crazy. I need the reassurance that you're safe."

Oh. My heart did a funny flutter in my chest. He wanted me to be safe. I swallowed through the emotion clogging my throat.

"Thank you," I said, dropping my gaze back to the phone. "It's pretty. I've never had a phone this nice."

"You do now," he replied. "It's set up and ready to go. Everyone's numbers are programmed in it already."

"Everyone?" I asked, not sure who everyone might be. I had very few people whose numbers I needed.

"Aspen, Gypsi, Maddy, Trinity, and Shiloh. Trev's is in there, too, if for some reason you can't get me. The office at the stables. The yoga studio. Jamaica's. Silver's."

My head snapped up. “Jamaica’s? Silver’s?”

My sisters didn’t have a phone unless my mom had gotten them one. I could see her maybe giving Jamaica my old one, but Silver?

He nodded.

“How did you know they had phones?” I asked, wanting to hear their voices so bad that it hurt.

“Because I took them each one.”

I stared at him, my mouth slightly open. I was in shock. Had I just heard him right?

“You gave them phones?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Why? Why would you do that? I mean, they can’t afford the monthly plans, and you don’t know them. Why would you—”

“I will pay for their service, just like I will pay for yours. And I got them phones so you could talk to your siblings when you wanted to. Your mom shouldn’t have taken that from you.”

Thank you was not adequate enough. I also didn’t think he wanted me wrapping my arms around his neck and kissing him all over his face. But that was what I wanted to do. That and call my sisters. Check in on everyone. I was going to cry. I fought it.

“Haisley,” Saxon said, and I stared at him. “Open the box. Get the phone out. Use it. And if you can keep from doing it, don’t cry. I don’t like making you cry.”

I smiled then and sniffled, nodding. “Thank you. I don’t know what to say. I’m not accustomed to this. Someone doing things like this for me. I ... just

... thank you. SO much. I can pay you for mine though. The monthly usage —”

“No. Don’t. I wanted you to have it. I’ll pay for it.”

I nodded.

When we were finally driving away, I remembered what we were doing, and I managed to find my words again after he blew me away.

“I don’t know what kind of dress to look for or where to look,” I admitted.

He glanced at me. “I do.”

Okay. I tried to relax. I was going to be dressed appropriately. His parents were going to be among friends, so they wouldn’t make me leave. Or would they? Was Declan going to be his date? I wanted to ask all this, but I couldn’t bring myself to. Not after he gave me and my sisters phones. I didn’t want to bother him at all.

He pulled in front of a dress shop that had chandeliers hanging from the ceiling and velvet furniture inside. The price tags on those dresses were going to be insane.

“This looks expensive.”

“It is,” he replied before getting out of the truck and coming around to open my door and once again taking me out with both his hands on my waist. “Relax,” he said, still holding me against him. “This is supposed to be fun.”

I glanced up at him, and he flashed his dimple at me.

“I’ll try,” I told him.

He placed a hand on my back and led me toward the shop. When he opened the door, he stepped back and let me go in, but he followed behind me, so close that I could feel his warmth. The women turned to look at us,

and I felt so out of place. I was sure they were about to ask us to leave.

“Saxon.” An elegant lady with a platinum bob smiled at him and walked around the counter to head in our direction. “This must be your friend you called about.” She reached out and touched a strand of my hair as her eyes roamed over my face, then down my body. “You’re right. She’s breathtaking. This way. I chose some dresses in the colors you requested, so we can start there first.”

I glanced back at Saxon as she rattled on about the design he’d suggested and color choices. I was shocked. Again. He kept doing that.

We stopped at a white door with a crystal doorknob. The lady twisted it and entered. I looked inside to see a dressing room the size of my bedroom at Saxon’s house. There were mirrors from floor to ceiling on every wall. A white velvet chaise lounge in the center of the room and dresses hanging on a gold rack.

“Would you like me to stay and help you, or do you prefer Saxon?” she asked.

I glanced at him and her nervously. I didn’t want anyone in here with me while I was changing clothes.

“I’ll wait outside, and if she needs any help, she can ask me,” he suggested.

The lady nodded. “Very well. I’ll give you some privacy and space. You let me see anything you like. I want to make sure the fit is perfect.”

“Thank you,” I said, unsure of what else to say.

She left, and I turned to Saxon, who was standing at the door, leaning against it, watching me.

Shifting my gaze to the dresses on the rack, I said, “Crimson, royal blue,

and silver,” before looking back at him.

He nodded. “I like those colors on you.”

“When have you ever seen me in silver?” I asked.

“In my imagination. I’ll be right out here if you need me,” he said, then reached for the door and closed it.

I stood there, staring at the closed door, replaying his words in my head. I was in his imagination? I wanted to open the door and ask if this was post my breaking up with him or pre. I wasn’t going to ask it, but I was tempted.

Looking back at the dresses, I had several to try on. I pulled off my sports bra and then slid off my leggings. Looking down, I saw the damp spot I had been afraid of. It was all his fault for being so ... so ... him.

Tossing my clothes over the chair, I reached for the first crimson dress and slipped it over my head. It was strapless, satin, and floor length with a slit that went above mid-thigh. The fabric hugged my chest and waist tightly with a little flare the rest of the way down. I was able to fasten it without help and look at myself in all the mirrors before opening the door to step out for Saxon to see me. There was a flash of something in his eyes, but it was gone so quickly that I wasn’t sure if I’d imagined it. I felt like a princess. I’d never worn anything this nice before.

When he shook his head, not smiling, my moment was over. Turning, I went back into the dressing room, not bothering to look at myself again. I hung the dress up and reached for another red one. This one had chiffon and was low cut in the front and back. It was also shorter hitting right above my knees. Like the last dress, I loved the way it made me look. I had never imagined looking like this. However, when I stepped out and Saxon shook his head, the same disappointment sank over me. It happened again with the

other red dress and then two green dresses.

I was starting to dread walking out that door. What if I didn't look good enough in any of these dresses? What then? Maybe you couldn't dress up a girl to fit in. It could simply be me making the dresses not work.

Reaching for the metallic-silver dress, I felt nauseous. When Saxon had looked unimpressed with the other dresses, I'd been scared to try a silver dress. What if I didn't meet his expectations or look like he'd imagined I would? Now, I was stuck with trying this one or the last green one or one of the burgundy dresses she'd left for me.

Might as well get it over with.

I slipped into it, knowing already that this was going to be the dress I needed help with. The back did some strange zigzag thing with a thin, shiny string; otherwise, my back was bare. I pulled it on and looked at it, holding it up so that it wouldn't fall. It hit at my ankles, and the slit was higher than any of the others. It was off the shoulders and gathered in the waist. The entire look of it reminded me of something a celebrity would wear on the red carpet.

He was going to want to see me in silver. This was the only silver dress. I opened the door, holding the dress up.

"I need help," I told him, stepping back inside.

Saxon came in behind me, and I looked at him through the mirror with my back to him. He closed the door and looked at my back.

"It's complicated," I told him. "If you can't get it, the saleslady can come do it."

He glanced up at me and smiled before looking back at the way it laced up, then tied at the top. When his fingers brushed my bare skin, I shivered. He

stilled for a moment, then went back to adjusting the back—tying it, I assumed.

Finally, he stepped back and looked at it, then up at me.

“Turn around,” he told me.

His gaze roamed down the dress and stopped on the slit before lowering. When his eyes came back up to mine, he sighed. “You look incredible. I’m struggling with the slit and the amount of cleavage, but, damn.” He shook his head, and his eyes traveled over me appreciatively again.

“Is it too much cleavage and leg for your parents’ party?” I asked, wanting this dress simply because of the way he was looking at me in it.

He chuckled. “No. Not at all. My mom will probably be showing more skin than this. It’s my personal issue. How do you feel in it?”

His question surprised me.

“Beautiful,” I admitted.

He rubbed his chin. “Yeah, you left beautiful way behind. This is another level.”

Okay, I wanted this dress. I might wear it every day if it got that kind of reaction from Saxon. Heck, I would sleep in it.

“I’m thinking sparkly red heels.” He was looking at my leg again. “Shit. That’s gonna ...” He shook his head. “No. This is it. Take it off.”

I turned my back to him and waited for his help. He stepped forward and slowly began undoing the back. It took less time than lacing it had. I forgot to hold the front, and it started to fall. I caught it just in time to cover my nipples. Looking up, I caught Saxon’s eyes looking at my boobs through the mirror. He didn’t move. He just stood there and stared.

There was no mistaking the interest in his brown depths. He wanted to see more, and I was so close to letting go of the dress and giving him a full view. The fear it would mess things up with us was the only thing keeping my hands in place.

Before I could cave to the temptation, Saxon turned and left the room. I gasped and leaned against the wall. My nipples were so hard that they ached as badly as the area between my legs did.

It took me several minutes to get ahold of myself before I could finish taking off the dress. I changed back into my leggings and sports bra. Once I had the dress hanging up again, I went to the door and walked out with it. Saxon stood, taking the dress from me, and walked me over to the corner of the store, where there were shoes.

The saleslady appeared. “Oh, she found one. You should have called me over. If there was any area that needed altering, I could have handled it.”

“It was perfect,” Saxon informed her.

The woman grinned at him, then turned to me. “Ready to find the perfect heels?”

I nodded.

Saxon slid a hand over my hip and nodded toward a red pair. “I want to see her in some red ones.”

I wasn't sure I was going to survive this shopping trip with him.



NINETEEN

HAISLEY

The moment we arrived back at his house, I went to my room to call Jamaica. She burst into tears when she answered the phone. Jamaica didn't have to be pregnant to be emotional. She was always the one I worried about the most. Her demons went deep, and she was so fragile.

"Don't cry," I told her, choking up myself.

"I can't help it. I miss you so much."

"I miss you too. Tell me how you are. How things are at home."

She sniffled, and I could picture her wiping away the tears on her face. "The same, except I have a newfound respect for all you did for us, growing up. Your shoes are really hard to fill. I don't do as good of a job."

"I'm sure you do a wonderful job. You're much nicer than me."

She laughed. "Not so much these days. DJ called me a bitch when I made

him clean up their room, and Vulcan said he misses your cooking, that mine sucks.”

“They are all assholes. I love them, but they’re still assholes. Don’t let the boys get to you. How is Silver? I’m going to call her next.”

Jamaica sighed. “She’s been difficult. She’s angry with Mom. In a bad way. She hates her for sending you away. She rarely speaks to her, and she stays out late. She’s seeing this older guy, who I know is in a gang. I wish AJ would come back and help with her.”

I rubbed my temple. Silver was always the wild one. I had worried about this.

“I’ll talk to her. Maybe I can do something.”

“I’d ask how you are, but seeing as how Mr. Hot and Sexy Saxon Houston showed up at the trailer, giving us phones, I’d say you’re doing good. When did that happen? Last we heard, you were living in Gainesville in an apartment with some strangers. DJ yelled at Mom about it. He swore if something happened to you, she was going to pay.”

I winced. DJ was trying to be the head of the house with AJ gone. I should have guessed that.

“I’m doing good. Saxon found out about the pregnancy and moved me into his place. He got me better medical insurance and a really good OB-GYN. We heard the baby’s heartbeat.”

“Ohmigod! You did?! I wish I could have heard it. I’m so glad you are safe and being taken care of. It will be easier to sleep at night.”

A door slammed in the background, and I heard Vulcan and Thorn yelling at each other. Smiling, I lay back on the bed. I missed the assholes.

“You got a fucking phone?!” Vulcan shouted. “How?”

“Haisley’s baby daddy gave it to me. This is her on the phone. Want to talk to her?”

There was noise, then a, “Hayes!” Vulcan’s voice was changing.

I squeezed the phone tighter.

“How’s my favorite oldest twin brother?” I asked him, smiling.

“Missing your grilled cheeses. Jamaica can’t cook anything but noodles.”

“She’s learning. Don’t be so hard on her.”

“Your baby daddy is bringing phones to us now? What’s up with that? He taking care of you?”

I glanced at the closed door. “Yeah, he is.”

“Good. One last person’s ass I gotta kick.”

I laughed, shaking my head. This was exactly what my heart needed.



Saxon didn’t say much when I stepped out of the bedroom, dressed for the party. His eyes said a lot, but that was all I had to go on. I worried on our walk to the house that my hair wasn’t what he wanted. I’d curled it and then twisted it up so that it was off my shoulders and neck. Maybe he liked it down better. But then I hadn’t said anything about how he looked in a tuxedo either. My words had left me, and my mouth had gone dry.

The house was all lit up as guests arrived in expensive cars. Once we reached the house, people called out to him, and he greeted them. He clearly knew how to live in this world. Me, on the other hand? I was clueless. I managed to smile and say something when I was spoken to, but it wasn’t

much.

Saxon's hand on my lower back as he led me up the stairs was my only source of comfort. The front doors were wide open with music and the smell of Christmas spilling out. It was even more decorated than it had been earlier this week.

Saxon's mother saw us, and she put on a bright smile as she walked our way, wearing an emerald-green dress that did in fact show a lot more skin than mine did. She also looked amazing in it.

"Saxon," she said, fake kissing his cheeks. Then turning to me. "Hello, Haisley. You look lovely."

"Thank you," I replied. "So do you."

She held her bright smile, but I could see the disapproval in her eyes. I wasn't good enough for Saxon. I never would be.

"Please go mingle," she said before moving past us to greet someone who had just arrived.

"This is what she loves," he whispered, leaning down to me.

"She's very good at it," I told him.

He didn't seem impressed. He just nodded his head in agreement.

We walked into the large living room, where we'd had our meeting, and it had been transformed into something straight out of a magazine.

"I'm going to get a drink. You want a water? Club soda? I can send someone to get milk from the kitchen if you prefer."

I shook my head. "No. I'm fine." I was afraid I'd spill anything I had on my dress.

He stepped away, then over to the bar, and I was alone. In the midst of a

crowd of strangers. I hoped he hurried.

“We meet again,” a deep voice said beside me, and I turned to look up at who I thought was Kye.

Tensing, I shifted away. I didn’t want him to close.

He chuckled. “You wound me, beautiful. I don’t normally elicit that response from women.”

I tensed. “Just the ones you gag and hold a gun against their back?” I asked.

He laughed. I didn’t.

“Come on now. That was just business. You were safe.”

I didn’t find the humor in it. I never would.

He leaned down close to me. “I don’t like that you’re scared of me. Let’s be friends. I’m a great friend,” he said, his voice lowering, as if he meant something else.

“Kye,” Saxon said, coming up beside me.

I was right about his name.

Relieved, I backed up until my back was touching him. His hand slipped around my waist.

“Don’t let him scare you. He’s full of shit,” Saxon said to me.

“Looks like you two are cozy again,” Kye said, grinning as he took a drink from his glass. “It’s always good when the parents can get along.”

“Did you not bring a date?” Saxon asked him.

Kye shrugged. “Wasn’t in the mood for the drama. Plus, I have to step out early. Genesis needs me.”

The best friend that everyone thought was more than that, but she was engaged.

“Wedding plans?” Saxon asked.

“Something like that,” Kye replied, and his demeanor took a complete one-eighty.

The easygoing flirt that hinted at the danger underneath now looked damaged and unsettled. Maybe they were onto something with this best friend of his. I just hoped he didn’t end up killing the guy she was engaged to.

“Saxon.” Declan’s voice made my stomach knot up. “Your mother said she saw you come this way. I’m sorry I’m late.”

Her eyes went to Saxon’s hand on my stomach, and they widened. Then, she glared at me.

“Where’s the popcorn when you need it?” Kye drawled.

“Saxon, we need to talk. Alone,” Declan told him, shifting her hateful glare from me to him.

“We did that already. You know everything. What more do we need to talk about?” Saxon asked, his hand dropping from me. It was as if he’d slapped me in the face.

“Yes, we did. But what you told me and what I am seeing are two different things. If she’s some girl you accidentally knocked up and are having to take care of because she’s poor, then why are you touching her like you’re here with her when I’m your date tonight? Our seats at the table are together.”

I was going to either be sick or cry. Probably both. I needed air. My gaze swung around for an exit, but outside was full of people too.

“Excuse me,” I said, stepping past Declan and heading in a direction where there were no people.

I didn’t stop until I made it to an empty hallway. Then, I looked around, opening doors until I found some stairs, and decided to take them. I would mess up my makeup if I cried. I just needed a moment. I could get myself under control. I was tough. I could do this. I would be fine.

At the top of the stairs was a wider hallway with doors scattered down each side. I stood there, taking several deep breaths, not sure if I should open doors, looking for a bathroom, or just stand here until I was okay to return downstairs.

I had told myself that he was just being friendly. Making the best of a bad situation. He wanted to get along with me for our child’s sake. He did not want me.

Sure, he thought I was attractive. We had dated. But he didn’t feel anything more for me. Declan, however, had some kind of hold on him. His mom liked her. He let her come in his house and demand he talk to her. She thought they were dating. She had called me poor and made me sound like a charity case.

Had he said those things to her? Was that why he’d bought the phones?

I placed my hand over my heart. Oh God, this hurt so bad. Was this a heart breaking? I’d thought it already had when I had to push him away, but this was worse. It was physically hurting me.

Two hands grabbed my waist from behind and began pushing me forward. I gasped and looked back to see Saxon behind me. His face hard. His jaw clenched. He pushed me, forcing me to walk to a door that he opened. He shoved me into the room before slamming the door and locking it behind him. I spun around and stared at him.

He stalked over to me. “Don’t fucking leave me again.” His hand reached out as he grabbed my chin and looked down at me. “She’s a bitch. A jealous, lying bitch. I was going to handle her. You don’t walk away. She thinks she wins if you do. She hasn’t won shit.”

I pulled my face out of his hold and crossed my hands over my stomach. “She called me poor. Am I a charity case to you, Saxon? Is that what this is? Are you being nice to me because you got some poor loser?”

His hand shot out, and he grabbed my neck. “Don’t you ever call yourself a loser. Or a fucking charity case. That’s not what you are, and you damn well know it.”

I glared up at him. “Then, what am I, Saxon? Are we friends now? Is that what we are doing? Because let me tell you that I am so confused by you right now.”

He squeezed my neck and lowered his face to mine. “Is that what you want? Do you want to be friends? You want me to pretend like I don’t think about how fucking sweet you taste? That I don’t jerk off in the shower, remembering how you look when you orgasm?”

I was breathing fast. “No.”

“Then, tell me, Haisley what you want from me.”

“I want you touch me,” I whispered.

“I’m touching you right now. You’re gonna need to be more specific.”

Licking my lips, I stared up at him. His eyes dropped to my mouth.

“If I kiss you right now, we won’t leave this room, and my mom will find us. This will be the first place she looks.”

The hunger in his gaze made me ache.

“Maybe not.” My words sounded desperate.

I inhaled deep and long, and his hand on my neck eased its grip. I wanted to grab it and hold it there. Beg him not to stop. To go with what he was feeling.

“This is my room, Haisley. If she hasn’t realized we’re missing yet, she’ll notice soon and be at that door.”

His hand dropped away, and I let out a shaky breath. My eyes took in the space we were in, and I realized it was a huge bedroom with trophies, footballs, jerseys, a massive flat screen, a sofa, and a king-size bed. This was what he’d grown up with as a bedroom. I wasn’t jealous or envious. I liked knowing he’d had this.

He took my hand and threaded his fingers through mine. “Let’s go.” His voice was deep and clearly affected by this. By us.

Would he still feel the same when we got back to the house tonight? God, I hoped so.

We walked out of the room, but he took me in a different direction than I had come. Instead, we passed a couple of other doors, then came out the top of the entryway. The chandelier hung just ahead with red berries intertwined throughout it. I wondered who had gotten on a ladder that tall to decorate it. When we reached the stairs, Saxon continued to hold my hand as he led me down the wide, curvy staircase. People were no longer arriving, and the few who still stood around, talking with glasses of champagne, shifted their gazes up to us. It dawned on me that they would assume we had been together in his former bedroom.

My cheeks warmed, and I dropped my gaze to watch my feet as we covered the last few steps. I was already pregnant. I didn’t want everyone

here to think I was the girl from the wrong side of town who couldn't keep her legs together. Who trapped rich guys. I had heard the gossip at school when people talked about my mom and all my siblings. I knew what they thought of me when they saw me.

"Saxon," a man greeted him as we walked onto the marble floor.

"Tidewell," Saxon replied. "It's good to see you."

"I hear you're stepping up too. It seems the ranks are all getting a new generation, starting with Blaise," he said with a bright smile on his face, as if he wanted Saxon's approval.

Saxon nodded. "It was inevitable." Then, he turned his attention to me. "Haisley, this is Bartmore Tidewell. He runs one of the casinos in Vegas for the family." He shifted his gaze back to the man. "Tidewell, this is Haisley Slate."

The man glanced at our linked hands, and he chuckled. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Haisley. Hang on to this one. They don't get much finer than him. He's a good guy."

I wanted to tell him I would hang on as tightly as I could, but I wasn't sure my grip had much hold. Instead, I returned his smile and said, "I'll do my best."

His laugh was full and belly deep. "I doubt it will be difficult. He seems rather taken with you." His eyes shifted back to Saxon. "I look forward to working with all of you."

Saxon simply gave him a polite smile. "Yes. I'm sure I'll see you soon enough. Enjoy the evening, and happy holidays."

As we walked back into the living room, Saxon leaned down close to my ear. "There are more people I'd like you to meet, but first, I need to go handle

the seating for dinner. You will be seated beside me. Not fucking Declan.”

The way his hand tightened as he held mine before releasing it gave me hope.



TWENTY

SAXON

Dinner was a nightmare. Mom had moved Haisley beside me, like I had demanded, but she'd kept Declan on the other side of me. Trev did what he could to defuse the situation since he and Gypsi were across from us, but it didn't change much. Not when Declan was fucking determined to stake a claim on me that she never had.

