



SURRENDER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A.M. WILSON

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Model: Drew IG: tat2_rider

CONTENTS

[Books By A. M. Wilson](#)

[Playlist](#)

[About This Book](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[What To Read Next](#)

[About the Author](#)

BOOKS BY A. M. WILSON

Powell Sanctuary.

Abandoned

Strayed

Surrender

Arrow Creek Series

Where We Meet Again

When Morning Comes

What Tears Us Down

Where Our Turn Begins

The Revive Series

Unleashing Sin

Redesigning Fate

Resurrecting Her

Revive: The Series

Westbridge Series

Pitch Dark

Broad Daylight

Salvaged Pieces

Standalone

Indisputable

PLAYLIST

Enjoy some of the musical inspiration for Surrender

Come Close || Jake Scott

What I Love About You || MILCK

High On You || Sam Fischer & Amy Shark

Wildest Dreams (Taylor's Version) || Taylor Swift

Past Life || Ni/Co

Coffee With You || Abbey Cone

Before I Loved You || Phillip Phillips

That Part || Lauren Spencer Smith

Could Be Good || Kat Cunning

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Whitney thought she was safe from her toxic marriage the day her husband died...

From the moment I return to my hometown for a fresh start, my plans begin to crumble.

The rental house that looked perfect online is actually a health hazard.

My new job at the hospital postpones my start date.

And a historic blizzard is about to dump nearly three feet of snow across the state, making doing just about anything impossible.

When my infant son screams down the motel into the early morning hours and causes the other guests to complain, I'm mortified and ready to brave the impending blizzard to find someplace else.

Until Jack Powell, the gorgeous motel owner and my childhood crush, makes an offer I can't refuse.

His house. To stay in to ride out the storm while he returns to the motel.

Quiet. Safety. Solitude.

Except one poorly-timed diaper disaster sends us all into chaos, and the blizzard strands us together in his house.

He teases me with a glimpse of something beautiful. A man who's attentive with my kids and worships my post-baby body, stretch marks and all.

Once the storm passes, Jack decides to let us go, keeping only the memories of our unforgettable time together.

But when my past finds us not long after, Jack can't run from his protective nature. He's determined to fight for all three of us. Even if that means he has to surrender.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

For a list of CW/TW, please visit

<https://amwilson.net/tw-cw-list>



WHITNEY

WITH A WAVE OF MY HAND, I brush an abandoned cobweb away from my face. The sticky thread dangles from a dusty pendant light in what's meant to be a dining room but smells like a deserted dwelling for untrained pets.

“What is this?”

The barely audible whisper leaves my mouth as my eyes dart around the dim room.

I had wanted to transform the space into a playroom. Just off the kitchen and living room, the space was perfect to set up the kids' toys and not have my sitting area cluttered with blocks, picture books, and soft, stuffed plushies. The ideal spot to keep an eye on the kids while I cooked.

“Will you take it?”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I attempt to breathe deep, failing miserably when a spark in my gut sends tingles to my fingertips.

“This is nothing like the pictures.”

I glance around the dirty space once more. The layer of dust is thick on the window sills, hardly detracting from the brown, filmy glass. Smudges, smears, and dirty fingerprints mar the beige walls so badly that I can't tell if they're painted that color or stained by the previous tenants.

“Finer details are always hard to see over the internet.”

My back straightens painfully, and I shoot him a glare. “This is straight up fraud.”

The property manager huffs with a harsh roll of his dark eyes. “If you don’t want it, just say so, so we can quit wasting both of our time.”

“You’ll have to give me a second when the property I thought I was seeing was claimed to be move-in ready and this”—I wave my hand around in the stagnant air between us—“is clearly *not*.”

“This property is perfectly habitable.”

“That’s debatable.” I cross my arms over my chest, shivering when his smarmy gaze drops to check out my breasts.

“Nothing a quick clean can’t fix.”

“With all due respect, sir, this is not a move-in ready home.”

“Right.” He nods once, sharply. “Then I’ll give the next on my waitlist a call.”

“Hold on.” The words fly from my mouth before I give them consideration. This is moving too fast.

A bushy gray eyebrow is cocked high on his forehead when he turns back to me. “Yes?”

“Just.” I hold my hand out between us. The digits tremble with an imperceptible shake. “Just give me five minutes, please. I need to make a phone call.”

The landlord shakes his head. “Lady, I ain’t got all day.”

“Five minutes,” I snap harsher than intended, but my last thread of patience is one twang away from snapping.

“I’ll be outside.” He draws a crushed pack of smokes from his breast pocket and slips one between his dry lips before he’s even crossed the threshold.

“Prick,” I mutter.

Turning to the dingy window, I drag my phone from my back pocket. While the contact rings, I focus on the sound rather than look around the place that only fills me with despair. Newly created daydreams vanish from my mind like a puff of smoke.

“How is it?” my sister-in-law asks by way of answer. The hope in her voice hits my defenses like a sledgehammer.

“Oh, Alice. It’s freaking awful.”

“No!” she cries with an appropriate amount of disappointment. Her brother, my dead husband Devon, might have been an uncaring asshole, but she’s become my best friend over the years.

“Yes.” I slap away a tear threatening to fall, pausing to strengthen my voice. I don’t want her to hear the worry. I don’t want her to think I’ve failed being on my own so soon. “It has to be a scam. The pictures must have been taken years ago or else the last tenant really did a number on this place.”

“I’m sorry, honey.”

The sigh I release weighs a thousand pounds. “I am too. I shouldn’t have put so much hope on one place.”

“Don’t settle. You can always come back to West Bend until you figure out a new course.”

Ha! She’d have to drag my body back to Arizona.

I swore I’d get out on my own two feet. I owe it to myself. To prove my parents were wrong all those years ago when they said I’d never make it on my own. To prove my husband’s death won’t be just another thing that traps me somewhere I don’t want to be.

“I don’t think so. I need to stay here and figure it out. If I come back, I don’t know if I’ll have it in me to leave again.”

“Is that so bad?” The cell towers do an amazing job carrying her clear whisper between us. Her voice is crisp in my ear as if she’s standing at my side.

“Not everything about West Bend was bad, but enough of it wasn’t good enough for me to stay.”

Alice is literally the only thing worth staying for, and in the end, even she wasn't enough to keep me in a place filled with so much disappointment and pain.

"I miss you so much, Whitney. It's only been four days. How am I going to get through the rest of my life without you close by?"

"I miss you, too," I answer with a dry croak, unsure how to comfort the rest of her concerns.

"What are you going to do?"

A fly buzzes in front of my face. I wave a hand to chase the pest away. The distraction means I don't have to focus on the way my gut sinks at the sound of her quiet sniffing.

"There's a motel in town. I think I'm going to get the hell out of this place and check in there for a few days."

"With the kids?"

"Well, I can't leave them in this dump with the scam lord, now can I?"

I can just imagine the mighty eye roll she's giving on the other end of the line. "No shit. Where are they now?"

"They're having a trial run at their new daycare in town." Dust motes float in the air and tickle my nose. I move away from the window and back into the middle of the room.

"Are you okay with that?"

The concern in her question turns my heart beat from a gentle pace to a full-on gallop. Alice knows me too well. "I have to be. I'm not the first mother in the world to send her kids to daycare so she can start a new job."

"You aren't. But that doesn't invalidate the fact that it is hard as hell to trust your babies with someone new."

"I know. I'm ready to get out of this dump and get my kids."

"Keep me updated, okay? I want to know where you land and for how long. And I want to know when I can visit."

I adjust the strap on my purse. “You can visit at any time. I’m sure the motel has more than one room.”

Alice snorts. “You’re such a smart-ass.”

“It’s the only thing keeping me sane right now. Do me a favor and keep your fingers crossed that nothing else goes wrong.”

“Double, double. I’ve got your back.”

A reluctant smile creeps across my face at the phrase we use to reference crossing both of our fingers and our toes. Alice truly is the sister I never had. She and my babies are the only good things to come out of my toxic marriage.

“Thank you. Love you. I’ll call you later once we’re settled in.”

“Be safe. Love you too. Bye!”

Feeling much calmer than five minutes ago, I tap the end button and return my phone to my pocket. I didn’t need a phone call to convince me not to cave and take this place, but I did need a friendly voice to soothe my frustrations.

I round the corner into the kitchen, outfitted with white appliances yellowing with age and carpet from the seventies. I thank the stars above that while I am desperate for a new beginning, I’m not *this* desperate. And if I wasn’t convinced enough, the fat brown bug scurrying across the countertop absolutely settles it.

Blegh.

I meet the eyes of the landlord when he enters through the door to the attached garage. A plume of hazy smoke follows him, filling the air with the acrid smell of cigarettes.

“I’m going to pass.”

His eyes turn hard, and his mouth snaps shut on whatever remark he had prepared. “Look, I get it. This place might not be what you’re used to wherever you’re from, but you get a lot of square footage for the price.”

“It’s certainly not what I was expecting. Thank you for your time.”

“I’ll drop the rent by fifty bucks.”

“No.”

“A hundred.”

“Please get out of my way.”

He doesn’t budge, forcing me to look around for another exit. The front door is somewhere behind me, but moving deeper into the house to find it seems like the plot to an episode of *Law and Order SVU*.

“I’ll throw in snow removal and lawn services in the summer, but that’s it.” He waves his hands between us. “You wore me down, but I can’t go any lower than that.”

“You’re mistaken if you think I want to bargain with you. This place isn’t suitable for my children. Frankly, it appears to be a health hazard, and I’ve spent more time than I care to standing around breathing this air. It’s a hard no, sir. Now, please get out of my way.”

He moves to the side with a huff, giving me enough space to squeeze through.

“Fucking city bitch,” he mumbles loud enough for me to hear as I pass.

A small town of five thousand is hardly a city. My spine snaps straight. A retort tickles the tip of my tongue, but that little voice in the back of my head says it’s not smart to tussle with unpredictable, strange men.

Memories surface of Devon’s associates coming to visit with a list of demands, and his warnings to give them whatever they wanted.

I’m no longer scared, and Devon is no longer alive.

I shiver and move swiftly to my car, fighting the urge to glance back the entire way.

The drive to the daycare center only takes a few minutes. Another bummer that the house fell through. The location

would have been perfect for busy mornings or walking to pick-up the kids in the summer months.

Rather than rush inside for my babies, I force myself to sit and enjoy the silence. This might be the last shred of time to myself for a while. My iced coffee melts in the center console. I slurp down the remnants and tear into a bag of M&M's leftover from our drive.

Find housing returns to the top of my mental to-do list. I can stay at the motel for the foreseeable future. I sold our house in Arizona before the move, and the money from the sale is enough to keep us afloat for a while if I budget. Devon also had a sizable life insurance policy that I've put aside to save for the children but could be accessed in case of emergencies.

Despite the housing issue, I'm ready to settle into the life I've always deserved, and I want to do it now.

Things weren't great between Devon and me. They hadn't been in a long time.

From what I've pieced together since his death, he had gotten into some shady business dealings. A year ago, they began to spill into our personal life. Men dropped by for money at all hours of the day. They would park at the curb, waiting for Devon to return home while the kids and I were inside. Every confrontation I had with Devon turned into a fight. He poured on heaps of mental abuse until I was confused and convinced I was the crazy one.

Overreacting.

Unstable.

Dramatic.

If he thought I was thinking about leaving him, he'd turn on the charm and shower me in affection.

Rinse and repeat.

And what was I to do? A pregnant stay-at-home mom with a two-year-old? My parents and I weren't close, and my best friend was his sister.

I didn't have anywhere to go. Anywhere to hide. The situation didn't feel dire enough to utilize a women's shelter.

Before I could find a way out of the situation Devon created for us, he died.

I grieved for my children. They'll grow up without a father, likely without any memories of him. They were only two-and-a-half and a newborn at the time. I mourned him by mourning the relationship I thought I'd had when I accepted his proposal. The empty promises and crushed dreams. I cried for the loss of someone's life. In other ways, I felt a sense of relief that the lies and manipulation and strange visits would stop.

That my children could grow up in peace.

I swallow against the shallow lump in my throat, brought on by becoming a widow at thirty-three. With a roll of the shoulders, I return to mom mode, shoving aside the recent past in order to pick up my kids.

I step out of the car into swirling snowflakes. The gray sky overhead a mirror of my mood.

Lucy clocks me the moment I step through the door. She waits patiently on the other side of the locked entry, eyeing me through the glass window while the sweet receptionist signs me in. The security measure gives me an extra boost of confidence that my babies will be safe here without me.

The second I clear the door, her little arms wrap tightly around my knees. "Momma!"

"Hey, Peanut." I scoop her into a tight embrace and plant a kiss on her soft cheek. The scent of her lotion and peaches engulfs me like a soothing balm. "Did you have fun?"

"I show you. C'mere."

Her wriggling signals for me to set her down. Once on her feet, she cruises through the main play area, stopping once she reaches a tower of wooden blocks on an alphabet rug.

I sink to my knees. "Great job, Lucy. You built a big, strong tower."

She beams. “Dad see it?”

My heart slows before picking up twice as fast. I tuck a soft section of her blond hair behind her ear. “No, Peanut. Dad can’t see it.”

“I show him?”

“You can’t show him.”

Her little pink mouth twists in consideration before she nods once. “He died?”

“That’s right. Daddy died.” My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.

“Okay,” she says simply and hops to her feet.

“Are you ready to go?” I offer my hand, easing us away from this conversation. I’m okay with the way we’re processing this big change in her life, but I know others don’t agree with the straightforwardness.

She slips her tiny, warm hand in mine. A serious expression settles in place. “Don’t forget brudder.”

A genuine smile crosses my face. “Of course! We would never forget Bennett.”

“I’d miss him.”

“Don’t you worry, sweet girl. I bet he’s waiting to see you.”

The smile she gifts me chases away the clouds from the day.

We pick up Bennett from the infant room, complete with a freshly changed diaper. The six-month-old coos happily from his infant seat, and his sister skips beside him. I load up the kids in my sedan and make the short drive across town to the motel I passed on my way in.

I haven’t stepped foot in Fairview Valley in nearly fifteen years, but it’s quite obvious the town hasn’t changed much. If my memory is correct, the motel hasn’t seen much more than a fresh coat of paint. I wonder if high school kids still rent

rooms to sneak away from the watchful eyes of their parents like my friends and I did so many years ago.

Home sweet home.

With a muted sigh, I gather my kids and our bags, and walk into our home for the foreseeable future. Our *temporary* home.



JACK

COOPER ALARMS a single soft *woof* from his place near the door. The gentle mastiff returns to his nap once we make eye contact. With the sleeping baby tucked into the crook of my arm like a football, I open the door to her parents waiting on my doorstep.

“Did you bring coffee?” I greet, scrubbing my free palm over my face. The growth of stubble on my cheeks needs a cleanup before I can head to work at the motel.

“Here. Now give me my baby.” My sister-in-law Bree forces the warm cardboard cup into my hand and snatches her precious offspring from my grip before I can even say thanks.

Corjan, one of my five adopted siblings, just laughs at his eager wife with a look only a smitten bastard would dare to wear in public. The two took their first night away since Charlotte was born. Out of all our siblings, I was the only one free for the night.

Babysitting her was easy *enough*. Newborns can’t really get into much trouble. Their schedule consists of eating, sleeping, and defiling diapers. Waking up on a Monday morning with broken sleep would have felt a smidge better with a fresh pot of coffee ready to go, but I was all out today.

“Thank you.” I mumble the delayed gratitude around the rim of a much-needed swallow. “Next time I babysit, remind

me to make sure I have coffee grounds before you bring her over.”

Corjan slaps me on the shoulder. “I’ll pack a canister in her diaper bag.”

“Rough night?” Bree teases, her mood calmer now that her baby is in her arms. She was reluctant to leave her and tried to bail twice last night before Corjan persuaded her out the door.

Charlotte blows a wet raspberry and gazes happily at her mom.

“She was up four times for food and diaper changes. I hate to be the one to tell you, but your sweet little munchkin has the colon of a forty-year-old man.”

Corjan barks a laugh, startling Cooper from his nap. “Nah. It’s just the milk. She’ll firm up a bit when she gets into solids.”

“Listen. I don’t ever plan on having kids, so this is a little too much information.” I hide my grimace around another drink.

Bree and Corjan share a look clearly deciding I’m full of shit.

They just can’t see anything other than the love and stars in their eyes since finding their way back together. The fact Corjan is my second brother to settle down in just as many years means he’s forgotten that the rest of us are perfectly happy being single.

Jude, Aiden, and I aren’t in much of a rush, that is. Last I heard, our sister Cortney might be getting serious with some guy named Sebastian, so it’s only a matter of time for her, I’m afraid.

There must be something in the water.

That, or everyone’s biological clocks kicked on at the same time.

Regardless, I don’t intend on being one of those lovestruck saps. I’m content with my dog and my motel. The help I lend to our family’s dog sanctuary from time to time fulfills me.

“If you don’t mind, I’m going to feed her quickly before we leave. We’re meeting Nancy for lunch.” Bree slips off her shoes.

Nancy Powell is our very much involved mother. Even as us siblings near our forties, minus Lee, who’s already there, she still insists on hosting weekly dinners, all holidays, and attending any other significant life event. Hell, the woman doesn’t even miss a single one of our nephews’ baseball games.

“Take your time.” I wave my hand in indifference. “I have Hunter covering the desk this morning, so I can head over to the motel whenever.”

“How’s that going for you?” Corjan doesn’t bother removing his shoes before crossing to the armchair facing the television. With everyone getting comfortable, I find my own seat on the leather couch.

I shrug at his question. “Business has been better. Usually the winter is pretty steady with skiers needing a place to stay, but with the snowmobile races postponed due to the blizzard coming this week, I think we only have a guest or two unless someone showed up overnight.”

“Next week should be pretty solid then,” Corjan remarks.

“Should be. I know the racers weren’t too happy with the delay, but this isn’t like the city. County roads take longer to plow, and we’re expecting thirty to thirty-six inches of snowfall over a twenty-four-hour period.”

“Shit. That’s worse than the Halloween Blizzard of 1991.”

The historic blizzard left nearly thirty inches of snow across the state. Only a true Minnesotan can say where they were during the event, with many bragging about their attempts to trick-or-treat during the storm.

“We’ll see how it pans out.”

“Don’t tell Bree that. This will be her first big snowfall since she moved back. Last winter was nothing compared to this.”

“I bet she’ll love it. The three of you all cozied up in that house with your dogs. Isn’t that some shit straight out of those romance novels she reads?”

“You told him I read romance novels?” Bree shrieks from the kitchen. A quick cry rents the air, followed by her gentle shushing.

“Don’t scare the baby,” I tease. “Between you, Juniper, and Cortney, you might as well start a local book club.”

Bree scowls from around the kitchen entry before disappearing around the corner.

“I swear those three get together, and it’s like they forget the rest of us exist. Does she not remember them going on and on about a new book by some author a few months ago? You would have thought one of them won the lottery,” I say.

“*Things We Left Behind* by Lucy Score.” Corjan spits out his response as if he’d been holding the words on his tongue.

I cock a sarcastic brow. “You into romance novels too, little brother?”

Corjan licks his bottom lip. “You’re perpetually single—”

“As if you’re one to talk,” I butt in, reminding him of the celibacy he clung to after Bree walked out on him a decade prior.

His shoe sails off his foot and smacks me in the shin.

“Dick,” he mutters.

Leaning forward in his chair, he levels me with a look. “As I was saying, I’m going to teach you two things. One, if your girl mentions anything that seems important to her, even in passing, you don’t forget it. Remembering those little pieces of information is the recipe to a happy relationship.”

Okay. He’s not wrong. It seems he’s grown wise over the years. “What’s the second thing?”

“Those novels are the spice.” Corjan leans back with a satisfied smirk on his face. “They’re like roadmaps. If I really want to get her going, I have her read them while I—”

“Corjan Powell, you stop talking right now!” A blushing Bree walks swiftly into the room and deposits Charlotte on her daddy’s chest. She levels her husband with a glare that I can’t see and rests her hands on her hips. After a tense moment of silence, her shoulders relax, and she turns to me. “Everything he said is true. End of discussion.”

A burst of laughter from me breaks the tension. “While you two have enlightened me, truly, I think it’s time I head into work and leave you to whatever it is that you do for fun.”

I rise from my chair and step into the full bathroom, needing that shave before I go.

Bree’s playful bickering carries through the wooden door.

“Do you see what you did? Jack’s never going to be able to look at us the same again.”

A LIGHT LAYER of snow covers the cars in the parking lot of my home away from home. The blizzard isn’t expected to start until tomorrow evening, so these flurries are more like a prelude. Ominous gray clouds roll overhead, casting everything in a similar dull shade.

Cooper meanders before me into the motel, winding around the desk to his bed in the corner and flopping down.

“Hey, boss.” Hunter glances up from the laptop on the desk.

“Morning. How was last night?”

“Quiet. One check-out and two check-ins. Both plan to stay the entire week.”

Those numbers hurt. I hide my grimace with a stiff nod. Thankfully, they aren’t typical.

“Why don’t you head out for a bit? Pick up anything you might need over the next few days and get some rest. I don’t anticipate the guests needing much while hunkering down for a blizzard, but you never know.”

Hunter moves into the sleeping quarters on the other side of the desk, returning a moment later with a thick coat in his fist. “Need anything?” he asks, swinging the jacket on and covering his red hair with a winter hat.

“Nah. Thanks, bud. I’ll make another run out in the morning in case you forget anything, so just make sure you have your personal essentials.”

He gives a crooked smirk. “I always do.”

I watch him leave. A blast of chilly air follows him out the door, the bitter cold bite reminding me to feed the fireplace on the other side of the room.

Hunter’s a good kid. He’s twenty but started working for me when he was only sixteen and looking for a job. At the time, I couldn’t promise him a whole lot, but we hold down the motel pretty well. I have a few part-time seasonal staff to fill in the gaps and a cleaning lady who helps me turn over the rooms.

My family thought I was crazy for taking over the motel when the previous owner retired. But I was young and feeling stuck. I’d sworn to myself a long time ago that I’d never leave the Powells after they took me in, and not a soul could ever take me away from my twin brother, Jude. The two of us had been through more than most in our childhood and leaned on one another to get through.

After high school, I felt directionless. College wasn’t a big priority, but I took a few business classes to appease Nancy and Terrance, and when the opportunity presented itself, it felt like a sign. I could stay in Fairview Valley. I could stay with my family who I owed so much to.

When my oldest brother Lee went and started up a dog rescue, he knit our family together even more. Everyone had a purpose and a place. A reason to stay in Fairview Valley.

After the current guests turn me down for fresh sheets, I return to my desk to work through this month’s books. This week will be rough, but the motel is profitable enough to keep me running despite the lack of guests. Next week, I’ll be

booked solid during the races and beyond as some stay into the following week to explore the area, ski, and go ice fishing on one of the many nearby lakes.

The door bursts open with an icy chill. Flurries surge inside on a gust of wind, followed by a woman with her hands full.

“Here, let me help you.” I round the desk without a second thought and retrieve a suitcase from her hand. When I reach for the other, I realize it isn’t a suitcase but an infant carrier with a thick tan blanket draped over the top.

“Thank you.” Her breathless voice is soft. “I forgot how cold it gets here.”

She stomps her feet on the all-weather mat and watches as the little girl at her side clumsily mimics her. The child’s short blond hair whips around her face with the movement.

“You from the area?” I deposit her bag beside the staircase to the rooms on the second floor and return to my post behind the desk.

“Years ago.” She waves her hand.

A warm hum of familiarity flares to life in my gut, but I’m having trouble placing her. I nod at her bare fingers. “Might want to remember to grab some gloves if you’re sticking around.”

“It’s one of those things.” She takes her toddler’s hand and walks up to me at the desk. “You remember to get all the essentials for your kids, but you can’t remember to grab them for yourself.”

A flash of irritation strikes me at her statement. I open my mouth to argue before snapping it shut.

“I don’t have kids.” I flash a blunt smile to let her know I’m not knocking her life choices.

Her eyes spark with amusement as she laughs. “I guess you wouldn’t understand, then. I’m just lucky I bought suitable boots, or I might end this trip without any toes.”

“How long are you staying?”

I pretend to click through my computer, knowing damn well we have a whole wall of rooms free at this moment.

The silence stretches on. I glance up to find her biting her bottom lip with a contemplative look in her eyes. They're a light brown. Almost a golden hue like a dark drizzle of honey.

“A week? Can we start there?”

Start there? My brows snap together. I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't a long stay.

My gaze flicks to the entrance, half expecting a husband to march through after fixing a flat tire or parking the car after dropping them off at the door.

“I can do that. But I feel like I should warn you that we have a big event next week, and we're all booked up next Monday through Thursday.”

“Oh.” She bites her glistening lip again before sliding her credit card and license onto the desk. “Well, I'll take the week and look for something else.”

“Do you need somewhere long term?”

She shrugs. “I'm not sure. The housing arrangement I had lined up fell through this morning, so I'm scrambling a bit.”

I nod while keying in her information.

Whitney Thompson.

She said she was from around here, but the last name is unfamiliar. Her birthdate places her several years younger than me.

I flick my eyes from her license to her face. She's too busy speaking quietly to her toddler to notice my surreptitious glance.

She's beautiful. The winter cold pinks her skin in a natural blush, and from this angle, her long black eyelashes fan against her cheeks in a startling contrast. I bite back a grin. It's no surprise she's saddled up with two kids. The good ones always get scooped up quickly.

“Here’s your license back. I’ve put a hold on your card, and the full amount will be charged at the end of your stay.”

“Thank you.” She slides the items into the back pocket of her jeans.

“If you need to stay longer, don’t hesitate to let me know. I know I said we’re booked, but if you’re here long term, we might be able to work something out.”

A piercing wail comes from the carrier by her hip. She starts bouncing her entire frame up and down. A flush covers her neck as her eyes connect with mine again. “I will. Thank you.”

“Follow me, and I’ll show you to your room.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary.”

But I’m already shouldering her bag and leading her up the stairs.

My number-one rule is that the comfort of the guest is priority. That means we carry luggage up the stairs for women and the elderly. We also offer for anyone else, though we’re usually turned down.

“Third door on the right.” I slip the key easily into the lock and swing the door wide, setting her bag just inside on the plush carpet. “Enjoy your stay, Mrs. Thompson.”

She lets out a sound between a gasp and a scoff. “Please. Call me Whitney. I feel old enough as it is.”

I smirk. “Have a good stay, Whitney.”

Her shoulder brushes mine, gifting me with a whiff of her flowery perfume before the door shuts behind her and her kids with a gentle click.

I stare at the oak door separating. A strange feeling twists in my chest. Something unfamiliar but not unpleasant takes residence behind my sternum.

After a moment, I banish my curiosity and return to my post downstairs.



WHITNEY

A ROAD TRIP with babies alone is a special sort of challenge, but it has absolutely nothing on sleeping in a motel with them.

My afternoon consisted of a repeat phone call with Alice to assure her we've settled in nicely, followed by no less than three same-day delivery orders for lunch, dinner, and a pack of diapers because I didn't bring enough and Bennett had a blowout.

Then Lucy escaped the room while I was cleaning her brother off in the bathtub and was returned by a guy working at the front desk while I held a dripping, naked babe wrapped in a white towel, sweaty hair sticking to my forehead, and my own tee shirt soaked.

After a small amount of pleading, Lucy finally surrendered with a quiet movie on the television around seven, and Bennett fell asleep beside her after finishing his bottle.

The light from Lucy's show flickers across the shadowed room. I massage my temples. A headache set in about an hour ago. The kind I know won't leave until I get a good night's rest. By the heavy way Lucy blinks, I might just be able to commence sleep with the two of them soon.

After picking up a few toys and dirty clothes, I collapse into the recliner and toss my phone onto an end table.

As if I wasn't enough of a hot mess and my life wasn't already in shambles, I wound up staying at the motel owned by none other than my teen crush. Jack Powell.

I didn't factor seeing him into my grand return.

Crush is too light of a word for what I felt at sixteen. Pure infatuation describes my feelings for the boy four years older than me. I haven't seen him in over a decade, but I'd know those gray eyes anywhere. And the genuine smirk almost always used to set my heart aflutter.

He looks good. Too good for his late thirties. Sandy-brown hair clipped close on the sides and long enough on top to slip between your fingers. His nose is straight with a slight bump from a scuffle with one of his brothers, and there's a sharpness to his jaw that didn't exist the last time I saw him. His strong frame is obvious despite wearing jeans and a long-sleeved shirt.

I find it highly unfair that men get better with age, and I feel like with each year, I'm chasing the last few grains of sand in the hourglass before I turn into a wrinkled hag. Or a fucking midnight pumpkin.

A flush heats my cheeks at a long-buried memory. He even saw me naked once by accident.

I spent the entire month following that summer incident avoiding him, which wasn't too hard because he seemed to avoid me too.

A notification sounds on my phone beside me. I squint at the harsh light to read an incoming email from the temp agency.

Urgent: Your Hiring Date Has Been Rescheduled.

Dammit!

I glean the short body of text quickly. Due to the incoming blizzard, the agency has postponed my start for *next week*. The position is for a patient scheduler at the local hospital. Considered full-time at thirty-two hours per week, it's not much, but I don't need a lot right now. I just need something to return me to the workforce after a few years without a job.

Returning to Fairview Valley might not have been the best choice of moves. The small size provides limited opportunities. I should have slapped my finger on a map and started somewhere brand new, but I sought comfort instead.

The throbbing in my temples pulses faster.

This is no big deal. So I rolled into town this morning thinking I was signing on a new house and about to start a new job. Instead, here I am in a motel without a place to live, and the job has been postponed.

A week delay isn't so bad. I can use the time while my kids and I adjust to daycare to reacquaint myself with the place where I grew up. Of all my concerns, the approaching blizzard should monopolize my worry. I don't have any necessities here to get me through a few days. I should call the front desk and ask if the motel has a kitchen area where I can store a bag of groceries.

New items join my mental to-do list as I double-check the locks on the door and turn out the lamp.

"Momma?" Lucy's sweet voice calls out as the room plunges into darkness.

"Yeah, baby?" I ease into the bed beside Bennett and reach across his small body to lay my hand on Lucy's back.

"We go sleep now?"

I brush her soft blond hair off her face. "We do. It's time for bed."

"I don't like the dark here," she whispers, scooting close to her brother's side.

"The dark here isn't any different from the dark in your old room, but I can pick up a small light tomorrow if you'd like."

She nods against my hand. "Love you more than chocolate milk."

"I love you more than cupcakes with sprinkles," I whisper back.

"Love you more than rainbows."

“I love you more than tickle fights.”

“I—I love you”—she yawns, the sound stretching out the vowels—“more than horsies.”

“I love you more than the entire world.”

As my little girl drifts off, I fall asleep right behind her, still sifting her soft strands of hair through my fingers.

A SHRILL CRY snatches me from a dead sleep.

My eyes open to a disorienting darkness, hands frantically patting the bed in search of my kids. Once I confirm two warm little bodies beside me, my heart rate slows measurably as the evening floods back into my awareness.

I hear it again. Bennett stirs beside me, his arms stretched above his head as he wails. *Loud*. Not the sweet little cry of an infant. This one sounds angry. Full-bellied sobs. His chest seesaws with his labored breaths.

“Shh. Shh.” I pick him up and hold him against my shoulder. My torso bobs jerkily on the bed as I regain my bearings enough to stand. The sleepiness abates enough that I won’t stumble with him in my arms, and I pace across the room as his little cries twist my heart.

The dimmer switch in the bathroom lowers the light. If Lucy can sleep through his cries, I don’t need something else to wake her.

In the near darkness, I fix him a fresh bottle with one hand. The minute the silicone nipple touches his lips, he arches his mouth away with a gasping cry, and his wails begin anew. I wipe the dribble of milk off his cheek with the corner of my sleeve and prop him against my shoulder.

“Shh,” I coo, alternating between rubbing his back and patting him. Maybe it’s gas? He acted like this a few nights ago before we left for the trip, but I assumed it was a one-off.

Burping him fails to yield any real results. I lay him on the bed to check his diaper. Clean. I change it anyway to assuage the hopeless feeling creeping into my sleep-deprived subconscious.

Bennett cries the entire time.

I snap up his onesie as quickly as I can and pull the inconsolable baby into my arms.

“What is the matter?” A hint of desperation infiltrates my whisper. Every few minutes, my eyes slide to the door. I’m almost certain the entire floor can hear Bennett’s protests. We begin a new trek across the room, slightly faster than before.

I bounce him. I whisper and coo soothing words that he’s too little to understand. I try holding him on my shoulder, then on his back. I tuck him beneath my arm on his stomach like a football and rock him side to side.

My arms grow heavy with his weight. The lack of sleep frays my nerves as minutes turn into hours of his nonstop discomfort.

Every so often, he cries himself out, falling asleep with a furrowed brow and a frown on his puckered lips. The first time I try to lay him back down, he startles awake for an encore performance.

The second time, I tuck him close and sit in the chair, but the moment I stop moving, he thrashes awake again.

At one in the morning, I call Alice, who offers moral support from afar.

By two, tears start to slip from my own bleary eyes.

At three, I nearly wake Lucy and drive us all to the nearest hospital, convinced something has to be wrong, but before I come to a decision, Bennett falls asleep again.

For the next hour, I stand, swaying in the middle of the room, my heavy eyelids repeatedly attempting to fall shut and whisk me into a deep sleep. Each time, I startle awake with a gasp and check the sleeping baby in my arms.

When the red glowing numbers on the alarm clock read five thirty, I can't take standing anymore, too afraid I could actually pass out on my feet and accidentally drop him. I risk settling back into bed.

I ease Bennett into the space next to Lucy, and without removing my arms from around him, I collapse onto my side on the empty mattress. My head settles half cocked onto the pillow, and I hold my breath while I study his face.

His eyes remain closed.

Finally.

Within seconds, I follow him into sleep.



JACK

PUFFS of exhaled air float around me in the early December chill. I gaze off into the wooded area beyond my back patio, a cup of fresh black coffee warming my palms while Cooper does his morning business. His dark fur contrasts sharply against the unblemished snow beneath the tall evergreens.

A stagnant energy has followed me this week. With the snowmobile races postponed and few guests at the motel, my schedule is uncharacteristically empty. I offered a hand to my brothers at the Sanctuary, but both Lee and Jude declined my help.

This time of the year tends to be slower. Fewer strays roam in the cold, and people are less eager to take home a new pet when they need to houstrain them during a zero-degree Minnesota winter.

Life will pick up in a week or two. It always does. Travelers show up in town to enjoy the winter events. Mom's annual Christmas party is in a couple of weeks, followed by the actual holidays, when we gather for more days than necessary.

I'm used to a life of peaceful quiet. But I'm not used to having nothing to do.

The shrill ringtone from my phone disturbs the placid air. The motel number flashes across the screen, almost like an

answer from the universe to my morning musings.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Jack. Sorry to bother you so early, but I need you down here. Quick if you can.”

I whistle sharply at Cooper and move through the sliding door. “What’s the problem?”

Hunter’s voice acquires a disgusted edge. “One of our guests called the cops on that single mom who checked in yesterday. They came down to complain this morning about her children crying all night.”

“What the fuck,” I mutter, slamming the sliding door behind Cooper. I sprint for the entrance to the attached garage and haul ass into my SUV.

“Right. I told them I’d check in with her and handle things, and they not-so politely told me they’d already handled it.”

“Any idea who’s coming?”

“No. Sorry, boss.”

“It’s fine.” Gloveless fingers twist around the cold leather steering wheel as I speed down the road. The dash reads seven forty-five. Fuck, it’s early. “I’m on my way. I’ll be there in a few to handle it.”

“Sounds good. Thanks for coming.”

“You got it.”

I hang up and depress the accelerator.

Something akin to guilt twists my gut. Whitney’s face flashes in my mind. Her gentleness with her kids. The passing joke about calling her Whitney and not Mrs. Thompson.

The conversation we had yesterday was brief, but the tension around her eyes hinted to more beneath the surface of needing a place to stay. A lengthy one at that. As if she didn’t already appear have enough going on, someone called the cops on her.

I shouldn't care. She's simply another guest, but I feel like I should have been there. If I get there in time, she might not need to even know anything happened, and I can send Fairview Valley's finest on their way.

The lot is vacant of police cruisers when I skid in twenty minutes later. I park in front and advance through the doors before the running lights have even dimmed.

A couple stands before Hunter at the desk, their faces twisted in anger. The room contains enough tension to feel suffocating, an obvious contrast to the cold air outside.

"Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Kramer. I hear there's a problem?"

The woman gasps sharply as if my question offended her, but her husband answers. "We hardly got a minute of sleep last night, Jack. When we checked in, you said this week would be quiet."

"Yes, I did say that. What happened last night?"

"Someone's baby kept me up all night," the woman answers bitterly.

I bite back a sigh. "I'm really sorry to hear that." I shift behind the desk and glance at the reservation screen. "If you'd like, I can move you to the other end of the hallway so you'll be farther away from their room. I can also offer you some earplugs if that might help. And I will speak to her and see if there's a problem we can fix."

"Some people just aren't made to be mothers." The woman speaks loudly, as if expecting the room to agree with her. Her husband nods, but Hunter chokes back a sound while my brows snap together.

"What on earth makes you say that?"

A black strand of hair falls into her eyes as she leans on the desk. She brushes it away before whispering conspiratorially, "Because babies only cry like that when they're being abused."

A white-hot fire lights inside my gut. It burns deeply and bright, illuminating years of real abuse from my childhood. The scars and internal wounds that won't ever fully heal. All the damaged parts.

“And you make that accusation on what basis, exactly?” I bite out. The words feel thick on my tongue. The shift in my energy forces her a step back.

“I mean, you can just tell,” she splutters.

“Mrs. Kramer. Mr. Kramer.” I roll my tongue on the inside of my cheek to gather a minute of calm before I bite her fucking head off. “I have offered you a solution. I'm sorry your sleep was interrupted, and I assure you that I will take it from here.”

The couple glances at each other. “I don't know,” Mr. Kramer starts. “I think maybe we should wait for the police.”

“I will handle it!” I snap. My fingers resting on the computer mouse twitch. “I'll refund you one night's stay for the trouble. If you'd please return to your room, call down when you're ready for breakfast, and Hunter will bring you a meal from the local café. There are menus in the drawer beneath the television.”

Mrs. Kramer raises her finger to interject, but her husband places a hand on her back and turns her away.

“Does Whit—*Miss Thompson* know the cops have been called on her?” I ask once they're up the stairs and out of earshot.

Hunter shakes his head. “No. I didn't know if I should warn her ahead of time. I thought maybe you could do something.”

“I'll give her a heads-up.”

I graze the receiver as the front door swings open. Sutton and Silas Stone saunter in, hands sliding into the edges of their black police vests.

“Morning, Jack,” Sutton, the older of the two, greets with a tip of his chin.

“Hey, guys. Sorry you’ve made the trip out.”

“It’s not a problem,” Sutton replies, walking toward the stairs. “What room is she in?”

“Hold on.” I move around the desk to intercept them. “I’ve already handled it. I think you’ve made a wasted trip.”

Sutton’s eyes narrow as he looks over at me.

Silas interjects. “What you do with your guest complaints is your business, Jack, but we have to look into this one.”

I feign ignorance. “Why? It’s a simple noise complaint. I’ve handled it.”

Silas shakes his head. “The complaint was for child abuse.”

Fuck. I was hoping Mrs. Kramer didn’t actually relay their speculative assumption to the dispatcher. “The baby was crying. Probably because it’s in an unfamiliar environment. I don’t think that warrants an investigation, do you?”

“You willing to bet on that, Jack?” Sutton asks. We lock eyes. I grew up with the Stone brothers. Silas is best friends with my brother Corjan, while Sutton is one of my oldest friends. He knows all about us Powell siblings and our pasts. Which means he fucking knows the answer to that.

A tense silence stretches between us, broken by my acquiescence. “Let me go first and explain.”

Sutton shakes his head. “You know I can’t let you do that.”

My pulse quickens as Whitney’s face swims in my consciousness. The guilt must be evident because Sutton places a heavy hand on my shoulder.

“We’ll be as quick as we can.”

“I’m coming with you,” I mutter as a hot, angry flush tears up my neck. I don’t know why I care, but the thought of ambushing this woman and her kids doesn’t sit right in my gut.

“Stay out of the way,” Sutton orders and leads us up the stairs.

He raps on her door sharply, a loud chorus of knocks impossible to ignore. Tense seconds tick by while we wait for an answer. After about thirty seconds, he knocks again.

Shuffling and murmured voices filter through the oak wood before the door swings open.

My heart fucking sinks at her appearance.

The vibrancy from yesterday is nowhere to be found. Whitney's golden hair is a mess, twisting around her face in a disordered fashion. A frown tilts her alluring mouth. Purple bags mar the pale skin beneath her lashes, making her honey-colored eyes stand out in stark contrast.

Her knuckles blanch where tense fingers curl around the door.

She drags her gaze through the uniformed men before her eyes lock on mine. They flit away just as quickly.

"We received a complaint about your children crying. May we come in?" Sutton asks.

"I'd rather you didn't. We had a rough night, and I was hoping—"

"That wasn't a question." Sutton cuts her off. "Please. Let us in."

The pained look on her face makes me regret not waiting downstairs. She doesn't need another witness to her embarrassment. But for some reason, I can't make myself move. My feet feel rooted to the floor beneath my shoes.

"Come in." Resignation weighs down the slope of her shoulders. She opens the door wider and steps out of the way.

I stay in the hall, but before she can follow the officers, I instinctively grab for her wrist, stopping just before I make contact. I don't know this woman any more than I do the Kramers, but my protective side that wants to take care of those who need it kicks in effortlessly.

"It'll be okay," I say, my voice low not to draw attention to my possible interference.

She keeps her shoulder to me and her face pointed at the blue carpet. The only indication she heard me is the sudden clench of her jaw and her throat moving on a thick swallow.

“These the only two kids you have?” Sutton asks, his tone sharp and accusatory.

“Yes,” Whitney answers.

“Hey there, little guy.” Silas leans over the alert baby playing on a mat on the floor.

The infant bats the toys dangling over his face with a delighted gurgle. His little legs kick happily.

Silas lifts the kid into his arms and pats him gently on the back. “You’re a happy dude, aren’t you?”

The baby just drools in response.

“Does he cry a lot?” Silas asks while Sutton surveys the room with a furrowed brow. Their tactic here is obvious. Sutton plays the stern cop while Silas is all smiles and kindness.

I grit my teeth tight, jaw locked as the scene unfolds.

Whitney releases a heavy breath. “He’s been colicky lately. Usually he’s just like this but for some reason at night, he’s having a hard time settling.”

“You’re Whitney Brewer, aren’t you?” Silas suddenly says.

Like two puzzle pieces snapping together, memories click into place. Thompson is her married name. Whitney was best friends with Bree back when Bree and Corjan dated in high school.

Whitney simply nods.

“What about this one?” Sutton jerks his head at the little girl coloring at the desk in the corner.

She looks at the adults in the room with a curious expression, a pink crayon clutched in her fist, but her focus returns to the book in front of her.

“She wasn’t crying last night.”

Sutton walks over to the little girl and drops into a crouch beside her. “What are you coloring?” He rakes his eyes over her exposed arms and legs, searching for marks on her body with a lack of subtlety meant to intimidate.

Tension rushes through my limbs, pulling my spine straight and my head high. My fist curls and releases at my side.

“Horsies,” the little girl responds shyly with a slight lisp.

Sutton cracks his first smile since arriving. “Pretty. Does your mom color with you?”

The girl nods. “Uh-huh. She likes blue, and I like pink.”

“What about your dad?” Sutton asks.

Whitney sucks in a sharp breath.

“Um, he dieded.”

All the oxygen is swept from the room by her answer. Two innocent words from this little girl strike three big men speechless. The silence stretches. The Stone brothers appear to grapple with the right words to say to the toddler.

“Are we finished here?” Whitney bites through clenched teeth.

Silas gives the baby one final bounce before returning him to his mother’s arms. “It’s good to see you,” he says sheepishly. With his eyes locked on the floor, he joins me in the hallway.

“Sorry to bother you, ma’am.” Sutton jerks his chin as he stops in front of Whitney. “You have to understand we can’t just let a call like that go without checking things out.”

Whitney’s head bobs in a jerky response. “I understand.” Her gaze cuts to me before sliding away.

Unease slithers through me. I want to go to her and explain. If these two assholes would finish up already, I could tell her this incident wasn’t her fault. That she and her kids are

welcome here as long as she needs a place to stay. My breath stalls in my chest while I wait for the finale to play out.

“Try to keep it down. Kids cry. I get it. I’d rather not have to make a trip out here again.”

“I will,” Whitney says.

I can see her defenses rise. The hard wall forming just beneath the surface. She’s resolved to leave. To save herself from any more embarrassment.

Without another word, Sutton steps into the hall. “Jack.”

The door closes on us with a deafening click.

“I’ll catch up with you later.” I turn back to face her room.

Sutton gives a short two-finger wave and follows his brother down the stairs.

Without giving my actions a second thought, I knock.

“It’s fine.” Her watery voice floats through the door. “There’s nothing more to say. I can be out by this afternoon.”

“Open the door, Whitney.”

“Really. Don’t worry about it.”

I grip the frame on either side and lean forward. “Open the door,” I order again.

The metallic clang of the lock signals her acquiescence. “What?”

I avoid drawing attention to the red blotches on her skin. I try not to look at the tears clinging to her lash line. “You don’t have to leave.”

She sighs. “Yes, I do. I can’t disrupt people like that, and I sure as hell can’t go through another morning like this.” She waves her hand to convey all that transpired. “I don’t feel safe here.”

My jaw tightens. “Are your parents still in town?”

“No.”

“Any family?”

“No.” She stresses the word the second time.

“Any friends? You used to be close with Bree, right?”

Something lights in her honeyed eyes at the mention of my sister-in-law. “You remember me?”

A short chuckle leaves my lips. “It clicked when Silas said your name. I remember the way I couldn’t see my brother back then without Bree attached to his hip, and wherever Bree was, you were close behind.”

“Is Bree still in town?”

“She left for a few years but came back about a year ago.”

Apprehension clouds her face. “We aren’t close anymore.”

I want to argue with her that it wouldn’t matter to Bree, but I can tell she’s uncomfortable enough with this situation. I save the battle for another day. “Where are you planning to go?”

She crosses her arms tightly over her chest. “Why does it matter to you?”

“Because this is my motel. What happened this morning doesn’t sit right with me. You and your children are welcome to stay.”

“I can’t. If I can’t find somewhere, I’ll head back where we came from.” She fixes her gaze over my left shoulder as if she can’t bring herself to look me in the eye while she says it.

“There’s a blizzard coming today. It’s not safe for you to travel. Half the state is already being hit. Unless you’re heading north to Canada, you’ll drive right into it.”

“I don’t know what else you propose I do, Jack.” Her breath hitches on my name. I feel it settle in my gut as if she threw her fist at me instead.

I pause to breathe slowly through my nose and gentle my tone. “Stay. Until this afternoon. I’ll come up after my shift, and I can take you to my place. It’s about twenty minutes across town.”

“Jack, no—”

I hold up my palm to stop her. “You and your kids can stay there for a few days until the storm passes. I have a dedicated room here for myself already. I’ll show you where the house is and come back to the motel. You’ll have the place to yourselves.”

“I couldn’t—”

“I insist. It’ll be much more comfortable for everyone.” My attention shifts behind her to her kids. “You’ll sleep better there. All three of you,” I add for emphasis. The dark circles beneath her eyes thwart any attempt she might make to argue.

She sinks her teeth into her bottom lip, testing the boundaries with her hesitation. Then she nods. “Thank you.”

I wrap my fingers around the doorknob. “I’ll come back at four.”

Without waiting for her to respond, I drag the door shut between us.

On my way down the stairs, I decide to tell Hunter later that I’ll be joining him back at the motel tonight. Just in case she decides to hightail it out of here before I can stop her.



WHITNEY

SWEAT COATS my palms where I twist them around the steering wheel. Jack's black SUV executes a left turn at the next stop sign. With my heart lodged firmly in my throat, I follow his path cut through the snow blanketing the road.

Swaths of gray cover the sky above me while fat flurries twist their way to the ground. The storm started about two hours ago, earlier than predicted. A part of me I refuse to acknowledge right now is grateful for Jack's offer.

The same part of me refuses to acknowledge I'm about to stay at the house of my childhood crush.

Lord only knows how many nights I used to think about Jack Powell. How many daydreams I used to entertain about Bree and me falling in love with brothers so we could marry into the same family. How many teenage fantasies starred that boy who's grown into a confident man. Who has no problem taking issues into his own hands and solves them.

He doesn't know me from the next person who stops into this small town, but his kindness is touching. Because if I stop to think about it, any idea I had about packing up and leaving was fueled by panic and a lack of sleep. The last thing I want to do is head back to West Bend. Not after all I endured there. Not after all I fought to leave in the past and start over.

However this ends, I'll have to find a way to thank him. Because with his help, I might just be able to get a decent night of sleep and not have to worry about bothering the strangers down the hall.

Jack pulls his SUV into the driveway of a single-story house at the end of a quiet street. The land surrounding the building stretches as far as I can see. Large patches of white snow are broken only by the silhouettes of trees. Snow crunches beneath my tires as I park my sedan behind him.

He's out before I have the door open, hustling to my side of the car. He walks tall as if he can't feel the frigid gusts of wind blowing against his neck.

"I'll open the door, and you guys can go right in through the garage. Leave your bags here. I'll get them."

He leaves me dizzy with an argument on the tip of my tongue. I close my door with a quiet exhale and retrieve my kids. The cloud from my breath floats above my head.

"C'mon out, Lucy," I say and unsnap her buckle for her to crawl from her car seat. She waits until I unhook her brother's seat before climbing out the same door. By the time her small hand wraps around my fingers, Jack's already returned.

"Just the bag from yesterday?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"You got a portable crib?"

His question surprises me. For a man with no kids, he sure knows how to handle them. I guess he sees all sorts of contraptions parents drag in for their stay since he owns a motel.

"It's in the trunk next to the suitcase."

"I'll grab that too, then."

While Jack Powell is all business, I'm a floundering mess of nerves. If I had any other option, *anything else*, I would take it. Instead, I gather a burst of courage, wrap it around myself like a shield, and trudge through the ankle-deep snow into the house.

We enter through the garage into a short hallway that functions as the mudroom. An all-weather mat lines the tiled floor, and a row of hooks hang on the wall.

“Stomp your boots before you take them off.”

Lucy follows my instructions with all the vigor of an independent toddler. She plops down onto her tush and uses both hands to drag each of her pink boots off. “All done, Momma!”

“Good job, Peanut. I’ll take your coat, and we can hang it up here.”

“I do it!”

“You can’t reach.” I switch Bennett’s carrier to my other arm and hold out my hand again. “Let me hang it up, Lucy.”

She shrugs out of the puffy material, the sleeves turned inside out, but grips it between her hands with a scowl. “I said I do it, Momma.”

Jack slips into the room behind me. His touch is featherlight on my back as he moves around me and deposits our stuff around the corner. Tingles from his contact dance along my spine.

Was his hand intentional, or the brush of two people in a crowded entry?

“I’ll help,” he says to me, the low timbre of his voice making me shiver. Then he addresses Lucy, “Need help reaching the hooks?”

Lucy’s confidence retreats a little as she looks up at the tall, strange man.