The third time she slipped her hand over my fucking dick, I shoved her hard enough that the others around us noticed, and then I stood up. I had to get away from her and get my anger under control. Haisley tilted her head back to look up at me, and the swirl of emotions in her eyes told me she'd had enough. The shit Declan had subjected her to tonight was unfair.

I held my hand out to her. "Let's go," I said quietly, hoping not to attract more attention than we already had. It was pointless. I could hear conversations going silent and knew they were watching me, us.

Haisley slipped her hand into mine and stood. I held it firmly, pulling her to my side, then put on the best charming smile I could muster before lifting my gaze to the rest of the dining table we had been placed at.

“If you all will excuse us, Haisley isn’t feeling well. First trimesters are tough.” I grinned as I said it. That got several laughs and sympathetic nods. “I’m going to get her home. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

There were many comments about my being such a good man and how lucky she was, but I ignored it all, placing my hand on her back and leading her out of this fucking place. We were almost to the door when I heard heels clicking behind us. That was either my mom or Declan. Tensing, I kept walking toward the door, and my hand was on the brass knob when my mom’s voice made me pause.

“Saxon.”

With a sigh, I moved Haisley slightly behind me, as if she needed protection. It wasn’t like my mother was going to attack her, but the instinct came anyway.

“Yes,” I replied.

“You aren’t seriously just leaving. Dessert hasn’t even been served, and you’re just leaving Declan there alone.” The disapproval in her tone pissed me off.

“I didn’t invite Declan. The only concern I have is Haisley. It’s been a draining night for her, thanks to Declan’s treatment of her. I’ve had enough. I’m taking her home.”

Mom took several long strides closer to us and glared at Haisley, which made me step further in front of her to block her from my own fucking mother.

“She trapped you, and you’re just letting her do it. I did my research. Do you know about her mother? She’s just like her. You can’t throw your life away on someone like her. Give her money to raise the baby, pay child support, whatever, but stop this ... this thing you’re doing. She doesn’t need to live with you.”

It was an odd moment when the mom who had raised you, loved you, was there for all your highs and lows turned into your enemy. My hands fisted at my sides as I stared at the woman I never imagined being furious with, but right now, I was shaking with it.

“If you ever speak another negative, cruel word about Haisley or my baby, I will leave. You won’t see me again unless it’s something the family requires me at and you’re there too. I won’t acknowledge your existence. Now, you can either accept this and change the way you treat Haisley or I’ll exit your life.”

I could see my mom’s eyes widen, and the hurt was clear, but she was not my priority. She had forced me to react this way. She wasn’t a mean person, and until I’d brought Haisley home, I had never seen her treat anyone the way she was treating Haisley.

“Melanie.” My father’s deep voice carried through the entryway.

I lifted my gaze to see him walking toward us.

Mom blinked, as if she had been stunned, then turned to look at my father.

“Leave them alone. Go back inside and entertain our guests.” His tone was one that left no room for argument. It was an order.

Mom nodded and didn’t glance back at me as she left us there.

Dad wasn’t angry as he stood there, looking at me. We hadn’t discussed Haisley. He never brought the pregnancy up, and I didn’t have a reason to

talk to him about it. We worked together like we always had, as if nothing had changed.

“Your mother will come around. She’s never had to face not feeling like she had control over your life. First, she had to relinquish you so you could take your place in the family, and now this.” He looked past me to Haisley standing behind me, where I’d all but barricaded her. As if my body could block out my mother’s harsh words.

“We will move if she says anything else to or about Haisley,” I told him.

He nodded. “I don’t doubt it. We’ve not talked about this, but I’m proud of you for how you’re handling it. You’re not a boy anymore. Every choice you’ve made has been that of a man. Just give your mom some time to catch up.” He glanced back at Haisley again. “I think it’s time you introduce me to the mother of my grandchild.”

Moving over, I turned enough to slip my hand behind her and move her closer to me. “Dad, this is Haisley. Haisley, this is my dad, Kenneth.”

My dad held out a hand to her, and I watched as she slipped her much smaller one into his.

“It’s nice to meet you, Haisley. My son has excellent taste. It’s good to know my grandchild won’t be lacking in the looks department.” He grinned as he said it, making Haisley blush.

A small laugh escaped her, and the way her eyes shone under the lights around us hit me in the chest, like always.

“Thank you, Mr. Houston. It’s nice to meet you.”

He let go of her hand. “It’s Kenneth. Please, no need for formalities.”

She was glowing. My dad had accepted her, and it was clear she had

needed it. Especially after the shit my mom pulled. I owed him big time.

“I need to get back in there and make sure your mother is behaving.” He winked. “You two go home and enjoy your evening.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

He nodded and stepped back before turning to walk back into the dining room.

I reached for the door again and opened it. “Let’s go,” I told her.

She stepped outside, then wrapped her arms around her and shivered. The temperature had dropped, and it was a good ten degrees cooler than it had been when we arrived.

I slipped my tuxedo jacket off and put it over her shoulders.

“Thank you,” she replied, pulling it around her and snuggling into it.

I realized I was fucking jealous of my own jacket.

We walked in silence until we were past the parked cars and the lights of my parents’ Christmas decorations.

“That was an interesting party,” she said, glancing up at me.

I smirked. “It was a fucking nightmare.”

Her laugh made me smile. “Yeah, it kinda was.”

I looked down at her. “I’m sorry.”

She frowned. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

We walked up the steps to the house, and I stopped before opening the door.

“Yeah, I do. I took you there, and you were attacked. It’s my job to protect you.”

She took a step closer to me and laid a hand on my chest. “You stood up to your mother and threatened to never speak to her again. I would say you went above any protection I ever expected from you.”

I looked at her hand on me, then back at her eyes. When we walked in this door, I was going to cross a line. One I had drawn to protect myself. But after tonight, I was done protecting myself. I had two lives that needed my protection. Haisley and our baby were my only concerns from here on out. Fuck my heart and my feelings. My dad had called me a man tonight, but I’d been acting like a damn boy.

The day might never come that Haisley wanted me or chose me for me alone and not because she was carrying my child. But I wasn’t holding back my feelings and need for her because of it. She was here with me. Our baby was growing inside her. And more than I wanted my next breath, I wanted her naked in my bed. I wanted my sheets to smell like her. I wanted to be able to touch her and kiss her whenever I wanted. I just wanted her.

II

“Unconditional love is hard to compete with.”

—Abbi Glines, Because of Love



TWENTY-ONE

HAISLEY

I stepped into the house, and the smell of the pine tree and cinnamon sticks that we had hung on the tree filled the air. The scent alone made all the other bad from tonight fade away. This reminded me of our tree, Saxon, and our night decorating it. I felt safe and wanted here. Yes, I missed my siblings, but here, I felt taken care of. I'd always been the caretaker, and I had never truly felt safe. Part of me felt guilty for having this when my siblings didn't. But then would I want to be here if it wasn't for Saxon? Would I want to leave my family and live somewhere nicer without them if I didn't have these feelings for Saxon?

No. I'd want to be with my family. Wherever they were.

I was happy here because he was here.

I slipped off his jacket and turned to hand it to him. The time in his bedroom tonight had been the best part about this evening. But after all that

happened, I knew the guy he'd been in that moment probably wasn't coming back. I wasn't sure what I had to do to get that Saxon back. The one who bordered on dark and looked as if he wanted to strip me naked and take me against a wall.

I bit my bottom lip to keep from groaning at the image I now had in my head. Saxon took his jacket from me. I let go of my lip and smiled at him.

"Good night," I said, needing to get in the bedroom before I threw myself at him.

"You're tired?" he asked.

"Yes," I lied.

He nodded, and I turned to go to my room.

Saxon's hand wrapped around my arm, stopping me. "You're not sleeping in there anymore."

I looked back at him, and there it was. The dark Saxon.

"My bed from now on," he said as he led me across the living room to the one room I hadn't been inside of yet.

When I cleaned, I didn't go in his room. I wanted to respect his privacy.

He opened his door and pulled me inside with him. I stood there, looking around at the room that was three sizes bigger than the one I had been sleeping in. The massive bed in the center had black sheets and a black down comforter with at least six pillows. The thought of sleeping there with him made my body hum with excitement. I bet it smelled like him.

Saxon's hands rested on my waist, and I shivered when his warm breath touched the curve between my neck and shoulder. His lips brushed my skin, and a small moan that I realized had come from me was the only sound in the

room.

“I’ve been thinking about taking this dress off you since you put it on in the dressing room today,” he told me as he trailed kisses along my shoulder. “I’ll let you sleep, but first, I just need to taste you.”

His hands went to the ties at the back of the dress, and they were loosened with ease. When my dress started to slide down, he stopped it, holding it up with his hands over my breasts. I gasped from the touch. I felt like I was on sensory overload.

“Turn around and look in the mirror,” he said, moving me so that the mirror over his dresser was in front of us.

My chest was rising and falling so fast that there could be no doubt in his mind that I wanted this. I was struggling to control myself, and I wasn’t hiding it at all.

His hands moved away, and the fabric slid down my body, baring my breasts, then slipping over my hips until I stood there in nothing but a white satin thong and the red heels Saxon had chosen for me.

“Fuck,” he groaned as he looked at me.

My eyes went up to his face, but his eyes were busy taking in my body. He moved a hand up to cup one of my breasts while the other covered my stomach before sliding down to the front of my panties.

“You’re so goddamn perfect. Every inch of you. I can’t decide where I want to touch first. Where I want to lick.” He moved his hand under the satin of my panties and shoved it down between my legs.

A deep groan vibrated against my back, and he sucked in a breath as his fingers slid between my tender folds. “You’re soaking wet.”

I whimpered as my knees buckled. Saxon wrapped his other arm around me, holding me up as he continued to explore between my legs while he watched us in the mirror.

“You taste so good here. I’ve fucking craved it.” He lowered his head until his lips brushed my ear. “Missed it.”

Oh God. If he kept this up, I was going to orgasm just like this.

“Do you want to sleep, baby, or can I lay you down on my bed, spread your legs, and lick up all this sweetness?”

My back arched, and I shook as an orgasm broke loose inside of me.

“Saxon,” I cried out as he buried his fingers inside of me. I rocked against his hand as the wave of pleasure took me with it.

The moment it eased, my feet were off the ground, and I was carried over to the bed, where Saxon laid me down. I looked up at him as he unbuttoned his shirt. His eyes devouring me as he did so. The sight of his bare chest had me wiggling with impatience.

“Fuck it,” he growled, ripping the rest of the buttons open and shrugging out of his shirt before climbing onto the bed.

Without taking off my panties, he spread open my legs, ran his finger under the thin piece of fabric, then lowered his head and began to taste the soaked satin. I watched him, unable to breathe. The way he savored it, as if it were a delicacy, made me start to beg. I needed his mouth on me. He buried his face between my legs then. The first swipe of his tongue had me bucking my hips and crying out his name again.

My hands went to the back of his head as he made hungry sounds while tasting me, as if he couldn’t get enough.

“Please don’t stop,” I sobbed, so close to another orgasm.

Saxon’s hands squeezed my inner thighs hard as he circled my clit with the tip of his tongue. The second release hit me, and it was more powerful than the first one.

“AH! OH GOD!” I screamed.

“That’s it, baby. Come all over my tongue,” he said in a husky voice.

He continued to lap at me as I trembled through the pleasure. When I began to come down from my high, he lifted his head to look up at me.

“Is it more sensitive?” he asked, using his knuckle to caress me.

“It is. Everything is more ... more intense. I think that’s why I’m ...” I paused.

He raised his eyebrows. “You’re what?”

I licked my lips. “I mean ... I always want you, but I ache more.”

A wicked grin curled his lips as he pushed a finger inside me. My mouth fell open, and I let out a moan.

“It’s swollen inside,” he said, his eyes going darker. “That’s making you needy. Wet.”

I was panting as he slowly played with me.

His eyes went to my boobs. “Just like how your gorgeous, full tits are swollen.”

“Yes.” My head fell back on the pillow. “I stay aroused. When you touch me or look at me, it gets so much worse.”

Saxon slipped his finger out of me, and I started to protest when he crawled over me. He stopped and tugged at one of my nipples with his teeth, then sucked on it before moving over to do the same to the other. His big hands

moved up to squeeze them as he went from flicking his tongue over the nipple, then sucking again. It felt amazing.

When he let go, our eyes locked, and then he moved further up my body with a trail of kisses over my collarbone and my neck until his mouth was on mine. I could taste myself on him. I ran my fingers through his hair and pulled at the curls. I loved his hair. He bit my lower lip and began to suck it. I pulled my legs up and wrapped them around his hips. Even through the pants he was still wearing, I could feel his hard length. I started to rub against it, needing that friction.

Saxon's lips left mine, and he was off the bed, his hands unbuttoning his pants. The moment he shoved them down, along with his briefs, I wanted to beg at the sight of his long, thick erection.

His hands went to my panties then, and he pulled them down my legs and over my heels before tossing them away.

"We're leaving the shoes on," he said, leaning down to kiss my left ankle, then my calf before he climbed back onto the bed, wrapping his hand around his erection.

I wanted to touch it, but he lowered his body over mine, and the tip ran along my entrance. I wanted that more. I wanted that so much more.

"Your juices covering my cock—it's fucking hot." His deep voice sounded strained. "Not sure how long I can last once I get inside you." He lifted his eyes to meet mine.

"I'm pretty sure I'm going to get off the second you're inside me," I admitted.

He let out a low sound. "Damn, baby."

He ran a hand down my leg, and then his fingers circled my ankle, where

the straps of my heels buckled. Picking it up, he placed my leg over his shoulder. With one rock of his hips, he sank into me fully. It stretched me to the point that it was almost painful, but in just the right way.

“So tight,” he said through clenched teeth as the veins in his neck stuck out. “Nothing feels as good as you do. Fucking nothing.”

He started to move then, and I grabbed his arms, needing to hold on to him. It was already right there. I was going to spiral into pure bliss, and I wanted it, but not yet. I wanted this with him. Seeing his face and the euphoric look as he stared down at me. I’d never felt this close to anyone. This connected.

He groaned as he started pumping harder. His arms flexed under my hands. “Fuck, I love this pussy. It’s mine, Haisley. This pussy gets needy, and I take care of it.”

The heated look in his eyes as he claimed me—sexually at least—shot me into the ecstasy I had known was about to take me.

“SAXON!” I shouted his name, clawing at him as my body rose to meet his thrusts.

The moment the warmth of his release filled me, I came again, lost in the pure, raw frenzy.

“FUCK!”

He jerked over me, and his arms started to give way. He fell to his elbows as he buried his face in the crook of my neck. I could feel him inside me. His cock still pumping. He wasn’t finished ejaculating. Running my hands up his back, I soaked in his hard, muscular form covering me. Marking me inside.

“If you try and leave me again, I will hunt you down to the fucking ends of the earth,” he said near my ear. His voice thick and raspy. “I swear to God, baby, I can’t let you go again.”

Tears burned my eyes as I wrapped my arms around him tightly. I never wanted to leave him, but I didn't know if I'd be forced to at gunpoint again. I couldn't tell him that. I was afraid to tell him that.

I said the only thing I could. "I don't want to leave you."

He lifted his head and looked down at me. "You promise?"

"I swear."

He dropped his head to my chest then and sighed. "Thank fuck. Because if you think you want to leave, give me a heads-up." He lifted his head again. "And I'll be sure to eat your pussy until you can't walk."

A laugh bubbled out of me, and he grinned, then pressed a kiss to my lips before lifting himself up and climbing off me.

"I'd suggest we shower, but I'll just wash you off. I like my cum being inside you. Not ready for you to let it leak out."

My body flushed as I watched his naked body walk to the bathroom. Good Lord, that man is beautiful. I thought I loved the dimples on his face, but the two on his lower back, right above his perfect ass, might be my new weakness.



TWENTY-TWO

SAXON

I didn't want to move. I knew I needed to wake her up. She had two morning classes on Saturdays, but her leg was draped over me, her arm around my waist and her cheek pressed against my chest. My eyes took in her soft, smooth skin and silky raven hair covering the pillow we were sharing. There were six on this bed, and we were on the same one. Well, most of her head was on me. I fucking loved that she clung to me like this. I'd never known I was a cuddler.

The thought of someone touching me when I slept had always sounded awful. But Haisley all over me was heaven. I never wanted to sleep without her again. Slipping my hand into her hair, I enjoyed the feel of it. Lowering my head, I inhaled her coconut scent.

"Are you smelling me?" her soft voice asked.

I grinned. "Yep."

A sleepy laugh escaped her.

I let my hands move over her body now that she was awake. Every curve I had missed and dreamed about. The changes that pregnancy had already started to do to her. I squeezed her ass, and she jerked, then laughed again.

“What time is it?”

I wanted to lie to her for selfish reasons. “Almost five.”

She tilted her head back and looked up at me. “I wish I could stay here like this all day.”

I pushed her down and rolled on top of her, careful not to put all my weight on her. “Open,” I told her, and she spread her legs immediately.

I did my best to thrust inside slow, but the moment her wet heat touched my cock, I was all the way in. I couldn’t help it.

“Stay here,” I told her as she moaned. “I’ll keep this achy little pussy happy.”

She ran her hands up my arms. “This Saxon is going to drive me crazy.”

I lowered my head to suck on one of her nipples. “I didn’t know there was two of me.”

“Mmhmm,” she moaned. “There’s the good guy. The charmer. Then, there’s this one.”

I bit the full lush flesh of her tit. “What’s this one?”

She cried out as I sank my teeth in harder this time. “The dark one.” Her voice was breathy. “The bad boy that’s just under the surface.”

I licked at the teeth marks I’d left on her, then looked up at her as I rocked back and slammed into her hard. “The dark one makes you wet.” I wasn’t asking. I knew. I could see it in her eyes. It scared her, but she was turned on

by it.

She nodded, whimpering.

I took her wrists and pinned them over her head as I started fucking her. She was so wet that I could hear it, along with the slapping of our bodies. My eyes went to her tits as they bounced, flashing the teeth marks I'd made on the left one. I wanted it to bruise. Turn blue. I wanted to see my mark on it.

“Saxon!”

When she cried out my name, I wanted to fucking beat on my chest and roar. The way she stared at me with complete rapture as her body trembled and jerked beneath me sent me over the edge, and I shouted as I shot my release inside her.

“I want this pussy full of my cum. When you get wet, I want you to smell me in your panties. This is my cunt. My tight, hot little cunt.”

“Oh God, Saxon, stop. I'm going to come again,” she panted as her nails dig into me.

The dirty talk got to her. Knowing I was the only guy she'd let have her like this made me even more territorial.

The tightness squeezing me kept my dick hard, and I continued to thrust into her. When she wasn't with me, I wanted her to be fucking sated. To feel where I'd been. Grabbing her hips, I pounded into her.

“You want to come again? Give me more of that sweet cream? Coat my dick in it?”

“AHHH!” Her body arched up, and her nails clawed down my arms.

There was nothing on earth more beautiful than this woman when she was coming.



Pulling the sherpa throw Haisley loved so much over her body as she slept, curled up on the sofa, while the credits to *The Grinch* played on the television, I made sure she was fully asleep before going over to the hall closet and pulling out the two bags I'd hidden in there before picking her up from work. Since Friday night, things had been different. In the best way possible.

Being able to kiss her whenever I fucking wanted to. Touch her body when she was close enough. Hold her while we watched Christmas movies and eat whatever cookie or treat she'd baked that day. The worst part was dropping her off at work in the mornings. I hated to see her walk away from me, and I caught myself checking the time all fucking day.

I took out the first wrapped box and slipped it under the tree. While she had worked today, I'd shopped. Christmas was three days away, and this tree was going to have enough gifts under it to make up for all the Christmases she'd woken up to nothing. I'd been casually asking questions. Making notes. I couldn't turn back time and give her the childhood she'd deserved, but I could damn well make sure to give it all to her now.

The wrapping paper had been a little more difficult to find for each gift, but I'd finally found a place online and had it overnighted. The next three presents were small boxes, and I slid them further underneath so she wouldn't notice them. The second bag had three larger gifts, and I wasn't going to be able to hide them, but I wanted her to see gifts under the tree for her. I wanted her to get to experience that anticipation she'd never gotten to have as a kid. Waiting for Christmas morning.

Next year, we'd have a kid. We would be putting together toys and setting

up Santa's gifts. Taking the last box from the closet, I took out the angel that had come in the mail today. Smiling at the black hair and light eyes, I grabbed the ladder and quietly placed it near the tree before putting my dark-haired angel on top of it.

I glanced back at her, and my chest tightened. All those times I'd thought I wanted someone and not gotten them. Not once had I felt for them what I did for her. I hadn't known this feeling existed. Thank fuck that I hadn't gotten the girl before. I'd have missed this. Missed her.

Shoving the last gift under the tree, I folded the bags and took them back to the closet. I had two more things to get, and then I'd have it all. When I walked back to the sofa, the credits had ended, and the room was silent, except for the sound of the gas fireplace.

I knelt down in front of her and brushed the hair that had fallen over her face back, then ran my thumb over her bottom lip. I loved this fucking lip. Her eyes fluttered, and she looked at me. I wanted to tell her I loved her. But it was too soon. This was new. We'd not had this before. We had only had two weeks. We hadn't lived together and gotten to know each other like we did now.

"I fell asleep," she whispered. "Oops."

I grinned. "It's okay. Jim Carrey will forgive you for being bored by his performance of the Grinch."

She laughed, then covered her mouth as she yawned.

"Come on. I'll take you to bed and let you sleep. I swear."

She started to say something when her eyes landed on the tree—or rather what was under it. I saw them widen slightly.

"There are presents."

“Yep. That’s what goes under trees,” I replied.

She looked back up at me, concerned. “Who are they for?”