Jack crouches down to her height. “Can I lift you so you can reach it?”

She hesitates, brown eyes flitting to mine.

“It’s your choice. You can say yes or no if you want to,” I guide her.

Her fingers tighten around the coat in her hands. With her mouth set in a determined line, she lifts her arms into the air at

Jack. “I wanna go up.”

“Alright.” Jack slips his hands beneath her armpits and hoists her level with the hooks.

She struggles for a minute to get the hoop around the metal end before it slides into place. Jack’s patience is endless. As well as his strength. She wears a triumphant expression when he sets her back on her feet.

“What do you say to Jack?” I prompt, sliding off my own winter boots. A basic black rubber outer shell lined with fur. Minnesota winters demand functionality over fashion.

“Thank you,” Lucy says shyly.

“You’re welcome.” Jack smiles down at her. “Here, let me help you with that.” He relieves me of Bennett’s car seat.

“Thanks.” I shrug from my coat and follow him a few steps inside.

The house is a small open-plan rambler. The short hallway opens into the living area. There’s a front door off to the left and the kitchen to the right. Despite the size, the house is clean and updated. The fixtures are new, at least from the past decade. The hardwoods are a rich chestnut brown. A leather sofa and recliner face a flat-screen television mounted above a stone fireplace. Between the kitchen and the living room is another hallway that I assume leads to the bathroom and bedrooms.

“You have a nice place.”

His bored gaze zips around the space as if he doesn’t think much of it.

“It’s about as much space as I need.”

Lucy skips around my legs into the living room and skids to a sudden halt. “What is *that*?” The crescendo pitch in her voice reaches a near shriek.

“That’s Cooper.” Jack does some hand gesture, and the big black dog trots to his side and lies down.

“That looks like a monster.” Lucy walks backward until she bumps into my shins. “Aunt Alice has a chachwa, and he’s small. Cooper is biiiiig.”

“Aunt Alice has a chihuahua, baby, and he’s not very nice.”

Lucy nods seriously. “He bit me one time. On my finger while I petted him.” She thrusts her index finger in front of her face.

Jack looks at Lucy as if her story is the most interesting thing in the world. His expression changes from curious to serious the more she talks to him. “I bet that hurt.”

“It did. Momma gived me a bandage and a popsicle.”

“Your mom sounds really smart. I like a popsicle when I get hurt too,” Jack says.

“Do your bandages have unicorns on dem?”

“I don’t think so. They’re just plain.”

Lucy tilts her chin back to look at me. “I don’t wanna get hurt here. Plain bandages don’t work,” she whispers loudly.

I sift my fingers through her hair, ignoring the way my stomach flips around at the undivided attention he gives my daughter.

“You don’t have to worry about Cooper. He’ll be with me, and he’s really nice. Just make sure you walk slowly around him and hold your hand out for him to sniff, like this.” Jack demonstrates, and after a minute of observing, Lucy follows suit.

“Perfect!” he praises and holds his fist out.

Lucy makes a fist too and stares at him.

“Like this.” He gently holds her small fist and bumps them together.

Any reservations I held about staying here begin to melt away. For a man without any kids of his own, he’s a natural. Watching him interact with my daughter makes my ovaries tingle.

“Can you show me where the room is?” I need to break up the moment before I say something stupid like *marry me*. A flush breaks out across my neck. South of my jeans, something awakens after a year-long slumber.

“Of course.” Jack smiles. He brushes his hands on his jeans and holds his arm out in front of him. “This way.”

Without my asking, he picks up my suitcase and the portable crib.

“There’s a full bathroom here on the left, and the bedroom is at the end of the hallway.”

The second I step over the threshold to the bedroom, I stop. The room is simply furnished with a king-sized bed in the center of the room, bracketed on either side by simple black nightstands. Across from the bed is a matching a nine-drawer dresser next to what I presume to be a closet. A tingling awareness creeps up my spine at the idea of being in Jack Powell’s bedroom. With Jack Powell.

Jack bumps into my back.

“Sorry!” I dash out of the way.

“If you give me a minute, I’ll toss some fresh sheets on the bed.”

Oh my god. And I’ll be sleeping in his bed.

I force a laugh. “I can handle that. Your hospitality is bleeding over into your home life. I don’t want to make you work away from the office.”

“It’s no problem.” He smirks over his shoulder while retrieving a stack of sheets from a drawer. “I’m a professional at this point.”

“I’m sure you are,” I mumble, a little dazed at the sight before me of a fully grown man stripping the bed in order to put on fresh sheets. The fact he even has a spare set is enough to make me want to pinch myself. This has to be an alternate reality.

I set up the portable crib to stop staring and give myself something to do. Within a few minutes, Bennett’s bed is ready,

and Jack removes an armful of bedding from the vicinity.

Oh Lordy. He's *washing* the sheets, too.

This man cannot be for real.

Bennett cries from his car seat, waking from his afternoon nap. While Jack starts his laundry, I pick up my boy and bounce him in my arms to soothe him.

“What else do you need before I go?” Jack asks, emerging from the hall.

He leans a shoulder against the wall, watching me with his arms crossed over his wide chest.

“You’ve done more than enough.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“What?”

“I didn’t ask if I did enough for you. I asked what else you need.”

“I’m fine.” I dip my head and inhale Bennett’s warm baby scent.

“Whitney.”

“Yes?”

He jabs his finger toward the front door. “A blizzard’s coming.”

My brows knit in confusion. “I’m aware.”

“Up to thirty-six inches of snow over the next two days.”

Shock releases my jaw, and it falls open. “I’m sorry, *how much?*”

“When I walk out that door, I won’t be able to return for a couple of days, so I need to make sure you and your kids have everything you might need.”

My pulse quickens. I try to comprehend the amount of snowfall expected but come up short. I don’t remember ever seeing that much snow in one storm. Over an entire winter? Sure. Minnesota gets a lot of snow. But all at once?

I don't know what I'm supposed to do with this information. I don't know what food we have. I didn't even get myself a decent pair of gloves after Jack suggested it yesterday. How am I supposed to shovel or clean off my car in three feet of snow without snow pants? A band cinches tight around my lungs.

"Food?" I croak the word.

"The fridge is full. The pantry too. I keep it pretty well stocked, but I went out yesterday, unless you need something in particular."

I'm already shaking my head before he finishes.

"You have enough diapers? Baby formula?"

"Yes. I should have enough."

Jack stares at me as if he's waiting for me to give him an answer. I just keep on bouncing Bennett.

"You look dead on your feet. What can I do to make this easier?"

I blink at him. Has anyone asked me that question before? I look around the room as if the answer is written on the wall.

Jack watches me with sharp eyes. "How about this? I'll throw a lasagna in the oven. There's one in the freezer. And if you need a few minutes to yourself while that heats, I can sit with your kids."

"I don't know if I'm comfortable with that." The words are firm but soft.

I don't want to insult all he's done for us, but at the same time, this version of him is a total stranger. My gut says I can trust him after he's been nothing but kind to me since I rolled into town. That doesn't change the fact that I don't really know him.

If I didn't even truly know my own husband, who's to say I can trust my gut about Jack? Even if we weren't total strangers when we were growing up.

His jaw tightens, and he gives a sharp nod. “I get it. Whatever you’re comfortable with. Let me get that food going for you guys.”

“Wait.”

He turns back to me in silence.

“I could use a shower,” I blurt.

He’s nodding before the last syllable is out of my mouth. “Sure, yeah. Do you need soap or anything?”

“No. Would it be okay if I set up Bennett’s video monitor on you guys? I just... I’d just feel a little better about leaving them.”

“That’s fine,” he assures me.

The lump in my throat dissipates at the concern on his face. “I’ll be quick. I only need ten minutes.”

“It’s okay. Whatever you feel is best. I’ll just get the food started and hang out on the couch with them. What do you say, Lucy? Do you like lasagna?”

“What’s basagna?” she looks up from her coloring book to ask.

A shaky smile touches my lips.

Quick, I remind myself. No more than ten minutes. Jack can be on his way, and I can settle in with my kids.

Everything will be okay.



JACK

“HERE. YOU CAN HAVE GREEN.”

“Thank you.” I pluck the crayon from Lucy’s chubby fingers. “Which one should I color?”

She stabs her index finger at the biggest horse on the page. “This one. It’s big like you.”

“Does that mean you’re going to color... this one?” I tap a blunt fingernail atop the smallest horse.

“Yep!” She beams a pearly white toothy grin at me.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to move Bennett?”

Her left arm curls protectively around her brother’s back. “I like him like this.”

The three of us camp out on my leather sofa. Lucy leans against the arm of the couch with her brother wedged between her and the back. He holds a plastic ring in his drool-covered fist and coos happily while he gnaws on it.

A thick coloring book is spread across Lucy’s knees where she insists we color a picture together. The video monitor on the coffee table faces the couch so Whitney can check in on us as she needs while she showers.

For a few minutes, the only noise in the room is the scratch of our crayons and Bennett’s satisfied babbles while the

shower runs softly in the background.

Three rapid beeps from the kitchen pierce our quiet activity.

“I have to go put dinner in the oven. Can you sit right here with Bennett for me?”

Lucy bobs her head without missing a swipe of her crayon.

I situate extra pillows in the area I vacate in case anyone decides to move around, but throwing the pan in the oven won't take me more than thirty seconds, and I'm hardly twenty feet away.

“Stay right there.” I keep my eye on them the entire way to the kitchen.

With the tinfoil vented on top, I slide the frozen lasagna onto the top rack and shut the door. I set the timer for an hour.

“Oh no! Bennett, no!” Lucy shrieks from the couch.

“What's the matter?”

A loud, dramatic retch precedes her screech. “Bennett pooped!”

I chuckle as I remember the diaper changes from my niece this weekend. “Ah, it'll be okay. Where does your mom keep the diapers?” I say more to myself than the three-year-old.

I'm not sure Whitney would want me to change her kid. I can give the appearance of trying to help to appease Lucy until her mom finishes her shower. A few minutes in a dirty diaper won't hurt him. I don't think. The stubble on my jaw scratches against my palm.

“He pooped on me!” She screws up her face as she sits frozen like a statue.

The smile is wiped clean off my face as the odor assaults my nostrils. I choke back a dry heave at the putrid smell.

“Mother of god.” My stomach turns over on itself as I near the kids. I slip my hands beneath the small boy to free his sister.

Why is it wet? Is that? No...

That's not.

No.

I draw in a ragged breath. Absolute horror flattens my lips into a thin, tight line. This kid has detonated his diaper and beyond.

"Shit," I mutter, my voice thick with another gag. My tongue feels swollen, and saliva pools in my mouth. I choke it down.

"Shit," Lucy parrots, her face screwed up to mimic mine.

"Shh. Don't say that. Pick up your coloring book and stand so I can help you."

She knocks the book to the floor and looks down at herself. Her angelic face twists into one of terror.

"He pooped *on me!*" she screams loud enough to shatter glass. Within seconds of dawning understanding, chaos erupts. Sure enough, smeared across her frilly pink top is a yellowish-brown streak of her baby brother's poop. Which means my fingers are definitely covered in it.

Lucy begins to wail.

I twist Bennett around, and *yep*, it's everywhere. Up his back. Down his legs. The color begins to seep through the thin cotton of his onesie. It's oozing out the top of his shirt into his neck and in his sandy-blond hair and squishing out of the leg holes with each flutter of his feet.

I tilt my chin back to stare at the ceiling in search of answers.

"Whitney?" I summon all my patience and calm to call out to her. Hopefully, she can hear me over the baby monitor. The control in my voice is a tightly pulled thread, threatening to snap into a panicked shout.

Lucy cries louder at my side. Apparently, I'm not moving fast enough for her, but I'm at a total loss here. It's as if my

brain short-circuits with the size of the mess. I don't even know where to begin cleaning this up.

My hands are covered in shit. Lucy is covered in shit. Bennett is drenched in his own shit. My options are to hold him until help arrives or set him back down on his mess and, with my very filthy fingers, gather god-knows-what supplies while dirtying everything I touch on the way to find them.

A wet, huffing noise drags my gaze from the ceiling to the couch.

“Cooper!” I bite off sharply. Through all the chaos, the dog came to investigate. He's buried his nose in the liquid mess all over my couch.

The smell permeates the air, a strange mix of sour, rancid milk and buttered popcorn, so sharp it burns the inside of my nostrils. I retch again.

“Down, boy.” Using my legs, I shove Cooper behind me and away from the horrid mess.

“No wonder you were crying all last night. Feel better?” The infant kicks away in my hands as if he doesn't have a care in the world. Somewhere along the way, he dropped his toy, and now he sucks on a chubby fist. “I bet you're hungry. Emptied the tank right onto my couch, huh?”

“Jack!” Whitney shouts.

For one blissful second, my heart rate slows before tripping over itself again as she barrels out of the bathroom in nothing but a towel, soap suds still in her hair. Steam billows out behind her, and the shower still runs in the background.

“Oh my gosh, what is going on?”

“We've had an incident.”

My molars grind together as I look in the direction of the kitchen. It's close enough to feel as if I'm looking at her, but I am absolutely not looking at her in nothing but one of my big gray fluffy towels wrapped tightly around her dripping-wet curves.

Fuck me. This couldn't get any worse.

“I could use your help.”

“What happened?”

My mouth sets in a determined line. “Bennett had a diaper failure.”

“Oh no,” Whitney breathes, her eyes so round and wide I can see the whites all the way around the irises from clear across the room.

“If you’re almost done with your shower, we’ll all need one after this.”

She releases a small, embarrassed chuckle and crosses the room.

“Don’t come closer!” I nearly groan at her proximity and fight against my cock getting hard. So much smooth skin is on display. The last thing I need is for her to come near me while wrapped in that towel, knowing she’s naked underneath.

Whitney reaches touching distance and coughs. “Oh my god! That’s so bad!”

“I didn’t know something so small could produce something so offensive.”

Her eyes light with humor as she looks up at me. A wrinkle appears at the bridge of her nose as the full Bennett effect reaches her.

“I’m so sorry.” She laughs. Her lashes fan against her cheeks as she blinks back tears. “I’ll take him with me so you can wash your hands.”

She relinquishes her grip on the towel to hold out her hands, and I’m astounded by her bravery. If that towel slips...

I fight to maintain my composure and not reveal this is the most stressful situation I’ve been in during my adult life. Not the baby. *Her*. She’s one towel slip away from being naked in my living room.

I hand Bennett to his mother and avoid looking at my soiled hands. With one more awkward chuckle, Whitney turns

on her heel and dashes back into the bathroom. Wet footprints slowly evaporate behind her.

My eyes close, and I inhale slowly through my nose. As I exhale, I reopen them.

“How about we get ourselves cleaned up before dinner?” I say to the only person left in the room.

A sharp elbow knocks into my thigh. I look down and suck in a startled breath through my teeth.

“I’m all cleaned up.” Lucy has her chin tilted to me, her pink shirt in a pile by her feet, and a brown streak on her forehead disappearing into her hair.

At least her tears stopped.

I wince. “C’mon, kiddo. Looks like you have a little mess in your hair.”

I guide her into the laundry room just off the hallway to the garage. She waits patiently while I wash my hands in the sink. *Twice*. Just in case the first time isn’t thorough enough. I like to think of myself as a brave guy who’s solid in a crisis. I help take care of dirty dogs. But back there? That was something else.

With clean hands, I hoist her up onto the counter and instruct her to lay with her head over the edge of the sink so I can wash her hair. I fetch a fresh towel from the dryer and drape it over her body so she doesn’t get cold.

The water temperature is warm where I test it against my wrist before I get to work lathering her hair. Lucy’s quiet while I concentrate, but her brown eyes never leave my face. I feel her studying me as I drizzle the blue dish soap along her hairline and gently massage the suds into her short strands.

“I have to rinse now. Can you close your eyes?”

Without hesitation, she squeezes them shut tight. The trust she’s placed in me feels precious and undeserved.

As my fingers rinse the suds, I can’t help but wonder when’s the last time someone other than Whitney cared for her. Does she have grandparents? Family friends? She

mentioned an aunt. I wonder if they're close. Does she have other adults in her life to spend time with?

My thoughts shift to my own family. The big group. My twin brother, Jude, who I'd give my life for. My brother Lee and his girlfriend, Juniper. Juniper's brother, Lincoln, who lives with them. Corjan, Bree, and their new baby, Charlotte. Cortney and her son, Oliver, and the guy she's been dating, although I don't have a good enough read on him yet. The youngest, Aiden, who hasn't quite grown up yet despite being in his thirties but still manages to show up for all the important events. And Mom. The glue that holds us all together. The one who picked us up when we needed someone most and brought us into her home.

Even at my loneliest times, the lowest points in my life, I was never truly alone. I always had Jude.

Then I had the Powells.

They're my people. My found family.

I can't help but wonder who Whitney has. Or if she and her kids have anyone at all.



WHITNEY

ISLAM to a stunned halt and cock my head. Lucy sits in the recliner, wrapped in a fluffy gray towel with her coloring book on her lap. Her short blond strands hang damp around her face.

“You washed her hair.”

Jack swipes a towel over the corner of his couch. I wince.

“She might need a full bath, but I took care of what I could in her hair. Her shirt’s soaking in the laundry. The sheets were done, so I started a new load. If you want to throw Bennett’s dirty clothes in there, just lift the lid and toss ‘em in,” he says without lifting his head.

For a minute, I don’t move. I’m not sure I remember how to. Bennett yanks a strand of my own damp hair, and the sharp pain on my scalp spurs me into action. I turn stiffly and walk into the laundry room to do as Jack suggested.

The only movement when I return is Jack cleaning his couch.

“I’m sorry about all this.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He dabs the stain once, then again, before standing and looking down at the dark, wet leather with a furrow in his brow.

“Can you clean it?” I ask nervously.

“I don’t think so.” He shrugs his shoulders and walks past me with the dirty towel in his hand. The water runs from the laundry sink, I’m assuming to wash his hands, and he returns empty-handed.

“I’ll buy you a new one.”

Half of his mouth quirks into a smirk. “You want to buy me a couch?”

My heart punches my rib cage. “Yes. I’ll replace it as soon as I can.”

“Your offer comes from a good place, but I’m not going to let you do that.”

An unexplainable panicky feeling rises within me. “I’ll give you some money, then. Maybe a professional cleaner can take care of it.”

Jack steps closer. Close enough I need to tip my chin up to catch his gray eyes. “Breathe, Whitney.”

“I am breathing,” I snark back.

He nods once. “It’s just a couch.”

“I—”

“I can buy a new one. I can buy ten new couches. It’s not a problem.”

I roll my bottom lip between my teeth. “I feel really guilty.”

“You shouldn’t.” He lifts his hand between us, and for a moment, I think he’s going to touch me, but then he lets it fall limp at his side. “My family owns a dog rescue. I’m not sure if you knew that. I take in a foster to work on behaviors a couple of times a year. More than once, I’ve ended up with messes or the dog chewed the absolute shit out of something necessitating a replacement.”

“Are you saying my children and I are like dogs?” I quirk an eyebrow.

He rolls his tongue around the inside of his cheek, biting back a laugh. “You are a little like a stray right now, huh?”

“Watch yourself, Powell,” I gasp in fake outrage.

“You said it, not me.” He swipes his hand through the top of his hair and turns his head away. “So no, I don’t need you to replace the couch for an accident that happened on my watch. I don’t need you to pay to replace anything in here at all.”

Little does he know I already have an envelope with a few bills I plan to leave behind to replenish the groceries we eat.

I open my mouth to respond, but a beeping sound from the kitchen spoils my retort.

“That’ll be the lasagna.” He leaves the room to silence the noise.

Swallowing down the last ounce of guilt, I gather my kids and follow.

Jack has pulled plates and is cutting the lasagna into huge squares by the time I get Lucy seated. A fresh shirt has replaced the towel she was wearing. The sparkly unicorn horn on her chest throws lights onto the table from the overhead chandelier. The smell of warm tomatoes, garlic, and basil permeates the kitchen, and my stomach growls.

“Can I help with anything?”

Jack turns around with two plates in his hands. He jerks his head toward a chair. “Sit. I got it.”

What am I to do but obey? I’m dead on my feet after not sleeping last night, and I can’t lie, the food smells divine. I can’t remember the last time I ate a meal I didn’t have to cook. Without a complaint, I sag into the nearest chair.

DINNER WAS AN UNEVENTFUL AFFAIR. A first since my little family returned to Fairview Valley. Jack dished the food, served the plates, and promptly plucked Bennett out of my arms before ordering, “Eat,” and sat down in his own chair. Our forks scraping against the ceramic plates serenaded us through our Italian cuisine.

Before I could even finish my final drink of water, Jack had our plates rinsed and loaded in the dishwasher. All the while holding my son and only using one hand to accomplish his tasks.

“I should go.” He gazes out the kitchen window where the sun has long since set. His reflection is clear, his brows dipped in a concentrated furrow.

How he can even see outside, I’m not sure. From my position, all I can see is darkness beyond the glass.

“I’m sorry for keeping you.”

He moves from the window and settles Bennett back on my lap. I watch as he disappears down the hallway.

“Where are your keys?” he calls, then reappears wearing a thick black winter coat. He drags on heavy-duty gloves. “I want to put your car in the garage before I go.”

“They’re on the hook by Lucy’s jacket.”

I’m not sure why, but I follow him into the hall. I should probably lock the house when he goes. At least that’s what I tell myself. Bennett feels like a brick in my tired arms, but I don’t set him down. Almost like his little eighteen-pound body is a shield.

A blast of icy air hits us when Jack opens the door to the garage. I watch from the entrance, listening to the whirr of the motor raising the door. Higher and higher, revealing more snow as it goes before the white gives way to darkness and fat snowflakes blowing sideways in the frigid wind.

“Shit,” I mumble.

“Fuck,” Jack says.

He doesn’t look back at me as he walks forward and picks up a shovel leaning against the wall. As he begins clearing the driveway, the shovel scrapes against the asphalt and ice beneath the powdered snow.

The snow nearly reaches his knee by the cars, but some areas have already started to form drifts from the high winds.

He battles his way into the storm with his chin tucked tight to his chest.

This is bad. Worse than I could have imagined. The temperatures have to be nearly twenty degrees below freezing. The winds are causing whiteout visibility. Even if Jack's SUV can handle the twenty-minute trek back to the motel, it's dangerous. There's no way of knowing what kind of ice lies beneath the thick layer of snow. He could slide off the road and be stuck until morning.

Or worse.

If something happened to him, I'd be liable.

After all he's done for us today, I don't think my heart could take the guilt.

Not to mention, it's just stupid to go out in these conditions.

I return to the house and gently lay Bennett in the portable crib with his teething ring. Lucy plays at the table with her dolls, her hair still drying from where Jack cleaned what I assume to be Bennett's mess from the strands.

Yes, he really has done more than enough for us.

I don my winter coat and yank the hood high on my head. The edges obscure most of my face. Tucking my arms around myself since I still don't have gloves, I step into my boots and trek back outside.

Jack's cleared another few inches. At this rate, he'll be shoveling all night.

"Jack!" I call loudly to be heard over the whip of the wind.

He straightens sharply, picking up the shovel as if he's ready to run with it or chuck it off to the side. "What's wrong?"

The wind batters my jacket as I step out from the shield of the garage. "You should stay."

"This isn't that bad. I can leave."

The numbness creeping into my fingers and toes calls *bullshit*.

“It’s not worth it. It’s too dangerous.”

The way he searches my face adds warmth to my cold skin. “I’ll take it easy.”

I step closer. “Jack. Please.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. I’m a bit selfish sometimes, and I don’t want to be alone here in case the cold bursts one of your pipes or the power goes out.” The lie passes easily through my cold lips.

His tongue rolls around his cheek. Those brows dip low over silver eyes that study my face. Maybe he wants to leave. Maybe the thought of being trapped here with my kids and me is enough to send him hightailing it out in the middle of a freaking blizzard, safety be damned—

“Fair enough. I wouldn’t want you to be alone to deal with that either.”

I rock back on my heels. “So you’ll stay?”

“If you want me to, I will. But you and the kids are staying put. I’ll sleep in the living room.” He walks steadily back to the garage.

If the cold hadn’t pinkened my cheeks, they’d pale as realization dawns. “You can’t sleep on your couch. It’s ruined.”

A heavy, gloved hand wraps around my shoulder. He dips his head. “Don’t worry about it. I want you to go in there and get yourselves settled. You had a rough night and a stressful day. I’ll finish up out here and be in. Okay?”

I gaze at him, a little stunned.

“Whitney?”

“Okay.”

He smirks.

I scamper back through the growing mound of snow into the warmth of the house. The sensual tilt of his lips plays in my mind.

The kids are right where I left them, so I drag my phone from my pocket and find Alice's name in my call log.

"You must really miss me. Three calls in two days," she says in an annoyingly cheerful voice rather than a greeting.

"You are never going to believe the last twenty-four hours I've had."

"Are you okay?"

Yes. No. I don't freaking know.

"I'm going to talk, and for however long it takes me to get it all out, I need you to keep quiet and do your best not to judge me."

She scoffs. "As if I ever would."

"Let's see. I'm currently riding out a blizzard at the house belonging to the owner of the motel I was staying at because Bennett cried so much last night the other guests thought I was abusing him, so they called the cops on me, and I just went outside and told that man, the same one I had a crush on in high school, that he doesn't have to make the treacherous drive back to the motel and he can stay here. With us. In his house. With him. During a massive blizzard."

"Shit, Whitney, that's a lot to unpack."

"Why am I like this?" I moan and run my hand over my eyes.

"What? Brave? Kind? Understanding?"

"I feel a whole lot of selfish."

"Selfish would be making him drive back when it's unsafe to do so just so you don't have to feel uncomfortable. Is he trustworthy?"

My thumbnail tears between my teeth. "I mean, I doubt he's a serial killer."

“Is he hot?”