I shrugged. “Well, I can assure you that I’m not buying my mom shit this year. I’d venture to guess they’re yours.”

She put a hand on her chest and looked back at the presents. “Mine? All of those?”

She could only see five of them. If she thought that was a lot, she was going to be very surprised by all twenty-one.

“I don’t buy people gifts. Well, except my mom, and like I said, not this year. The only person I’m interested in buying anything for is you.”

Her eyes lifted to mine again. “I thought the tree was the best Christmas gift I’d ever gotten.”

Fuck, that made me want to cry. When she said shit like that, it hurt my heart. My damn chest felt like it was breaking. A tree wasn’t a gift. But she was made happy with so little. I wasn’t going to fucking tear up. She liked it when I was the dark Saxon, as she’d called it.

“I think I can do better than that,” I told her, reaching down to take her hand and pull her up against me.

“This tree is pretty impressive,” she said, smiling at me.

“So’s my tongue. Why don’t you come sit on my face and let me show you a new way to enjoy it?”

The flash of desire in her eyes told me I’d said the right thing. Pulling her to me, I lowered my head and touched my lips to hers gently. I could be the bad boy who turned her on when she wanted it, but damn if I wasn’t going to have my moments too. Sure, I liked talking dirty and fucking rough. But I

loved taking my time and savoring her. Showing her just how special she was and seeing her eyes light up when I got it right.



TWENTY-THREE

HAISLEY

I had exactly two hours between my classes to find Saxon some more Christmas gifts. In between my classes on Saturday, I'd bought him something that I had been torn about getting until things had changed Friday night. What I hadn't expected was him to have bought me so many things. I knew he didn't want me to do the same thing, but I wasn't going to just give him one thing.

He kept doing sweet things, which were already the best presents I'd ever gotten. Like the angel on top of the tree with my color hair. I hadn't even known they made angels with black hair for tree toppers. He went out of his way to make me feel special. Not one person in my life had ever cared about making me feel special—until Saxon.

There was something else I wanted to get him, but I wasn't going to find it in a store. I had to get Trev to help me with that. Seeing as Saxon's mom

wasn't an option. I planned on texting him later, but first, I needed to look for the things I could find in a store.

I went into a bookstore and looked around until something caught my eye, and unable to help myself, I bought it.

The next two stores had mostly men's clothing, and I didn't want to give him clothing. Finally, I got to a place that had unique items and engraving. Although I wasn't sure I had time to get something engraved, I looked around at the different items.

A leather bracelet with a flat copper center meant for engraving drew me to it. I picked it up and looked at it, wishing I had time to get something engraved on it. The worn leather strap looked like Saxon's style. I turned it over and realized there was something already engraved on it. Holding it up, I saw two words that made my chest tighten. It was perfect.

I stood there for a moment, battling with myself because this said more than I'd admitted to him. It would make my feelings for him completely transparent. He might not be ready for something like that. I started to put it down, but I couldn't. It was if it had been put here for me to find.

Giving in, I took it to the counter to pay.

With the two wrapped gifts, I headed back to do my last yoga session before we closed for the holidays. Before I got ready, I stopped and sent Trev a text, explaining what I was looking for. I started to tuck my phone into my bag when it lit up.

Trev's response was fast.

I have exactly what you're looking for. I'll get it to you without him knowing.

Smiling in relief, I responded.

Thank you!

The next session went by slow, and I knew it was only because I was ready to see Saxon. When I shifted into the next pose, my eyes caught movement at the door, and I paused. Warm brown eyes and dimples met my gaze. Biting my bottom lip, even more ready for this to end, I turned back to the people in front of me.

While I moved them through the next steps, I felt Saxon's eyes on me. I bent, then slowly stood, reminding the ladies to breathe as they changed positions. Unable to help myself, I looked back at Saxon. His eyes were roaming over my body, which wasn't helping me concentrate.

Trying to remember what I needed to do next, I let out a small laugh. Hopefully, no one noticed. The last five minutes were a basic routine, and I was standing up, wishing everyone a happy holiday, then turning to see Saxon push off the doorframe he had been leaning on and walk toward me.

He was wearing gray sweatpants and a hoodie. My eyes kept going down; I couldn't help myself. He was normally in jeans. The rest of the room seemed to disappear, and he was all I could see.

"Is there a private bathroom or changing room anywhere?" he asked, slipping his hands over my hips until he was cupping my butt.

"Back there is a small storage room." I nodded behind me.

He backed me up, then turned me around and gently pushed me in that direction. My bag and coat were inside, but that was it. He closed the door once we were crowded into the small space.

"You wearing this tight outfit, sticking your ass in the air, and spreading your legs," he whispered in my ear before biting my earlobe, "it got me fucking worked up."

I leaned into him. His mouth covered mine. He tasted like mint chocolate. I grabbed his hoodie, pulling myself closer to him. I'd missed him. He was becoming an addiction.

He broke the kiss and jerked down my leggings and panties at the same time. "Put your hands on the wall," he ordered me.

I placed both palms against the painted brick.

"Stick that ass out like you were doing in there."

Smiling, I moved my hands down the wall, bending slightly until my butt was pointing up.

Saxon ran his hands over it. "Open your legs wider."

I opened them as far as I could with my leggings around my ankles.

"That's it," he groaned, and then he plunged inside me.

I had to brace myself to keep from falling forward. Biting my bottom lip, I held back the cry of pleasure.

"Fuuuck, that's what I needed," he groaned as he began thrusting. "You're still slippery from the load I left in you this morning."

My toes curled as my body began to hum.

"Did you miss me?" he asked.

"Yes," I panted. "So much."

"You miss my dick?"

"God, yes."

"I love this needy pussy," he grunted. "Can't get enough of it."

"I'm gonna come," I said as another moan left me.

"That's it," he praised me, running a hand down my back. "Come on my

cock like a good girl.”

On those words, the crest slammed into me, and I cried out, unable to stay quiet.

Saxon let out a shout, and I felt him spasm inside of me as he continued to move.

When he finally slowed, then stilled, he reached down and wrapped his arms around me to pull me up against his chest. “I didn’t come early to fuck you in a closet,” he panted near my ear.

“I’m not complaining,” I replied, tilting my head to look up at him.

He smirked. “I wasn’t prepared for all that bending and stretching. I’m going to need you to do that shit at home, naked, for me.”

Laughing, I nodded in agreement.

He leaned down and placed a kiss on my head. “First, we have some shopping to do.”

“Shopping?”

“Yep.”

“For who?”

Saxon pulled out of me and then bent down to pull my panties up, followed by my leggings. “Your sisters and brothers.”

When he stood back up, he pulled his sweats back to his waist.

“Okay,” I replied, mentally calculating how much money I had left in my account. “I don’t get my next paycheck from here until Christmas Eve. I’m not sure I have enough to get them all something. Maybe I could get the girls something to share and do the same for the boys.”

I felt guilty for not thinking about buying them something. We’d never

celebrated Christmas, so it wasn't something that I'd considered. But I should have. I was celebrating it, and they weren't getting to.

"I said we were shopping. Not just you," Saxon said, opening the door. "I want you to go buy each of them something you know they would want. Price isn't an issue. Don't look at the price."

I shook my head. "No. I can't let you do that. You already bought the girls phones."

Saxon grabbed my chin and held it firmly. "I didn't ask permission. We are buying them Christmas gifts, getting them a tree, and taking it to the trailer. You're gonna see your family for Christmas, and if I want to, I'll even stop and buy a bunch of fucking cookies and shit to take." He leaned down and kissed my lips, then let my chin go. "Now, let's go."

I watched him walk into the room. My heart beat wildly in my chest, and I wanted to tell him I loved him. Instead, when he turned around to make sure I was behind him, I hurried to catch up, slipping my hand into his.

He squeezed mine and took my bag from my hand, carrying it as we left the studio.

"Saxon."

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

He tugged me closer to his side. "You're welcome."



This was too much. There were three presents for each of my siblings and even a gift for my mom. A tree with lights and decorations, four boxes of treats from a bakery in town, and a stocking for each of them, full of candy

and gift cards for ice cream, Starbucks, and fast-food restaurants. I had tried fighting Saxon when he kept buying things, but eventually, I'd given up.

Seeing their faces when we walked in with our hands full of wrapped gifts was worth it. I would pay him back somehow. If it took the rest of my life. DJ, Vulcan, and Vinn went back to the truck with him to get the six-foot cypress and bags of ornaments. Jamaica helped me bring in the cookies, brownies, cupcakes, and an assortment of holiday treats.

Decorating the tree with them was a first for us. It would have been perfect, but Silver wasn't here. Mom always worked nights because it paid more per hour. I left her gift under the tree. Convincing the others that they could only open one and to save two for Christmas morning wasn't easy. Especially for Thorn. I knew their dad normally gave them something, but it was typically the day after Christmas, and it was rarely wrapped. Last year, he had bought them all T-shirts from Vegas, and they'd been delivered in the plastic bag the store had given him.

"Can we open Silver's since she isn't here?" Thorn asked as he looked up from the Nintendo Switch Saxon had been determined to buy each of the boys.

"Of course not," I told him.

He groaned, then jumped up to go grab another cupcake. They were all going to be on a sugar high, and Jamaica was going to be left with them. My eyes went to Saxon sitting with Vulcan, showing him how to do something on the game he was playing.

If I hadn't already been in love with him, I would be after tonight. This was the only Christmas present I ever needed. Well, it would be better if Silver would get home. I'd called her twice and texted her several times. She'd said

she was coming, but so far, nothing.

I was trying not to worry too much and put a damper on their fun. Jamaica sat, curled up on the worn once-gold sofa that was more of a pale yellow now, watching the boys while eating a cookie. She seemed to be happy. I was thankful for that. It was clear she had a lot on her with me gone and Silver rebelling.

Saxon's eyes lifted and locked with mine. He studied me for a moment, then stood to come over to me. "Let me see your phone," he said.

I pulled it from my pocket and handed it to him. I watched as he opened it with my passcode, which was the baby's due date. Then, he pressed something and zoomed in.

"She's almost here," he told me with a frown. "Look." He stepped up beside me and showed me a screen on my phone. It said Silver's name and showed a car moving at eighty-seven miles an hour about two miles from the trailer park.

"Who is driving her?" I asked, looking up at Jamaica.

She seemed tense. "Probably Hike. The guy I told you about."

"The one in a gang?" I asked, looking back at my phone to see he was still driving entirely too fast for back roads.

"Yeah," she replied softly.

"What gang?" Saxon's voice took on a hard edge.

"Red Kings," DJ answered, looking angry about it. "She's being so damn stupid. I swear she's trying to get killed."

Saxon turned back to me and looked at the app one more time. "This is Life360. You can track her or Jamaica at all times. As long as they have their

phones.” He glanced over at DJ. “You keep everyone in the house. I’m going to go meet Silver and her boyfriend.”

I grabbed his arm. “No, don’t. Just let it go. He’s probably just a punk kid.”

“He isn’t. He’s twenty,” DJ informed me.

“Twenty!”

Silver was only fifteen. How the heck had she met a twenty-year-old? What was she thinking?

I heard the music before the headlights came into view.

Saxon squeezed my arm. “Stay inside.” Then, he was gone before I could do anything to stop him.

“He’s gonna get shot!” DJ warned me.

I twisted my hands nervously.

“Saxon is a part of the Mafia,” Jamaica replied. “I’m guessing he’s armed.”

“He doesn’t look threatening.” DJ didn’t look convinced. “Who told you that?”

I was wondering how she knew that too. I hadn’t told her.

“People talk,” she said softly.

I walked over to the window, my heart racing as I watched Silver get out of the car. She stumbled, grabbing on to the door.

Great. She was drunk.

I heard her laughter as she leaned against the hood and pointed at Saxon.

“She’s drunk again.” DJ sounded disgusted beside me. “Probably high too.”

She was taking drugs now?

I wrapped my hands around my stomach and watched as the guy sauntered toward Saxon with a cocky look on his face. They were about the same height. Hike, however, was covered in tattoos and piercings. He had a shaved head and needed to get some pants that fit him. Those were about to fall off.

When he leaned in close to Saxon's face, I tensed up. I couldn't breathe. What if he got hurt? What if—

“Holy fuck!” DJ said beside me, getting closer to the window.

Saxon had a gun pressed to Hike's forehead. I swallowed nervously. He'd moved so fast that I hadn't realized what he was doing. Hike took a step back, and Saxon followed him. Both Hike's hands went up, and I heard Silver screaming.

I started for the door, and DJ grabbed my arm.

“Oh, hell no. He said for us to stay in here. He told me to make sure everyone stayed inside. I'm doing what the man says.”

Jamaica was behind me now, and the other three boys were crowding in around us, watching. Silver ran around the car clumsily, and when she reached Saxon, he held her off with one hand while never taking his eyes off Hike.

“He's a fucking badass,” Vulcan whispered.

“Guess he is Mafia,” DJ added.

“I just thought he was a rich pretty boy,” Vinn said, clearly impressed instead of terrified.

Leave it to my brothers to find this exciting.

Saxon nodded his head to the car, and Hike opened the car door and started to get inside. Then, he turned and said something to Saxon. There was no

sound, but from Hike's reaction, Saxon had shot at something. Then, he was in Hike's face.

My nails were biting into my palm. I wanted this over and Hike gone.

Hike got in the car and backed out, then spun off. Saxon was saying something to Silver as she wobbled on her heels, then turned around and threw up.

Fantastic.

I was angry that this had happened. That she had been out there with a twenty-year-old gang member, getting drunk and high. I stalked to the door. DJ didn't stop me this time. Jerking it open, I went outside and made my way to Silver.

She had finished heaving and wiped her mouth off with her arm before standing and looking at me. The angry snarl on her lips was something I'd never seen on her before.

"Are you happy?" she yelled. "I love HIKE! And he"—she pointed at Saxon—"threatened him. Put a motherfucking gun to his head! He's gonna pay for this. The Red Kings won't let this stand."

This was killing me. What had happened to the little girl who looked up to me? Who was this?

"Silver, he's too old for you. He could go to jail for touching you. And a gang? Seriously? After all the crap with AJ, you go and date someone in a gang?"

She tossed her hair over her shoulder. "Don't act high and mighty. You got knocked up with a guy connected to the Mafia. How is that better? Just because they have money and shit! It wasn't Hike holding the gun tonight."

“Please, Silver. Let’s not do this. The others were having a good night. I’ve missed you.”

“Bullshit! You got out of this hellhole!”

“Yes. Because I was forced to leave. I would have never left y’all. You know that.”

She stormed toward the house. “We don’t want you here! Take your Mafia boyfriend and leave.”

The door swung open, and DJ walked out. “Shut up, Silver! You’re wasted and ruining everything. You always ruin shit. We want Haisley and Saxon here.”

She stomped up the stairs and shoved DJ as she passed him.

My eyes burned with unshed tears. Why was she doing this? How did I reach her when she wouldn’t even talk to me?

“I’m sorry about the gun. He said some sexual things about Silver and threatened everyone with his stupid gang. I needed him to understand that he was threatening the wrong people.”

I covered my eyes, not wanting to cry. I didn’t want the others to see me cry. “She not like this.” My voice cracked.

Saxon’s arms came around me and pulled me to his chest. “She’s got some tracks in her arms. She’s high. That’s what’s making her talk the way she is.”

“Oh God,” I groaned, dropping my hands and taking a deep breath. I had to keep it together for the others. They needed me to be strong. “What if he comes back when we leave? What if that gang comes and hurts them?”

Saxon shook his head. “They won’t. You’re going to go back inside, and I’m going to make some calls. The Red Kings will handle Hike. I promise

you.”

I stared at him. “How do you know?”

He pulled me to him and pressed a kiss to my head. “As far as hierarchy goes, they’re at the bottom of the food chain. Just go inside. Ease their minds. I will make sure they stay safe.”

This was not what Saxon had asked for. I had a world of baggage to deal with.

“Thank you. You shouldn’t even have to get involved. My family isn’t your problem.”

“Haisley, if it affects you, then it is my problem,” he said. “Go inside. Stop worrying. Try and enjoy the rest of the evening.”

I nodded and took a deep breath, wiping at my face to get rid of the stray tears that had broken free. “Okay,” I replied.

I’d gotten my happy for a moment. It had been brief, but I should have expected life to take it from me. Saxon wasn’t going to fall in love with me and want to keep me with this kind of crap in my life. No matter how much I wanted him, he deserved better than what he got with me.



TWENTY-FOUR

SAXON

I stood on the front porch as the headlights came into view. I'd wanted Haisley to be asleep before I left her in the bed. She had cried until she fell asleep, and I fucking hated it. The headlights of the G-Wagon turned off, and both the driver's door and the passenger door opened. I hadn't known Trev was bringing anyone.

Straightening from where I'd been leaning on the railing, I walked down the steps just as the Hughes brothers walked into the light from my porch. I hadn't asked him to bring Blaise. I'd needed advice and to blow off some steam. If I'd wanted to bring the family into it, I'd have called Levi. He would be the one who went to Blaise. Not me.

"Blaise," I said in greeting. Then looked at Trev.

"Don't look at me like that. He called me. He'd already heard," Trev said.

“I was going to fill Levi in, just not tonight,” I explained to Blaise.

“He’s my brother. Fuck the chain-of-command shit,” Trev drawled.

Blaise studied me for a moment while he lit up a cigarette. “You put a gun to a Red King’s head,” he said, taking a pull from the cigarette. “That shit gets back to me fast.”

“You what?!” Trev exclaimed, grinning, then slapped me on the chest. “Fucking hell, man! Why can’t you do this shit when I’m around so I can see it?”

“Trev,” Blaise said with an annoyed look on his face.

Trev shrugged. “Oh, come on. You can’t tell me you didn’t get one ounce of joy from hearing Sax had pulled his Glock on someone.”

Blaise ignored him and kept his eyes locked on me. “Red Kings are fucking bottom-feeders. They’re mostly young thugs.” He took another pull from the cigarette.

“He—” I started but was cut off.

“I know what he said. Taser, their leader, got in contact with me. Hike is currently being dealt with for pissing off one of my men. They’re not interested in making us an enemy. Taser gets his shit from someone under my control. He knows it can be shut off with one call from me.”

I ran a hand through my hair and sighed in relief. Fuck, my chest felt somewhat lighter.

“You love her,” he said simply.

“Yeah,” I admitted without pause. I did.

“Then, this changes things,” he replied, taking another drag from the cigarette in his hand.

“You want me to call off the police protection on their trailer?” Trev asked him.

Blaise shook his head. “No. I’ve already spoken to Horn, their leader. They’re looking for a reason to lock up Taser. Red Kings have been sloppy. If they are funneling coke into the schools, I’ll shut them down myself.”

“If Silver is getting her fix from them, then their hands are in something other than coke. She wasn’t messed up on an upper,” I told him.

Blaise nodded. “Probably oxy.” He let out some smoke. “If you’re keeping her and your kid, then we have to change some things. Starting with AJ. I’ll need to go visit him, and you’ll be going with me. Let’s get through the holidays and the wedding shit. Then, we will head out.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “How’s this going to affect Haisley?” She was my only concern.

Levi could get the fuck over it. I knew he was going to be pissed that we’d made any contact with AJ.

“I don’t know yet. That depends on AJ,” Blaise replied. “But she’ll have to choose a side. It’ll come down to her brother or us.”

I wanted to believe she’d choose me—or us. But she’d dropped me before. She could shut me out again. Take our baby with her. I nodded, unable to say anything else.

“Expect to leave a few days after Christmas,” he told me. “Let’s go,” he said, turning to Trev and heading back to the vehicle.

“You good?” Trev asked me. He could read me too well.

“Yeah.”

“Liar.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know who she’ll choose. Not sure I can survive her leaving me this time.”

“If you’re laying on the Saxon charm, like I told you to, then she’s sunk, or she will be before it’s time for that.”

I hoped he was right.

“You have more faith in that than I do.”

Trev smirked. “I’ve seen it in action too much not to know its power.”

I rolled my eyes, and Trev squeezed my shoulder.

“Sorry I brought him. I had no choice. If you want to talk tomorrow without the *boss* up in our business, let me know.”

I understood. Truthfully, talking to Blaise had eased some of my concerns. I knew Haisley’s family was safe.

“I’ll see you tomorrow night at the party.”

I didn’t watch them leave. I went back inside to Haisley. I didn’t want her waking up to find me not there.

Tonight had started out great, but it had come to a crashing end. Leaving her siblings behind had been hard on her, and I’d been so fucking torn. I wanted to grab her and run away from all that shit that made her unhappy. Knowing it was because she loved them, that she cared, made me feel guilty for wanting to be selfish with her. I didn’t want to share her. I wanted her smiling and happy. Her family seemed to do the opposite to her.



The bedroom door opened as I moved the last chocolate chip pancake from the griddle to a plate. I looked up from the breakfast I’d gotten up early to

start on to see Haisley standing there in my hoodie that I'd left hanging over the sofa in my bedroom. A sleepy smile touched her lips as she made her way over to the bar.

"You're making pancakes," she said.

I turned off the griddle and walked around the bar. I needed to touch her. "They're not just any pancakes. They're Christmas Eve chocolate chip pancakes. I also made bacon and sliced up strawberries." I grabbed her by the waist and tugged her against my bare chest.

She tilted her head back to look up at me. "I've never had Christmas Eve chocolate chip pancakes, and I've never had a hot, shirtless guy cook for me."

I leaned down and pressed a kiss to her cheek. "Good. If another one does, I'll have to kill him."

She laughed and turned her head so that our lips met. I let go of her waist to cup her face in my hands. Having her lean into me and grab my biceps, like she couldn't get close enough, gave me some reassurance that she felt something beyond our situation. I sucked on her bottom lip before tasting her again. When she broke the kiss and dropped her forehead to my chest, she sighed.