Now, it’s my turn to scoff. “Didn’t you hear my story? I haven’t had the time to even consider his looks.”

“So he’s hot.” She laughs. “It’s okay to find another man attractive, Whitney. It’s not like Devon will rise from the dead and be mad about it.”

Alice’s warped sense of humor makes me smile a little, but I suspect she refuses to acknowledge the deep wounds she hides beneath her exterior.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s one night, and he’ll be out of here tomorrow once the roads are plowed.”

The door to the garage swings open.

“I have to go. I’ll call you soon.”

“Sleep well.”

A well-timed yawn stretches my voice. “I will. Bye.”

I end the call and shove my phone in my pocket.

“Is Bennett asleep? I just need to grab a change of clothes, and I’ll get out of the way.”

My hand flutters between us. “No, it’s fine. I wasn’t sure if you needed anything so I haven’t put them to bed.”

He jerks his head at the hall. “Come on.”

I follow instinctually without placing any consideration on his demand. Happy baby sounds come from the portable crib when we enter the bedroom. Sure, now Bennett’s content. Where was this version of my son last night when he was screaming the motel down?

Jack crosses the room to the dresser and yanks out a pair of gray sweatpants and a navy-blue tee shirt. The clothes remain in the crook of his elbow as he rounds the bed to the nightstand and picks up a remote.

“This one here, click the light bulb if you need a little extra light at night.” He demonstrates. A yellow glow emits from beneath the king-sized bed. “It should be enough if you need

to change a diaper or give Bennett a bottle. I used it a lot when my niece was over this last weekend.”

“How old is your niece?”

“She’s about four weeks old.”

“Oh wow, a little one.”

“Yeah. Her parents had some work to take care of out of town.” He shrugs one shoulder. “She didn’t do much except sleep, eat, and drool.”

The smile on my face feels brittle through the gentle ache in my stomach. It wasn’t that long ago Bennett was a tiny newborn. “It won’t be long before she’s a little more active.”

Pieces begin to fall into place. Jack’s gentle and protective nature comes from experience.

“She’s Bree’s and Corjan’s. Maybe you’ll run into them while you’re in town.”

Guilt slams like a sledgehammer into my mood, shattering it. I haven’t spoken to my high school best friend in over ten years, and while our separation felt natural, we both ghosted the other. I have no clue how she feels about me now.

“I’d love to see her.”

Another yawn hits me hard. Jack’s eyes soften at the corners.

“There’s a lock on the bedroom door from the inside. When you and the kids feel settled, go ahead and lock yourselves in for the night.”

“I-I’m sorry if I gave you the impression—”

“Whether or not you think I bite doesn’t mean you shouldn’t take every precaution to avoid my teeth.”

“Noted.”

His eyes rove over my face. “Sleep well, Whitney. You’re safe here.”

For some reason, I believe him. But I don’t think I’m worried about my safety.

My heart? That's an entirely different matter.



JACK

“I DIDN’T MEAN IT, please stop!”

My sobs fall on deaf ears. I crouch in the corner of the bedroom with my hands over my ears to block the sound of the belt whooshing through the air. Despite the way I cower and curl in on my small frame, my eyes never leave Jude’s where he stands stoically in the center of the room. His back receives the punishment for us both.

“Please don’t hurt him!”

“Jack, be quiet!” Jude shushes me and squeezes his eyes shut as the belt lands across his back again. His lips move silently, mouthing words I can’t hear.

I JOLT AWAKE. The dream evaporates slowly like a dense fog in the morning. It takes me a moment to remember where I am. The recliner in my living room to be precise. A door closing is audible just above the howling wind outside the window behind me.

I drag my palm over my face, pushing away the remnants of the dream.

Memory.

Cooper stares at me from his bed. I signal with my head for him to follow, and he steps behind me as I walk to the dark kitchen, searching for coffee. The coffee pot on the counter is set and ready. All I need to do is press start, and the fuel for my morning begins to brew.

I let him out for his morning business. Fat white flakes drop from the black sky. He jumps over a snow drift on the patio to reach the backyard, and I leave the door cracked so he can push his way back in when he's finished.

I'm not sure where things stand with Whitney this morning, but judging by the snowfall in my backyard, I have a feeling we'll be spending the day in this house. At least until the plows clear the roads.

While I wait for my drink, I grab my phone off the charger on the counter and check in with my family. Starting with my twin, Jude.

“Jack.”

Tension creeps from my bones at hearing his voice. “Morning. How's everything out your way?”

“Shit. As expected. The dogs can barely stand to be out there in this fucking cold. Except Ashe. She loves this shit.” It makes sense the big Samoyed loves the snow.

“You need anything? Got enough food?”

“First off, I'm going to guess wherever you are, you're stuck there, so I don't know why you're offering. Second, I'm all set.”

“I'm offering because you hardly ever get your ass off that fucking plot of land.”

Jude lives at the Sanctuary and is the primary caretaker of the rescue dogs.

Cooper nudges open the sliding glass door and emerges covered in white powder. The icy air chases him inside. I round the counter and close the door behind him.

“You worry about as bad as Mom.”

Closing my eyes, I inhale deeply, taking his comment without a retort. The way I promised myself I would take all his shit the way he used to take beatings for me as kids.

Even though we're twins, I was always smaller than Jude. He had bulk where I had height. He was solid, and I was lanky and long. And he figured out really quick that I couldn't handle the belt the way he could. It hurt more against my skinny frame. It took me longer to recover.

Our parents were more than eager to beat Jude in my place and watch how it tormented me mentally. They'd pit us against one another. He'd take my punishment, but if I cried, he'd get more lashings. They'd hit him and ask if I was done being a pussy, and if any sound escaped my mouth, they'd hit him again. And again.

Eventually, I learned to control my emotions. By then, I'd reached puberty. My muscles filled out, and when I wasn't the skinny little boy anymore, when I was tall and strong, I got us the fuck out of there. I swore I'd never let Jude down again.

That means I help out at the Sanctuary when he needs me, I pick up groceries for him when he doesn't feel like driving into town, and I check in with him when the weather's bad or he's sick. And it means that he can say whatever the fuck he wants to me, and I let him get away with it. Even when he's being a fucking dick.

“Have you heard from anyone else yet?”

“Last I heard, everyone else was home last night and staying put. The only person driving around in this shit was you.”

“I didn't.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I'm still at my house.”

“With the girl?” Humor laces his voice.

“Yeah.”

A silent beat pulses through the line.

“How’d that happen?”

“She thought it was too dangerous to drive through.” I scrub the back of my heated neck.

“Good,” he says gruffly.

“Do you want to share with me why that would be good?”

“Nah. Just glad you’re safe, brother.”

I check the time on the microwave clock. *Six fifty-five.*
“Me too.”

We hang up a few minutes later. I busy myself whipping up a batch of pancakes and make another call.

“Isn’t it a little early to call your mother?” she answers on the second ring.

“I’m awake and wanted to see how you’re holding up.”

“I’ll tell you the same thing I told Lee and Jude when they both called half an hour ago. *I’m fine.*”

A warm smile twitches my lips. Lee will drop anything and come if you call. Jude checks in on us to reassure himself we’re all fine. And I like to think of myself as the most protective of the bunch. Nobody messes with my family. Not even the fucking weather.

“Your knee okay? You know it acts up with the cold, and I don’t want you to overdo it and fall when the roads are this bad.”

“It’s fine, sweetheart. Oliver and Lincoln are over to keep an eye on me so I don’t get into too much trouble.”

“Good,” I grunt and focus on pouring the batter onto the hot pan to avoid issuing more instructions. “If the roads clear up, I’ll be over later to plow your driveway and sidewalk.”

“What do you think the boys are here for?” I can hear the smile in her voice. “They’ve already been given stern instructions to handle all that.”

“It sounds like you’re in good hands.”

She hums. “And it sounds to me like you already have your hands full, so don’t worry about me.”

My mouth runs dry. I drink a mouthful of my coffee and use the lull to flip the pancakes.

“Jack?” Mom calls.

“I’m here,” I mutter.

I swear I can fucking *hear* the twinkle in her eyes. “Thought I lost you for a second.”

“Must be a bad connection.”

“Well, now that you know I’m as fine as ever, I’ll let you go get on with your day.”

If I were home alone, I’d argue and keep her on the line, fill the dead air with bullshit to chase away the loneliness I know she feels ever since Dad died. But I have a tall stack of pancakes, and the driveway isn’t going to shovel itself.

We say our goodbyes a moment later, and after I twist off the burner, I find myself standing in front of the door to my bedroom.

Three soft raps of my fist against the door break the silence in the house.

“Whitney,” I say low, beneath my breath.

The door opens just a crack. A thin strip of light illuminates the floor of my bedroom. Stuttered breath leaves my lungs as she opens the door fully and steps through, nearly bumping into my chest.

“Sorry, I don’t want to wake them.”

All I can do is stare. My jaw fights against falling open. Whitney’s always been gorgeous in a way I never allowed myself to ruminate on. But sleep rumped? She’s downright sexy.

Wisps of that golden-blond hair hang loose around her face. Straight and soft-looking. I wonder how it’d feel to sift my fingers through the strands. How it’d feel in my fist while I kissed her. How it’d tickle my chest.

An exhale clears away the forbidden thoughts.

She's my guest. No different from the ones staying at the motel. In all my years as the owner, I've not once taken up an offer to hook up, and there have been plenty. Bachelorette parties and wedding guests being the most likely to slip a phone number across my desk.

I usually tuck them in my pocket and pretend there might be a chance. Then when they walk away, I throw it in the trash. The illusion is usually enough to keep my customers happy.

I should treat her similarly. Not ogle her in the early morning after waking her from a much-needed sleep.

"Sorry." My voice is rusty. Clogged with compliments marinating on my tongue that I keep to myself.

She crosses her arms over her chest. The move raises the hem of her oversized tee shirt to mid-thigh. "It's okay. I was already awake."

"Early riser?" I cock a brow.

"When you have kids, you get used to their routines." She glances at the door behind her. "They must have needed the sleep more than I thought."

I nod, then clear my throat awkwardly of all the things I have no right to say. My gaze drifts lower naturally, reaching the expanse of her shapely legs. I startle and yank it up.

"I just wanted to tell you I made pancakes. There's extras for you and the kids."

Her pretty lips part in surprise. "That was nice of you."

I scratch my cheek, suddenly feeling like my skin is the wrong fit. "I'll be outside clearing snow if you need anything. Help yourself to anything around the house. There are blankets in the hall closet if anyone is cold. Feel free to eat and watch TV. I'm sure I'll be a couple of hours."

"I'll keep them contained," she says.

"I'd rather you were comfortable and made a mess."

Her nose wrinkles across the bridge. “I think Bennett has done enough of that.”

“Might want to double diaper that kid.”

She laughs, and I find myself grinning at seven in the morning like a damn fool.

I quickly wipe the smile away.

“Anyway, I’ll be just out there.” I hook a thumb dumbly over my shoulder. “Shout if you need anything.”

A sleepy smile tugs on her lips. “I probably won’t, but thanks for the offer.”

I turn on my heel and leave before any more dumb things find their way out of my mouth.

EVEN BENEATH THICK CHOPPER MITTENS, numbness pricks my fingers. The feeling in my toes disappeared about half an hour ago despite wearing wool socks. The ice hidden under the layers of thick powdered snow crackles beneath my boots. The roads remain unplowed. White stretches as far as I can see, not another living thing in sight, and based on the five-foot snow drift at the end of my driveway, I doubt anyone will be out for hours.

This blizzard is insane. I’ve cleared nearly my entire driveway over a couple of hours, yet a new layer already clings to the ice. The path from the front of the house to the back patio is also finished. I managed to start both vehicles and move them into the garage out of the elements. This way, when either one of us is ready to leave, we won’t have to clear the snow off them again. By the looks of things, we might even be stuck here for another night.

I wonder if Whitney will regret asking me to stay once I tell her.

It can’t be later than ten in the morning, and we’ve been in one another’s presence for all of five minutes, but the

revelations I had in those five minutes will be hard to ignore once I go back inside.

One, she's pretty. And my stupid eyes can't seem to get the message to stop fucking staring at her.

Two, she's on her own. And I'm not the type of man to sit around and not help. Hence the pancakes, the dinner, the shoveling, helping clean up her kids, and just about anything else she might or might not ask of me today.

Usually, my initiative isn't a problem, but I have this feeling. Foreign and persistent. A little voice whispers in the back of my head that I'm enjoying this. That I like helping with Lucy and holding Bennett for her. I like granting her a reprieve when she doesn't ask for one and doesn't expect it.

And at the same time, I want to kick my own ass for teasing at something that can never be. I've never been about that life. The family man. Not a bone in my body has ever been interested.

Swirls of snowflakes whip my cheeks, reminding me it's time to head inside before frostbite sets in. I pull my hat low on my forehead. I tow the snowblower back into the garage and lean the shovel against the wall until the next round falls, and I return to do this all over again.

Then I roll my shoulders and prepare to step inside to the unknown that waits there, doing my best to douse these sudden flames of interest.



WHITNEY

A HOWL of wind accompanies the sound of the door creaking open. My heart leaps straight to my throat, bracing for what news Jack might bring. I've put on fresh clothes and brushed my hair and teeth since he woke me a few hours ago. The taste of maple syrup still lingers faintly in my mouth.

“Whitney?” His gentle voice precedes him around the corner. His skin is stained pink from the cold. His brown hair a tousled mess atop his head from his knit hat.

“Hi,” I greet cautiously. Not being in control of my situation has a current of nerves sizzling beneath my skin. The anticipation of not knowing what he's about to say and how I'm going to react to it produces a solid rock of uncertainty in my stomach. “How is it out there?”

He runs his long fingers through his damp hair. “Not good. Everything is coated in ice, and the drifts are about five feet high in some places.”

“Have the plows been around?”

“No. And I'm sorry to say that since we're so far out, we'll probably be one of the last ones.”

“It's okay.” A tired smile stretches my face. “As long as you're okay with us being here.”

He steps farther into the room, stopping about ten feet away. His brow knits low on his forehead. "I wouldn't have offered if I wasn't."

Right. *Stop beating his generosity to death.*

Before I can think of something else to say, he jerks his head to the right and says, "I'm going to clean up and stay out of your way."

I open my mouth to argue, but he turns around. My eyes trace his build. The way his jeans hug his ass simmers heat low in my belly. Jack always did have a fine ass. Round enough to give him some shape without being too big. It looks firm beneath his clothes.

Hormones spring to life after years of lying dormant. I shake my head to rid myself of the thoughts and rock the recliner Bennett and I sit in. Blame the thoughts on the fact I haven't had sex since the night Bennett was conceived and choke down the guilt that comes from wanting to embrace my sexuality.

Memories surface about all the times I was to be there for Devon's needs. To open my legs even if I didn't feel like it or if I was tired of being touched by the kids all day and just wanted to have some time to myself. The way he'd argue that I didn't understand what it was like to be a testosterone-filled male. As if women aren't sexual too.

He made me feel like I was his to do with as he pleased, all without caring what I might require in return.

I can't blame myself for admiring Jack's ass.

Hoisting Bennett on my hip, we wander into the kitchen in search of something for lunch. Jack took care of both dinner last night and breakfast this morning, so I haven't even had the opportunity to see what he has in his pantry. After all he's done for us, I'd like to make him a meal. Still, I feel like I'm invading his space as I peer in the fridge. An anxious ember burns in my stomach.

The refrigerator is stacked. He certainly prepped well for this blizzard. The shelves are teeming with food. Fresh

produce, beverages, yogurt, eggs, and thawed meats ready to be cooked. The options are endless.

With one hand, I drag out ingredients for a frittata. Something fresh and light but easy enough with a baby attached to my hip. I can't use the portable crib because Jack will need his room after his shower.

I get to work whisking eggs and chopping veggies, letting Bennett crawl around my feet. I startle when Jack comes around the corner. He's wearing sweats and a tee shirt, extending his cell phone to me.

"I'm sorry," he mouths.

My eyes drop to the black rectangle as if he's holding a live grenade.

"I tried to tell her it's a bad time."

"Who?" I whisper back.

He runs his tongue along his bottom lip. "Bree," he says quietly.

A jolt of adrenaline spikes through my system. I gingerly pluck the phone from his fingers as if it has teeth and bring it to my ear.

"Hello?"

"Oh my god, it really is you!" Bree shouts in my ear. Her enthusiasm tamps down my nerves.

"It really is." I laugh and stare unseeing at the green vegetables on the cutting board.

"How are you? What are you doing back in town?"

"How did you know I was here?" I eye Jack. Has he been talking about me to his family? I can't imagine he'd have anything good to say based on the past twenty-four hours.

She had the cops called to my motel, kept up my guests, and her little guy shit all over me and my couch. Oh, and she's hogging my bed!

He quirks his eyebrow back at me.

“Oh, you know how it is. Jack mentioned to Jude he was helping out this single mom, and those Powell boys gossip like a bunch of old ladies at brunch, minus the cackling. Corjan told me he heard it was someone named Whitney, and I was like, ‘*Whitney Brewer? No way!*’ so I had to call Jack and ask.”

“It’s me.” I sigh. “My return to town has been eventful, to say the least.”

“It sounds like it! And stuck with Jack in a snowstorm, you poor thing. If he gives you any trouble, just stick him out in the snow until he shapes up. The cold would do him some good.”

“I don’t think I could get him through the door.” I grin.

“It would be fun to try.” She giggles, and suddenly, we’re seventeen again at a sleepover and plotting our future as sisters-in-law.

My stomach flips.

“Anyway, I wanted to ask you to come out for a drink with me after this snow clears up. I was thinking Friday night at The Rocks.”

“Oh. That’s really nice of you, but I have kids, and it’s just me here.”

“I know you have kids, Whit. I told you those boys gossip. I have a fantastic babysitter who’d be more than happy to watch them for us for a couple of hours.”

“I—” Before I can decline again, she cuts me off.

“It’d be great to see you, and this way you can meet her too so if you ever need a night off, you’ll have someone to call.”

What’s the harm? A night off sounds nice, and I don’t know when I’ll get another opportunity. Plus, without Alice here, it’d be nice to establish an old friend in town. And I’ve missed Bree.

“Okay. I think that sounds great, but let’s make it next week. I need a little bit more time to get settled in.”

“You’ll come?”

I lean down and brush my palm against Bennett’s soft sandy hair. “I can give you my number, and you can text me the address and time.”

“I can’t wait. Give me back to Jack, and I’ll text you.”

I rattle off my number, and once she reads it back, I pass the phone to Jack. A smirk lingers on his lips before he turns without a word and disappears around the corner.

Something else to look forward to joins my mental checklist.

Job? Check.

House? Working on it.

Friends? *Check.*

Returning to Fairview Valley might not be so bad after all.

LUNCH WAS AN AWKWARD, quiet affair.

Jack returned from his shower, damp hair pushed back off his forehead, just as the frittata was ready. Once again, he held Bennett. We ate in mostly silence, punctuated by stilted bits of conversation.

Did you and Bree make plans?

Yep, we’re going out next week.

Great.

The minute Lucy finished, I put Bennett down for a nap, bundled Lucy in her winter gear, and took her to play outside. By the time we returned from our freezing trip into the icy cold, Jack had disappeared, so Lucy and I decided to join Bennett for a nap.

I rouse sometime later to silence. The room is black from the early sunset and heavy curtains. If I didn’t have a clock, I could convince myself it was midnight and just stay in bed.

This awkward dance can only take place for so long before it becomes obvious we're avoiding one another, and as the guest, I think it's my place to break the ice.

"Lucy?"

Rustling comes from Bennett's portable crib. A moment later, his breathing evens out in sleep. I reach across the expanse of the king-sized bed, fingertips stretching to the other side, but come up empty.

"Lucy?" I call louder. My feet hit the hardwood with an audible slap. I pass Bennett, checking he's still asleep, and I'm out the door in two seconds. Strands of hair tickle my cheeks as I careen around the corner.

"She's in here." Jack's soft voice sounds from the kitchen.

Rounding the corner, I find them seated at the kitchen table. Bowls of different substances are spread across the surface, too far away for my bleary eyes to make out.

"What's this?" I ask groggily.

Jack scratches his cheek with his thumb. "I think it's called sensory play? I googled things to do with a toddler. She came out and said you were still sleeping. I didn't want to wake you."

Jack set up sensory play with my three-year-old?

I step closer to their space, not wanting to interrupt Lucy's concentration. Sure enough, each kitchen bowl contains a different textured food. Small grains of rice, smooth dry beans, dry spiral pasta, mini marshmallows, what looks like Jell-O, whipped cream, and even a bowl of fresh snow.

"How long has she been out here?"

Jack checks the clock on the stove. "About an hour. She hasn't moved since I set this up." His response is equally quiet. Something about his deep tenor slips soothingly over my skin.

"You're good at this."

"Hmm?"

I wave a hand between us before gripping my opposite elbow. “This. I spent all day inside with these two, and it would have never crossed my mind to set up something like this.”

His mouth opens and closes as if he’s at a loss for words. He presses his lips into a thin line before cocking a brow. “I’m sure you would have if you were in your own home.”

“Nope.” I grin. A red stain spreads across his cheeks. “Are you blushing?”

Jack turns to the sliding glass door and brushes his index finger across his cheek. “No,” he growls out.

“Must have been the lighting,” I tease.

“Here, Mr. Jack. Hold this one.” Without looking up, Lucy holds out a single dried bean. Jack dutifully extends his palm, and she drops the bean on it, then resumes her play without further instruction.

Jack looks at the bean, then Lucy, then back at the bean before biting back a grin. “Now what?” he whispers loudly.

“I think you’re stuck there,” I stage-whisper back.

“If that’s the case, do you mind grabbing me a...” He falters, glancing at Lucy before looking back up at me. “A b-e-e-r from the fridge?”

“You can say beer in front of the kids.”

Why does his consideration for my kids make my stomach flutter? My tongue swipes against my suddenly dry lips, and I duck my head into the refrigerator a few seconds longer than necessary. The burst of cool air diminishes the flush on my cheeks.

“Your kids, your rules.”

His fingers brush against mine as he takes the bottle from my outstretched hand. My fingers slip through the condensation, cold where they touch the bottle but warm where they touch him.

I withdraw hastily and wipe my palm on my jeans. A glance at the clock reveals it's nearly six. My face scrunches. "I was out for a really long time. I'm sorry about that."

"You needed it."

I puff out a breath. "I did. Do you have anything you need to do? I can take over here."

"Nuh-uh. I'm the designated bean holder. I take this duty very seriously."

I roll my lips to bite back a smile. "In that case, I'll get something started for dinner. Any requests?"

His gaze feels heavy on my back. Not judgmental but watchful. "Help yourself. I shopped indiscriminately."

"I think..." I pause, eyeing the eggs and parmesan in the fridge. I check the cabinet for pasta. "I'm going to make spaghetti carbonara if that's all right with you."

"You're spoiling me. I made you a frozen lasagna and boxed pancakes. You're using my kitchen and ingredients like you're on a cooking show."

I locate a heavy stock pot and fill it with water for the pasta. "After a week of takeout and gas station food, I think I'm in the mood for something real."

"I'm not complaining."

"Mr. Jack." Lucy breaks into the conversation.

"What's up, Luce?"

"Who colored on you, Mr. Jack?"

A clove of garlic slips through my fingers as I watch the two interact.

Lucy traces her fingers along one of the many swirls of black ink on Jack's arm. Her brows furrow in concentration.

"These are called tattoos." Still holding the single bean, he closes his fist and extends both arms for her perusal.

"Do they come off in the bath?"

Jack's laughter is a husky rumble. "No. They don't come off."

Lucy continues tracing. Jack and I both watch her explore his decorated skin. I can't say I blame the girl. I might like to trace those tattoos someday with something other than my finger.

"Ouch." A sharp prick in my left index finger brings my attention back to my hands. A crimson bubble of blood wells from a puncture wound. The knife still clenched in my right fist the culprit.

Jack stands. "What happened?"

"Cut myself." I move to the sink.

"Oh no! Mr. Jack only has reglier bandages." Lucy's distraught observation causes both Jack and I to freeze.

"It's okay, Peanut," I soothe, washing the wound.

Jack appears at my side. "Let me see."

"It's just a little wound."

His huge palm cups my elbow and tugs me closer to him. Close enough for him to bend down and inspect the damage. Warm breath wafts over my fingers, chilling the parts still damp from the faucet and affecting my pulse.

"It's not too bad. I'll grab the first-aid kit."

"Lucy, honey, it's okay." I find her standing on her chair at the table, small hands clenched into tight fists at her sides. She tracks Jack as he returns a moment later, carrying a clear plastic box with a lid.

"Don't worry, Luce. I'll fix your momma right up."

Securing my hand in his grip, he uses the other to dab on an antiseptic. His hands are warm where they wrap around mine.

The steady pulse in my cut serves as a poor distraction. A woodsy scent, reminding me of green pines and oakmoss, holds me captive as Jack works on my hand. Those long

fingers are precise at sticking on the bandage, lingering a second too long as he presses down the final edge.

“There,” he murmurs, eyes flicking between mine and my index finger.

Our hands fall between us.

“You hafta kiss it,” Lucy sniffles.

“Lucy, he’s not going to kiss my finger.”

But my words are left hanging in the balance when Jack ignores them, lifts my limp hand into the void between us, and presses his lips carefully against the fresh bandage with his gray eyes locked on mine.

Surely he can feel the way my pulse races beneath his fingertips. I can only hang on and pray the hitch in my breath isn’t audible.

“Better?”

“Y-yes.”

He straightens but doesn’t immediately release my hand. He twists his neck. “Better, Lucy?”

Her attention flickers to me. “Yeah-huh.”

I fight against hyperventilating. “I better finish dinner if we want to eat tonight.”

With a lingering squeeze, Jack drops my hand and returns to the sensory table with my little girl.



JACK

SHE'S SO GODDAMN PRETTY.