"I'm sorry about last night. You went to all that trouble to make it special."

I ran my hands down her arms. "Please don't apologize. None of that was your fault. I'm just sad it was ruined for you and the others."

She took a deep breath and looked up at me. "I'm going to enjoy today. I am going to call later and check on things. I want to catch Mom at home if I can. I'd like to talk to her about Silver. Not that it will do much good."

I was going to do all I could to make sure her Christmas Eve was special.

“We’ll get her help. I promise.”

So many emotions flashed in her lavender eyes. I wanted to dissect them all and understand what she was thinking.

“This isn’t your problem. I got pregnant, and since finding out, you have done more than I would have ever asked for. The baby is your only responsibility. You don’t have to take on all my other baggage.”

This kind of talk had to stop. She was keeping a wall up, and I wanted every fucking wall burned to the ground. No barriers between us. I wanted all of her.

“Haisley, let me make myself clear. This isn’t about responsibility. This is about my wanting you happy. I love seeing you smile. I love hearing you laugh. This past year, my life changed, and until you, I had very little that gave me any kind of peace or joy. My head was all fucked up, and my chest felt twisted all the time. But when I’m with you, it makes all of that shit okay. You center me. Remind me about the good in life. So, when I do things for you, it’s because I have an overpowering need to take care of you. I need to.”

That was as close as I was going to get to telling her I loved her. At least for now. But damn if that wasn’t the definition, then I didn’t know what was.

“Saxon?”

“Yes?”

“You are very good with words.” A small smile touched her lips. “I don’t know what to say to that.”

I leaned down and pressed a kiss to the tip of her nose. “Say, *Sounds good. You can fix all my problems.* Then, let’s eat breakfast.”

She laughed then, and that lightness I craved spread through me.

“You center me too,” she whispered.

That was good. That was real fucking good.

I reached around, grabbed her panty-covered ass, and gave it a squeeze.
“Sit down. Let me feed you.”

More laughter. God, I really did love that sound.

I reached for the remote and turned Christmas music on, then picked up the fireplace remote and turned it on even though it was seventy degrees today.

“What color and setting for our Christmas Eve lights?” I asked her.

She chewed her bottom lip for a moment in thought, then let it pop free.
“Colored and dancing.”

I set it for her, then went to fill her plate. I would be damned if something was going to ruin this day. I wanted it to be perfect for her. The thought that I’d kill to make it happen crossed my mind, and I paused. That kind of thing had been coming to me more and more lately. Was it because I’d seen enough death now that it was making me numb to it? Or was it all about Haisley? Until her, there hadn’t been anyone I was willing to kill for.



TWENTY-FIVE

HAISLEY

Curled up against Saxon, watching *The Holiday*, put all my other concerns at rest for a while. As the credits rolled, he threaded his fingers through mine.

“I bought all the supplies for us to do some baking, but right now, you feel and smell too damn good. I don’t want to move.”

Grinning, I ran my free hand up his chest and let it rest against his pec. “You bought baking supplies?” I asked, wanting to laugh.

“Is that funny to you?” His hand squeezed mine.

“It’s cute.”

“I was going for sweet,” he replied, then flipped me onto my back and hovered over me. “But now, you’ve called me cute, and my masculinity has taken a hit.”

I licked my lips, staring up into his brown eyes. “I wouldn’t think your

masculinity was so fragile.”

His hand pushed the shirt of his I was wearing up until my stomach was bare, and then he lowered his head and pressed a kiss to it. I squirmed as he left a trail down to the edge of my panties. He ran his hand between my legs, and a moan escaped me.

“Fuck, you smell good,” he groaned, then tugged them down my legs and dropped them on the floor.

I was panting, watching him. He took my right leg and kissed the inside of my calf before placing it over his shoulder. Then, he did the exact same with my left leg. His eyes lifted to meet mine as he moved down until I could feel his warm breath just before his tongue licked against my clit.

I cried out, my hands going to the back of his head.

He let out a low growl as he began to feast on me like he was starving for it.

“So good. Oh—oh,” I stuttered out as my climax began to build.

Saxon thrust a finger inside of me while he ran his tongue against my lips. “Fuck.” His voice was thick and raspy. “Such a needy little pussy.”

I began to tremble as he continued to pump his finger inside of me. My hands fisted in his hair.

“SAXON!” I screamed his name as my orgasm broke free.

I was still shaking as he dropped my legs, standing up to shove his sweatpants down. I watched as his thick, swollen erection was freed. Then, he was between my legs, and the tip was already pushing inside me.

“GAH!” he shouted as he thrust inside me. “You drive me fucking crazy. I was just gonna eat that sweet pussy.” He grabbed my waist as he began to

drive inside of me. His eyes locked on where we were connected. “Never”—he slammed into me again—“has anything felt this incredible.”

His words and the way his face looked, fierce and obsessed, while he filled me over and over again had me close to another peak. He let go of my waist and dropped down, holding himself above me. His arms flexed as his body moved. He was so beautiful that it hurt.

“Come with me, baby,” he begged, grabbing my hair with one hand and pulling.

The crest I was approaching burst free, causing me to clamp around his cock. He grunted, and his breath caught as his eyes locked on mine. I could feel the hot splash of his release inside me as he jerked with each pump of it. I’d never seen anything so sexy in my life.

“OH GOD,” I screamed as my body spiraled into another euphoria.

Saxon pulled tighter on my hair as he drove into me harder. “Fuuuck, baby!”

We were both gasping for air as we stared at each other. Sweat rolled down the side of his face, and I started to smile.

“Wow,” I whispered.

He chuckled as he leaned down to press a kiss to my lips. “Are you okay?”

I laughed. “I would say I am better than okay.”

He ran his hand through where he had been previously pulling my hair. “I got rough.”

I nodded. “Yes, and it was hot.”

“You make me lose it,” he admitted. “Once I get inside you, I can’t get enough.”

“Mmm,” I moaned. “If you keep talking about it while you’re still buried inside me, we are going to need to go another round.”

Saxon leaned up and looked down at me. “Why don’t we move it to the shower?”

“For another round?”

He ran his thumb over my lips. “Yeah.”



Wrapped in a towel, I walked over to pick up my phone. Still no response from Jamaica or Silver. I sat down on the edge of the bed and pressed Jamaica’s number. Saxon was still in the bathroom, shaving.

After he fucked me against the wall of the shower, talking dirty to me, making me come again, I had felt like I was on cloud nine. But walking into the room and seeing my phone reminded me about other things.

It rang three times before Jamaica answered.

“Hey,” she said.

I could hear the boys shouting in the background. It was typical.

“Hey. How are things?”

She sighed. “Same, I guess. Except Silver is angry because Hike has ghosted her. She’s not heard from him since last night.”

“He’s bad news. Do you feel safe there?”

Vulcan yelled at someone to, “Fuck off,” and I rolled my eyes. Probably DJ or Vinn.

“Yes. A cop car drives by often. Real slow.”

My chest tightened. I knew Saxon was behind that. “I don’t think Silver

will ever hear from Hike again.”

“Why? They didn’t kill him, did they?” Jamaica whispered.

“No. Saxon just said that he would handle it.”

“He’s in the Mafia. They kill people. That’s how they handle things.”

My hand tightened on the phone. “They didn’t kill AJ,” I reminded her.

“No, but he’s gone. We haven’t seen him. He could be dead for all we know.”

Saxon wouldn’t lie to me about that.

“He’s not. He’s in Orlando.”

“You’ve seen him?” she asked hopefully.

“No. But I trust Saxon and the others. He’s not dead.”

I could hear DJ tell one of the others not to touch his brownie. It gave me a little joy to know they had all those treats to eat today.

“Is Mom home?” I asked, doubting it.

If she was, I’d have heard her yell at the boys to shut up by now.

“No. She came home at seven, slept for four hours, then left to go clean a house. Walmart is closed tonight, so she doesn’t work until tomorrow night.”

“Where is Silver?” I could have looked at the app on my phone, but I kept forgetting it was there.

“She’s at Shay’s house.”

She’d been friends with Shay since fourth grade. Maybe they were doing family stuff. Shay’s parents were normal. I liked Silver being around her. I’d wait until I saw she was home before I tried texting or calling her.

“I’ll try calling her later, and I’ll call back tonight or in the morning to talk

to Mom.”

“Okay,” Jamaica replied. “Thanks for coming last night. I miss you.”

“I miss you too. But call me whenever you need to or want to.”

“I will.”

Emotion clogged my throat as we said our goodbyes, and I ended the call. I set the phone back on the bedside table and stood up. When I turned around, Saxon was still in the bathroom. I heard the sink water running. I headed for my room to get dressed.

We were going ice skating at an indoor rink I hadn’t even known existed. I’d never been ice skating, but he’d promised me he’d teach me.

When I walked into my room, I paused as my eyes took in the items on the bed. Going over to it, I touched the floor-length crimson satin dress I’d tried on in the store last week, which I had thought made me look like a princess, but Saxon had said no to. There were sparkly silver heels that were toeless and had a bow on the ankle. Rhinestone teardrop earrings and a silver bangle bracelet with a few rhinestones in it lay on the other side of the dress with a silver clutch.

I shifted my attention to the second dress. I recognized it too. It was my favorite out of the green dresses I’d tried on. The feathered fringe skirt was what I loved most about it. Like the other dress, there was a pair of heels. These were a shimmery cream color with a thin strap that would go over my foot and around my ankle. A pair of pearl earrings and a clutch that matched the shoes lay beside it.

“Do you like everything? I had the saleslady pick the shoes and accessories. If you want to exchange any of it, I can take you there before we go ice skating,” Saxon said behind me.

I spun around to see him watching me as he leaned against the doorframe.

Was he serious? What would I not like?

“They’re gorgeous. All of it. Is it for the party tonight and the wedding tomorrow?”

He nodded.

“I thought I would just be wearing the silver dress again tomorrow. I wasn’t sure about tonight’s dress code,” I said, looking back at the stuff he’d bought me. “But this is too much. I know how much those dresses cost and —”

Saxon’s hands touched my hips as his chest brushed against my back. “The fact that you planned on wearing the same dress again makes me want to lock you in this house and keep you away from this world.”

My stomach knotted up. Did he mean I was going to embarrass him?

He brushed my hair back off my shoulder. “You’re not vain and worried about appearance. You don’t demand expensive things. The things I have to attend are full of females who are spoiled. I don’t want that to touch you, but I also don’t want to be there without you.”

I turned to face him. “I can promise you that I won’t ever act spoiled, although if I end up spoiled, it’ll be your fault.”

He smirked. “Is that so?”

I poked a finger in his chest. “You keep buying me things, buying my family things, watching movies with me, planning things, like holiday baking and ice skating.”

Saxon took my finger and kissed it. “I’m a little offended you left out the orgasms. I did give you four of those just today.”

I leaned closer to him. “Five actually.”

“How did I miss one?”

“I didn’t know you were counting.”

He opened my hand and pressed a kiss to my palm. “Watching you come is one of my favorite things.”

“Hmm ... that’s funny. I was thinking the same thing about you earlier.”

Saxon’s eyes flared, and I shivered.

“Baby, if we don’t leave this house, I’m going to strip this towel off you, bend you over the bed, and fuck you again. You need to put on some clothes.”

I bit my lip and let the towel fall to the floor.

Saxon’s eyes slowly raked down my body. “Jesus Christ,” he whispered. He reached up and cupped one of my breasts, then squeezed. “They keep getting bigger.”

I watched him as he stood there, taking me in.

Finally, he nodded his head toward the bed. “Bend over and stick that ass out.”

I was already wet again. Hurrying, I went over to the bed, away from the dresses, and leaned over it, pressing my elbows into the mattress. Saxon’s hand slid between my open legs, and he made a deep, pleased sound in his throat.

“You’re always so fucking wet for me.” He ran his fingers over my entrance, teasing me. “Tell me what you want.”

I gasped as he pinched my clit.

“I want you to fuck me.”

Saxon slapped the sensitive folds, causing me to jerk and cry out. I heard his zipper come down, and I squirmed, anxious for the full, stretched feeling he gave me.

“I can’t seem to get you sated. The more I fuck this cunt, the more it wants. My cum is going to be leaking out of you all day—I’ve shot so much into you.”

I moaned.

“You like the thought of this pussy staying coated with my cum? Fuck, you’re naughty,” he said in a husky whisper.

“Please,” I begged him, looking back to see him stroking himself as he looked between my legs.

His eyes lifted to meet mine before he stepped forward, grabbed my hips, and sank inside of me.



TWENTY-SIX

HAISLEY

Walking into the Hugheses' mansion with Saxon's arm around my back, I was struck speechless. I had thought they had already decorated when we came to Gypsi and Trev's party. Boy, had I been mistaken. There wasn't a space that wasn't touched with holiday adornment.

A gorgeous blonde woman, dressed in a glittery white dress that clung to curves that made me envious, stepped forward, smiling brightly. The massive rock on her left hand caused my mouth to fall open, and I had to quickly close it. There was no way that was a real diamond.

"I've heard so much about you," she told me. "I'm so glad to finally meet you."

"Haisley, this is Fawn, Gypsi's mother and Garrett's fiancée," Saxon told me.

I could see the resemblance. It was like looking at Gypsi in the future, although the woman looked maybe ten years older than Gypsi, not old enough to be her mother.

“Thank you for having me,” I told her.

An attractive older man with silver at his temples stepped up behind Fawn. His eyes reminded me of Trev’s. I knew this must be Garrett Hughes.

“Saxon,” he said in greeting, then turned to me. “Nice to finally meet you, Haisley.”

I swallowed nervously. “Uh, thank you, sir.” My voice sounded shaky.

Fawn reached out and touched my arm. “His presence is intimidating, but honestly, he’s a big teddy bear.”

Saxon coughed to cover a laugh, and Fawn winked at him, then glanced back at Garrett. I doubted anything about that man was like a teddy bear.

“I guess I need to remind you tonight how intimidating I can be,” he said, looking down at Fawn with possessiveness in his eyes.

She laughed and leaned closer to him. “I hope so.”

“Jesus, get a room,” Trev told them, walking up to us. “Sax, Haisley, come with me.”

Saxon excused us, and we followed Trev through an archway of white berries, silver chiffon, and white twinkling lights. He glanced back at us. “We have the firepits lit out on the veranda, where there are fewer old people.”

As we were walking through the great room with its massive, roaring fireplace and a live instrumental band, my gaze fell on Saxon’s mom. She was headed our way. I tensed, unsure of what to expect. Twice, I’d thought about going to the house and talking to her. Trying to see if I could smooth

things out with us. But I'd let my fear and insecurities stop me.

"Hello, Trev," she said in greeting. "I was hoping I could speak with Saxon and Haisley for a moment before you take them out to the others."

Trev nodded. "Sure." He glanced back at Saxon before heading toward the open glass doors.

"It's Christmas Eve, Mom," Saxon said tightly.

She pressed her lips together. "I know. I'm not here to argue with you. I miss my son, and ... I want to fix things between us."

His hand on my hip tightened. "Accepting Haisley is in my life, is staying in my life, and that we are having this baby together is the only way to fix things between us."

She nodded. "I know." She glanced at me. "I'm sorry. I handled everything wrong. Saxon is my only child, and I've had his life all planned out in my head since he was a baby."

"And now, I'm an adult, and I make the decisions about my life," he interrupted her.

"Yes, you do. I think ... I wasn't ready to let you go. I wanted you to get to choose who you had a child with."

"Stop," Saxon said, his jaw clenched. "What happened with Haisley and me wasn't ideal. But not because of the pregnancy. Because I lost her. The pregnancy brought her back to me and gave me a chance to keep her. Convince her to want me. She's the only woman I would ever want to have a baby with. So, if I got to choose, I would choose her. I got lucky."

I was torn between wanting to cry and wanting to grab him and kiss him. I stared up at him, wishing I could tell him everything. That I did want him. I'd

always wanted him. That my wanting him had nothing to do with my ending things with him.

“I know. I guess I’m not saying this correctly. I can see how much you love her. I made a mistake, and I’m asking you both to forgive me.”

I stood there, waiting for Saxon to correct her. He wasn’t in love with me. Was he?

He nodded. “Okay.”

I felt his mother’s eyes on me, and I turned to look at her. I could see the pleading look on her face. “Yes, of course. I hated coming between you both.”

She smiled, looking relieved, and stepped forward, holding out her hands. “Can I hug you?” she asked me.

I nodded, and she wrapped her arms around me. I returned the hug.

“Thank you,” she whispered, then let me go and moved over to pull Saxon into a tight hug.

I watched as she kissed his cheek and whispered something to him before letting him go.

“So, tomorrow morning,” she said, wiping at a tear that had gotten free and rolled down her face. “Will you come to breakfast?”

Saxon looked down at me, as if waiting for me to answer.

“That sounds nice,” I said, looking from him to her.

“Can you make it a late breakfast?” he asked.

She smiled happily. “Yes, of course. We can make it a brunch.”

Kenneth walked up then and looked from Saxon to his wife. “I take it, by the look on her face, all is well here?”

She nodded and turned to smile at her husband.

Kenneth turned to me. “Then, we will be seeing you for breakfast?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Good.” He gave Saxon a nod.

When we left them to go outside, I wanted Saxon to say something about the thing his mom had said about him loving me.

Instead, he leaned down and brushed a kiss on my temple and whispered, “Thank you.”

I frowned. “For what?”

He chuckled. “For being fucking perfect.”



When I opened my eyes the next morning, the sounds of Christmas music came from the living room. I glanced over, and Saxon wasn't there. I stretched, then climbed out of bed. A long-sleeved red flannel shirt of Saxon's was lying on the end of the bed. Smiling, I picked it up and slipped it on. This hadn't been there when we fell asleep last night. He must have laid it out for me.

I quickly went to the bathroom and brushed my teeth and hair. My fingers touched a small bruise at the base of my neck, where Saxon had bitten me during a wild round of sex on the kitchen counter while we were making fudge last night. We had stayed up past midnight, making different sweets while also having sex twice. Smiling at the memory, I was ready to see him.

Slowly, I opened the door, excited about my first Christmas morning with Saxon. The tree had colored lights that were twinkling, the fireplace was lit, and three stockings were hanging on it, where they hadn't been before. They

seemed full, as if they'd all been stuffed. Finally, my eyes fell on Saxon, sitting in one of the leather chairs, watching me with a cup of coffee in his hand.

His lips curled into a smile. "Merry Christmas."

I felt giddy. "Merry Christmas."

"You want some hot cocoa, or do you want to start with gifts?"

I licked my bottom lip. "Um ... gifts," I admitted.

He grinned, setting his cup down. "I kinda figured you'd say that."

He curled his finger at me, and I walked over to him. He reached up and pulled me down into his lap.

"I need a kiss first."

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I kissed him. His hands ran up my back and then into my hair as he gave my bottom lip attention. It reminded me of last night, when he'd rubbed icing on my lips, then licked it off.

Pulling back, he groaned. "If I don't stop, we won't get to the gifts."

Normally, I would want to keep going, but I was too excited about watching him open what I had gotten him.

"Okay," I agreed and scrambled off his lap.

He laughed at me, then stood up. "I need to give you your gifts in order," he told me.

"There's an order?" I asked, looking at the tree and realizing there were more gifts there than there had been last night.

"There is," he confirmed.

He reached for a medium-sized box with red wrapping paper that had 2003

in white on it. I looked from him to the box.

Why is the year I was born on the wrapping paper? I wondered.

“Why does it have 2003 on it?”

He sat down on the ottoman in front of me. “Because that was the year you were born.”

I nodded. “Yes, I know that, but—”

“Just open it,” he replied, smiling.

I unwrapped it and then opened the lid to a white box. Reaching in, I pulled out a brown bear, wearing a yellow-and-red striped scarf and red deer antlers on its head. He was sitting down, and on one foot, it said *Macy’s*, and on the other, it said *2003*.

I looked at him as tears stung my eyes. “I can’t believe you found this.”

He shrugged with a grin on his face, holding out another present. This one was red-and-green striped with 2004 in white on the paper.

“Why 2004?” I asked, wondering what was special about that year.

“I can’t go back in time and fix the past, but I can make up for every year you didn’t wake up to Christmas gifts under the tree.”

My eyes went wide, and I looked back at the tree. “You got me a gift for every year of my life?” I asked in disbelief.

“One for every year but this one. You got several for this year.”

“Saxon, that is way too—”

“Don’t. Just open your gifts. Let me enjoy this.”

I stared at him in amazement. He was serious. How was he real, and how was I the one lucky enough to be here with him?

“Thank you,” I said finally, although once again, those words were so inadequate.

“You’re welcome, Haisley, but this was also for selfish reasons.”

I frowned. “How is putting this much thought and money into someone else’s Christmas selfish?”

He smirked. “I’m trying to make sure you never leave me. And I love making you smile.”

“You could have saved a lot of money then because you’ll have to throw me out to get rid of me. All of this was not required ... although it sets a bar that can never be reached.”

He picked up his cup and took a drink, then winked at me. “Good. Now, open it up. We only have two hours before we have to go to my parents’.”

I continued opening the gifts as he gave them to me. They were specific to the year, and several of the items were things I realized he’d asked me about casually.

Like when we had watched *A Christmas Story*, he’d asked if there was a toy I wanted as a kid and never got. I’d listed three easily—My Little Pony, a Bratz doll, and Polly Pocket. Those were the 2006, 2007, and 2008 gifts he gave me.

I laughed and teared up as I unwrapped things, like a Hannah Montana CD and wig. I’d admitted to being a fan back when I was a kid and wanted to bleach my hair to look like her. Every time I thought he couldn’t outdo his last gift, he managed to. I laughed until my side hurt at the One Direction poster. The Justin Bieber *Believe* tour T-shirt looked new. I was grinning so much that my face hurt.

“How did you find this?” I asked.