The way the light catches her hair makes the strands appear almost like threads of gold. They seem artfully arranged around her face, but I think it's just naturally her. I don't know enough about girly things to tell if she styled it that way on purpose, but I'd guess not. With the way she's had her hands full with her kids and this new adventure, she hasn't even had the time.

I don't even think she knows her allure. The way her jeans hug her curves, wrapping snug around her hips and ass. *Soft. Womanly.* Her body speaks to the most primal parts of me in a way I haven't felt in, *fuck*, who knows how long.

"Jack? Did you hear what I said?"

Her voice drags me back like a siren's song. I blink heavily.

"Hmm?"

"I asked if you have a colander?" She stares at me with a puzzled expression.

"Uh, cabinet to the left of the stove."

"Thanks."

Steam rises from the sink where she drains the pasta. A cry from the baby monitor on the counter infiltrates the sound of her cooking.

“Shoot. Bennett’s up from his nap.”

“I got him.” The legs of my chair scrape loudly against the floor.

His cries grow louder on my way down the hall. With my hand twisting the knob, I send out a silent demand to the universe to please not let the baby be covered in shit again. The meal Whitney is cooking smells fucking delicious, and I know, just *know*, poo-pocalypse 2.0 would ruin my appetite.

I push the door open a crack. A simple sniff test produces nothing out of the ordinary. A cleansing breath fills my lungs with fresh air and a small amount of bravery, allowing me to sweep the door the rest of the way and enter the room.

“Hey, bud,” I soothe gently, moving swiftly to the portable crib pressed along the wall. The wails stop at the sound of my voice. I don’t waste any time before I scoop him up and cradle him against my chest. We’re on our way to his mom in less than ten seconds.

“There she is,” I announce to no one as we return to the kitchen.

Bennett’s eyes are wide and watery as he studies my face in the light. He drops his head and rubs it against my clavicle. I meet Whitney at the edge of the island.

She bends down and kisses Bennett’s forehead. “Hey, baby boy.”

Her proximity brings the scent of her flowery perfume. Bennett’s round fists press tightly to his eyes, and he buries his face in my chest again.

A warmth spreads through me as he stops rubbing his eyes and burrows in, sagging his weight against me. An unusual emotion spreads through my chest. I have the strangest urge to sit in my recliner, flick on the television, and hold him for as long as he’s content.

Since when am I the type of guy who wants to hold babies?

Forcing the foreign sensation away, I settle back into my seat at the kitchen table instead. I help Lucy stack the bowls to make room for dinner while Whitney sets the food out on the table. Once plates and utensils are set, she hovers indecisively between her chair and mine.

“I can take him.”

“Sit.”

She extends her arms toward us. “Really, it’s okay. I’m used to it.”

I level her with an unmovable expression. “Precisely. Sit. Enjoy the meal you just cooked. *With both hands.*”

The breath of air she forcefully releases lifts a strand of hair from where it lies against her flushed cheek.

“Why do you always do that?”

I look up from feeding Bennett a limp piece of pasta. “Do what?”

“Hold him while we eat.” She talks to the plate she’s filling for Lucy rather than meet my eye.

“Do you remember my sister, Courtney? She’s a single mom too. I remember her coming over to a family dinner when her son, Oliver, was just a baby. She was running late and had rushed in with her hands filled with the diaper bag and the car seat. When she sat at the table, she burst into tears and said, *I just want to eat a meal with both hands.* I’d never thought of that before, but I never forgot it. I think we all tripped over ourselves to take Oliver from her.” The corner of my lips twitches at the memory.

“Who won?”

“What?”

“Who was the first one to take Oliver from her.”

“Jude.”

She fills her own plate and settles into her chair with a soft look in her eyes. “I would have guessed Corjan.”

“Not a bad assumption. Up until Bree left him, he would have been first to offer. After that, he almost looked pained anytime he was tasked with holding Oliver.”

With everyone else served, I dish myself last. My mouth waters at the creamy dish waiting to be devoured.

“She left him?”

“Yeah. About a year or so after they’d married.”

“What happened?”

The twirled fork of spaghetti pauses in front of my mouth. “I think that’s her story to tell.”

“I can imagine that was hard. They were pretty serious. I’d never seen two people more in love.”

“We thought the same. But it all worked out in the end.” Done waiting, I shovel my fork in my mouth.

Holy shit.

The flavor explodes on my tongue, and I immediately secure another bite. “This is incredible.”

Whitney’s cheeks flush beneath the glow of the overhead light. “Thanks. It’s something edible I can whip up quick.”

“Babe, just to say, I live off the specials they’re serving down at The Rocks and whatever I manage to cook myself, which isn’t much. This is more than just something edible.”

“It’s easy.”

“Whitney.” I level her with my eyes. “Take the compliment.”

“I’m glad you like it,” she murmurs.

“Do you like to cook?”

Her gaze skates across the table, locking on the room beyond my shoulder. “I enjoy it sometimes.”

There's more she isn't saying. Otherwise, she could look me in the eye while saying she doesn't always feel up to it.

Does she feel guilt over not always wanting to be the one serving a meal? I don't think as a society we appreciate the mental effort that goes into planning three meals a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. An effort that falls disproportionately on women and mothers.

"You're good at it. But I'll tell you right now, if there wasn't several feet of snow outside, I'd be happy with takeout too."

Her mouth drops open, then closes as if she can't come up with something to say. I fill the silence for her.

"Meaning, if your kids will eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and you're happy eating one too, don't feel like you need to make something spectacular like this just because I'm here. You don't owe me."

When her eyes turn glassy, I almost wish I could take the words back. Except I feel deep down inside that she probably needed to hear them.

Her water glass knocks against her plate as she picks it up. I wait patiently for her to finish her sip.

"Do you really think it's spectacular?" She presses her lips into a tight line but not before I notice the bottom one tremble. And that fucking breaks my heart.

"Best damn thing I've eaten this year."

"Thank you."

"Just to say it'd be a goddamn blessing to get to eat this food on the regular."

"Thank you."

I ignore the hoarse quality in her tone. "You're welcome, Whitney."

Moments pass, marked by the clink of silverware and porcelain.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to give the kids a bath after dinner.”

“Help yourself. There are fresh towels beneath the sink in the bathroom.”

She moves to stand, but I stop her with a hand on her forearm. The warmth of her skin seeps into my fingertips. “I got it. I’ll clean up so you can take care of your kids.”

I hand her Bennett and set out to clear the table.

Twenty minutes later, the dishwasher is loaded, and the leftovers are put away, waiting for me to sneak a second helping later. With the bathroom door tightly closed, I don my winter gear and head outside to clear snow for a second time.

AN ORANGE FIRE crackles in the grate, filling the room with the scent of smoke and charred logs. The leather recliner creaks as I extend my legs and thaw my frozen toes in its warmth. Outside, the storm is letting up. Flakes drift lazily rather than blowing around. This last round of shoveling might have taken care of the bulk of it. I don’t expect more than an inch or two come morning.

I know what I should do. I should wake up early, clear the remainder away, and head to the motel, leaving her here like we originally intended. If the Kramers have checked out, I can give Whitney the option to stay here or return to the motel. Bennett appears to be sleeping fine.

We can revert to virtual strangers. Not two people who shared a house for forty-two hours.

My fingers tighten around the cold beer clenched in my fist.

For some reason, that plan sucks.

Halfway to a frustrated sip, the door to my bedroom creaks open, and I pause with the bottle in front of my mouth. I strain

to listen for little feet sneaking down my hallway like earlier this evening.

“Mind if I join you?” Whitney asks, her voice hesitant and tense.

“Not at all.”

She rounds the couch and sits gingerly on the unsoiled end. The other is covered with a black plastic garbage bag secured with duct tape. A visual reminder of what lies beneath.

I finish that sip I meant to take and rest my bottle on the armrest. “How was bath time?”

She changed into a baggy Arizona State sweatshirt and a pair of black leggings. Fuzzy purple socks pulled to the middle of her shin. Clenching my jaw, I train my eyes back on the dancing flames.

“Uneventful. Thankfully. They’re both sleeping now.”

I nod. “That’s good.”

“Listen, Jack. There’s something I need to say to you. It’s really not that big of a deal, but I couldn’t stop thinking about it while I was getting the kids cleaned up, and I guess the saying it’s better out than in can apply to words, right? Because this thought just isn’t leaving me alone.”

The second she said my name, I focused all my attention on her. I could listen to her nervous babbling for hours, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t intrigued by whatever has her this worked up.

Whitney takes a deep breath. “It’s just that I’m embarrassed. You’ve been more than hospitable and accommodating, and I’ve been trouble since I showed up.”

Maybe I like trouble.

I swallow the words with a sip of beer.

“Your guests complain about me, my kid ruins your couch, you’ve had your hands full with children who aren’t yours, and on top of all of that, I coerced you into staying here. You

could have had a nice couple of quiet days to yourself, and I ruined—”

“You think you coerced me?”

“Didn’t I?”

“How? By bringing up the very real issue of my safety and yours? God forbid the pipes burst or the power went out and nobody could get to you. You presented an argument based on reason. That’s hardly coercion.”

“That still doesn’t change the fact you could have had less chaos.”

“What if I like chaos?” *Shut up, shut up, shut up!* What am I saying? But the dam broke, and I keep going. “Maybe I like holding Bennett so you can get a break, and the homecooked meal, and a little bossy girl who calls me Mr. Jack.”

“Can you just listen? You aren’t helping.”

“Helping what?”

“God, I used to have the biggest crush on you,” she mutters, burying her face in her hands. It isn’t quiet enough to escape my notice.

Things just got interesting.

“Hold on to that thought.”

She gasps, “Wait!”

But I’m already out of my chair. I stop in the hall closet to pull out a couple of blankets and extra pillows, then move to the fridge to grab the rest of the six-pack of beer. Ignoring her confused stare, I arrange the items in front of the fireplace and drop down onto my ass, patting the spot to my right.

Whitney bites the edge of her lips, hesitating for only a moment before she slips off the couch and settles on a pillow across from me.

“Now, let’s start that last part again.”

She picks up a pillow and tosses it at my chest. “You weren’t supposed to hear that.”

“Come on, tell me. What did little Whitney like about little Jack?”

Her gaze trails from my face down my body, forging a path of fire across my skin. “I don’t think you can ever refer to yourself as little. Even back then.”

“Fair enough.” I pop the top off a fresh bottle and hand it to her. “I never knew you had a crush on me.”

“Yeah, well, that’s how I wanted it most days. But sometimes I wished you’d just notice me.”

I huff a laugh. “Is that why you let me catch you naked?”

“I did not let you catch me!” she shrieks, a flush blazing up her neck. “Corjan said nobody was home!”

I roll my tongue over the inside of my cheek and grin. The memory of finding her changing in my bedroom all those years ago flits to the surface.

“It’s not funny!”

“No, it isn’t.” I pick an imaginary piece of lint from my thigh. “The truth is I didn’t notice you. Not in the way you wanted me to.”

“Gee, thanks,” she mumbles, a light flush on her cheeks.

“Hey, it’s not like that. You’re beautiful. But it’d be a little creepy if I found a sixteen-year-old attractive when I was almost twenty-one.”

It’s her turn to laugh, rich and throaty. “Maybe from your perspective, but sixteen-year-old me would have felt so cool.”

“I would have felt like a creep.”

“Yeah.” She leans onto her elbow and sighs. “It’s funny how those things change as you get older and have kids. I can’t imagine what I’d do if Lucy were in that situation.”

“I don’t envy you for that future conversation.”

She clears her throat. “Anyway, you derailed what was supposed to be an apology since you won’t let me repay you for the food or replace your couch.”

“Nope. You have nothing to apologize for either.”

My response is meant to be final, but I nearly choke on air as she wraps her pouty lips around the rim of her beer. Watching her drink is the sweetest form of torture. If this keeps up, I’ll need to place a pillow over my lap like a damn teenager.

“I’ll let it go for now. But don’t forget I live in Fairview Valley now. So there’s hope to repay you in the future.”

“Speaking of, I was going to tell you there’s a house for rent off Third Avenue by the library. I’m not sure if you remember the area. I have no idea what it looks like or what they’re asking, but I thought I’d pass along the info.”

Her annoyed expression clears instantly. “I will definitely check it out. The movers are supposed to show up next week, and it’d be nice if I had a place at least on standby before they got here.”

“I have space if you don’t figure it out by then. The garage has empty shelving and also a finished attic.” I stop talking as she levels me with another glare. Tossing back the dregs of my beer, I pop open another one and say, “Or I’m sure most members of my family can also help you out if you’d rather not get me involved again.”

Whitney huffs and turns her attention to the fire. “I appreciate it. I really do. I guess I’m just struggling with relying on people when the whole point of starting fresh was to do it by myself.”

I swallow hard. The words I want to say roll around on my tongue. “I think one of the most independent things a person can do is realize when they need a little help and not be afraid to ask for it.”

“Says the guy who lives on his own and runs his own business.” She finishes off her own drink, so I hand her another. Our fingers brush.

“You think I’ve done all that without asking for help? My brothers helped me fix the place up.”

“You’re lucky to have them,” she says, her voice soft and delicate.

A silence envelops us. I pick at the label on the bottle in my hands, questions I want to ask bouncing around my skull. “Can I ask you something personal?”

“Sure.”

“What happened to the kids’ dad?”

“I wondered when you’d bring that up. Lucy isn’t exactly subtle when talking about her father.”

“I think it’s great she feels like it’s okay to talk about him.”

Whitney leans a bit closer and wraps her arms around her knees, holding them against her chest. “He died about six months ago, not long after Bennett was born. Had a heart attack in our garage while we were gone visiting his sister. Lucy doesn’t really understand. She knows he’s not here anymore, but I don’t think she grasps the idea of dying. She’ll ask where he is and then remember he’s gone.”

I find myself drawn a bit closer. “How are you holding up?”

She gazes down at her feet. “I’m fine.”

That doesn’t sound right. “Are you trying to convince me or you that you’re fine?”

“I’m trying...” She clears her throat. Her hair falls down her back as she tips her head for a drink. “I’m trying not to sound as guilty as I feel inside.”

“Why would you feel guilty?” I keep my expression blank.

“Because being married to Devon was the biggest regret of my life. I feel terrible that he’s gone, but I also feel a little bit like I’ve been set free. And that makes me a horrible person.”

Her words pummel into me like a round of fists in a boxing match.

“Whitney.” I wait until her attention returns to me. Those honey-colored eyes brim with the guilt she just confessed. I

soften my tone considerably. “I need you to spell it out for me, babe.”

“He was involved in some secret side business. I don’t know if it was drugs or what, but strange men who had nothing to do with his accounting firm came around all the time. Sometimes they’d approach me for money when Devon wasn’t home, and he’d instruct me to give it to them. They’d sit at the curb and watch the house. I was afraid to be alone, but I was also afraid to leave, worried they’d break in while I was gone and be waiting for me inside when I got back.”

I grit my teeth together and attempt to relax my fists. “Did anything ever happen to you?”

She shakes her head, and my pulse eases. “No. They didn’t touch us.”

“Did anyone approach you after he died?”

“No. I guess I assumed that whatever business they had going with him died along with him.”

“I’m so sorry. Sorry I asked, and sorry you went through not only that fear but also losing your husband.”

She laughs a sarcastic, pain-filled sound. “I think I spent so much time mourning the relationship while he was still alive that I was all tapped out of grief by the end.”

Before I can stop myself, I reach over and touch her arm gently with a few fingertips. “Lay it on me.”

Her head jerks back, and her brow furrows. The grief temporarily chased away. “What?”

“I’d say we have about twelve hours left, give or take, before I get out of here and you return to whatever it is you plan to do now that you’re back in town. So lay it on me.” I hold my arms out to the sides. “For the next however many hours, I am your impartial listener. Get it off your chest.”

“It’s embarrassing,” she says in an incredibly small voice.

“Fuck that. It’s only embarrassing if you let it embarrass you. Otherwise, it’s just your past. We’ve all got one, and almost none of them are pretty.”

The depth of her inhale causes her shoulders to rise. “He was so selfish.”

“What else?”

“He called me crazy all the time, and he hated confrontation.”

“Go on.”

“He’d get so defensive if I asked him for help. I don’t think he ever changed Bennett’s diaper. Not once.” Whitney clenches her jaw and looks away. Her slender fingers dent the pillow in her hands. “He didn’t clean or shop or cook.”

Suddenly, she leans forward and tosses the pillow away from her lap. Her eyes shine in the glow of the fire. I can’t help but clock the foot of space between us.

“I took care of everything, and he made it seem like it was my problem.”

I lock eyes with her, fighting against the pull of those honeyed depths. “And who took care of you?”

She licks those lips, a deep pink to match her flushed cheeks, and her eyes flicker to my mouth. “What?”

“You have needs too. Who took care of you?”

“I—” Her breath fans across my face, the remnants of beer and something uniquely her. Fuck, what I wouldn’t give for a taste.

“You did.” I move an inch closer. My hands itch to thread through her hair and show her what she’s been missing. “You took care of yourself, and that’s not right. I’m sorry you had to do that.”

“How much time do we have again?”

“Twelve hours or so,” I answer hesitantly.

“That’s enough,” she mutters. Then she wraps her hand around my neck and crashes her lips against mine.



WHITNEY

HE TASTES LIKE FRESH AIR.

The second coherent thought I muster is that I am finally kissing Jack Powell. Sixteen-year-old me would be so freaking proud.

Jack groans, loud and low in his throat, then his tongue swipes along the seam of my lips, seeking entrance. I part my lips easily, mustering the courage to take what I want because I know this opportunity won't happen again.

He's tender, absorbing my sudden attack like he's been preparing for it, and he wants to slow us down and take his time. His large, warm palm cups my jaw, fingers threading through the hair at the side of my head. His thumb strokes over the apple of my cheek. Soft and delicately as if he's afraid to mar the skin.

Rising on my knees, I pull our torsos closer, needing to feel more of him. My breasts press against his hard chest, and my hand wanders from his neck to feel him there. My fingertips dance hesitantly against him, tracing ridges and lines hidden beneath soft cotton.

His free hand wraps around me, and in a second, he's flipped me over. My back is flat against the blanket, a pillow beneath my head, and Jack hovers over me, all without losing the connection of our mouths.

My lashes twitch against my cheeks as his tongue caresses mine. Dipping and swirling as if he can't get enough of me. Jack kisses like he's resurfacing from a lake, desperate for that first breath of fresh air.

A deep groan rumbles in his chest, vibrating where we're pressed together. His rib cage expands above me. I'm surrounded by him. The arm around my back strokes soothingly up and down my spine as if he can't quite touch me enough.

A gasp falls from my swollen lips as he moves his mouth to my jaw, kissing his way to the sensitive space beneath my ear. His lips part. Wet warmth traces along the same path as he tastes. I arch my neck against the pillow to grant access. He dips his head, leaving devastating kisses on the hollow of my throat.

I slide my fingers from his neck into his hair and grasp the strands. A warmth simmers through me, spreading with each touch of his lips against my skin.

Still holding his body above mine, half twisted on the pillows and blanket, his other hand dips beneath my sweatshirt to skate across my ribs. Long, callused fingers press inward, tracing each bone on his path upward. I suck in a sharp breath as his hand settles on my breast.

“Okay?”

“Yes,” I pant, curving eagerly into his touch.

An amused chuckle leaves his lips. “You have gorgeous tits, Whitney. Too bad all this fabric covers them.”

“Take it off.”

“Mmm.” He traces my collarbone with his tongue. “You might get cold.”

“Then you'll just have to keep me warm,” I gasp.

“I think I'm up to the task.”

His other hand joins the one beneath my sweatshirt, the fabric moving up my stomach and over my breasts. “This his?”

It takes a moment to realize he's talking about my clothes. If my sweatshirt belonged to Devon. "No."

"Good. I already have enough reason to hate him. I didn't need another."

His mouth leaves my skin for the first time since this started in order to peel the garment over my head. He tosses it away without a glance to where it lands.

"Much better."

"Yours too." My fingers curl around the hem of his shirt in a desperate race to see him bare.

His eyes lock on mine. Humor and no small amount of pure arousal swirl in their gray depths. My knuckles brush against his warm skin and the hard planes of his abs as I drag upward, revealing his body to me inch by devastating inch. He tucks his chin to aid me in pulling the shirt over his head. The cotton remains tangled in my fingers as he lowers himself on top of me. Our mostly naked torsos press together.

"You feel so good beneath me, baby."

I drift my fingers lazily along his naked back and nuzzle my face against his pecs.

His mouth drops to the swell of my breasts as his thumb traces my hard nipple over the fabric of my tank.

"Jack," I pant, curling inward as a bolt of arousal spikes through me. My hips roll, seeking friction, but he's still only half on top of me.

"Feel good?"

"Yes!"

"Do you want more? Or should I stay right here, teasing you just like this?" Sure fingers dip into the cup of my bra, and the back of his index finger strokes over my nipple, skin to skin.

"More please."

He groans and sinks his teeth into my breast. "You sound so pretty when you say please."

I open my eyes to see him watching my face as if trying to solve a complicated puzzle. My tank top follows the same path as my sweatshirt a moment later and winds up on the floor.

“I like this.” His finger slips beneath my bra strap, gliding up and down and teasing the elastic down my arm. Bending forward, he drops a sensual kiss on my shoulder.

A flush paints my chest and neck a deep pink, and my insides burn with need. “I-I... Jack, I need...”

The fire casts shadows along the planes and angles of his face. His eyes burn into mine. Still holding my gaze, he dips his head and laves his tongue over my nipple through the lace.

My hands fly to the back of his head. One holds him there while the other grips the long strands on top, unsure if I need to pull him away. I can't breathe with his ministrations. The attention he supplies to one breast, only to switch to the other the moment he stokes my arousal to a boiling point.

I've never been this turned on in my life.

Between my thighs, I'm dripping. A flicker of shame burns bright before I tamp it out. It simply can't be helped, what with how long it's been since I've been touched by someone other than myself.

With a deft flick behind my back, the bra loosens and slides free. Jack pays extra attention to my bared breasts.

Supporting himself on his elbows, he circles both my nipples at the same time with the pads of his thumbs. My breath hitches loudly, and he grins.

“So sensitive.” He lazily laves the right one with his tongue. The tip glistens as he lifts his head.

My hips jerk skyward, my arousal reaching nuclear levels if I don't get some freaking friction going on down there.

Jack's palm slams into my hip, pinning me to the ground. He chuckles darkly. “Hold still, Whitney.”

“Please, Jack,” I whimper, arching and closing my eyes.

The tip of his nose circles my tight peak before he bites down.

“Ah!” I cry out, feeling a delicious clench below.

I didn’t know it could be like this. The buildup. The foreplay. Jack teases my body like a prelude to the main event, knowing exactly what he’s doing to me.

“I’m going to take care of you,” he murmurs against my bare skin.

His lips trace a sultry path down my sternum.

Finally. We’re getting somewhere.

Just as the tip of his tongue circles my belly button, I stiffen. Jack immediately sits back on his heels and sweeps his gaze over me.

“What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing.” I bite my lip and shift my gaze away. Please just let him continue. “Keep going.”

A forearm lands beside my head. I shift my attention back to his face. Except rather than a few feet of distance between us, he’s only inches away. His naked torso hovers above mine.

“Tell me what happened.”

The way I’m panting dries my lips. I lick them to buy time. “I was married.”

He nods once. Sharply.

“I, um, I haven’t done this since before then. And it’s just that *I’ve changed a lot.*”

His dark eyebrows snap together. “What was that?”

“I’ve changed a lot. I don’t *look* the way I used to before I had kids.”

I stop breathing as he drags his gaze slowly down my body to my leggings.

“You do know thinking of you with the body of a teenager doesn’t turn me on, right?”

“I know. It’s just that I’m softer now.”

“That’s what I fucking like,” he growls. His palm settles hot and heavy on my lower stomach, over the pooch that still hasn’t gone away despite Bennett being six months old. The skin hangs a bit loose and round. “This is nothing to hide. It’s gorgeous. Every inch of you.”

My eyes sting with how gentle he’s being.

With a look of concentration on his face, he drops back down to hover above my body and touches his lips to my belly button. My breath catches as he traces a thick stretch mark with a placid fingertip.

“These stretch marks tell a story. So full of meaning and life.” His tongue follows the white jagged blemish along my skin, not stopping until he reaches the top of my leggings. He pays special attention to each one with his mouth, worshipping the lines until I’m a writhing mess beneath him.

He drags my leggings off, parts my thighs, and slips his shoulders between them. The calluses on his fingertips scrape along my calf, slipping along my thigh until he pushes my knee to the ground and pins my leg open wide. His other hand parts the flesh between my legs, running along my wet slit.

“Jack, please,” I gasp, forgetting about my reservations when he’s so close to where I need him.

“Tell me you’re beautiful.”

“W-what?”

A light touch runs from my clit to my entrance. “I’ll give you what you need after you tell me you’re beautiful.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t think anybody taught you.”

A shiver races up my spine. The words tumble around my mouth, heavy and awkward. “I’m beautiful,” I whisper.

“Hmm,” he murmurs, lips vibrating against my stomach. “I’m unconvinced.”

My mouth falls open to protest, but a callused fingertip circles my clit, so all that comes out is a breathy moan.

Abruptly, it stops.

“Jack!”

“Say it again, Whitney. Tell me you’re beautiful.”

His finger moves, poised at my entrance.

I squeeze my eyes shut. “I’m beautiful.”

“Better.” He thrusts in to the first knuckle. “Again.”

“I’m beautiful.”

The finger fully glides in and out, stopping before completing the next inward thrust. “Again.”

“I’m beautiful.” My voice grows stronger.

Two fingers this time, sliding deep and curling up against my inner walls. Jack grunts and drops his forehead to my thigh. “Fuck yeah, you are.” He’s pumping them now, slow and steady, and the wave rises within me. “Say it.”

“I’m beautiful!” I cry out, my legs beginning to tremble.

“So beautiful like this, squeezing my fingers like you’re going to come. Can you take another one?”

I nod against the pillows. “Y-yes,” I nearly sob, twisted so tight I might completely shatter.

Three fingers poise at my soaked entrance. “Whitney,” he growls in warning.

“I-I’m beautiful!” My voice shakes, choking on the words as he plunges all three fingers inside me. “Oh god.”

He watches my face as his pace increases. His gaze is like a hot caress. The inventiveness is a little jarring, if only because I haven’t had it before. Nobody’s looked at me like this while giving me pleasure. Hell, nobody’s even given me this much pleasure, and I haven’t even had an orgasm yet.

As if reading my thoughts, Jack holds down my knee with one elbow and twists his wrist, dragging those three fingertips over a sensitive spot inside that liquefies my bones and pulls

my muscles taut all at once. My eyes roll back and my neck arches, tipping my chin to the ceiling as a ragged cry falls from my lips.

The pressure on my knee disappears only to reappear over my mouth.

“Shh. You don’t want to wake the kids.”

My eyes find his, locking on those molten irises. The desire I feel inside reflects back at me. Jack removes his palm and teases his index finger on the seam of my mouth. Tentatively, I open for him, and he slides the digit inside to settle on my tongue.

His eyes roll back, and he groans. “Can you be quiet, or do I need to fill your mouth?”

My heartbeat pulses throughout my entire body, clenching around his fingers still buried deep. At my hesitance, he lets out a quiet and grated, “*Fuck.*”

“We’ll do that later. Right now, I need to make you come.”

I bite my lip as my body bows, his attention increasing down below. He keeps me spread wide, his hand returning to my knee to keep it pinned to the ground while his shoulder pushes against my other thigh until my calf rests on his broad shoulder.

A flush spreads through me at the obscene sounds his fingers make dragging through the evidence of my arousal. Before I can latch onto the embarrassment, he does something with his fingers that sends a tremor through my legs, and then his warm, wet mouth latches directly over my clit.

I just have the presence of mind to slam a pillow over my mouth and scream his name into it as I detonate like a nuclear bomb—a white flash of light, an explosion, and shock waves are all part of the experience.

Did I just black out? I think I blacked out. My ears hum with my pulse. I throw the pillow off my head, and the glow of the fire returns light to my consciousness.

“J-Jack,” I gasp.

He's still there, his unmoving fingers pressed deep and his tongue lazily circling my clit. Looking between the valley of my heaving tits, I meet his feral gaze.

"Such a pretty girl when you come." Still watching me, he sucks on my clit and swirls his tongue around the swollen bud.

My hips jerk skyward, still restricted by his elbow and shoulder, and my fingers dive into his hair. "I'm too sensitive."

"You're going to give me another."

"I don't think I have another," I pant.

"You gave me twelve hours."

Twelve hours? We established that we had twelve hours. I didn't say he could fuck me for all of them—*Oh!*

"Yeah." He laughs triumphantly. "Your cunt just clamped down on my fingers like a vise at whatever you were just thinking."

It did. It really, truly did. "You're going to kill me."

"What a good fucking way to go."

His mouth returns despite my fingers twisted in his hair, and he begins to *eat*. His talented tongue passes over my clit to lap at the space around where his fingers are buried inside me. The combination of being filled without thrusting and his tongue moving around the sensitive area produces a steady throb between my legs.

He slides his fingers out, and I nearly weep.

My jaw opens to protest the loss when he attacks my pussy with a ferocity I've only ever read about. Lips, teeth, tongue—they all work together. He groans against me, the vibrations only adding to what the rest of his mouth is doing. He plunges his tongue inside, fluttering it deep only to remove it and lick a strip to my clit. Gentle nips and soothing licks accompany the symphony he's directing.

My thighs seize and burn with the need to clench tight around his head. One hand slaps out at the empty space beside me while the other moves to my naked breast. I squeeze and

knead the mound of flesh, then whimper, “I’m going to come again.”

He groans. “Ride my face, Whitney,” he orders gruffly.

I lift my hips to comply, grinding against his mouth and tongue. Shifting between my thighs draws my focus. Jack is propped up on one elbow, his face buried in my pussy, and his other arm moves rhythmically at his waist.

He’s stroking himself. He’s getting off on the taste of me. I don’t know why I find that so hot, but it is, and my body agrees if the wetness spilling from me is any indication.

Knowing he’s enjoying this nearly as much as me brings a heady rush. My fingernails scrape over his scalp as I plunge my fingers back through his hair and drag him hard against me, riding his tongue.

“*Fuck,*” he grunts.

As the waves crash over me, I hold my breath and bite back a scream. My vision reduces to black pinpricks as my pussy throbs in time to my pulse.

I come back to a weight moving up over my chest. Jack looks down at me, his mouth glistening in the fire’s glow. He wipes his chin on his shoulder before nuzzling his nose behind my ear. Blunt teeth tease the lobe, sending another wave of tremors through my body.

“You taste fucking divine.”



JACK

I'VE NEVER FELT this way before in my entire life. The spitting fire is drowned out by a chorus of Whitney's gasps and whimpers playing in my head on a loop. I don't think I'll ever forget the sounds. Despite her hesitation about how her body looks, she let me draw noises from her that most women would shy away from. And the way she rode my face? It makes me want to sit her on top of it and refuse to come up for air until she comes twice more.

She thought I might kill her with pleasure, but this sweet single mom will be the absolute death of me. Twelve hours might not be enough for all I want to do to her. All the positions I want to fuck her in and feel her wrapped around my cock.

A steady palm wrapping tight around said appendage draws the air from my lungs. I grunt and gaze down into a set of liquid honey eyes and a coy smile.

She flutters her lashes. "My turn?"

I lazily catalog her features. The flushed cheeks and bright eyes and fresh-fucked hair. I slide my fingers through, smoothing down some of the wayward strands, and cup her gently beneath her ear. "Nothing is off-limits. I'm all yours for the night."

Her eyes flash heatedly, and I swear she purrs.

I run my thumb along her jaw and brush the pad over those pouty lips about to be wrapped around me. Her tongue darts out to lick my thumb. A bolt of arousal twitches my cock in her palm. She squeezes once before unfurling her fingers to retreat a few feet across the floor where she left her beer.

I watch her sexy naked hips sway as she goes. Overwhelming lust at her gorgeous curves dominate my thoughts.

“Thirsty?” My voice is gritty with arousal.

“You have no idea.” Her eyes darken in the firelight, and her beer bottle thuds against the end table.

I give myself an anticipatory stroke.

She immediately advances a step in response.

I cock an eyebrow. “No, pretty girl. Get on your knees for me and crawl.”

Whitney lowers herself, holding my stare. She leans forward, palms flat on my floor, and I feel my cock jerk. Her breasts point down, those red tips tight, and that little bit of stomach she’s so worried about looks like an enticing handful, creating a delicious crease where it meets her curved hip. If only she knew how badly I want to lick her there, to trace her insecurities with my tongue.

“Slowly,” I demand as she starts to crawl.

“Is this good?” Her voice is breathless yet strong. She knows exactly what she’s doing to me.

“You look like a fucking goddess.”

The corner of her mouth quirks into a smirk.

She reaches my feet and runs her palms up my jeans-covered shins. “You’re wearing too many clothes.”

Watching her, I lift my hips in offering. She doesn’t waste any time curling her fingers beneath the band at my hips and yanking them off along with my shorts. My hard cock bobs with the movement and rests against my stomach.

Her gaze fixes on my lap as she releases a strangled sound. “Do you know how to use that thing?”

I sputter a laugh. Wrapping a fist around the shaft, I give myself a slow jerk. Precum beads at the tip. “Come closer and find out.”

She shifts on her knees until she’s between my thighs. I cock my left leg at the knee. Picking up her wrist delicately with my free hand, I wrap her fingers around my other one, where I continue to stroke myself. As we reach the tip, she swipes her thumb over the liquid at the tip and sucks it into her mouth.

Fucking hell.

I slip my hand from beneath hers and fist it against my thigh. She makes me feral with need. The way I want to bury my fingers in her hair and thrust up into her throat when she hasn’t even licked me yet is insane. It’s greedy. And it’s not lost on me that I haven’t felt this way around anybody but her.

All thoughts fly from my mind when she presses her lips against the tip in an open-mouth kiss. Her tongue flickers in the space between her lips. My head falls backward, eyes rolling back as a groan tears up my throat.

“Are you playing with me?”

“Payback is a bitch, they say.” She swirls her tongue around the head peeking out above her firm fist.

I raise an eyebrow despite the sweat gathering along my hairline. “Did you not enjoy it?”

“I fucking loved it.” She sucks on the top like she’s savoring an ice cream cone. “I’m repaying the favor, and I must say, the buildup was the best part.”

With her eyes locked on mine, she finally pushes the first inch in her mouth, just past her teeth. I reach forward and swipe her hair from the side of her face and over her other shoulder so it’s out of the way. I don’t want anything in my view as I watch her take my cock down her throat.

“Such a good girl,” I praise, stroking the side of her neck. I wrap my thumb around the front and feel her pulse thundering beneath my fingertips. “Can you go a little deeper?”

My thigh bunches tight as she complies. Another inch slips inside her wet mouth. Her tongue dances along the side of my length and swirls over the top in a dizzying pattern.

“Fuck. Just like that, pretty girl. Take a little more for me.”

She pauses and then pulls off. My jaw falls open as the cool air hits the saliva on my cock.

Her fist works over the parts she hasn't reached, but it isn't enough. I grit my teeth as she toys with the tip.

“You're just begging for a hard fucking after this, aren't you?”

Her pupils blow wide in the orange glow of the fire. “I might be.” Stroke up. Stroke down. “I think the only one about to beg right now is you.”

A feral growl rips from my chest. “Take me in your mouth, *please*, I need to fuck that throat.”

A high-pitched sigh falls from her lips before she silences it with my cock. She wraps her pouty mouth around me and plunges me to the back of her throat. She gags, and I slip my fingers into the hair at the crown of her head, pulling her up a couple of inches.

“Are you good?”

She nods and moans her assent, beginning a rhythmic bob.

Holding her head steady, I thrust my hips up until I touch the back of her throat, and she flexes the muscles with a swallow.

“Fuuuuuuck.” I drop my head and start gathering her hair into my fist. I twist it around my palm until the strands fall loose, and I do it all over again. The distraction only lasts so long as my balls draw up and pleasure curls in my gut. “Look at me,” I grunt.

Honey-colored eyes meet mine, pupils blown wide. A rosy flush covers her chest and neck.

“You want me to come?” I grind out.

Holding my eyes, she slides her mouth down my shaft. When she pulls back, my skin glistens.

“Do you want it down your throat?”

Whitney nods.

My thrusts become erratic with the knowledge. Fisting the hair atop her head, I hold her steady, chin tilted and eyes locked on mine, and fuck her mouth with growing intensity. Hips stuttering. With a shattered groan, my cock pulses, and I find my release buried in her mouth.

“Such a good girl for me,” I murmur. “You did so good, Whitney.”

She releases me with a ragged breath, her lips swollen and glistening. I reach out and swipe my thumb over the moisture on her bottom lip.

“You’re even more beautiful like this.”

I didn’t think it was possible for the rosy flush on her cheeks to deepen. Leaning forward, I hook her beneath her arms and drag her against my chest. Her palm lands flat on my pec and her head tucks neatly beneath my chin. Held against me like this, she rides the rise and fall of my chest as my breathing returns to normal.

“This okay?” I ask.

“This is perfect. Hands down the best one-night stand I’ve ever had.”

“Already? I haven’t even fucked you yet,” I tease.

She tilts her head back to grin at me, opens her mouth, probably to quip some sass, but I can’t help myself. I really can’t. I slide my fingers into her silky strands and capture her lips in a lazy kiss. My tongue slips inside her mouth to languidly stroke against hers. With my eyes still closed, I

brush my nose against hers and trail teasing kisses down her throat.

“Jack,” she whimpers and squirms against me.

“Hm?” I drag my teeth against her pulse point.

“Do you have a condom?”

I look down at her. “It would appear we’ve made a slight error in our evening.”

She squeezes her eyes shut. “Don’t say no. Please, *please*, don’t say no.”

I chuckle at her despair and stroke beneath her chin. “I do have a condom. I have an entire box. The problem is they’re currently in the drawer of my nightstand in the bedroom.”

Whitney’s expression instantly melts, and she jumps to her feet. She finds her discarded sweatshirt in the pile of our clothes and drags it on. Leaning over me, she drops a chaste kiss on my nose. “Be right back.”

I’ll never admit to her that I watch the way the hem of her sweatshirt rides dangerously close to her naked ass as she dashes away.

She returns a moment later wearing a victorious smirk, a black box clenched tight in her fist.

“I’m surprised you were up for the task,” I say as she settles next to me and whips the sweatshirt back over her head. Her confidence gives me an instant hard-on. Or that could be the uninhibited inches of her nakedness.

“I have ninja feet. I’ve become quite good at sneaking around sleeping kids.”

“Thank fucking god for that.”

A ringing comes from somewhere in the pile of clothes and blankets. Her brows snap together, and she fishes out her phone.

“It might just be spam, but it might not be,” she explains, putting the phone to her ear.

“Hello?”

She repeats her greeting, but after a few seconds, she ends the call and tosses the phone away. Her shoulder rises in a shrug. “Nobody was there.”

Leaning forward, I snag her around her waist and drag her back down to my lap. She straddles me. Her wet pussy settles directly on my erection, warm and slick and inviting. My hands palm her curvy hips, soft flesh filling my palms. I close my eyes and rock her over me.

Each time my tip brushes her clit, she gasps and grinds down harder. So hard that on the back stroke, I nearly enter her, and we both groan.

“Condom?” I grit through my teeth.

“Just... wait... a sec.” Her naked tits heave in my face as she pants.

My fingertips indent the flesh at her hips. “Are you going to come like this, pretty girl? Soak my cock before it’s even inside you?”

She bites her lip. “Uh-huh.”

“Does it feel good?”

“Yes,” she gasps.

“Whitney.” Her name tumbles from my lips as I snap my hips up, control slipping. She feels too good. Too hot and wet and needy.

Her lashes flutter against her cheeks, twitching from the pleasure she’s bringing herself. She slides against me, a particularly hard grind that hits just right. I snap my hips up, nearly impaling her. My fingers dig into her hips so hard, she’s going to bruise as I grit in warning, “Whitney.”

Fuck.

She feels fantastic writhing against me.

A fucking vision sent to leave my control in tatters.

Her legs tremble on either side of my hips.

I'm not going to... *fuck*, I'm slipping dangerously close.

"*Whitney*," I snarl.

"I'm coming," she gasps. Her back rounds, and she burrows her face deep into my neck. The warmth of her breath fans against my sweat-dampened skin there, and her breathy moans and sighs fill my ears. Her hips jump and stutter in my hands.

I shove her hips back until her ass rests on my thighs, her face still in my throat where she dances her tongue along the skin. My cock throbs between us, precum leaking from the tip to mix with her wetness smeared against me. The sight is positively one of the most arousing of my life.

I shred the condom packet with my teeth, roll the rubber on, and poise myself at her entrance in two-point-five seconds flat.

"You ready?"

She nods. Half-moon crescents appear on my shoulders from her fingernails.

And then I'm slipping into her without resistance, feeling her take every inch of me until I'm seated balls deep and swear I see fucking stars.

"Goddamn, goddamn," I chant.

She cries out and begins to rock her hips.

"That's it. Ride me, Whitney. Look at you. So beautiful." One hand leaves her hip to skate north. Over her stomach, between her breasts, settling at the base of her throat. I take the delicate column in my palm. The thumb on my other hand moves over her clit.

Her body shakes in my lap and goose bumps burst along her naked flesh. The sound of our skin slapping together fills the room.

"I'm close again."

"I know you are. I can feel you squeezing my cock." I've been teetering on the edge since I slid inside her perfect pussy.

My thumb circles her clit with more pressure. Faster.

“Need to come.”

“I’m right there.”

Just as a scream erupts from her lungs, I seal my mouth over hers and swallow it down. My own grunt rumbles between us. My hips stutter up into her before I still and yank her down, holding us tight together. She throbs around me, and I pulse deep inside, filling the condom. The thought flits through my mind that I wish I could be filling *her*.

Our kissing slows in time to our breathing. Her palm presses hotly to my chest, the other wrapped around my neck and playing with the short strands of hair there.

I open my eyes to find her looking at me, wet streams dividing her cheeks.

I brush a knuckle over the tear tracks. “Did I hurt you?”

She scoffs and shakes her head. “I think you sent me to heaven and back, but you didn’t hurt me.”

A primal part of me swells with masculine pride and something else. A little flutter behind my ribs that I willfully ignore.

“Good,” I whisper and press my lips to the tip of her red nose as she shivers.

I locate her sweatshirt beside us and yank it over her head. She raises her arms. The fabric falls and settles at her waist, reminding me we’re still connected.

“Any idea where my underwear went?”

My fingers slide around her hips to caress her gorgeous ass. “Nope. But you don’t need them until morning.”

A flash of something lights her honey eyes. “Why’s that?”

I slap the right cheek teasingly and roll her off me onto her back. Gazing down at her, I answer, “Because you gave me all night.”

And I'd be a fucking dumbass to cut this short. Even if that means just holding her in my arms until the sun comes up.



WHITNEY

A SLIGHT CHILL sweeps over my skin, threatening to drag me from the deep slumber. My lashes flutter against my cheeks. I refuse to open them. The dream I'm having is too warm, too good to wake from so soon. I snuggle deeper into the blankets wrapped around me, hanging on for as long as possible until my morning responsibilities force me to let go.

Which happens five seconds later when the patter of little feet rouses me instantly from sleep. I pat a frantic hand down my body in search of clothing, breathing a loud sigh as I discover the sweatshirt and underwear covering my behind.

Did Jack put clothes on last night?

I fly into a sitting position and scan the surroundings. No sign of Jack or his clothing. A flutter of white next to me draws my attention to a note on my pillow.

WHITNEY-

The roads are cleared. I've returned to the motel, and the house is yours until you find a new place. Good luck with the move. Here's my number in case anything breaks.

Jack

P.S. Single best night of my life too

THE DISAPPOINTMENT SIMMERING in my chest is extinguished by a messy-haired toddler falling into my lap.

“Good morning, Lucy.” I push the hair from her eyes. “How did you sleep?”

“Why you on the floor?” She ignores my question and asks her own.

“I fell asleep watching a movie.” I point at the TV. She’s only three, yet my gut still sours with guilt. “Let’s get you breakfast.”

The subject change to food works easily, and she skips off to the kitchen. After using the bathroom, I retrieve Bennett, wide-eyed and babbling in the portable crib, and set about making us all an edible meal.

Fruit, yogurt, and toast. I blame the lack of creativity on someone keeping me awake for most of the night.

We went another round, another two orgasms for each of us before we collapsed into a sweaty, boneless heap and promptly passed out. I thought we’d also wake up together, but it appears Jack had his mind made up and didn’t want to face what the morning would bring.

Maybe he expected me to be clingy and ask him to stay again. And perhaps he’d be right.

Not about the clinginess, but I probably would have invited him to stay for breakfast. And he probably would have found a task to do around the house to keep us comfortable. A meal to make or snow to shovel or something to fix. Morning would have turned into afternoon, and who’s to say when nap time rolled around, I wouldn’t have tried to seduce him into another orgasm or two. By then, it’d be dinnertime again, and we’d eat while he held Bennett in his arms, and after, we’d settle the kids down and find ourselves alone with another twelve hours ahead of us.

Really, I should be thanking him for having the foresight to get out when he did. This cycle seems all too easy to fall into

because Jack makes it easy. Despite all the things I have to do.

The listing for that house he told me about needs to be called along with an email to confirm my start time at the hospital on Monday. I need to drop a check off at the daycare to cover payment for the remainder of the month. I should do some shopping. Winter gear for me and Christmas presents for the kids because the holiday is only about two weeks away.

“Momma, I see Dadda,” Lucy announces from my left as she chews a mushy bite of banana.

“You had a dream about him?” I slip a crisp bite of apple in my mouth.

“No, I seed him outside. He looked like a wolf.” She scrunches her face to bare her teeth and holds her fingers out like claws. “He had hair all over.” She waves her arm in a circle around her head.

My heart aches with her little story. Her doctor mentioned there might come a time when she starts to process his death, and it can bring a delayed sense of grief. I add a mental note to call her pediatrician this afternoon.

“I’m sorry, Peanut. Should we look at a picture of him?”

She nods solemnly.

I retrieve my phone from my pocket and find an album of pictures of Devon. I created it for the kids after he passed. I tap the first one and hand it to her.

Her little blond eyebrows squish together as she gazes at her dad. “He’s not a wolf?”

“No, baby.”

“I was scared.”

The guilt hits hard. I should have been with her last night. I should have slept in that big bed with her rather than rolling around on the living room floor with Jack. My kids need me. She needed me.

Last night was... I swallow hard as I search for the word.

Perfect.

Unfortunately, it can't happen again.

I squeeze Bennett tight to my hip and lean down to press a kiss against her hair. "It's okay to be scared. But when you're scared, it means you're brave too."

She turns the screen to me, now black. "I watch show?"

Thank goodness toddler attention only lasts a few minutes. I follow her lead and let the subject drop. "Finish your breakfast, and I'll turn on the big TV, okay?"

She eagerly shoves a spoonful of yogurt into her mouth, making me smile.

AFTER BREAKFAST, I let Lucy watch a show while I played with Bennett on the floor. He rolled to his stomach and pushed up to his knees, rocking back and forth, teasing a crawl. My heart ached a little thinking about him hitting milestones when we don't even have a house to remember them in. I'd rather not have to tell him someday that he learned to crawl on a stranger's floor. The same floor I had the best orgasms of my life on the night before.

Once my mom guilt began to tingle that she'd watched enough TV, I bundled them both up, found a spare pair of gloves in the laundry room, and we trudged outside for a bit of playtime in the snow. Lucy lasted about half an hour of bounding over huge snow drifts and helping me build a snowman before she was cold and tired enough to come inside for some warm milk.

With the two settled down for a midmorning nap, I gaze out the front windows at our creation with a hot cup of coffee clasped between my hands. We didn't have a hat or a scarf, but Lucy found perfect twigs for the arms, and we used rocks for the face instead of buttons. A straight orange carrot juts from the irregularly shaped sphere for the head.

A gentle smile tips my lips. I'm grateful for these memories Jack made possible by letting us stay here. I might

even be a little sad we have to leave so soon.

The sound of my phone ringing pulls me from my thoughts. I straighten and set the coffee cup on the table beside the recliner in order to dig my phone from my pocket. My heart leaps into my throat, immediately sinking at the name flashing across my screen.

Devon's mother.

Steeling myself with a deep breath, I swipe the bar across the screen.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Whitney. How are you doing, darling?"

"I'm well, Janet. How are you?"

Her sigh holds the weight of her grief. "You know. About as well as expected, I suppose."

That's her standard answer. As if she has some chart she's measuring herself up against about how grieving mothers should be doing at the six-month mark.

She has one for me too. And according to her, I'm not grieving enough.

I decided before the funeral that I'd never let her know what her son had been up to. I tucked down any thoughts and feelings I had about his behavior and hid the truth. What good would it do? She lost her son who she loved dearly despite his failings, and I played the part of a woman who lost the love of her life.

Except he wasn't.

I loved Devon. But several years into our marriage, it became clear that while I loved him, he wasn't the love of my life.

"I miss my son." Her scratchy voice invades and snaps me back to the present.

"Have you been to visit him?" I ask carefully. She didn't live in West Bend with us, but she's close enough to make the drive or ask Alice to take her.

“It’s not the same. I don’t feel him there.” She sighs. “I wish you hadn’t sold his home.”

Tension straightens my back painfully, and I bite back the harsh exhale flooding my throat. “That was our house, and I couldn’t stay there any longer,” I respond with a forced softness.

“But you didn’t have to leave town! You’re so far away in Minnesota. Back to a place you haven’t been in years. I’ll hardly see you or the kids.”

“You know we’ll visit. I promised we would.”

“They’re all I have left of him.” The shake in her voice brings a lump to my throat.

“I’ve told you I’m sorry, but I did what I needed to do. What was best for me.”

“And what about what’s best for Devon?” she snaps.

My jaw falls open. “Devon is gone,” I hiss, blinking back the burn in my eyes. “None of us asked for this. Not Devon, not you, and certainly not me or my children. They lost their father.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” she sniffs. “Six months, you know? Sometimes it just hits me out of nowhere. I miss the kids too. And you, of course.”

“Of course,” I murmur.

“Do you think you could visit soon? I have the guest room you can stay in.”

I gnaw the inside of my cheek and glance around Jack’s house. “It’ll be a while. We’ve only just left and haven’t even settled in here yet.”

“All the more reason to come back.”

“Janet,” I warn.

“Just think about it,” she rushes out. “Alice told me your house fell through, and you’re at a motel. It’s not too late to come back.”

My gaze falls on the spot in front of the fireplace where Jack pleased me within an inch of my life.

Oh, I think it's far too late to come back.

"I don't want to lie to you and say I'll think about it because I probably won't. My mind is made up. I'm staying in Fairview Valley."

"Devon would be so disappointed in your decision."

Well, he made decisions that disappointed me too. I swallow down the harsh retort and settle on another simple sorry. Sensing the conversation is going nowhere, she turns her attention to asking about the kids, and we hang up a few minutes later.

A tumultuous storm of emotions roars inside me. I busy myself with tidying up, checking the fridge for dinner options, and making a list of groceries to replace before we leave for our own place, hopefully soon. Then I set about tackling my mental to-do list, starting with Lucy's pediatrician.

Followed immediately by the rental on Third Avenue.