He'd told me about his first concert, and it had led to me telling him how I had wanted to go to the *Believe* tour so bad. All the girls at school were going and talking about it. Then, when it was over, they all wore their concert shirts to school. I'd been so jealous.

"Let's just say my masculinity suffered a little, and the guy I got it from didn't look like he believed my story. If word gets out that I'm a Bieber fan, you know why."

I pressed my lips together, then put the shirt down and stood up to go wrap my arms around his neck. Burying my face in his hair, I inhaled. I didn't think I could love him more, but he was proving me wrong.

He fisted his hand in my hair and pressed a kiss beside my ear. "Just a couple more, and we will be to the 2023 gifts," he whispered.

I let go of him and sat back down to finish.

When he handed me the first shiny red gift that was for this year, I felt my heart flutter. I was ready to give him his gifts even though what I had gotten him paled in comparison to what he'd just done for me.

The first gift was a butter-soft cream leather jacket with sherpa lining.

"As much as I love seeing you in my coat, I figured you'd like something more feminine."

I had been happy with his coat, but this one was gorgeous. I loved it.

In a small box was a gold bracelet of linked hearts that had a red stone inside each one.

"The ruby will be the baby's birthstone," he said simply.

My eyes teared up again, and I sniffled, taking it out so that he could fasten it on my wrist.

“It’s beautiful, Saxon. Thank you,” I said, wiping at my face.

The next gift was a pair of riding boots, which he informed me I would need after the baby was born. But that I could break them in, coming to the stables with him and getting to know the horses. Followed by a gift certificate for five pregnancy massages and a Christmas ornament of a pregnant woman that had the year on it. He took it from me and hung it on the tree.

After I was finished, there was a pile of wrapping paper and ribbons all around me. I stood, stepping over it, and went to get the things I’d gotten him.

Turning back to Saxon, I smiled. “Your turn.” I placed them in front of him. “I don’t have an order to them, but I will be honest; I can’t compete with what you gave me. I don’t think anyone can. That was amazing.”

He took my hand and pulled me down to him. “Are you happy?”

I nodded. “Very.”

“Then, I got my gift.”

Holy crap. He had to stop. I was going to blurt out those three words I had been having trouble not telling him. He made it hard to keep my feelings tamped down. Although, after all this, I wanted to believe he loved me. What man did that for a woman he didn’t love? Was he waiting for me to say it first?

I looked down at the smallest gift and knew the inscription on the leather bracelet was pretty damn close to telling him without saying it.

He reached for the first box. It was the one Trev had helped me with. He opened it and took out the framed picture.

“I was at that game. It is one of the few football games I went to in high

school. I remember watching you make that touchdown, and I wanted to cheer. I couldn't, of course, since I was sitting on my school's side. I think my crush on you started then."

Saxon stared at me in disbelief. "You had a crush on me?"

I nodded. "To be fair, I think every girl in this county had a crush on you and Trev."

"You had a crush on Trev?"

"No. Just you."

He looked back down at the picture. "I can't believe you were there."

"Turn it over," I told him.

He turned it over to see the other side was a picture of me. A friend of AJ's had taken that picture with his phone.

"That was me that night," I told him.

You could see the scoreboard behind me and part of the field.

"Damn, you miss a lot when you're on that field," he said. "I wish I'd seen you then."

"Our worlds were completely different. It wouldn't have mattered."

He lifted his eyebrows. "I can promise you, I wouldn't have given a fuck about our worlds."

I smiled at the thought but knew that my dropping out of school to work and take care of the kids had happened shortly after that game. We wouldn't have worked at all. But it was nice to think about.

Saxon set the frame down and shook his head. "I feel sorry for that guy in the picture. He had no idea about the smokin' hot girl in the stands who had a crush on him."

I picked up another box and handed it to him.

He opened it and started grinning. The deluxe edition of *The Godfather* I'd found in the local bookstore. "I've actually never read it. I'm looking forward to it."

I shrugged. "It's a pretty edition, and, well, when I saw it, I couldn't walk away from it. I've read it, by the way, and it's great."

He placed it by his picture, then picked up the next gift. I bit my lip, wanting to laugh before he opened it. He pulled out the bag of specialty coffee beans and the grinder first, and then he took out the travel coffee tumbler. Turning it around, he read the word *DILF* on it and started chuckling.

"You needed something better to keep your coffee warm when you go out to the stables in the morning."

His crooked grin as he nodded was definitely DILF-worthy. "The guys are gonna love this."

When he reached for the last box, I felt nervous. I tried not to fidget and held my breath as he opened it up. Taking out the leather bracelet, he turned it over and read the words on the copper plate. I didn't say anything this time. I wasn't sure if this was a good idea or a bad one.

"I am?" he asked, looking up at me.

I nodded.

We sat there, staring at each other silently. Finally, he slipped it on and touched the engraved words.

"I'm trying to decide what you're saying with this. If this is true, then that would mean ..." He stopped.

It was then I saw the uncertainty and hope in his gaze. He was afraid to say it. He needed me to say it. I understood that now. It was why he hadn't corrected his mother or brought it up to me later.

"It says *My Fairy Tale* because that's what you are. I imagined falling in love, but my imagination didn't compare to this. Falling in love with you has been the most beautiful, terrifying, exciting thing that I've ever experienced."

Saxon was up out of his seat and pulling me into his arms the moment the words were out of my mouth. His lips touched mine with a fierce possessiveness as his hands fisted in the shirt I was wearing. He kissed me like he was afraid I was about to vanish. I held on to him just as tightly, wanting to assure him I wasn't going anywhere.

When he broke the kiss, I was breathless. He rested his forehead on mine, keeping me against him.

"I love you so fucking much, Haisley," he said in a husky whisper. "When I'm with you, I'm whole. I don't want to think of life without you. I can't."

I kissed him then replied, "I'm not going anywhere."

He let go of the shirt and began unbuttoning it before tugging it over my head. "I need inside you—now," he growled.

I began taking off my panties as he tore his shirt off and shoved his sweats down.

Grabbing my waist, he backed me up until I was against the wall. He picked me up. "Wrap your legs around me," he ordered.

When I did, he sank into me with a hard, deep thrust.

"I love you," he groaned.

I wrapped my arms around his neck. "I love you," I gasped.



TWENTY-SEVEN

SAXON

I stood, watching Haisley dancing with Gypsi and Shiloh. She was teaching them some dance moves to “Watch Me (Whip/Nae Nae).” When she threw her head back and laughed, I got fucking flutters in my chest.

Other than the call she’d had with her mother, who had been a bitch, today had been perfect.

My mom was great. Starting with the stockings she’d brought over early. She had always filled me a stocking, but this year, she added one for Haisley and the baby. Watching Haisley go through the baby’s stocking had made me choke up some.

Breakfast at my parents’ was smooth. Mom had just as many gifts for Haisley under the tree as she did for me. Mom had even helped her cover the bite mark I’d left last night at the curve of her neck with some makeup so it didn’t show today.

The wedding had been over the top, and she'd loved every moment of it. I wasn't sure how long we had to stay at the reception, but from the looks of it, Haisley wasn't ready to go. I wanted her to have friends. I could wait a little longer before I got her out of that green dress.

"You look like you're in love," Gage said, leaning against the pillar beside me.

"I am," I replied, glancing at him.

His eyes were on Shiloh with that obsessed gleam. "She love you?"

"Yeah, she does." The leather bracelet on my arm with the words *My Fairy Tale* was never coming off.

"Good. Then, we don't have to worry about any more AJ shit."

I glared at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He shrugged. "She loves you, then she's not going to do anything to help AJ out."

I was so fucking over the AJ thing. Dammit, they had let him live. They'd decided he wasn't the one at fault—or at least that he didn't deserve to die. What was their issue?

"AJ has no contact with her. But he's not done anything to cause a problem since he left."

Gage took a drink from the whiskey in his glass. "We hope."

The hair on my neck stood up from the way he cut his eyes at me. "What does that mean?"

I did not need AJ doing something stupid. I couldn't let them kill Haisley's brother.

"It means boss has his first official meeting with us this evening. The office

at his house. Seems some shit went down in Orlando last night. It affects us.”

My hands fisted at my sides. Motherfucker. I looked back out at Haisley, and she had successfully taught the other two the dance. They were doing it in unison.

I was not going to lose her. I couldn't. Why couldn't her fucking brother lie low?

Blaise had become the boss today. When Garrett had woken up, he'd handed over the reins. He was semi-retired though. Not completely. He just wanted more time with his new wife.

Blaise wasn't going to give AJ a second chance. He would need to make sure his ruthlessness wasn't questioned. If I was forced to be a part of killing AJ, how could I look Haisley in the eyes?

Goddammit!

“Don't go breaking shit yet,” Gage said. “We don't have all the facts.”

“I can't kill her brother,” I said through clenched teeth.

Gage sighed. “Oh, but you can. That's part of who you are. Who we are. And something the women we love have to accept.” He slapped me on the back. “Eventually, you'll get to kill a fucker for her, and it'll be sweet as fuck. You saw Trev slice that bastard to pieces. He enjoyed the hell out of it.”

Haisley's eyes met mine, and she paused, studying me. Fuck, I had to get control over my emotions. I shut down so she didn't see what I was dealing with internally. Gypsi said something to her, and she nodded, then smiled before turning back to walk toward me.

“It's fucked up, isn't it? For most people, the person who owns their soul is the one they tell everything to, don't have to pretend in front of. For us, we

have to keep our dark shit in a box deep inside with a lock on it. You'll get used to it," Gage said, then left me before Haisley got there.

She touched my arm as she stared up at me. "Is everything okay?" she asked.

I leaned down and pressed a kiss to her lips. "Yeah. Just work shit," I told her, sliding a hand around her waist. "How much longer do you want to stay?"

She glanced around, then back at me. "Whenever you want to go is fine."

I nodded my head toward the dance floor. "You look like you're having fun. I didn't know you had moves like that."

A sexy smile curled her lips. "I've got some I can show you when we get home."

My cock twitched in my pants. "Is that so?"

She nodded. "Ever had a lap dance?" Then, a frown puckered her brow. "No, don't answer that."

I squeezed her waist. I'd had a lap dance, but I was not telling her about it. "Baby, are you offering one?"

She blushed prettily. "Yes."

"I'm ready to go now," I said, taking her hand to leave.

She laughed and fell into step beside me. "Is it okay if we go?"

I glanced down at her. "Fuck yeah, it's okay. If any of the guys say something about it, I'll tell them you offered me a lap dance. They'll understand. Trust me."

We only had to stop fifteen goddamn times on our way out. Every fucker I knew had to talk to us. Couldn't they tell I was trying to leave? When we

finally got to the valet and they pulled my truck around, I was ready to put my fist in the face of the next person who delayed us. My mind kept playing images of Haisley naked, moving her body over me as I sat there.

For now, AJ was forgotten.



Gage opened the door to Blaise’s office, and I followed him inside. We hadn’t met in here before—or at least, I hadn’t.

Levi sat in a brown leather chair with his ankle propped on his knee, looking at some papers in his lap with a scowl.

Huck was leaning against the desk with a cigar between his teeth while Kye and Trev were arguing about something over on the deep burgundy leather sofa. Everyone lifted their eyes when we walked in, and Gage saluted them.

“At ease,” he drawled sarcastically, making his way over to the bar, where a bottle of Blaise’s favorite whiskey sat.

Blaise wasn’t here yet, but then I had arrived ten minutes early. It seemed everyone had also wanted to be early for the first meeting with Blaise as the official boss. That wasn’t why I was early though. I was fucking anxious. The fear that AJ was about to become one of our hits scared the fuck out of me. Doing anything that would hurt Haisley seemed impossible.

Would I have a choice? No. I already knew that answer.

“Did you tell him why we’re here?” Huck asked Gage, pointing the cigar between his fingers at me.

“I did,” he replied, taking his drink and sinking down on the other brown leather chair.

Levi looked up from the papers in his lap. “It’s not looking good for her brother. We should have killed him, and that’s on me. Aspen begged me, and the fact that they’d lost the younger sister already got to me. I was weak.” He looked pointedly at me. “Lesson number one: Don’t let anything make you fucking weak. It comes back to bite you in the ass.”

I stuck my hands in the pockets of my jeans to keep from fisting them at my sides. “She’s not just my girlfriend,” I replied tightly. “She’s carrying my baby.” Which fucking trumped all of them when they’d faced shit with their women.

“All the more reason to kill her fucking brother. To keep her safe. He’s mental,” Huck said before sticking the cigar back between his teeth.

“Easy. We haven’t heard from Blaise yet. No need to stress him out,” Trev told him as he stood and walked over to me. He gripped my shoulder and squeezed. “Deep breaths, man. Don’t go there in your head.”

I looked at him and nodded. He was right. I was getting worked up, and that was what they wanted. They liked to fuck with me. I was the only one who hadn’t killed someone. Sure, I’d had my gun pointed at men when we went to handle business, but it was never me who pulled the trigger. Normally, it was Gage or Huck. Sometimes, it was Blaise. Twice, I had witnessed Trev make the kill. But never me.

The door opened, and Blaise walked in the room. His gaze swung from Levi over to me. He gave me a look that made my stomach clench before walking by the bar, pouring whiskey into a glass, then going to take the papers Levi was holding.

“I trust Sax is aware of why we’re here. He’s not about to be blindsided?” Blaise said, lifting his gaze to Gage.

“Did as told, boss,” Gage replied, then grinned. “Damn, I like saying that.”

Blaise smirked, then walked over to his desk and dropped the papers on it. He took a drink as he studied them. Every second he remained silent, my heart slammed against my chest. I wanted to demand he explain what was going on. Tell me what AJ had done. Stop making me slowly lose my shit while standing here.

“To make this clear, the Florida Vipers are what we call a set. They aren’t connected to the LA Vipers. A man named Jag built the Florida-based one. His connections with a group that smuggles in crack, heroine, and PCP to the Tampa port is how he got started. We underestimated Acid’s connections and ability to continue without Jag.

“The LA Vipers don’t like when their name is used, and if Acid’s Vipers grow any bigger than Florida and stretch into the Southeast, they would be wiped out by the others. Right now, I doubt the LA gang knows they exist. They’re small fish.

“If our resources are correct, Acid has rebuilt the Vipers after we took out most of them and Gage killed their leader. It seems Destiny is a part of them too. She’s recovered from the slicing Blaise dealt her, although her scars are unattractive. Apparently, my slicing off the Viper tattoo from Acid’s body as a warning wasn’t enough. I should have put a bullet between his eyes.

“The Vipers are making plans for revenge. Word is out that I’m the boss now, and we believe that’s what he has been waiting on before making a move.”

I needed to sit down. What the fucking hell? I moved over and sat on the end of the sofa. I could feel their eyes on me. All of them. What did they want me to say? AJ was a Viper. He was Haisley’s brother.

Fuck!

“We go wipe them out a second time and make sure Acid and Destiny get a bullet. Stupid bitch won’t go away,” Gage snarled, flipping his knife between his fingers like the psycho he was.

“My informant believes they’re going to wait until the new year,” Levi said, standing up. “Which means we need to move before then.”

“I’m assuming we aren’t just going to go busting into their lair, guns out,” Kye drawled, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees. “Although that sounds kinda fun.”

Huck took the cigar from his mouth and looked over at Blaise. “There are only forty in Orlando. Acid is in Tampa with the other sixty. So, are we hitting Orlando or Tampa first?”

“Who is over the Orlando members if Acid isn’t there?” Kye asked.

I felt Trev’s eyes on me, and bile rose in my throat. That was what they hadn’t told me yet, and the way my best friend was looking at me, I understood why.

I dropped my head into my hands. “Goddamn,” I swore.

“Oh fuck. It’s AJ, isn’t it?” Kye realized.

“Afraid so,” Blaise replied. “We let him live, and that was a mistake. He fooled us. We thought he was blinded by feelings he had for Gina, but that wasn’t the case at all. He was feeling us out. Testing us. Seeing how we handled things.”

Gage let out a hard laugh. “Stupid fucker.”

Blaise sat down in his chair. “I thought about going at them both at the same time, splitting the men, but that would also mean splitting us. We’re

more lethal together. We will start with Orlando. That will be Acid's warning. He'll either back down, and we can just go take him and Destiny out. Or he will retaliate, and we'll have the Tampa members to wipe clean."

Levi looked from Blaise to Huck. "We take down AJ, and the rest will scramble. We won't need to kill them all. Same with Acid and Destiny. We could split up to take out the leaders, then come together to start popping off the members."

Blaise leaned back in his chair. "Gage is going to want to take out Acid and Destiny. You and Huck could take AJ. Then, for some goodwill with the Feds, we'll lead them straight to their location. The Vipers aren't the biggest drug threat in this region, but they are funneling enough drugs into the state for the Feds to care."

Gage lifted his gaze from the knife in his hand. "Or we could let the LA Vipers know about them. They've got branches all over the US. Last I heard, they had one as close as Atlanta. I'm surprised they're not in Florida yet."

Blaise studied Gage, then nodded. "Maybe goodwill with the LA Vipers is better than with the Feds. That's the good demented shit you excel at."

Gage's chuckle sounded sadistic. "At your service."

The corner of Blaise's lips curled as he shook his head, then looked back at the rest of us as he stood up. "Levi, get me the contact I need for the LA Vipers. Gage, sharpen your toys. Huck, I need lookouts sent to Orlando and Tampa to watch things."

"The Judgment owes us one, boss. Liam could set up men at both locations. We could use the backup. The more men we have on it, the better," Levi said.

Blaise nodded. "Yeah, okay. You're right. We should use the MC. I'll call

Liam and have him set that in place.” Then, he looked at me. “And someone get Sax a fucking drink.”

I stood as everyone else did, and Blaise left the office. This was worse than what I’d imagined.

Trev turned to me. “You heard Blaise. AJ isn’t what he pretended to be. He’s dangerous.”

I understood that. I got that AJ was putting his entire family, Haisley’s family, in danger just by association, but would she understand that?

“I don’t know how I can keep this from her.”

And I didn’t know if she’d forgive me.

“You have to,” Gage said, holding out a glass of whiskey for me.

I took it and downed it in one gulp. I was going to need more than that. I handed the glass back to Gage. “She’s going to be devastated.”

“She won’t know. He doesn’t contact her,” Trev pointed out.

But I would know.

“Come to the house. We can sit out at the pool and drink until we pass out. Just like old times,” Trev suggested.

I shook my head. “No. I have to get back to Haisley.”

I needed to hold her. Remind myself why I was doing this. Get my head wrapped around how I was going to handle it.

“All right, fine,” Trev replied.

“Not a word to her, Sax,” Levi said as he opened the office door to leave.

“I won’t,” I replied.

Lying to her about what we did was one thing. Having to lie about her

brother was another. At least I wasn't going to be the one to kill him. I couldn't live with myself if I had to do that.



TWENTY-EIGHT

HAISLEY

New Year's Eve was tomorrow, and I couldn't wait to spend it with Saxon. He was taking me to downtown Ocala for an event they were having there. We had left the tree up so that we could come back here and sit on the sofa, watching the ball drop in New York City with our tree lights and a fire.

Saxon had been around a lot this past week. He didn't work at the stables when I wasn't at the yoga studio. We had been spending all our free time together.

"Hey, Haisley," Trace said, coming up beside me. "Our schedules haven't been matching up. It's almost as if we are purposely being kept apart."

I glanced at him, realizing I hadn't seen him but from a distance since the day Saxon had walked in on Trace flirting with me.

"Uh, yeah," I replied, not wanting to talk to him now either.

“So, you and the baby daddy still getting along?”

“His name is Saxon,” I said. “And, yes, we’re doing great. Thanks for asking.”

Trace leaned too close to me and smirked. “If it goes south, you let me know.”

“It won’t,” I snarled, annoyed. “I have to go.”

I took my purse and headed outside. Trace was laying it on thicker than usual. Maybe our schedules would continue to be at different times. I preferred not dealing with him.

I had two hours before my next yoga class, and I was craving a chocolate milkshake. After my next class, Saxon would be here to get me, and I was anxious to see him. I found myself clinging to him the more we were together.

Silver had been behaving better since Christmas and had even spoken to me on the phone once. She texted me back when I sent her texts, so that eased my mind. My mom hadn’t said anything about the gift certificate to get a pedicure and manicure we’d given her. I didn’t know why I’d expected her to, but it hurt that she hadn’t even mentioned it.

With Silver doing better, I wasn’t constantly worried, and I could enjoy being in love. My future with Saxon felt safe and solid. Life was being good to me.

“Hey, sis.”

AJ’s familiar voice startled me.

I spun around to find him leaning against the wall inside the alley between the yoga studio and the health food store. He had on a baseball cap and dark

sunglasses, but I knew my brother, even with his bad excuse for a disguise.

I scanned the area around me before walking into the alley. “What are you doing here?” I hissed.

He smirked. “I thought you’d be happier to see me.”

“I would have been happy if you’d called. You can’t be in Ocala, AJ. You know that!”

He leaned closer to me. “Why? Because your baby daddy and his friends don’t want me here?”

My nails dug into my palm. “So you do know I’m pregnant, and you haven’t called once to check on me?” I asked angrily. “Do you know Mom kicked me out? That Silver was dating some thug in a gang? That she was taking drugs?”

AJ chuckled as if this were funny. “Red Kings aren’t a fucking gang. They’re kids acting like they’re badass because they sell some shit drugs inside the high schools. Silver is fine, and clearly, you’re doing great. Designer yoga clothes, expensive kicks, and Oakley sunglasses. I was surprised when I found out you’d gotten knocked up, even more shocked about who the daddy was.”

I pointed at his chest and pushed hard. “But you weren’t there when we needed you.”

“Because your boyfriend and his Mafia family ran me out of town,” he said with a sarcastic tone.

“You took Aspen from the hospital,” I reminded him. “That Gina woman hurt her. Broke her arm!”

He looked annoyed. “Gina paid for it. With her life. That’s not my

concern.”

“Your life had better be your concern. Get out of this town. Go back to Orlando. But call and check on things. Don’t just disappear without a word again. Mom doesn’t need that. She’s already lost one kid.”

He sighed and pushed off from the wall. “Okay, this is getting annoying,” he said as his hand wrapped around my upper arm tightly.

I jerked at it, and his grip became painful. “Let go of me!”

“No, I don’t think I will, sis. You’ve become valuable. I had to wait to be sure,” he said as he began pulling me further into the alley and away from the street. “See, at first, Saxon didn’t want you. He was pissed off about the pregnancy. I wasn’t sure if your pretty face was going to win him over.”

The deeper we went into the alley, the more I fought against his hold. He ignored it, shoving me forward without letting go.

“Then, next thing I see is him coming to get you from work and not being able to take his hands off you. Looking at you with those eyes full of love.” He shoved me around a corner and toward a back parking lot. “That’s when I knew you’d just become important. And fucking easy to use.”

I tried pulling away as he stopped at the back of a van that said something about carpet cleaners. “What is wrong with you, AJ?” I asked, starting to panic.

He was talking crazy.

“Nothing, sis. I’m doing real damn good today.”

The back of the van opened, and two men were back there, smoking. They had on the stupid Viper vests and the snake tattoo that AJ had on his arm.

One with red hair, shaved on both sides, grinned. “You got her.”

“Of course I did,” he replied, taking my purse off my shoulder, then pushing me toward the open doors.

I was not getting in that van. I tried to elbow him, but he grabbed me and tossed me toward the redheaded guy.

“Tie her up, Tick. She’s feisty,” he said to the man.

Tick tossed his cigarette out of the back. I opened my mouth to scream, but his hand slapped over my face.

“Get me a gag!” he told the other guy.

“Don’t trust her. She’s smarter than either of you. Get her to the shack. And don’t hurt her. She’s my sister. If someone has to hurt her, it’ll be me.” His eyes locked on mine. “Don’t make me hurt you. Because I will. I’ll slice you up if I don’t get what the fuck I want.”

My heart raced as I tried to talk over the gag they’d tied around my head.

What was he saying? He would slice me? This wasn’t real. It couldn’t be. AJ wouldn’t hurt me. Sure, he wasn’t a great brother. Most of the time, he sucked at it, but he wouldn’t hurt me.

“Play nice,” he said with an evil grin and slammed the doors to the van.

“She’s fucking hot. He said she was pretty, but damn.” The other guy had a fully shaved head and piercings in his nose, lip, and both eyebrows. There were also tattoos of numbers randomly on his neck.

“Don’t touch her,” Tick reminded him. “He’ll fucking take your head off.”

The other guy reached out and ran a finger down my face as Tick finished tying my hands together tightly behind my back.

“He said don’t hurt her,” the guy drawled, tilting his head to study me. “You got the looks in the family, didn’t you, love?” he said.

My throat burned from the bile. I jerked my face away from his touch, and he laughed.

“Fuck, she’s hot and feisty. Acid is gonna love her.”

“No shit,” Tick replied.

The driver’s door opened, and another man climbed inside. “She tied down good?” he asked the two beside me.

“Working on her ankles now, but she’s not fighting,” Tick called back.

“Let’s go to Tampa,” he replied.

Tick stopped and looked at the driver. “Tampa? AJ said to take her to the shack.”

The guy turned around to look at Tick. The right side of his face had been burned at some point and was scarred. He had long, dark hair that seemed to help cover some of it. “Acid wants her brought to him.”

“Does AJ know?” Tick asked.

“No. Acid said not to tell him.”

Tick shook his head and sighed. “Fuck.”

“AJ might control Orlando, but Acid is the boss.”

The other guy beside me grunted. “I’d rather face off with AJ than Acid.”

“Exactly,” the guy up front replied. “We’re taking her to Tampa.”

I screamed against my gag, and all three sets of eyes looked at me. I tried pleading with my eyes.

Did they know I was pregnant? If I made them angry, would they hit me? I had to figure out a way to get away from them.

“Damn, she’s gorgeous,” the driver said. “Don’t fucking mess with her.”

Acid will burn you both alive. He's gonna want that one."

He turned back around and started the van. I closed my eyes as a tear ran down my face. Saxon wouldn't know where I was or what had happened to me. Would he think I'd left him? Oh God, my chest hurt. What if I never saw him again?

"Don't cry, love," the guy beside me said. "Acid don't hurt pretty things like you. He just collects them."



TWENTY-NINE

SAXON

I slammed the truck door at the back parking lot behind the health food store. My heart was beating against my chest so hard that I was struggling to breathe. My eyes scanned the area until I saw it lying there. Haisley's purse. It was against the back wall going inside the alley. I broke into a run. My throat felt like someone had a vise grip on it.

Picking up her purse, I scanned the area around it for any sign that could tell me what had happened to her. The bike engine roared as it pulled inside the parking lot, followed by Trev's G-Wagon. I opened her purse and reached inside to pull out her phone. Holding it in my hand, I wanted to throw it against the wall and scream. The fucking tracker in it did me no good if it wasn't on her.

The moment she had left the studio, I'd known. It alerted me. But that was normal. I wasn't worried until it was time for her to go back to the studio and

she hadn't moved. A heavy dread settled over me. I'd known something had happened.

"How long has her purse been there?" Levi asked as he climbed off his bike.

"Twenty minutes," I replied.

Trev climbed out of the driver's side of his vehicle, and Gage got out of the passenger seat.

"That doesn't mean she left it there twenty minutes ago. Let me see your phone," Levi said, and I pulled mine out of my pocket and handed it to him.

He studied the tracking app that was loaded on it while Trev came up to me.

"It's going to be okay."

I could see in his eyes that he wasn't sure about that.

"No, it's not," I told him through clenched teeth.

"We'll find her," Gage said, sounding more convinced.

"Looks like she was taken at the alley entrance beside the studio. Brought down the alley, then out to there." Levi pointed to a parking spot, the farthest away from where the alley exit was. "The purse was brought back here and dropped after that. Someone took her in a vehicle."

"How did they get her from the alley entrance to out there without her causing a scene or screaming for help?" Trev asked, frowning.

Levi looked at me. "They either knocked her out ... or she trusted them."

I felt like my skin was on fire. A slow fury started to roll over me. "AJ."

He nodded. "Makes the most sense. AJ would have surprised her. She would have walked with him, talking to him. Then, once he got her far

enough away, he took her.”

“Fuck,” Trev muttered.

Gage’s eyes locked on mine. “He was a dead man, but now, I’m guessing you might want to be the one to pull the trigger.”

“If he hurts her, I’ll kill him.”

Gage smirked. “Then, let’s find the bastard.”

“Huck’s getting Blaise. Trev, you get Kye, Mattia, and Six. Y’all take the Escalade to Orlando. Liam’s men will meet you there. Sax and I are meeting Huck and Blaise at the airstrip. We’re going to Tampa.”

“Won’t AJ take her to Orlando?” I asked, not liking the idea of being away from her a second longer.

Levi looked at Gage, who nodded. “If they want to bring us to them and are using her to do it, they will take her to Acid. They’re trying to draw us to Orlando, where they think we will react the way we did with Shiloh. What they don’t know is, we have the LA Vipers ready to clean house behind us.”

Fuck. I didn’t want to think about Haisley being in the middle of all this.

I had to get to her. I couldn’t fall apart. She was going to be okay. She had to be. Both her and the baby. My eyes stung.

“Then, let’s get to the airstrip,” I said, stalking toward my truck.

Gage opened the passenger door and climbed in. He held out a pack of cigarettes to me. I shook my head and started the engine.

“You need to learn to smoke. Takes the edge off,” he said, lighting one up.

“I’m gonna be a dad. I don’t want to shorten my life.”

Gage laughed. “Too late. You were born into the family. We face death all the damn time.”

He had a point, but I wasn't going to add another thing that could take me out of this world too soon. I wanted to be a grandfather one day with Haisley sitting beside me, watching our grandkids play. My hands tightened on the steering wheel. She had to be okay.

"Can I just say, you are one calm motherfucker? When I was in your shoes, I threw shit, went insane, lost my mind."

I cut my eyes at him. "You're already insane."

He smirked. "Yeah, good point."

"But when I find out who took her and if any man laid a hand on her, I'm going to take them out of this world and enjoy watching them bleed," I said, feeling the rage inside me humming in my veins.

"That's the shit I'm talking about. I can't wait to fucking watch."



My leg bounced as I stared out the window of the plane. The closer we got to the ground, the more impatient I got.

I needed to get to Haisley. Get her safe. Then make sure no fucker ever got near her again.

This shit was my fault. I'd let her go to the yoga studio and work, even when I knew AJ was dirty. I hadn't fucking thought he'd come get her. Jesus, she was his sister. If he had taken her, then he was using her as bait to cause a damn war.

What if we were wrong? FUCK! I needed to know where she was. Who had taken her. Not knowing was driving me insane.

Blaise walked back into the main cabin. "Liam's men found AJ already. Trev is heading to them now. He's about an hour out. He's isolated. No one

was with him.”

“He doesn’t have Haisley?” I asked, standing up. I couldn’t sit anymore.

I’d already known that Blaise believed Haisley was sent to Tampa, but I’d been holding out hope that AJ had kept her with him.

Blaise shook his head. “No, but he’s angry, and he’s not talking. Well, he’s currently unconscious. He spit on Tex, and he knocked him out in return.”

I ran my hand through my hair and began pacing.

What if someone else had taken her? If we were on the wrong path and something happened to her while I was chasing fucking Vipers ...

I struggled to breathe. Motherfucker, my chest hurt. I needed to know where she was. I had to find her.

Blaise and Levi both felt like she was in Tampa. Levi was good at this shit. He had to be right.

“Trev has the order to bring him to Tampa. He’ll know where Acid has her. We will unleash the LA Vipers on them once we have Haisley safe, and Gage gets to put a bullet in Acid,” Blaise said.

“I’d rather slice him up,” Gage told him.

“No time for that. We need to handle what we came to do, then let the others have their fun.”

Blaise took a seat and motioned for me to do the same. “We’re about to land.”

Please be there, baby. Please let us be fucking right.



THIRTY

HAISLEY

“AJ isn’t answering his phone,” Tick said, walking back into the sanctuary of the abandoned church he’d left me in with the other guy who had been in the back of the van, who I now knew was Skid.

They had blindfolded me until we were out of the van and inside, but I could clearly tell this had been a church. The cross over the pulpit, the broken church pews scattered about, and the stained-glass windows with depictions of Jesus’s life in them all made it an easy guess.

Skid shrugged. “Acid is almost here.”

Tick sharply jerked his head to the side three times. He did that a lot. I figured that was where he had gotten the name Tick.

“I need a hit,” he said, clawing at his arm.

The wooden doors swung open, and a tall man with dark hair and eyes and

a wide mouth, almost like Steven Tyler, along with a snake tattoo covering both his arms and going up his neck walked inside. His eyes locked on me, and he smiled.

“So this is AJ’s sister,” he said as he got closer to me. “He mentioned you were pretty, but he was definitely holding back.”

“Fucking hot is a better description,” Skid added.

“Hmm,” the man said, walking around me, as if inspecting me completely. “AJ believes she will draw them out?”

“Yeah. She belongs to one of them,” Tick told him.

“Which one?”

Tick and Skid looked at each other. They had no idea.

“Take her gag off,” he said to them. “We need to know who we pissed off. How many they’ll bring. If Blaise will be coming too.”

“I got it, Acid,” Tick said, hurrying over to me.

This was Acid. I should have guessed. He had more snake tattoos, and the other two seemed to be nervous around him.

Once the gag was gone, I glared up at Acid. I wasn’t telling him anything. His gaze was appreciative as he took in my face now.

“Those lips,” he said softly. “You have a lovely, full bottom lip. It’s incredibly tempting.”

I said nothing.

He sighed. “I’m going to have to keep you safe. I don’t want you hurt. Now, who do you belong to?”

“I don’t belong to anyone,” I replied.

He grinned. “Defiance. I like it. I should have known you’d have some fire in you. AJ is your brother after all. We have time. They aren’t going to find us here,” he said, holding out his hands. “We can wait it out. Get to know each other.”

The way he said it, like he meant something more by that, made me cringe.

“I know you’re not Gage’s. I’ve met Shiloh. Then, the new boss is married, so you don’t belong to Blaise. The two scariest fuckers are checked off the list. There’s the younger Hughes.” He glanced over at Tick. “Do you know if he has a woman?”

Tick shrugged. “No clue.”

Acid sighed. “I could get Destiny here, but she’s so damn bitter about all of them that she would go for your throat.” He leaned in closer to me. “My sister used to be a stunner. Got mixed up with that family and pissed off Gage. Had Shiloh abducted. She is now a carved-up monster, I’m afraid. But he did let her live. That’s part of my revenge. They ruined her life. It’s time someone takes them down a few pegs,” he said, sitting down beside me. “Besides, when I kill off the family, then the Vipers will have power. I want power.” He smiled at me as if I understood him.

I continued in my silence.

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. “What? You aren’t going to tell me how they’re going to slaughter me? Take out everyone in their way?”

I shook my head. “They don’t know where I am,” I finally said.

My throat clogged as I let myself accept that. Saxon wouldn’t find me. I had to survive this without him.

He grinned. “You don’t have much faith in them. Tell me, how long have you been involved with the family?”

“Not long enough,” Tick said with amusement.

“I’m not involved with them,” I corrected him.

He made it sound like I participated in their business.

“Oh, you are. You’re fucking one of them,” he informed me.

I looked away from him, fighting back the tears in my eyes. I was tired. My body ached from being tied up, but more than anything, I missed Saxon.

A loud thud made me jump. Then a crash. Acid shot up, turning around as he pulled a gun from his waist. I tried to scoot my body over, but couldn’t manage to get far. Just enough to see Tick lying facedown on the floor with blood pooling around his head.

“Where the fuck are you bastards?” Acid asked, turning around with his gun ready as he scanned the room. “I’ll put a bullet in her pretty head,” he warned.

He didn’t get a chance to say anything more before he let out a loud shout and his gun fell to the floor while he grabbed his wrist. Blood trickled down his arm. He hurried over to grab his gun, but then he cried out, and he fell to his knees on the ground. More blood oozed from his leg.

I looked from him to search the room again. Was I next? I wanted to cover my stomach to protect the baby, but my hands were still bound behind me. Tears were streaming down my face as I waited to see where the silent bullets would go next.

AJ came stumbling from behind a wall. I gasped as he tripped, hitting the floor. Blaise Hughes walked in behind him. His eyes found mine just as the wooden doors swung open. The sight of Saxon coming through the doors with Trev and Kye behind caused a loud sob to tear from my chest.

Saxon broke into a run until he was in front of me. His eyes scanned my face and body. "Did they hurt you?" he asked.

"No, just the ropes," I said to him, and he let out a sigh of relief and began untying my legs.

"He's new. Y'all came out blazing for the new kid's woman?" Acid's voice was pained as he held his good hand over the shot on his leg.

Saxon tensed up as he untied my arms. When I was free, I stared up at him. He touched my face.

"I love you," he whispered, then stood up in front of me, facing Acid.

"FUCK!" AJ roared as Blaise kicked him.

"Stand up," he said, looking annoyed.

"You led them here?" Acid accused my brother.

AJ was bruised and bleeding. One of his eyes was completely swollen closed.

"They tortured me," he said in a raspy voice. His open eye swung to me. "This make you happy, bitch?! Seeing what they did to me?"

I covered my mouth to muffle my cry.

He glared at me as if I had done this. He had taken me. I hadn't done anything to him.

"Stupid trash. You're one of their whores now." AJ spit blood as his hateful stare held me.

"AJ," I choked out. "Why are you doing this?"

I felt my heart breaking. Where was the brother I'd grown up with?

"I'm not doing shit! You did this. Used your pussy, just like our slut mom.

Got knocked up like the white trash you are—” He didn’t get to finish the horrible words spewing from his mouth.

Saxon had moved so quickly that I missed it. I opened my mouth to scream when Saxon’s gun was pointed directly at AJ. The click of the trigger, and then my brother crumbled to the floor. I thought I heard myself scream. Everything seemed to be locked in a haze. This wasn’t real. It couldn’t be.

Acid fell facedown with a heavy thud, and I didn’t even see who had pulled the trigger that killed him. It was all happening so fast. There was a rush. Gage and Levi were there, and Gage walked over and kicked Acid with the toe of his boot.

“Bye, fucker,” he drawled.

Saxon was in front of me, then pulling me up and into his arms. I felt numb. I couldn’t make my feet work. I just stared at the scene in front of me. AJ unmoving. A pool of blood around his head.

Images of us as kids flashed through my mind. We had survived that life together.

Now, here I was, the reason he was dead.

“Haisley, baby, look at me.” Saxon’s voice seemed so far away, but he was right here.

I shook my head. I couldn’t. I took a step back and stumbled. He reached to steady me, and I held out my hand to hold him away.

“No!” I cried out. “Don’t.”

The pain in his eyes sliced through me on top of the other agony I was already enduring. I couldn’t comfort him though. How could I? He’d shot my brother. I couldn’t just let him hold me. What kind of person would that make

me?

“Haisley.” Trev’s voice surprised me. I hadn’t known he was so close. He placed a hand around my arm. “We need to get out of here.”

The bodies were everywhere. What would they do with AJ? Would my mom get to bury him? She’d have to bury another child. A sob tore out of me, and I had to grab Trev’s shirt to hold on to him. My knees buckled. This would destroy my mom.

“Baby, please,” Saxon begged, taking a step toward me.

I shook my head frantically. No. If he touched me, I would cling to him. I wouldn’t let go of him. I couldn’t do that. Not with AJ right there.

“Let me get her,” Trev said gently.

I couldn’t look at Saxon. Any more emotion, and I was going to crack. Maybe I already had.

“Come with me,” Trev told me with his arm wrapped around my shoulders. “Lean on me if you need to. Let’s just get you to the car.”

We walked out of the church, leaving AJ’s body bleeding out. I didn’t look back. Seeing him like that was going to forever be burned in my brain. When we stepped out into the darkness of the night, a black SUV pulled up, and Trev walked me over to it, opening the back door for me to climb inside. He held my hand and eased me inside. When he turned, I heard him whispering. Saxon’s voice was a little louder than a whisper.

“She’s fragile right now.” Levi’s voice carried over theirs. “She needs some rest and time. Don’t push her.”

“I’m not letting her leave without me.” Saxon sounded angry, but there was panic laced in his voice.

“Trev, go with her. Take her to Trinity,” Blaise’s voice called out. “Sax, we have business to handle. You are seeing this through.”

There was silence, and then Trev climbed in beside me and closed the door. I looked at the front seat to see Kye and a guy I didn’t know.

“Ready?” Kye asked.

“Yeah,” Trev replied.

As we pulled away, it felt like my soul was being torn from my body. And not because I was leaving my dead brother in an abandoned church. But because I was leaving Saxon.



THIRTY-ONE

HAISLEY

It was late afternoon the next day before any of the guys returned.

Sleep last night hadn't come. Although my body was exhausted, my mind wouldn't shut off. A doctor had come to the house, and Trinity explained to me that he was Shiloh's uncle and he worked for the family. He had been called to come check on me and the baby. He listened to the heartbeat and checked my vitals. Everything was fine. He had asked if I wanted something to help me sleep, but I'd said no. Maybe I should have taken something.

When I went downstairs at sunrise, Trinity was already in the kitchen, making coffee. She insisted I eat something and reminded me I needed to eat for the baby. I had no appetite, but she was right. I managed to get down a cup of yogurt with granola and berries.

I didn't think I wanted to talk, and both girls seemed to understand that. Trinity and Aspen gave me space. Aspen brought me a few books, suggesting

I take a mental escape with a story. I understood that. I'd done that in my life more than once. However, I couldn't focus on the words. The events of last night kept replaying in my head.

When Levi and Huck walked into the house, I was sitting on the sofa, curled up in a blanket, looking out the window. Trinity rushed out of the kitchen to wrap her arms around Huck. Aspen had gone out back earlier with a book in her hand.

"I'm working on dinner now," she told them. "But if you need something to eat now, Levi, Aspen made her brownies earlier."

Levi ran a hand over his head. "Thanks. Is she outside still?"

"Yes," Trinity replied.

Levi turned to look at me, but said nothing, then walked to the doors leading out back.

Huck whispered something in Trinity's ear, and she shook her head slightly. I turned my gaze to stare at the unlit logs in the fireplace. If they were back, then Saxon was home.

Was he at our house alone? Part of me had thought he'd come here. Was he going to leave me here? Could I see him and not fall apart?

Huck's heavy footsteps left the room, and I thought Trinity had gone with him, but she sat down on the sofa beside me. I turned to look at her, and she gave me a sad smile.

"If you want to stay here, you can, but Saxon really wants to see you. He's been texting me all day, worried about you," she said softly.

I closed my eyes tightly, not wanting to cry. How did I deal with this?

"I don't think I can ..." I couldn't say the words.

Part of me wanted to see him so bad that it physically hurt. The other part kept screaming at me that he had killed my brother.

“This life, what they do, it’s not easy. It takes some adjusting. But at the end of the day, no matter what I know Huck has done, I can’t imagine a life without him. It requires unconditional love to live this life by their side.”

“He killed my brother,” I said. I knew she’d already been told what happened, but I needed to hear myself say the words aloud. See if I could face it.

“I know.” She reached out and laid her hand over mine. “He’s not the first one who has killed a family member of someone they love. Maybe Maddy will tell you about it sometime. I wasn’t here then, but she struggled hard until Blaise went to her and explained what had happened. Why he had done it. Saxon is one of the nicest guys I know. If you love him, then you need to let him in. Let him explain it.”