JACK

ITHOUGHT about calling Whitney when the Kramers checked out on Friday morning, but I slammed the phone down before I typed in the third digit of her phone number I stole from her reservation.

Hunter looked at me from the corner of his eye, probably adding the incident to the long list of my strange behavior, which started with me telling him I'd be covering the overnights for the foreseeable future.

On Saturday, I spent the majority of the day fixing a drainage issue in one of the rooms needed for the snowmobile racers coming tomorrow. After the shortage of guests during the blizzard, I couldn't afford to send someone to another motel. Lee and I were able to solve the problem with no small amount of f-bombs and other colorful words, and it kept my mind occupied for most of the day.

But my grouchy mood is far from escaping the notice of my keen family. Bunch of fucking gossips that they are.

Mom said I knocked on her door too roughly when I arrived an hour ago for our Sunday family dinner. Jude called me out for showing up late in the first place, and just a few minutes ago, Aiden teased me about sulking in a chair.

I tilt back the cold beer in my hand, avoiding eye contact, and let them pick on me without my participation.

“What the fuck happened during that blizzard?” Aiden questions in a loud whisper to Lee.

“Language!” Mom snaps and shakes a potholder in his direction. If she’d thrown it, I might have been able to crack a smile.

“Will you shut up? I just haven’t been sleeping well.”

Jude’s eyes meet mine, an understanding sweeping between us. The assumption in his eyes isn’t fully wrong. My dreams have been a mix of childhood memories and new ones. Of darkness and belts and firelight and twisted sheets.

But deep down, the honest truth is I haven’t been this turned on in my life. Even now, just the thought of Whitney sends blood rushing south. A perpetual half-chub lying against my thigh. I feel like I’m fifteen again and just discovered the pleasures of jerking off.

Except it’s not my hand and a dark room that I want.

It’s golden hair and honey eyes. And a long list of things I can’t have. I’m not looking for picket fences. Just a couple of dozen orgasms with her beneath me would do.

I groan and rub my temple as my cock twitches. Bad timing, my dude.

“What’s wrong?” Cortney asks, flicking her sheet of dark hair over her shoulder where she sits on Sebastian’s lap. The polo-wearing prick brushes her hair from his shoulder like it personally offended him. I send him a glare.

“Headache.”

“I have the perfect cure.” Bree wanders into the room from the hallway where she was feeding Charlotte. “Can you hold her, Uncle Jack?”

I flick my gaze over the tiny sleeping bundle swaddled in her arms. “Since when am I the guy who holds the babies?” But despite my protest, my arms reach for her and tuck her tight against my chest.

She’s lighter than Bennett.

Why in the fuck am I comparing the two?

“You’re so good with her.” Bree brushes her fingers against Charlotte’s fine baby hairs.

“You keep handing her to me, so I’m the only one who gets any practice.” I send a glare to Lee, Jude, and Aiden.

“Do you want me to take her?” Lee offers, a smirk tilting his lips. The bastard knows my answer.

I settle my palm over Charlotte’s back. “No.”

Juniper comes around the corner from the kitchen with a small plate of sweets. She directs her attention to Bree, who stands between Cortney and Juniper.

“Are we on for this week?” Juniper asks.

I curl my finger around Charlotte’s fist.

“I talked to Whitney this morning. She said Wednesday would be best.”

My ears perk up.

“Works for me,” Cortney says. “I don’t have to be at the Sanctuary for vet checks until Thursday afternoon, so I can nurse my hangover all morning.”

“Am I invited to this little get-together?” Sebastian leans around Cortney to ask, a thread of irritation in his tone. The man is jealous about my sister going out with her sisters-in-law?

“You got a problem with her going without you?” I answer his question with one of my own. That protectiveness flares to life.

He scoffs and wraps his arm tighter around Cortney’s waist. “Of course not. Ever think I’d just like a night out with my girlfriend too?” He says it as if he doesn’t believe I know how to think at all.

“No boys allowed,” Bree interjects with a sweet smile. “Corjan is inviting all of you to somewhere else far away.” She waves her hand dismissively.

Cortney kisses the pout from Sebastian's downturned mouth.

I bite back a sneer.

"All of us? Who's going to watch your kids?" My shoulders stiffen at the realization I lumped Whitney, Lucy, and Bennett into my question since Bree is the only one with a child not old enough to watch itself.

Bree settles in Corjan's lap. "I have a babysitter coming to the house."

I pretend to be intrigued by a dark little tuft of hair on the side of Charlotte's head.

"What time?" Juniper asks.

"What time for what?" Mom rounds the corner with a cup of coffee in her hand, the steam rising in white curls in front of her face.

"We're getting drinks on Wednesday. Want to come?" Juniper turns to Mom with a bright smile. Despite being Lee's girlfriend, Mom nearly wanted to adopt Juniper into the family the same way she took in the rest of us. The two have a close bond.

Mom waves her hand. "Bah. You girls couldn't keep up with me." She winks. "I thought maybe you were discussing the family Christmas party. It's on the nineteenth, you know."

"At The Rocks at eleven, yeah, yeah, we know," Aiden pipes in. The room falls deadly silent for a moment before the girls burst into laughter.

"What?" Pink stains his cheeks despite the cheeky grin on his face.

Mom huffs. "For you, the time is eleven, yes." She sips her coffee and speaks into the cup, shifting her eyes from side to side. "For the rest of us, it's noon."

I snort, startling Charlotte. A few gentle pats on her back calms her back to sleep.

“What for?” Aiden steals a cookie from Juniper’s plate, earning a scowl.

“You can’t seem to arrive on time. To anything,” Cortney points out.

Aiden crosses his arms and leans against the doorjamb. “So you lie to me?” He crosses both palms over his heart. “My own family? I’m shocked. Hurt, even.”

“I know what I’m getting you for Christmas.” Mom smiles up at him. “*A watch.*”

“I already have a cell phone to check the time.”

Mom leans forward slightly. “Then use it.”

Aiden bites into the cookie, crumbs falling to the front of his long-sleeved navy shirt. He slaps them away. “Where’s the fun in that?”

A round of chuckles accompanies Mom’s eye roll, but the smile on her face attests to her amusement.

“Anyway, we’ll meet at eight on Wednesday night. Late enough, but not too late,” Bree announces to the girls.

“What do you say, boys? Meet at eight on Wednesday?” Lee asks.

Corjan wraps his arm snugly around Bree’s hips. “Make it eight thirty. I need to make sure my girl gets there safe.”

Nods of assent come from all around. I drop my gaze to the sleeping babe on my chest as something unfamiliar slithers inside me. Something unpleasant I can’t name.

I shove it aside. “Someone bring me one of Juniper’s chocolate chip cookies.”

“How do you know I didn’t make those cookies?” Lee asks.

“Because if you tried to make cookies, you’d end up with a mess and no cookies,” I fire back.

Juniper covers her mouth on her way out of the room as she cackles.



WHITNEY

“ARE you sure your babysitter can handle three small children?”

My palms sweat, and my heart ticks a little too fast in my chest. I wipe my hands on my black jeans before cooling them with the condensation on my glass.

We’ve been at The Rocks for no more than twenty minutes, but I haven’t been able to settle down yet. I thought leaving the kids at a daycare center was hard.

Ha! How naive of me.

Leaving the kids with a twenty-year-old babysitter is a million times harder.

Scarlett seemed well-equipped to handle the kids, going so far as to recite her résumé, including her first aid and CPR training, but my nerves decided not to get the message.

Lifting the Moscow Mule to my lips, I savor the spicy, crisp drink before swallowing it. If it wasn’t the first round, I would have ordered a shot of tequila instead.

The place hasn’t changed one bit. Reddish-brown brick and liquor signs displayed in the windows feel like a step into my past. Dim pendant lights hang above the bar. The dance floor and pool tables still sit in the back of the room, and if I

wanted I could even order a burger from Ruben, the same cook from when I would come here for dinner in high school.

Bree forgot to mention that the girls we'd be drinking with were none other than Jack's sister and sisters-in-law. I'm surrounded by Powells when one Powell in particular is the last person I'm supposed to think about.

"Are you okay?" Bree asks from her stool beside mine. Us four girls are lined up at the bar like we're waiting for the start of a bachelorette party.

"Hm? Oh, I'm fine." I shove the black straw between my lips. "I'm not used to leaving my kids."

She wrinkles her nose. "Me neither. This is only the second time. Being with family helps, and Scarlett is really great. We've been doing a trial run by having her come over to watch Charlotte while I do some things around the house and run errands. She came highly recommended, I promise."

I roll my shoulders back and lift my chin. "I just need to get over it. They'll be fine. Everyone's fine." I wave my nearly empty mug in the air and catch the bartender's eye. He nods.

"Jack said you were looking for a place to stay. Any luck?" Juniper asks around her own straw stuck in some sweet-looking pink drink.

"Jack told me about a rental on Third Avenue. I'm supposed to see the place on Friday."

Juniper rotates toward me on her stool. "I hope it works out. I spent a good six months searching for a rental. Of course I found one as soon as Lee and I became official, and he moved right in with me." She giggles.

"I hope it doesn't take that long. I can't stay at Jack's forever."

A pause in the conversation beneath the flashing strobe lights has me lifting my eyes from my fresh drink.

Cortney tilts her head, the shine on her hair catching beneath the lights. "You're still at Jack's?"

“Yes?” My eyes slide to Bree, but she’s studying her lap. “Is that bad?”

Her head flies back. “No! It’s not bad. You should stay.” Bree’s palm settles on my shoulder, and she rubs it soothingly.

“We just didn’t know,” Juniper adds with a warm smile. “He’s pretty private most of the time. Jude too. So we’re hearing this for the first time.”

“He didn’t tell you I stayed after the blizzard?” I look at Bree, but Cortney shakes her head.

“He let us believe you went back to the motel. Though, I don’t think he outright said that you did.”

“I think it’s sweet.” Bree pulls a piece of popcorn from the bowl between us. “Him letting you and your kids stay somewhere more comfortable.”

“It is sweet,” I mumble. My head throbs in time to the music.

“Did you start your new job this week?” Bree keeps the focus on me. I shouldn’t be surprised to be beneath the spotlight.

“I did. It’s nice so far.”

“What is it you’re doing?” Cortney bites the straw between her lips.

“I’ll be working patient registration at the hospital. It’s not glamorous or even a passion of mine, but it’ll pay the bills.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that. What do you think you’re interested in?” Cortney asks.

My grip tightens around my drink. “I sort of put all my hobbies aside when I became a mom.” I flush with embarrassment over the truth.

Cortney leans across Juniper. “I did the same thing. My son, Oliver, was three when I finally found my passion and returned to school. It can take time to remember you’re so much more than just a mom.”

“So you and Bree used to be best friends in high school?” Juniper moves the subject along to safer waters. I vow her next round is on me.

I pull a crisp onion ring from the platter the bartender sets in front of us and push it down the line. “Yes. I grew up on the other side of town with my parents.”

Juniper selects a mozzarella stick. “I wouldn’t remember. I’m a bit younger than the rest of you.”

Bree leans into my shoulder to whisper, “She’s still in her twenties.”

Lee has to be at least ten years older than her, if not closer to fifteen. I swallow down a bite of my onion ring. “I don’t blame you for snagging an older man. Those boys in their twenties don’t know a whole lot about being with a woman.”

A certain man four years older than me pops into my mind before I shove him away. Now, that’s a man who knows how to please a woman. I press my thighs together.

“I agree,” says Cortney. “The boy from my twenties knocked me up, then left me for someone else.”

I grimace.

“Corjan and I split for ten years because he was nowhere ready in his twenties.” Bree primly dabs a fried pickle into some ranch.

“I’m still dying to hear that story. I can’t believe it’s real. The two of you were so in love when I last saw you.”

She shakes her head. “In love but stupid. We wasted so much time, but it doesn’t matter now.” Her smile is filled with love and warmth.

I softly lay my fingertips on her forearm. “No, it doesn’t matter.”

The questions continue through another round. Cortney tells us she met Sebastian six months ago when he came into her veterinary practice with an injured stray cat and claims it was love at first sight. I try to ignore the way Juniper and Bree share a covert glance. They fill me in with funny tales of the

dogs at their family's dog sanctuary. Bree and I trade kid stories, and I send them into a fit of laughter as I recall Jack's incident with Bennett's diaper blowout.

Cortney wipes tears from her eyes. "You don't know how badly I wish he had home security cameras." She laughs and slaps the bar with her palm. "I'd pay money to see that."

"It was pretty bad, but I have to say, he handled it extremely well for a bachelor without kids."

"And I thought him complaining about changing Charlotte's diaper four times was funny. You win." Bree brushes her hands together as if ridding them of crumbs.

"Who's ready for another round?" Juniper asks the group, eyeing everyone's glass.

"Listen, the rest of us here can't drink like we're in our twenties." Cortney pushes away her empty glass. "But I'll still have another."

"I'm in," Bree says. "It's a pump-and-dump kind of night."

"Me too," I add. "Minus the pumping and dumping part."

"Did you breastfeed Bennett?" Bree asks.

"We had latch issues, so I had to give up after a couple of days. It was hard, especially when I breastfed Lucy for fifteen months."

The guilt resurfaces. Devon's complaints about listening to Bennett crying at night when he was hungry, and I couldn't get him to latch. The lack of a support system didn't make it any easier for me to figure things out, so I ultimately threw in the towel. Even six months later, I still feel like I deprived Bennett of something Lucy had.

Bree nudges me with her shoulder. "No shame in that. Babies need to eat one way or another."

"I agree." I return her sympathetic smile.

A fresh round of drinks lands in front of us, and before I can take a sip, Cortney shouts, "I want to dance!"

Just like that, the melancholy of a moment ago vanishes.

We're all grabbing one another, sticky drinks spilling slightly over the rims of our glasses and onto our fingers. Giggles break out as we stand for the first time in more than an hour, and the alcohol hits us all at once. We form a tipsy line and wobble our way to the rectangular dance floor at the back of the room, currently sparsely occupied.

The alcohol lowers my inhibitions just enough that I don't care how empty the floor is. As soon as I cross onto the wooden planks, I let the music move my body and relax into the beat.

"I'm so glad you came out." Bree slings an arm around my shoulders and talks loudly in my ear. "I'm sorry we didn't keep in touch."

"It's my fault. I'm the one who moved away."

"It doesn't matter!" she shouts over the music. "I had a cell phone. I could have kept in touch. I'm just so happy we have the chance now. And we both have kids." She sighs.

"Itty bitty ones."

"It's almost like we used to imagine." Her eyes flash knowingly.

I think of the one thing missing. The one thing that would have made my childhood dreams a reality. "Almost," I concur.

She squeezes my hand tightly, then spins away, throwing her hands up with a laugh as the beat picks up. Music pulses through speakers mounted on the ceiling, running down the walls and filling the space with a catchy, upbeat tempo and nostalgia.

We dance for what feels like hours. Until my feet ache and my vision twists. Another round of drinks accompanied us to the floor, delivering me to the happy place I haven't been in so long. We bat away well-meaning proposals with smiles, and nobody tries to set me up despite me being the only single girl in the bunch.

Eventually, my bladder can't hold the drinks any longer, and Bree and I split from the others for a bathroom break. With her hand clasped tightly in mine, we tow one another

down the hall beside the booths and away from the throbbing bass I can feel in my bones.

“Having fun?” she asks after I step back out of the single occupant toilet to find her fixing her makeup in a compact mirror. Her cheeks are rosy with a flush, and a sheen covers her chest. I step up beside her, finding one on my skin to match.

“Are you kidding? I haven’t had this much fun in years.” I check my mascara in her mirror. “It’s so nice to just go out and not be a wife or a mom or a... a widow.” I cringe through the last word as if it’s meant to be hidden.

“I get it. You deserve to meet your needs too.”

I nod, knowing she gets it. She did just that when she walked away from Corjan. Our circumstances may be different, but she knows what it’s like not to have your needs met for so long.

I brush a wayward strand of hair from my face, dab the makeup smeared beneath my eyes, and tilt my head toward the end of the hall. “Come on. Let’s get back out there. I think I only have an hour left in me before I need to tap out.”

Bree giggles. “Me too. When they tell you to read the baby books, they forget to mention how your alcohol tolerance goes away after not drinking for nine months.”

I point at her. “You’re switching to water.”

Her expression sobers, and she nods. “Well, maybe after one more.”

Bree follows a few paces behind me. Just as the dim lighting gives way to a darkened room with strobe lights, a body steps in my path.

“Excuse—” I freeze.

They take a measured step forward. I counter with an apprehensive step back.

It has to be the alcohol, even though I’m not drunk. My mind swirls, refracting light and playing tricks on me. The

face in front of me twists into a familiarly sloped nose and angled cheekbones.

My breath catches, stuttering from my lungs like a slowly deflating balloon.

“What’s the matter?” Bree brushes into my back and moves around me. I catch her slender wrist in my palm.

“This can’t be real,” I stammer.

Devon stands in front of me, looking very much alive.

“Hello, Whitney.”

“You’re dead,” I whisper, shock coursing like venom in my veins. “Y-you died.”

“Oh fuck,” Bree mutters beside me. She’s a flourish of hair and limbs, but I can’t take my eyes off Devon long enough to see what she’s doing.

“It’s so good to see you, sweetie. You look good.”

The endearment snaps me from the fog, and a white-hot rod of anger sears down my spine. “You’re supposed to be dead,” I spit.

“Ohhh, fuck. Jack?” Bree starts talking rapidly behind me.

“It’s a long story. We should go sit down.” Devon moves forward again, but I counter with another step back, bumping into Bree.

“No. No, no.” I shake my head. I hold my hand up between us to ward him off. A wave of nausea forces me to pull it back and cover my mouth. “How could you do this?” I hiss. I blink harshly against the burn in my eyes.

“I had to. I had to do what was best for all of us.”

“By faking your death?” I shriek. Tremors slip down my limbs as the ground becomes unsteady.

“You are not really taking this the way I thought you would.”

“I can’t imagine her taking it any other way,” Bree retorts.

Devon moves a threatening step forward. “You stay out of this!”

“Don’t talk to her like that!” I move in front of Bree, and the hallway tilts around me in a way that has nothing to do with the alcohol.

Why did I think this was a good idea?

Maybe because ex-husbands aren’t supposed to rise from the dead.

“Please just listen to me. It’s important.” Devon swipes a hand through his dark, shaggy hair. It’s grown out since I last saw him. A full beard covers his face. I suppose when one pretends to be dead, it’s a little hard to visit a barber for a haircut. He looks unkempt. Nothing like the attractive man I married and tried to start a family with.

Thick saliva coats my throat, my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth. “Start talking.”

His eyes flick over my shoulder to Bree. “Can we go somewhere alone?”

“No.”

“Where are the kids?”

I reach behind me and wrap my fingers around Bree’s wrist again. Tighter this time. Holding her to me like a lifeline. “We’re going.”

“No, wait!” He shifts in front of us, blocking our escape.

“You have no right to ask about them! No right!” I shout in his face. “Who do you think has taken care of them for the past six months? Who do you think has answered Lucy’s questions about what happened to you? Do you have any idea what this will do to her? And you show up randomly and think you can demand answers from me? Fuck you!”

Bree gasps behind me and pulls her hand free in order to wrap her fingers around *my* wrist instead.

“I needed the money!”

A wave of dizziness crashes over me. “The... money? What money?”

But I already know. I already know, and I’m about to be sick all over this hallway floor.

“The insurance money.”



JACK

“IF YOU’RE GOING to hog all the chips, you can bring your own next time,” Jude announces from his spot on Lee’s couch. He’s relaxed in the corner with an arm slung across the back and his ankle resting on the opposite knee.

Aiden looks up from beside him, the blue bag fisted in his hand with a scowl. “Maybe I fucking will.”

“It’s not like I don’t have more.” Lee throws an unopened bag at Jude’s face. He grunts and tears the package open. “I’ve learned to always get more than necessary with you animals.”

Corjan snorts into his Coke can. “Right. I’ve heard Juniper telling Bree how you and Lincoln eat through the grocery budget in three days flat.”

Lee smirks and returns to his chair in the corner by the picture window. “I still can’t get it through her head that she no longer needs a grocery budget.” He takes a deep pull from the amber beer in his hand.

“Old habits die hard,” Jude mutters as he turns his gaze out the dark window.

My brothers and I have been gathered at Lee’s for the last hour and a half. As soon as Corjan dropped Bree off safe and sound at The Rocks with the other girls, we set a meeting spot and converged for beer, snacks, and camaraderie. We might

see one another several times throughout the week, but we don't often make time to do this.

“What do you think the girls are getting up to?” Corjan asks and tosses a piece of popcorn into his mouth.

“Trouble,” Lee mutters around the rim of his beer with a smirk. “At least Juniper will be.” The smitten bastard shakes his head like Juniper's kind of trouble is the best thing he's ever experienced.

“Anyone need anything from the kitchen?” I stand abruptly. This conversation is taking a turn into a territory I'm not a part of and don't want to be. A chorus of negatives chases me into the kitchen, where I catch my breath.

The problem isn't the discussion of wives and girlfriends. The problem is there's somebody out there tonight who I can't help but wonder about. Is she having a good time? Did she and Bree pick up their friendship where they left off, or is she miserable trying to make old connections fresh again?

Is she safe?

Whitney seems sociable. She's kind and sarcastic and a hell of a lot of fun. Maybe that's the problem. Maybe I'm jealous I'm here and not out getting to know her in a way that has nothing to do with the sounds she makes when she comes.

The image of us cozying up at a bar, heads together and knees touching, flashes through my mind.

I sure as fuck haven't been able to stop thinking about her, and this isn't helping one bit. I can still hear her moans in my head and feel her curves in my hands. I've woken up every morning since last Friday with my dick hard and her image in my head.

I squeeze my fingers around the edge of the countertop and blow out an exhausted breath.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. My brows snap together at the name on the screen.

“Corjan, why's your wife calling me?”

“What?” He’s out of his chair and pulling his phone out of his pocket to check the screen.

I swipe to answer and put the phone to my ear. Before I can utter a hello, her voice is coming at me.

“Ohhh fuck, Jack?” She’s breathless. My eyes snap to Corjan’s.

“Bree? What’s going on?”

“Um, I think we’re going to need you down here at The Rocks. Quickly.”

I’m already moving before she’s done talking, throwing on my coat and snatching my keys. “I’m coming. What’s happened?”

“Can you also tell Corjan to go ahead and relieve Scarlett, the babysitter? I feel like Whitney will need some time to calm down and…” Her words are cut off by shrieking.

My pulse kicks up a wild rhythm.

“Bree?” I bark.

Her next sentence flies out in a rush. “Whitney’s ex showed up, and he’s supposed to be dead, so she’s not taking the news really well that he’s still alive and tracked her down.”

Fury lights a fire in my chest. “I’m coming. Keep her with you, you hear me? Don’t let her out of your sight.”

Without waiting for her response, I end the call and turn to my brothers. “Corjan, Bree says you need to go relieve the babysitter and wait for her to return to the house.”

“What’s going on?” Lee asks, his jacket on and keys in hand.

I look him in the eye and mutter one word.

“Trouble.”

THANK FUCK we chose Lee's house tonight because he's closer to the main part of town. In five minutes, I'm pulling up to the curb outside The Rocks with Lee sliding in to park behind me not a moment later.

Tension draws my muscles tight like a marionette string above my head. My jaw ticks, and my back molars grind together as I brace for what I'm about to find inside. I'm not sure why Bree called me. Whitney isn't *mine*. The only thing for certain is that any man who willingly leads his wife to believe he's dead is not a good man. Not by a long shot.

If Whitney needs someone to step in and help deliver that message, I will happily be that guy.

The music instantly drowns out the wind outside as I step over the threshold. My eyes adjust to the dark interior and flashing colorful strobe lights. I stand at the entrance and scan the room until I spot a familiar face.

"There. Cortney and Juniper are on the dance floor."

Arguing voices rise above the music to my right as I step off the entrance mat. Lee also turns his head in that direction.

"You go to her. I'll check in with Cortney and Juniper and be right behind you," he says. At my nod, he takes off.

The closer I get, the easier their conversation is to hear.

"I knew you were involved in some shady shit!"

"It wasn't like that. I just got in over my head."

"There were men outside our house! They'd watch us for *hours!*"

"And I found a way to fix it! I honestly don't understand why you're so angry."

"You son of a bitch. I could kill you myself!"

I bound around the corner just in time to catch Whitney around the middle. She struggles against me, pushing against my forearm and kicking her legs.

"Let me go!"

“Time for you to go,” I tell her ex in a tone hardened with steel.

“Who do you think you are? Get your hands off my wife.” The guy leans forward, his threat clear in the slope of his spine and the curl of his fists. The problem is I don’t find him intimidating when I have at least four inches of height and twenty pounds of muscle on him.

“Your wife?” I growl, red flashing across my vision. I pull Whitney into my side, angling my shoulder to block as much of her as possible. “I don’t remember seeing you while she was beneath me, screaming my name and taking my cock the other night.”

Even beneath his full beard, his cheeks burn red. “You’re sick,” he spits.

“Between the two of us, buddy, that title is all yours.”

“I hate you,” Whitney seethes, and for a split second, I think she’s talking to me. My arm twitches around her. A flame licks hot beneath my ribs. “I fucking hate you, Devon. I never want to see you again.”

He throws his hands up at his sides. “I’m not just going to go away, Whitney. I’m right here. I’m not dead!”

She lunges forward again only to be trapped by my arms around her waist. “You ever hear of insurance fraud? You’re going to jail. Hopefully for a long time.”

“You wouldn’t do that to me. We can live off that money after I take what I need. It can be like we’ve always wanted. We can get a bigger house. We can go on vacation.”

“I want nothing to do with you.” Her voice flatlines. “You should have stayed dead.”

A shadow passes over the entrance to the hall, and suddenly, Lee appears. From around his arm, Cortney and Juniper peek around the corner.