She squeezed my hand as a tear ran down my face.

“What if it’s not enough?” I whisper.

“If your love for him is unconditional, it will be,” she replied.

A door slammed, and I looked up to see Kye walk into the room. He was holding a bloody cloth to his nose, and his eye looked like it had a cut over it.

“Kye! What happened to you?!” Trinity asked, jumping up and going over to him.

“I’m fine,” he grunted, then looked at me. “Are you making Saxon stay outside? Dude has had a fucking hard night. Jesus, at least let him come in and eat.”

My heart sped up. “He’s outside?” I asked, not sure if I should be ashamed

of the sudden urge to run outside and throw my arms around him or feel relieved that he was here.

“Yeah, sitting on the tailgate of his truck, looking like the saddest fuck alive. Give him a break,” he said, shaking his head as if he was disgusted with me before walking toward the kitchen. “I smell food. Trinity, I love you!” he told her.

“He’s been there since noon,” Trinity said, turning back to me. “He came straight here from the airport.”

I covered my face with my hands. I missed him so much. He was out there, not pushing me to see him. He was always so selfless. He put me first with everything. It was hard to accept that he could also kill a person. Specifically my brother. It didn’t fit with what I knew of Saxon.

“I was going to take him a plate of food. I took him some lunch but that was hours ago. Do you want to?” she asked.

I didn’t want him sitting outside. I’d thought he’d be at home. But I also didn’t want him to leave me.

“Why didn’t he go home? He’s got to be tired and hungry.”

“He loves you,” she said with a sad smile. “I need to go get the rest of the food out of the oven. Let me know what you want to do.”

I unwrapped the blanket from around me. “I’ll go talk to him.”

She smiled. “Good.”

Kye walked back into the room with a brownie in his hand and his mouth full and blood coming out of both sides of his nose. He saw me get up, and he studied me hard as he chewed, then swallowed. “You going out there to see him?” he asked me.

“Leave her alone, Kye,” Trinity told him. “And go wash your face.”

He looked at Trinity and shrugged. “I was just asking. I’m worried about him. She wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for him—”

“Kye!” Trinity said sharply, stopping him from what he was going to say.

“Whatever,” he grumbled, turning and walking back to the kitchen.

I made my way to the front door, feeling more anxious with every step. By the time I opened it, my chest felt like it was going to burst. Saxon was sitting on the back of his truck. His cowboy hat shadowed his face, but I knew the moment he saw me. He stood up but stayed where he was. His entire body was rigid, and I wished I could see his expression. The closer I got, the more of his face I could see.

He reached up and tilted his hat back, as if he could read my mind. There were dark circles under his eyes and a cut on his right cheek. His bottom lip looked busted.

Why hadn’t anyone told me he was hurt? What had happened to him? My eyes scanned the rest of his body to see if he was okay. Was there blood anywhere?

When I reached him, a lump had formed in my throat. “What happened to you?” I asked.

Had he even put something on his wounds?

He shook his head. “That doesn’t matter,” he replied. His voice was raspy.

“You look exhausted, and you need to clean and doctor those cuts,” I told him. “Why are you sitting out here?”

“Because it’s as close as I could get to you.”

I stood there, looking at him. The ache inside of my chest was for him. He

looked so defeated and broken. The sadness in his eyes was killing me.

“I don’t know how to do this,” I whispered. “I want you to hold me, but I feel like wanting that is betraying my brother.”

Saxon opened his arms. “We can figure it out, but right now, I really fucking need to hold you.”

I went into his arms, unable to resist. All the emotions, tangled up and battling inside me, were still there, but needing Saxon was the strongest one. His arms tightened around me, and he took a deep breath, lowering his head close to my ear.

“I’m sorry.” His voice was raw with pain. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

I clung to him the way I had known I would once I let him touch me. I wouldn’t be able to leave him. Saxon owned my heart. No matter what he had done or what he would do in the future, I needed him. I blinked as the tears clouded my vision. This must be unconditional love.

“Please, Haisley, don’t leave me. I can’t—” His voice broke. “I need you with me. You’re my center. Please, if you leave me, you’re going to destroy me. I can’t survive that.”

More tears poured down my face as I held on to him. “Leaving you was never an option. I love you.”

He pulled his head back and looked down at me. His face was breaking my heart. “You’re not leaving me?” he asked, looking frantic.

“No.” I shook my head.

He closed his eyes and let out a long, heavy breath. “Thank God.”

I took a hand from around his back and reached up to cup the least injured side of his face gently and kissed the side of his mouth that wasn’t broken

open and swollen.

His hands fisted in my shirt, and he held me tighter.

“Come inside. Eat something. Let me doctor your face,” I said, looking up into his eyes.

“I just want to take you home,” he replied. “I’m afraid you’ll change your mind.”

“Saxon, I won’t lie. I am struggling with this. But even last night, when it all happened, not once did leaving you cross my mind. I’m not going to change my mind. And you need to eat, and your face needs medicine. Your lip might need stitches.”

He wrapped his arms further around me and held me against his chest. “Fuck, I love you so goddamn much, it hurts.”

We stood like that for a few moments, and then I stepped back and reached for his hand. “Let’s go inside.”

He threaded his fingers in mine, and we started for the door when he stopped.

“Wait,” he said, then ran back to the truck and got something out of the front. He took long strides to get back to me, holding a plate with a sandwich, chips, and a brownie on it. Nothing had been touched. “Trinity brought me food out when I got here,” he explained.

“Why didn’t you eat it?”

He wrapped his free arm around my waist and pulled me against his side. “I didn’t have an appetite. I thought my reason for living hated me.”

I shook my head. “I could never hate you.”

He sighed. “Last night, when you wouldn’t let me touch you”—he

shuddered—“fuck, that messed me up.”

We reached the door, and I opened it. Saxon dropped his arm from my waist, and I went inside. The sound of the others came from the kitchen. Saxon closed the door behind him, and then his hand found mine, and he held it. With his need to touch me and the way he looked at me, I could tell he was scared. He didn't trust that I wasn't going to change my mind.

He led me to the kitchen, and when we walked in, everyone stopped talking.

“Thank fuck,” Kye said, staring at us.

“You too? What happened to your face?” Trinity asked Saxon, then turned to frown at Kye.

Kye shrugged, and I realized Saxon was glaring at him.

“I'm good,” Saxon told her.

“I want to doctor his face. Especially his lip,” I said. “Do you have some supplies?”

Trinity stood up. “I'll go get the stuff you need,” she replied.

“Jesus, it's a fucking busted lip. What he did to my nose is worse,” Kye grumbled. “No need to baby the fuck out of him.”

“You did that?!” Aspen asked, sounding as upset as I was.

Levi looked from Kye to Saxon, but said nothing.

“Is it done?” Huck asked, scowling at both of them.

Kye looked at Saxon, then shrugged. “Depends on him. He's got some shit to work out.”

“What did you say to him, Kye?” Levi asked, and his glare made me nervous.

“Cleared something up,” Saxon said tightly. “Let’s not talk about it here.” His hand tightened on mine, and he pulled me closer.

Huck looked at Levi, and then I saw some unspoken communication between Saxon and Levi as they stared at each other. Something had happened between the three of them- Levi, Kye and Saxon.

Trinity walked back into the room with a first aid kit and handed it to me. “Here you go.”

“Thanks,” I told her, then looked up at Saxon. “Let’s go clean this up first.”

“Okay,” he replied, turning from the stare-off he and Levi had been having to me.

I led him to the nearest bathroom, glad to be away from all of them for a moment. Whatever had happened between Saxon and Kye wasn’t over. At least not from the way Saxon had been glaring at him. I didn’t want Saxon to get hurt more.

“Hey! If y’all do the *make up and fuck* thing, leave the door open so I can hear!” Kye called out.

“KYE!” Trinity and Aspen shouted at the same time.

Saxon tensed beside me. I tugged on his arm when he paused.

“It’s okay. Come on,” I urged.

The last thing I needed was for them to get in another fight.

Saxon’s jaw was clenched, but he nodded and continued to the bathroom with me.

I went inside first and nodded at the toilet. “Sit down,” I told him.

He closed the lid and sat while I opened the kit to pull out the peroxide first. When I turned back to look at him, he was watching me with a look of

adoration that made my stomach flutter.

“It’s going to sting, but not as bad as the alcohol would,” I warned him, stepping between his legs to clean the scratch on his face and his lip.

He never winced. His eyes stayed locked on my face.

“I think I hate Kye,” I muttered.

Saxon grinned, and his hands slid up the back of my legs and squeezed my thighs. When I was finished cleaning, he released me, and I turned to get the antibiotic ointment.

“Thank you for cleaning me up,” he said behind me.

I looked back at him. “I don’t like seeing you hurt.” I started applying the medicine to the cut on his cheek.

“It has its pros. I like having you take care of me.”

My eyes moved from his cheek to meet his gaze. We stood there like that for a moment before I went back to my task. When I finished, I put the things back in the box while he stood up behind me. I lifted my eyes to meet his in the mirror.

“You didn’t want to end things before,” he said as he ran his hands down my arms. The fierce look in his gaze as he stared at me made my heart act funny. “You were forced.”

I nodded, swallowing hard. Was that what he and Kye had fought about? Kye had told him about them threatening me if I ever saw him again?

He inhaled sharply. “Fuck, Haisley,” he said in a ragged whisper. “That’s going to haunt me. All of this is. I just want to protect you, make you happy, and all the shit I’ve put you through ...”

I shook my head. “Don’t say that. None of this was your fault.”

It was a hard thing to juggle mentally. My brother was dead. He hadn't been a good person. I knew he had issues, but somewhere along the way, he'd gone bad. He took me, not once caring that he was putting me in danger. The words he'd shouted at me were cruel and sliced deeply.

While lying in bed last night, staring at the ceiling, I'd come to terms with the fact that AJ hadn't loved me. He had loved power, drugs, and himself. The world he had been in would have brought more danger to my family than anything Silver did would have. It hurt to know my brother had clearly hated me. I would never know why now.

Loving Saxon was easy. It wasn't even about forgiving him, I realized. I already had. I was just trying to find a way to mourn with him beside me. It was a struggle to make sense of.

"I hurt you. I said things. The way I treated you, that's going to tear me up over and over again." Saxon's expression looked tormented.

I didn't have the words right now to make him feel better.

"I'm sorry. I'm throwing this on you, and you're dealing with so much already," he said, threading his fingers through mine. "I promise I'll spend forever making you forget the things I said ... and last night. I love you, Haisley. I don't have any other explanation."

Our eyes were still locked on each other as we looked into the mirror. "Where is AJ's body?" I asked.

The expression on his face was etched with pain and regret. "It's gone."

I nodded. He couldn't tell me what they'd done. That was part of this life too. One I had to accept if I wanted to be with Saxon.

"My mom won't know he's dead, will she?"

He shook his head.

I sighed. Maybe that was for the best. I never wanted any of them to know what AJ had done. What he'd said to me. What he'd said about Mom. It was easier if they remembered the brother he'd been. He hadn't exactly been a great one. They didn't miss him. The boys barely mentioned him.

"I'm sorry," Saxon whispered.

"I know," I replied.

"He took you." He closed his eyes for a minute and inhaled deeply. The veins on his neck were showing as he flexed jaw. His eyes opened back up. "He let them touch you. Hurt you."

I turned around and placed a hand on his chest. "I know."

"Come home with me," he pleaded. "I just want to be alone with you. I need to hold you."

I needed that too.



THIRTY-TWO

SAXON

Haisley lay, curled up in my lap, asleep as the ball dropped in Times Square. I picked up the remote and turned off the television. She'd been asleep for the past two hours. I wasn't ready to take her to bed yet. Holding her like this was the only thing that eased my inner turmoil since I'd realized she had been taken yesterday morning.

I had thought that when I killed a man, it would be in self-defense. I didn't know what Haisley was thinking, and I was terrified that if I pushed her to talk about it, she'd change her mind and leave me. But when I had taken my gun and shot AJ, it had been out of pure rage. I had acted without thinking.

He'd taken her, had her tied up, given her to a fucking gang. I wanted to kill him for that, but I was trying to remain in control. When he started spewing all that cruel shit from his mouth at her, I just snapped. I wanted to shut him up. I couldn't stand that he was hurting her. The fury that coursed

through me and the need to protect her took over. Blaise hadn't ordered me to kill AJ. I just did it. Not thinking about the way his death would hurt her. That hadn't registered in my head at the time.

Fuck, it sure had when I heard her scream. Her eyes, wide with horror, had torn through me like a blade. I never wanted to experience that again.

I kissed the top of her head. Carmichael had said she was fine and that the baby's heartbeat was strong. Nothing had harmed either of them physically. But the pain she'd suffered emotionally was something that was going to take time. I just wanted that healing to happen with me. Not away from me.

She stretched, and her lashes fluttered before she opened her eyes, gazing up at me. "Oh no," she whispered. "I slept through midnight."

I brushed the hair off her face. "It's okay. You needed sleep."

She covered her mouth as she yawned, shifting in my lap to sit up. "You need sleep too. Let's go to bed."

I reluctantly let her stand up and then followed her. She had taken a shower and put on one of my T-shirts earlier this evening. Seeing her in my clothes always made the possessiveness inside me stir. I wanted to take her to my bed and make her come on my mouth, but other than a few kisses, she didn't seem ready for anything sexual.

I could wait. As long as she was beside me, I could deal with anything. My need to mark her and remind her that she was mine wasn't what she needed emotionally. I just had to remind myself of that, especially as my gaze traveled over her bare legs while the shirt rode up as she climbed into bed, flashing me her pink panties.

I pulled my shirt off and took off my sweats, leaving my boxer briefs on before turning off the light and joining her. Thankfully, she scooted up

against me, and when I put my arm around her waist, she laid hers on top of it.

“Good night,” she whispered. “I love you.”

“Good night. I love you.”

Sleep came faster than I’d thought it would.



Waking up with my dick so hard that it hurt, I left Haisley in bed to go take a shower and get myself off to get some relief. She was still sleeping when I was finished, and I knew she needed to rest. I went to the kitchen to make some coffee and prepare for when she woke up.

Things were going to have to change. I wanted her rested before I brought it up, but tomorrow, she was supposed to go back to work at the yoga studio, and I couldn’t let her do that. Not anymore. Her brother had left enemies behind, and she was now on their radar.

AJ wasn’t the only man I’d killed that night. He was just the first. A few of the gang members had shown up while we were getting rid of bodies, and it had been me and Gage that faced them. I wasn’t an unknown in the family anymore, and that also made Haisley unsafe, working out in public without protection.

I was on my second cup of coffee when the bedroom door opened and she walked out. She gave me a small smile as I stood up and set my cup down on the counter before going over to her.

“Your lip looks better, but you have a black eye,” she said, frowning.

I grabbed her waist, needing to touch her. I leaned down and pressed a kiss to her lips. I could smell the toothpaste on her freshly brushed teeth and

wished I could really kiss her without bleeding on her. My fucking busted lip was keeping me from tasting her.

“What sounds good for breakfast?” I asked her, running my nose along her neck just to smell her.

She shivered. “Um,” she said softly, leaning into me.

“I’ll make you whatever you want,” I whispered near her ear and flicked my tongue out to lick the soft skin just below it.

Her hands ran up my back, and she pressed her tits against me. I hadn’t expected this response from her, but, damn, I wanted it. My dick was already hard, thinking about it.

“Do you want something else first?” I asked, running my hands under her shirt to caress her ass.

She let out a small moan.

I reached between her legs and ran my fingers over the crotch of her panties. “Fuck, baby, you’re soaking wet,” I groaned near her ear.

“Ah!” she cried as I shoved two fingers inside her panties and began to tease her slick folds.

When she began rocking, I pulled my hand out, then licked her off my fingers while she watched me.

Picking her up, I took her over to the sofa and sat down with her in my lap. “What I really want to do is bury my face between your legs, but my fucking lip won’t let me,” I told her, opening her legs. “Instead, I’m going to play with this sweet little cunt and watch how pretty it is while you fuck my fingers.”

Haisley’s mouth was open, and her eyes glazed over with need. She lifted

her hips as I pulled her panties off.

Today would be about pleasing her. Every fucking way I could. Starting with sexually. I had so much to make up for with her. The fact that she was here, in my lap, after all the shit I put her through was a miracle. I wouldn't take it for granted.



THIRTY-THREE

HAISLEY

Working with Saxon in the stables the past two weeks had made having to give up my job at the yoga studio worth it. I loved getting to watch him ride. He was sexy as hell on a horse. We'd had more sex in the stockroom than we had in the bedroom lately. Once he got off a horse, I was so turned on that I was drooling.

He seemed happy about having me around too. I had worried I would be in the way, but he found ways to keep me close to him. I'd gotten to know the other stable hands, horse trainers, and Kenneth. It was like a family, and I had found a place to fit in.

Melanie had come down to invite me up to the house for tea more than once. She showed me Saxon's baby and childhood picture albums. When she had mentioned the fact that they'd emptied the bedroom across the hall from theirs and were going to turn it into a nursery for when they got to keep the

baby, I'd started to cry. Having her accept the baby meant more than she could imagine. My own mom still didn't want to talk to me when I called.

I knew, one day, Mom would get the news that AJ was missing or that he was dead. There was no way he could just vanish. I still dealt with it at times and broke down, but I was crying for the brother that he had been once. Not the monster he'd turned into.

Rig finished the carrot I had given him, and I patted his head, telling him he was a pretty boy before heading out to see what was taking Saxon so long. He'd said we were going to the house for lunch, but that had been fifteen minutes ago.

I shaded my eyes from the sun with my hand and scanned the men until I found Saxon standing with a girl I didn't know. I made my way over to them. Saxon's back was to me, but the girl he was talking to saw me, and she paused what she was saying before turning back to Saxon with a flirty smile. When she reached out and touched his arm, I tensed.

What did she think she was doing?

I stopped beside Saxon, and he looked down at me. A smile instantly touching his face.

"Hey, baby," he said, wrapping his hand around my waist. Then, he glanced up at the girl. "Haisley, this is Allegra Grace. She's the jockey who is working with Rig. Allegra, this is my girlfriend, Haisley."

Allegra had light-brown hair and pretty blue eyes. However, those eyes were currently looking at me like she wanted to stomp on me. She was attractive. I wondered if she and Saxon had ever had a thing.

"It's nice to meet you, Allegra," I replied, smiling at her for Saxon's sake.

She gave me a tight smile, then looked at Saxon. "You didn't tell me you

had a girlfriend now,” she said. “Must be new.”

I felt a sick knot in my stomach. I could trust Saxon. Right? Yes! He loved me. She was just trying to make me feel uncomfortable. It wasn't going to work. I leaned into Saxon's body.

“We talk about Rig when we speak,” Saxon told her. “Not relationships.”

Allegra raised her eyebrows, as if amused. “Now, Saxon, that's not true. We've done more than talk in the past.”

Okay. That was it. I was over this.

I placed a hand on his chest and looked at her. “Whatever you did in the past with Saxon is just that. In the past. Don't bring it up with me standing here in an attempt to intimidate me or make me think there is something going on between the two of you.”

His hand tightened on my waist, and I wasn't sure if that was a warning or not, but I didn't care. He could get over it. I was sure she wasn't going to quit because of me. And if so, well, there were other jockeys.

“A bit aggressive. I'm sure Saxon can decide for himself if our fucking is in the past,” Allegra said, tilting her head and giving Saxon a suggestive grin.

I stepped in front of him. My temper was now in full-blown force. “You've not seen aggressive. And, yes, you fucking him is in the past.”

Saxon's hands were on my hips, pulling me back against him. “All right, baby,” he said gently. “Allegra, we have a business arrangement, but I'm not going to let you upset my girlfriend. Clearly, she trusts me, but she shouldn't be faced with a situation like this. You can apologize to her, and I will let this go. It's time for me to take her inside and feed her and the baby,” he said, placing a hand on my stomach.

I liked the way her eyes widened on Saxon's hand on the small bump.

"Oh, wow, pregnant. I hope it's yours," Allegra said to him before giving me a haughty look.

Saxon moved me to his side and took a step closer to Allegra. The furious expression on his face surprised me. "You crossed a line. You can take your things and go. Don't come back."

"You can't fire me," Allegra snapped back.

"Yes, I fucking can. You disrespected Haisley. I won't allow anyone to hurt her in any way. If you were a man, I'd have a gun at your head." His voice was cold and low.

Allegra tossed her hair over her shoulder. "Whatever. This is bullshit."

Saxon took my hand. "Let's go, baby."

He passed the stables and stalked toward the house. I hurried to keep up with his pace. His long legs were eating up the ground. I knew he was angry, but I thought it was just at her, not me. When we reached the house, he slung open the door and crowded behind me as I walked inside.

I turned to look at him, about to ask if he was okay.

"Get your jeans off," he ordered me.

"What?" I asked as he started unbuckling his belt.

"You getting jealous. I need to fuck you." He threw his belt on the ground.

"Because you're mad?"

He shook his head. "No. Because it was hot as hell. Now, get naked. I'm not going to make it to the bedroom."

Smiling, I began to take off my jeans as he watched me hungrily. I needed to remember that he liked me getting jealous. If it made him react like this,

I'd do it all the time.

I barely got my jeans and panties off when a completely naked Saxon went down on his knees in front of me.

“Open your legs,” he told me, grabbing my thighs and pushing them open.



THIRTY-FOUR

SAXON

The moment my tongue slipped inside her dampness, her knees buckled. I reached up and grabbed her waist to hold her.

“Saxon,” she whimpered.

“Yes, baby,” I said, lapping at her needy little pussy. “You taste so fucking good.”

She made soft sounds, grabbing at my head, which drove me crazy.

“I want you to ride my face,” I told her, then moved to lie back on the floor.

She looked down at me with her mouth slightly open as she panted.

I held out my hand. “Come here. I need some more of it. I’m not done.”

She dropped to her knees beside me, and I took her leg and pulled it over my chest.

“Move up until your pussy is on my mouth, then ride my tongue,” I said, squeezing her ass as she moved closer.

When she reached the right spot, I pulled her down on my face and began rubbing her hard, swollen clit with my tongue.

“Oh God!” she cried out and rocked her hips as I ate her. “Saxon, AH!”

I grabbed my throbbing dick and began stroking it. The pre-cum leaking from my slit gave me enough lubrication.

“So good ... oh God ... Saxon ... this is ... I’m gonna come!” she shouted as her body shook with her orgasm.

I pumped harder as I felt her gush of release. Fuck, she tasted amazing.

“Saxon.” She panted my name as she slowed her hips.

I grabbed her and pushed her down my body.

“Fuck me,” I demanded.

She lifted her leg and aligned her tight pussy with the head of my cock, then sank down on me with a loud moan.

“FUCK!” I growled, lifting my hips to thrust deeper into her.

Haisley placed her hands on my chest and began riding my dick like she had my face. The pleasure on her face as she looked at me made my cock jerk inside her.

“Take the shirt off, baby. I want to watch your tits bounce.”

She straightened and grabbed the hem of the shirt, then pulled it over her head, tossing it aside. Her bra went next. It was like my own fucking striptease. Her tits were so fucking big. I loved how large her nipples had gotten. Reaching up, I squeezed one.

“God, I love these,” I groaned.

Haisley started lifting her hips and slamming back down on my cock.

“GAH! Fuck, that’s gonna make me come!” I said.

“I want to feel it inside me. I love how it feels, shooting in me—”

“GOD! FUCK!” I yelled as her words sent me spiraling off, and I pumped my cum into her tight cunt. “Take it! You feel that?!”

“YES!” she cried out.

She began to tremble just before her walls clamped down on me, and she screamed my name. Her orgasm prolonged mine as her pussy milked my dick.

She fell on top of me, out of breath. Our bodies were sweaty as I held her against me.

“That was amazing,” she said against my neck.

“I love you,” I told her. “But I also love your pussy a whole fucking lot.”

She giggled, and I smiled, burying my nose in her hair.

“I’m going to get jealous more often,” she said, lifting her head to look down at me.

“Baby, you don’t have to get jealous to ride my face. Just crawl on up anytime you need it.”

She leaned down and pressed a kiss to my lips. “Thank you for defending me out there.”

I grabbed her head with my hands. “I will always defend you.”

We were going to be okay. We had a lot of shit still to work through, but we would be stronger because of it.



ULTRASOUND

HAISLEY

Saxon's hand tightened on mine as we watched our baby on the screen. The 4-D image took my breath away. I could see the baby's face and body clearly. It was real. Not just a heartbeat and the reason my stomach was no longer fitting in my jeans.

"Do you want to know the sex?" the nurse asked, looking at me, then at Saxon.

"Yes," I replied, then glanced at him to be sure.

He nodded.

The nurse grinned and took a picture on the screen, then pointed. "It's a girl."

We hadn't talked about what we wanted. I just wanted it to be healthy. I turned to look at Saxon, wanting to gauge his response, and his eyes were

glassy. He looked down at me and gave me a sheepish smile and sniffled.

“We’re having a girl,” he said and laughed softly. “Damn. That got to me. I wasn’t expecting that to hit so deep.”

“Our baby is a she,” I replied.

Loving him was so easy. But when he did things like this, I swore I managed to fall deeper in love.

Saxon’s eyes went from the screen, then back to me. Then, he bent down and brushed a kiss on my forehead. “Thank you,” he whispered.

I tilted my head until our lips met. My fairy tale was better than any book I’d ever read.

Burn Teaser...
(Coming October 15, 2023)



FROM PROLOGUE

KYE—TWENTY YEARS OLD

JUNE 1

Using my key to unlock the door, I walked inside my mom’s old house, which Genesis was renting during her summer break. My mom had remarried and moved to Key West three years ago, but she’d kept my childhood home for visits here. Genesis using it made me fucking happy.

The vanilla-cinnamon scent hit me, and I smiled. I tossed my keys on the bar as I passed the kitchen and headed to the living room.

“Honey, I’m home!” I called out teasingly.

“You’re earlier than I expected. I just got out of the shower.” Genesis’s voice carried down the hallway. “Give me a few minutes.”

My gaze swung over to the coffee table, covered in snacks. The usual was there—chocolate chip cookies, brownies, Rice Krispies Treats, which she

didn't bake, but bought from a bakery in town because Baby Doll didn't bake or cook. There was a bowl of regular M&M's—my favorite—a bowl of popcorn, and the mandatory bowl of fruit that neither of us ate but was there in case we might want something healthy.

The cupcakes in the center of it all were new though. I could tell from here they were my favorite chocolate cake with vanilla icing. Again, those had come from a bakery—no way Genesis had made them. They looked fucking delicious, and when my girl tried to bake, it was rarely edible. The one in the center had an unlit candle. Grinning, I grabbed a cookie and flopped down on the sofa to wait on her.

“I thought I'd have time for a shower before you got here. I figured the party with the Lords of the Underworld would keep you out later,” Genesis told me as she walked around the sofa and took a seat beside me.

She'd been calling the family the Lords of the Underworld since I'd told her about them when I was sixteen.

My dad had gotten me my first tattoo, and I'd been so fucking pumped. Genesis was shocked that my dad would let me get one at my age. Then, Bowie said something about a tattoo being the least of the things my dad would let me do. Genesis had always known how to make me talk. She wouldn't let that go. Finally, I caved and explained the family to her.

When I was done, she had stared at me and said, “So, you are telling me that instead of college, you're going to just join the Lords of the Underworld in organized crime?”

Bowie had spit his drink and doubled over, laughing. I'd been annoyed though. In her eyes, I was already the one who didn't measure up. Bowie was the golden boy. He did all the right things, said all the right things, treated her

like a fucking princess. I was the hell-raiser.

I still was, but Bowie had been out of the picture for years.

“So, tell me about the party. How many strippers did you bang? Did y’all slice open the veins of your enemies and drink their blood?” She popped an M&M in her mouth, grinning at me.

Genesis was a complete smart-ass. An adorable smart-ass.

I leaned back and wiggled my eyebrows at her. “You want to know my head count?” I asked.

She sucked on the M&M in her mouth, which was the way she ate the damn things and one of the reasons I loved them so much. “It’s your birthday, Kye. I’m your best friend. You have to share all the details.”

I held up two fingers.

She placed her hand over her heart and gasped. “Just two? You’re slacking in your old age,” she taunted me.

I smirked. “Baby Doll, I can assure you that nothing about me is slacking.”

That got a laugh out of her as she stood back up, slinging her damp locks of hair behind her shoulder.

Genesis might be my best friend, but she was a female, and I wasn’t fucking blind. I’d never been with her. I was just smart. Protected our friendship by ignoring her appearance. Bowie had been the one to fuck it up. He’d been the one to make her something more.

My gaze traveled over her narrow waist and the small flash of flat, tanned stomach as her pink plaid pajama pants hung on her hips. Letting my eyes continue their path, I briefly allowed myself to quickly appreciate the outline of her perky, round tits in the pink tank top she was wearing as she walked

over to grab a lighter from the mantel.

Holding it up, she smiled at me. “Since your birthday was in the lair of the Lords of the Underworld and I missed your birthday cake, I thought we’d have some cupcakes here. Don’t worry. I didn’t make them. I bought them from the cute little bakery downtown.”

That made me chuckle. As if I would ever think that the perfectly iced cupcakes had been made by her. Not in this lifetime.

Genesis leaned forward, giving me a view right down the neckline of her tank top, and I jerked my gaze off her tits before I saw nipples. Getting hard over your best friend’s tits wasn’t cool. Although I’d always wondered about her nipples. What they looked like. I couldn’t help it. I had a thing for tits, and Genesis had some great ones.

I heard the lighter flick, and I waited until I could see her standing back up out of the corner of my eye before turning my gaze back to her.

She was holding the cupcake, the candle in the center of it lit, out to me. “Make a wish,” she said to me.

I blew the candle out, then took the cupcake from her. “Thanks, Baby Doll.”

“You’re welcome. Now, you need to pick the movie you want to start with, and I’ll go get the drinks. Corona, or are you ready for your birthday present?”

“I can’t have a drink and my birthday present?” I asked her, trying to figure out the reason she looked almost giddy.

Her aquamarine eyes sparkled when she was excited about something. I was intrigued. What had she done?

“You can, but they could be one and the same,” she said in a singsong voice.

“You got me whiskey for my birthday,” I guessed.

She winked at me, then left me in the living room to go get whatever it was she was so fucking happy about. It felt like my birthday finally. All day had been just a regular day, except for the strippers and drinks I’d had at Huck’s shop with the guys.

As nice as all that had been, it didn’t feel like my birthday until I was with Genesis. She’d been with me on my birthday every year since the summer I’d turned eight. Without her, it just didn’t feel right. There had been a time when I would have wanted Bowie here too. That ship had sailed. He was no longer a regret. I was fucking thrilled he’d left our friendship. I got Genesis all to myself.

She came walking back into the room with two whiskey glasses in one hand and a gift bag in the other. It was times like this that I could see past those killer eyes of hers, that fucking beauty mark that sat just over the left corner of her heart-shaped mouth, and her perfect slightly upturned nose to the tomboy with dirty knees and stringy hair. The girl who had been down to any crazy-ass idea I came up with and did her damn best to do it better than Bowie and me.

She held out the bag to me.

“You look real damn pleased with yourself,” I told her.

“Oh, I am,” she replied.

I opened the bag and pulled out a bottle of Pappy Van Winkle’s Family Reserve—15 Year. This shit ran close to three grand. I jerked my gaze back up to look at her in shock. I knew exactly how much she made a week. She

was working at the boutique in town that my mother owned.

“You got me Pappy’s?” I asked.

She held up the two glasses. “I might have designed a boho wedding dress for a girl at school, whose brother-in-law is a higher-up at the Buffalo Trace Distillery in Frankfort, Kentucky. I clearly didn’t pay what you’re thinking. Not that I don’t love you that much, but because I have to pay rent and all.”

She placed the two glasses on the coffee table in front of me. “Let’s drink to twenty.”

Then, she sank down onto the sofa beside me, curling her legs underneath her. “Now, pour us some Pappy’s.”

I opened the bottle and gave Genesis her two-finger pour while I was more generous with myself. Turning back to her, I handed her the glass and then picked up mine. We tapped the glasses against each other, the clink of our glasses filling the room, because that made my girl smile.

Genesis said, “To twenty. May it be the best year yet.”

I watched her take a sip from the glass and wondered what it would take to convince her not to go back to Savannah in the fall. It was selfish of me, and I knew I’d never let her give up her dream, but, fuck, I missed her like crazy. This past year with her away at college had sucked. I hated it.

Putting the glass to my lips, I tried to push aside thoughts of the future and enjoy tonight.

“Which movie first, birthday boy?” she asked. “*The Conjuring*, *Poltergeist*, or *Scream*?”

I rested my head on the back of the sofa and turned to look at her. “Those are my options?”

She nodded. “Yes. I’ve seen those enough that they no longer scare me. And I live alone, so nothing new that can cause me to lose sleep. Going next door to my parents’ isn’t happening either.”

I reached over and grabbed her chin. “But you have me. A Lord of the Underworld to keep you safe.”

She tilted her head and gave me an amused smirk. “Yes, but you are only staying tonight. What happens tomorrow night when I need to pee and I’m too scared to go to the bathroom? Call Mom and ask her to come over and watch me?”

I laughed because she wasn’t exaggerating. I knew this to be fact. “No, you call me, and I’ll come running.”

“And if you’re in the process of getting busy at the time? I might pee my pants before you can get here.”

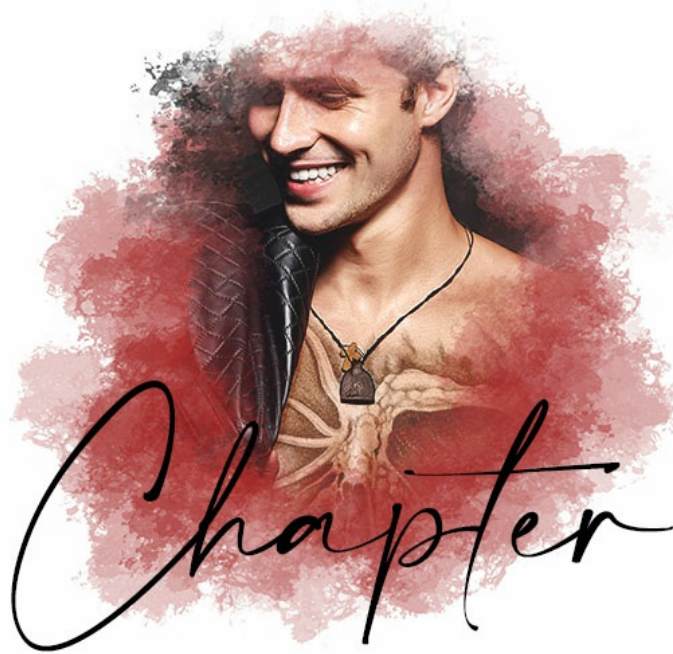
I let go of her chin and rolled my eyes. “You know the moment you call, I’ll drop what I’m doing.”

Genesis took a sip from her glass and studied me for a minute. “Okay, fine. What movie do you want to watch? I’ll be brave.”

I leaned forward and took the bowl of popcorn and a brownie, then sat back, handing the brownie to her. “*The Conjuring*,” I replied with a wink.

Taking her brownie, she shook her head, smiling at me as she settled in close to my side, pointing the remote at the television. “You just like getting me worked up,” she said.

“Always have, Baby Doll. You’re fucking adorable when you get all stressed.”



ONE

KYE—TWENTY-ONE YEARS OLD

JUNE 1

I bent down to pick up my keys, placing a hand on the door to steady myself. Swaying, I caught myself before I fell over. Fucking hell, the keys were moving. I squinted hard and tried to focus. Slowly, I reached down and grabbed the keys. Success. Standing back up, I managed to find the right key and jam it into the lock on the door.

When the door swung open, the sweet smell of Genesis hit me, and, damn, I loved it when she made my childhood home smell like her in the summers. Stepping inside, I grinned, then stumbled and had to grab on to the side table by the door to keep from falling over. I should have stopped after the fifth shot of tequila. But, damn, those tits with that little shot glass between them had been too fucking tempting.

“Honey, I’m home,” I called out, dropping the keys and hearing them

clatter to the floor.

Silence.

I made my way to the living room. It was dark. Where the hell was Genesis? It was my birthday. Leaning against the wall, I groaned as things began to spin. Slapping my hand around until I found the light switch, I slowly opened my eyes against the sudden brightness. Maybe I should have left the lights off.

My gaze locked on the coffee table, covered in all our favorite snacks. The cupcakes in the middle brought a goofy grin to my face. She'd stuck a candle in the center one again this year. I liked that new addition to our tradition.

"Baby Doll! Where are you? I'm ready for movie night," I yelled and managed to make it to the sofa without tripping over the other furniture.

Sinking down on the worn leather, I sighed in contentment. This was what I had been missing tonight. Sure, the drinking, strip club, and fucking had been great, but I did that pretty regularly. My birthday movie night with Genesis was special.

I laid my head back on the sofa and closed my eyes. She'd be in here soon. I just had to wait. She was probably getting a shower. I loved the way her hair smelled after she used that coconut shampoo. I needed to bury my nose in it, listen to her laughter, feel her snuggled up against me as we watched one of the horror movies we already knew word for word.

Happy birthday to me.



The pounding in my head made opening my eyes a bad idea, but my fucking mouth was so dry that I couldn't swallow. I needed water. Groaning, I rolled

over and realized I wasn't in a bed. Where was I, and how much had I had to drink? Jesus Christ, I felt like I'd been hit by a truck.

"Here," my favorite voice in the world said. "Drink."

My eyes opened, and Genesis sat on the edge of the coffee table, holding a glass of water. A smile curled across my lips. The sight of her was a relief.

"Baby Doll." My voice sounded gravelly and hoarse.

She gave me a tight smile that concerned me. What was wrong? I sat up and took the glass of water from her and drank it all down while studying her. Something was off, and if I wasn't so fucking hungover, I'd know what it was.

Had I done something or said something last night? Why was I here anyway?

"You okay?" I asked her, trying to remember why I was on the sofa.

She laughed softly and shook her head, then stood up. "I'll get you some toast and an aspirin."

I reached out and grabbed her wrist, stopping her. She was acting weird. It wasn't like I hadn't shown up here drunk before. That shouldn't have been an issue. Unless ... fuck, had I come on to her? I winced, thinking about it.

"What's wrong, Baby Doll?" I asked her, trying like hell to remember last night.

The last thing that I could clearly recall was drinking shots out of Chyna's cleavage. Levi held her big, fake tits together while I drank from the shot glass between them. Then ... oh, wait. I also remembered Levi spanking her ass with his belt, then me kissing the welts before fucking her from behind. She'd sucked Levi off, and then he'd left. I thought we'd fucked again after.

Things got blurry.

Genesis sighed, and the tight smile she'd been giving me just looked sad now. My chest tightened. What had I done?

Think, Kye! Fucking think!

She was upset. I'd messed up somehow.

"I'm fine. Let me get you something to help with your hangover, and then we can talk."

I shook my head. "No. I want to talk now. You're upset, and if I did something, then I need to fucking know so I can fix it." Standing up, I winced as the pain in my head sliced through me.

She narrowed her eyes as she looked at me. "Do you remember last night?" she asked me.

I stalled. I wasn't going to give her details on what I did remember. We joked around about my sex life, but that was it. She knew little about what I did with women. I had never even told her about my four cock piercings. That was just shit you didn't tell your girl best friend.

"Not all of it," I admitted.

She simply nodded and looked away from me. This was not good. I was going to have to spend the summer making this up to her, whatever it was. The summer ... holy fucking hell! My gaze swung back to the coffee table, where the snacks had been last night. I remembered them. The table had been full. The cupcakes, the candle. Motherfucker!

I shoved my hand in my hair, furious with myself. The pain in my chest was now worse than the pounding headache. "Baby Doll, I am so sorry. I drank too much. Fuck." I closed my eyes, trying to find the right words.

“It was your twenty-first birthday. You went out with friends and got drunk. That’s what people do. It’s fine. I shouldn’t have expected you to come back here. That was silly.”

No, please stop talking. She was killing me.

“Don’t do that. Do not let me off the hook like that. I can’t handle it.”

I opened my eyes to look at her perfect face. Her heart-shaped mouth with the beauty mark right above the corner of her lip, the slightly upturned nose, and those aquamarine-colored eyes. It was painful sometimes to see just how beautiful she was.

“I’m not letting you off the hook. It’s just the facts. No reason to get worked up over it.”

“You are upset. It’s all over your face. I fucking hate myself,” I said, reaching out and pulling her to me in a hug.

She smelled so good. This was what I’d needed last night. Why had I drunk so damn much?

“We can celebrate tonight. Have our tradition with me sober and right here with you all damn day.”

That was what we needed. What I needed. I wasn’t going to feel right without it.

“I can’t,” she said against my chest.

I pulled back and looked down at her. “Why not? You’ve already got all the stuff. We don’t need to waste it. Besides, I want my cupcake, and I need to blow out my candle and make a wish.”

She let out a soft laugh. “We can do that this morning. And I packaged up all the snacks and put them in a bag for you to take.”

“No!” I said, shaking my head.

I wasn't fucking taking anything. We were eating them right here on this damn sofa. She was going to curl up next to me as we watched movies.

“We're having our movie night.”

Genesis sighed and stepped back from me. “I'm leaving, Kye. I'm going to take the summer semester at school.”

My world felt like it had just stopped spinning. Panic sank its claws into me.

“What? You're leaving me because I messed up last night? I'm sorry! I swear to God, I will make it up to you all summer. I'm yours. We will have movie nights every night. I won't get drunk or go to the strip club. Just you and me.”

Genesis put her hand on my chest, and I reached up and covered it with both of mine. She had to stay. All I got of her anymore was the summers. I could convince her.

“It's not about last night. I registered for it back in April. I was going to tell you, but you've been busy, and we haven't seen much of each other since I got here three weeks ago. You've got a lot going on and I get that. This was something I'd been considering since last summer. I left most of my things at my apartment back in Savannah. I thought I'd get a chance to talk to you about it, but you canceled on me last week. You had to handle an issue with the underworld and all. Anyway, I planned on discussing it with you last night. But ...” She gave me that sad smile again. “I start my job tonight. I have to leave in an hour if I'm going to get there in time.”

She was leaving me. The only light I had in my world was really walking out that door. And it was my fault. She'd been here for three weeks, and we

had barely had time together. I'd been busy, but even when I could have made time for her, I hadn't. As much as I hated it, she had a life in Savannah. One with friends and a job. Here, I was the only thing she had, and the deeper I got into the workings of the family, the less time I had to be with her. I wanted her happy more than I wanted my next breath. Even if it meant letting her leave me.

"I'm gonna miss you so fucking much," I told her. The thick emotion in my voice was impossible to mask.

She turned her hand over and clasped mine in hers. "I'll miss you too. But life is changing for both of us. You'll always be my best friend. Even if we aren't in the same city."

I pulled her back to me and wrapped my arms around her.

Genesis Stoll had been the best thing in my life since the day she'd walked into my backyard and ruined my eighth birthday party. Every good memory I had, she was in it. When life got dark, she was the thing I reached for to keep me sane. I was selfish with her. I always had been. This time, I wasn't going to be. I loved her too much to hold her back.

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