“Not going to say it again, buddy,” I say to the ex before flickering my gaze to Lee.

Devon seems to get the hint. He presses his back against the hallway wall to keep his eyes on both of us. He glances back and forth between my brother and me. “This isn’t over. You hear me, Whitney? I’m going to fight for my family. I’m going to win you back. I did what I had to.”

“You did not! You did what you had to for yourself. You dug the hole, got into it, and then you crawled back out like nothing more than the cockroach you are to ruin the little happiness I found for the kids and me.” She takes a shuddering breath, her torso jerking in my arms. “Go to hell.”

Her ex cuts his gaze through the group before spinning on his heel and storming out.

I run my palms over her arms from shoulders to elbows. I push a loose lock of hair behind her ear. “Are you alright?”

Whitney looks up at me, her face stoic. Time seems to stop between us as if she’s coming to a decision. She bursts into a ragged sob, and I drag her face into my chest.

“I’ve got you,” I murmur against the top of her head. “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

My chest cracks and aches as she tries to burrow deep. As if she’s trying to crawl inside my body. I haul her tighter, pressing her front entirely to mine from the tips of her toes to the top of her head. “You’re safe.”

“I hate him,” she cries in a watery voice.

“I hate him too,” I murmur, stroking my hand down her silky hair.

She chokes on a muffled laugh.

Bree appears from behind us. I nearly forgot she was there. “You brought backup.” She gestures to Lee with a flip of her hand.

“I’m here for you,” Lee says to Bree, then looks behind him. “And you and you.”

Juniper and Courtney emerge from around the corner. My sister wears a furious expression, and Juniper looks concerned.

“I have her things.” Juniper extends a black coat and purse.

I reluctantly remove one hand from Whitney to take the items. “Thanks.”

“You’ll get her home? And keep her safe?” Juniper asks, a redness to her lower lids I couldn’t see from a distance.

“I’ve got her,” I answer with finality.

Bree steps to my front and softly touches Whitney’s back. “I have your kids. They’re with Corjan now, and I’ll go straight home. We can keep them overnight for you.”

“N-no, I-I’m fine,” Whitney hiccups.

Bree gives a crooked smile that Whitney can’t see with her head buried in my chest. “You need to take care of yourself first. That means sleeping this off so you can be ready for what they might need from you tomorrow.”

“You’ll kiss them goodnight for me?” she snuffles.

“Of course.”

Whitney turns her face out of my chest, keeping her cheek pressed against me. “Okay. Thank you.”

“I’ll call you in the morning.” With a final brush of her fingers down Whitney’s shoulder, Bree joins the others at the end of the hall.

“Thank you,” I mouth quietly to Lee.

His gaze flicks down to Whitney tucked tightly in my arms, and a secret smile spreads across his face. “You’re welcome.”

I don’t answer because right when I get the urge to curl my fingers and punch the smug smile from his face, Whitney twists her fingers into the fabric at my waist, and her torso shudders against me.

I drop my lips to the shell of her ear. “Can I take you home?”

“Just a sec.” The raw anguish in her voice rips me to shreds.

A million questions swarm like angry bees while I hold her, but I dismiss them until later.

Once she's home and tucked into my bed, sleeping off the shock and the potential hangover, I can analyze what this might mean.

One thing is for certain, I don't plan to let that asshole get that close to her ever again. That means some adjustments are in order.

Minutes pass while we stand pressed tightly together, and I just hold her until her shakes turn into shivers and her sobs quiet to sniffles. When she lifts her head to gaze at me with those watery, red-rimmed eyes, my stoic mask nearly crumbles.

"I'm ready to go now."

I brush the hair back from her forehead. Clasping her chin between my index finger and thumb, I press an unhurried kiss to her lips. Her wet lashes flutter closed to the tune of her breathy sigh.

"Let's go home," I whisper, brushing against her lips with each word.

I maneuver her around, my palm lingering on her lower back. The heat of her seeps through her dressy shirt. Touching her soothes that protective instinct in me that I'm fighting to keep in check. The entire way to the door, I study the faces we pass. I can't promise I'll be so restrained should we happen upon her ex again.

He's been warned. And I'm not generous with second chances.

She stumbles a second time in the short trek to the door, so I tuck her into my side so tightly that I half carry her. Now that her crying has subsided, anger swiftly moves in to take its place.

"I can't fucking believe him. Can you believe him?"

My mood flickers between amused and pissed like a light bulb during a thunderstorm.

“I need to call Alice.” She stops on the sidewalk and starts digging in her purse.

“Who’s Alice?”

“His sister.”

“I don’t think you should be calling anybody right now.”

Her head snaps up so sharply that she nearly catches me in the chin. The glare she pins me with sends blood rushing south to my cock. God, she’s hot when she’s pissed. I don’t know whether I should drag her to the car and get her home or press her up against the wall and kiss that angry look off her face.

The gentleman in me wins out as if there was ever a question. I’m not one to ever take advantage of a woman under the influence, no matter that I had her wrapped around me not even a week ago.

“She needs to know he’s alive.”

“She can know in the morning.” I open the passenger door and help her inside. She thrusts her ass in my face as she crawls up and settles herself on the seat. I reach across her stomach to buckle her in.

“What if she already knows?” Her frightened, wide eyes hold mine. “What if his family is in on it? What if they’ve been helping him?” she whispers.

“It won’t make a difference. It’s still wrong.”

“But they would have lied to me.” Her chin wobbles. She seems to shake herself out of it. “No. Alice wouldn’t do that.”

I gently squeeze her knee and shut her in. The sooner I can get her home, the sooner she can sleep this night off and analyze it with a fresh mind.

The moment the engine fires to life, she fills me in on what happened before I got there.

“I feel like an idiot.”

“You have no reason to feel like an idiot, Whitney. This isn’t your fault.”

“He had guys watching the house. I should have known he was into something bad. I should have done something.”

“What could you have done? Were you going to call the cops on your husband?”

“Maybe. If it meant keeping my kids safe.”

“Did he tell you what he was doing?”

“No.” She curls her feet onto the seat and leans against the center console. “He was a freaking accountant. I don’t even know how he did it. How does someone fake their own death? There was... there’s... I have a certificate even. It was sworn, stamped, and certified that he was dead.”

I pull into my driveway and kill the engine. Her lids are half closed as she stares at nothing. By the time I round the hood and open her door, she’s half asleep.

“Come on, pretty girl. Let’s get you into bed.”

I pick her up around her back and under her knees. Her head falls against my chest, tucked beneath my chin. Her floral perfume is growing familiar, sparking something primal and protective. Snow crunches beneath my boots on the trek to the door, and the whirr of the garage closing encases us in darkness.

With her securely in my arms, I walk through the unlit halls to my bedroom and lay her gently on the bed. She tucks herself into a ball and faces the middle, hands beneath her cheek.

I make quick work of her heeled boots, dropping them to the floor one at a time with a muted thud. Undressing her further would be a violation, so I just pull the comforter to her chin.

As I turn to leave, her hand shoots out of the blanket and grabs my wrist with surprising strength. A burning touch.

“Don’t go.”

“I’m not leaving. I’ll sleep in the other room.”

“Sleep here. I don’t want to be alone.”

My heart stalls before doubling its beat. Sleeping next to her is okay, right? The war in my mind lasts all of thirty seconds before I'm toeing off my boots. "Let me lock up. I'll be right back."

She nods sleepily, and her breathing evens out.

I do as I said I would before grabbing a stack of clothes to sleep in and change in the bathroom. On the way to the other side of the bed, my pulse trips over itself. I could back out now. I could go sleep on the recliner as I originally planned. But her sweet voice when she asked me to stay rings in my head.

She's been let down enough tonight. I don't want to be another on that list.

And if she regrets it in the morning?

I'll make sure there's nothing for her to regret.



WHITNEY

YOU'D THINK I'd have learned not to drink so much by my mid-thirties. Though it seems the older I get, the quantity doesn't matter. I'm going to wind up with a shitty hangover whether I had a glass of wine or did a line of shots—even if I can't remember the last time I did a line of shots.

In fact, I don't remember drinking much last night at all.

Thank god for Jack having blackout curtains. At least the morning light isn't contributing to my throbbing headache. The nausea twisting my stomach is another discomfort, along with the tightness of my cheeks and the gritty feeling in my eyes.

What the hell did I do last night?

I roll to my back, and my arm collides with something hard and warm. My head jerks to the left so quickly I almost sprain something.

I'm in bed with Jack Powell. His *bed*. Not the floor. Not naked—I lift the covers and check my body.

Nope, not naked.

Although I'm in the same clothes I wore to the bar last night. Gross.

He appears to be asleep. Eyes closed, and pink lips slightly parted. His chest rises and falls with his even breaths. Black sweatpants ride low on his hips, his chest covered by a light gray cotton tee, and it doesn't escape my notice that he's lying atop the covers beside me.

And like a faucet being flipped on, the night comes rushing back in startling Technicolor.

Devon is alive. And he found me.

He wants the insurance money.

Bree kept my kids overnight because I was drunk? No, distraught.

And somehow, Jack showed up at the bar. Someone called him, one of the other girls, and he came for me. I'm not sure what to make of that through my fuzzy brain, but upon initial inspection, all the feelings related to Jack Powell are good ones.

I vaguely remember asking him to stay last night as I crashed. A warmth spreads through my chest as I take in his position. He's fully clothed and on top of the covers. He clearly didn't want to cross any boundaries last night. Just one more thing I can appreciate about him.

I sneak from the bed to use his bathroom. I brush the stale alcohol from my mouth and pop a couple of ibuprofen for the headache. After chugging a glass of cool water, I creep carefully back into the bed.

"My turn," he grumbles, his voice gritty with sleep. Those two words pulse straight between my legs.

"Morning, Jack," I murmur, watching him rise from his side of the bed. His hair is a twisted mess that only makes him hotter.

His sleepy gray eyes crinkle at the corners as he gives me a soft smile. "Good morning. Don't move. I'll be right back."

Anything short of a natural disaster won't move me from this bed until he says it's okay for me to do so. I watch his ass

as he walks out of the room, and the moment he rounds the corner, I tug at the neckline of my shirt to fan myself.

My position is the same when he returns. He walks straight up to my side of the bed to crawl in and drags me over so we face each other in the middle.

His brows dip low over his eyes as he searches my face. “How are you this morning?”

“My kids?” I swallow hard. “I know they’re safe, but have you heard anything?”

He rolls the other way and pulls his phone from the nightstand on the other side of the bed. “Bree checked in early this morning. I read the messages and went back to bed.” He opens a message thread and hands me the device.

BREE

Good morning all of you who don't have children crying at six o'clock! Don't worry, Jack, you can tell Whitney that Charlotte's getting this party started. Her children are little angels.

JUDE

Why in the hell is this a group chat?

BREE

Because everyone was together last night, so it's easier to pass information along in a group.

JACK

Is that your update for Whitney, Bree?

BREE

Yes. Tell her they slept great and are just getting up for breakfast now. You can pick them up any time.

JACK

She's still sleeping, but I'll let her know. After ten would work best.

CORTNEY

Oh good, Jack's here. Hey Jack, next time you want to announce you stuck your cock somewhere, maybe wait until your sister is out of the vicinity so I don't have to stick a fork in my eardrums.

CORJAN

No way, he did what?

LEE

What did you think the two of them were doing during the blizzard, Cort?

CORTNEY

I didn't need to hear a play-by-play. Thanks.

MOM

Good morning, children. Did you forget I'm in here?

AIDEN

This is the best wake-up text ever. Lol

“OH MY GOD.” I squeeze my eyes shut. Embarrassment blazes a pink flush across my cheeks. “Please tell me this isn't real.”

Jack bites his lip. “Sorry. It's real. Now answer my question since I answered yours. How are you?”

I place my palm on his chest and study my fingers there. “I'm good, I think. The initial shock has worn off.”

“I can imagine it was quite shocking.” He brushes his thumb along the edge of my jaw, his voice coarse and quiet.

“I have to turn him in,” I state firmly. “I have to do the right thing.”

“Have you used any of the money?” Worry colors his tone. I shake my head quickly to abate his concern.

“Fortunately, no. I’ve been living off our savings and the money from selling our house. I haven’t touched the account with the life insurance money yet.”

“Then you should be okay.”

God, I hope so. I never asked to be tangled up in this mess.

“Thank you for coming last night.” My face burns with gratitude and shame. My throat feels tight. “I don’t normally get physical like that, I swear.”

Jack laughs lightly. “Last night’s circumstances were extreme, and I’d say justified.”

“I was crazy.”

His hand captures the back of my neck. Steel-gray eyes lock on mine. “Maybe I like a little crazy.”

Some unnamed emotion bubbles inside me.

“Can I kiss you?”

At my jerky nod, our lips meet in the middle, and he groans down my throat. I open my lips and slide my hands to his shoulders to tug him closer. The tingle between my legs transforms into a full throb as he licks his way into my mouth. His hand skates along my ribs, heading north toward my breasts.

“Is this okay?” he breathes against my mouth.

“Yes.” I let him roll me to my back in the bed. His fingers find my nipple, and he pinches the sensitive tip. I scissor my legs to alleviate the ache.

“Tell me what you need, pretty girl.”

“I need you to touch me.”

His mouth leaves mine to trail kisses along my jaw. He settles in the space beneath my ear. “Be more specific,” he husks. “Touch you... here?” His thumb swipes over my sensitive nipple. “Or maybe... here?” He walks his fingers down my stomach, heading south to dip beneath the band of my jeans. “These can’t be very comfortable.”

I drop my hands to the button and zipper. “Take them off.”

“You say such pretty things with that sweet mouth.” He drags his teeth along the column of my throat. “But I bet I could make you say filthy things too.”

“I’ll say whatever you want if you just touch me.”

His thigh slips between my legs to press tight against my core. “Like this?”

A fire of need detonates as his thigh presses the seam of my jeans directly over my clit. “Ah!”

“Been dreaming of you in my bed, baby. I need to make you come in my sheets.”

“Please,” I beg, my center grinding against his thigh.

“Ride my thigh. I can feel how hot you are. Press that pretty pussy against me until you’re close.”

His hands settle firmly on my waist, pinning me down except for my hips as I grind against him. I’m soaked and pulsing, clenching around nothing as tremors sweep through my limbs.

A whine tears from my throat. “I-I’m close.”

He sits back on his heels and drags his cotton tee over his head. His body is beautiful. Cut muscles stand out beneath smooth skin. The swirls of his black tattoos curl over his shoulder and onto his chest.

My mouth dries as my pussy throbs, and the orgasm slips like sand through my fingers.

“Why’d you stop?”

Jack brushes a single finger over my clothed clit, sending a jolt of pleasure through me. “Because I have you wet and

ready for me. The only place you're going to come is on my cock."

Understanding dawns, and I'm a frenzy of limbs as I yank my shirt over my head and toss it with my bra over the side of the bed. Jack watches me with sizzling amusement as I lift my hips and tug my jeans beneath my ass.

"A little help here?"

He tackles me flat on my back, his mouth landing on my breast, circling my nipple with his tongue. As shocks of pleasure spark within me, he grips the denim caught on my legs and peels them to my knees so I can kick them off.

"Thank you," I gasp, reaching for his sweatpants to do the same. Sensing my intention, he grabs the other side and helps me shove them off. His cock bobs hard and eager from his pants and presses against my thigh. I wrap my palm around him and tug.

His groan is guttural. The vibration of it sinks into my chest. He hauls himself over me to take my lips again as his fingertips slide between my legs.

"You're so wet for me." He circles my clit, causing me to whine. "You're doing so good for me. So patient. I'm going to make you feel so good, okay? Hang on a minute longer."

I clench around the emptiness. "Jack, please, it hurts," I whimper, needy and desperate for him.

He reaches for the nightstand and grabs a condom. "Spread your legs for me, Whitney. Let me see how ready you are."

My thighs fall open to the mattress as my cheeks burn with arousal. I'm so turned on I don't even have the space to be embarrassed. Not when he's looking between my legs as if he's never seen anything more beautiful. He rolls the condom on and settles his tip at my entrance.

My eyes snap closed, and my head falls back.

"Look at me. I want to see your eyes as I fill you."

I sweep my heavy lids back. Jack's gray eyes are hot on my face. A rosy flush decorates his cheeks, lips swollen from

sucking my nipples. He drags a steady fist up and down his cock.

“I wish you could see what you look like right now. Your skin is dewy, your tits are swollen and tight, and your pussy is begging for my cock.”

I lick my lips and nod. “Please, fuck me, Jack.”

He exhales heavily through his nose. “Eyes on me,” he orders, then presses the tip forward.

I fight the urge to tip my head back. His mouth falls open on a silent moan as he seats himself deeper. “Almost there.”

The wetness there allows him to glide in with little resistance. He pushes into me slowly, so slow I can feel every inch stretching me open until he’s seated deep and his balls press against my ass cheeks. We both groan.

“Such a good girl, Whitney. You look so hot taking me.”

“More.” I sink my nails into his shoulders and pump my hips.

Jack’s back bows as he begins to thrust, a steady rhythm building into a crescendo of creaking mattress springs and the headboard banging against the wall.

“More. Faster,” I beg, the coil twisting tighter with each deep thrust. I gasp his name like a whispered prayer.

“Fuck, baby. You’re squeezing me so tight.” One hand pins my hips down as the other wraps around the base of my throat. He pounds into me like he’s trying to send us both to the floor. He releases my hip to massage my clit, and I jolt.

“Give it up, baby. I want to feel you come around me.” He takes my mouth and swallows my moans.

“Yes, right there.”

With one sharp thrust, I’m splintering, bursting into pieces. My fingers twist tightly into the sheets at my sides, my throat hoarse from Jack’s name tearing up my throat.

He follows a second later, shoving his face in my neck with a groan.

Jack's torso slides against mine, both of us slick with sweat, as he collapses out of breath. A knee held to the side keeps most of his weight off me, but I find something comforting about his body settled on mine.

"You took me so well," he praises, running his hands soothingly over my skin while his cock softens inside me. I flush beneath the compliment.

He rolls to his side in the middle of the bed, draping his arm over my waist to keep me close. As the silence stretches, I turn to look at him and find him watching me.

"Is something wrong?"

"I should take you to get the kids soon, but I'm enjoying this."

I dance my fingertips over the stubbled corner of his jaw. "I can't remember the last time I had twenty-four hours to do what I wanted. I think it was before the kids were born."

A serious expression falls over his face. "There is one more thing I want to talk to you about before we get ready to go. Something I was up thinking about last night."

"Yes?" I shift to my side and tangle my legs with his.

"You're going to stay in this house. I don't want you looking for a rental until we know your ex is gone, and he will leave you alone."

"I don't think that's necessary."

"It's what's going to happen."

"You can't tell me what to do."

"Call the rental. Ask them to put you on a waitlist or that you need more time, but now's a bad time to leave."

I glare at him silently.

"And I'm going to stay here with you."

A heavy stone of surprise drops in my gut. My jaw falls open as a stream of arguments runs through my head. "I... what...? You don't need to do that."

“You can argue all you want to, but you know this is the best solution. I don’t think he’ll leave you alone.”

“That isn’t your problem.”

“You’ve sort of been my problem since you rolled into town a week ago.”

“So now I’m a problem?” I scramble to my knees and tower over him. He sits up in the bed, his face nearly in line with mine.

“Yes, a problem. The most fascinating, curious, intriguing, complex problem I’ve ever encountered.”

“I—what?”

He runs his palm over his stubbled jaw and pushes his hair back from his forehead. “Any man who would pretend to die, then let his wife and kids go through the grieving process that comes with that all for some money is not a good man. In fact, he’s a very bad one. And you’ve got amazing kids, and you’re you, and I don’t want to take a chance when I can do something about it.”

He... thinks my kids are amazing?

After screaming down his motel, and escaping through the door, and pooping on his stuff, and having to bathe them and hold them and help me care for them when they cry, he still finds them amazing?

I don’t even know if their dad ever found them amazing. He treated them like a nuisance.

“I’m me?” I ask hesitantly, my voice a rough croak. I blink back the moisture gathering in the corners.

“Yes. You’re you,” he says. Period. As if that’s the end of it. “Just to tell you, I already have a company coming to install security cameras, so it’s all settled.”

I gape at him.

“Now”—he takes my hands into both of his and draws me from the bed—“you’re going to go call the rental, take a nice

bath, and when you're ready, I'll feed you, and we'll go get the kids."

"I'm still drunk, aren't I?"

He tows me into the hall, both of us bare-assed naked. "No way. I wouldn't have fucked you unless you were totally sober."

"I appreciate that. Not because I don't like a little drunk sex once in a while, but because the sex this morning is something I want to remember."

"Whitney."

"Yes?" I bat my eyelashes at him.

"Get in the bath before I decide to fuck you again."

My thighs press together. *Yes, sir.*

ALICE

I swear to you I didn't know

ME

When did you find out?

ALICE

This morning. What happened?

ME

He ambushed me at a bar with my new friends.
How did he even know where to find me?

ALICE

I'm not sure. But I have a feeling that our mom knows something

ME

She called me a few days ago and practically begged me to come back to West Bend and admonished me for selling the house. I think she knew something too

ALICE

I'm so sorry

ME

It's not your fault. Did he say what his plans were?

ALICE

He just kept saying he's going to get you back. I screamed at him not to fucking bother

ME

Thank you. I appreciate that

ALICE

Stay safe. He doesn't deserve you

ME

Fingers crossed he leaves me alone

ALICE

Double Double

A MUSCLE CRAMPS in my clenched jaw as I tuck my phone back into my purse. Jack drives me to the bar so we can pick up my car before we get the kids. I tried to argue that I could call a ride-share, but he said he's not positive Devon left town so it's too soon to take chances.

I caved to Jack's persuasion. I would have caved even if I wasn't nursing the remnants of a hangover because he's not wrong. If Devon could track me to a random bar, I don't doubt he could find me at Jack's house.

Startled by my thoughts, I turn to Jack. The houses of Main Street flash behind him in muted blurs of color. "How did he find me?"

His chiseled jaw ticks. "I was wondering that myself."

"He's been dead," I hiss with frustration. "There's nothing left behind. I sold the house and packed everything. A dead person can't just get access to a person like that." My mouth opens and closes as my mind whirrs with possibilities. "This is scary."

A heavy hand lands on my knee in a tight squeeze. "We'll sweep your car for a tracker. He clearly planned this out, but he doesn't seem too bright. There's a flaw somewhere, and we'll find it."

"I'm sorry you've been tangled up in this."

"Helping you out hasn't been a hardship. I can assure you of that."

Our conversation ends as he pulls up at The Rocks beside my sedan in the empty lot. He waits until I'm locked inside before directing me to follow him to Bree and Corjan's house.

We park in the driveway of a familiar rambler on the outskirts of town. Snow piles high, nearly reaching the windows in the front. A brightly embellished Christmas wreath hangs merrily from the black front door. I try to leave space between us on the way up the front steps, but Jack's hand hovering protectively at my lower back is impossible to ignore.

He knocks twice, then twists the handle and pushes the door open. He pokes his head inside, then steps back to gesture for me to enter.

A small entry gives way to a warm kitchen. Black cabinets line the lower walls while the top is open shelving, stacked with perfectly complementing dishes. The countertops are a

warm wood, and Bree stands in front of a large farmhouse sink with her head aimed over her shoulder.

“Hey, guys,” she greets, wringing out the sponge in her hands.

“If Whitney or her kids are here, you keep the doors locked,” Jack says, his voice tight and serious.

Bree’s eyes grow wide. “Oh my gosh, I didn’t even think... It was locked all night, I promise. I just opened it half an hour ago when you said you were on your way.”

I study his clenched jaw and the way his fingers roll in and out of a fist. “It’s probably overkill, but we’re being extra careful until we know her ex is gone.”

Bree’s head bobs. “Of course. All was quiet last night. Corjan’s just keeping them entertained in the living room while I clean up from breakfast.”

I offer her a brittle smile. “Thank you.”

Jack prowls to the living room while Bree puts her hand gently on my arm. “How are you?”

“I’m doing okay. I think I’m more angry than anything. Angry and scared.”

Her fingers flex against me. “I understand. We’re here for you. All of us. I hope you know that. I’d say after last night, you’re an honorary Powell.”

I scrunch my nose. “I saw the group chat this morning.”

Bree stifles her giggle behind her hand. “I’m sorry. It was funny.”

“Hilarious,” I deadpan, only to grin a second later.

She loops her arm around mine and leads me to the living room. Familiar feelings rise to the surface, that easygoing friendship long ago buried making itself known.

“Your children are wonderful by the way. Lucy is so bossy she had Corjan wrapped around her finger in five seconds flat.” She snaps her fingers for emphasis.

“Did Bennett blow up any diapers while I was gone?”

“None. A little fussy going down to sleep last night, but nothing we couldn’t handle.”

Any response evaporates on my tongue as we round the corner. Corjan sits in a rocking chair in the corner with baby Charlotte tucked high on his chest, talking to Jack, who stands beside him, bouncing Bennett in his arms. My little guy faces the room with a drooly fist in his mouth and clutching a stuffed elephant in the other.

Men with babies.

Hot men with babies.

I swear my ovaries sizzle. Bree sighs contentedly beside me.

“What a view,” I mutter for only her to hear.

“Hi, Momma!” Lucy bounds across the room.

I drop to a knee and brush my fingers through her fine hair. “Good morning, Peanut.”

“Look.” She thrusts her arm out at me, nearly punching my cheek. A beaded bracelet shakes around her tiny wrist. “Cory made wif me.”

“She means Corjan,” Bree adds.

“It’s beautiful, Lucy.”

She tilts her head back with a sly smile. “Mr. Jaaaaaack!”

He immediately stops talking to Corjan to tip his head to Lucy with a smile. “What’s up, Luce?”

She skips up to him and wraps her fingers around the belt loop of his jeans. “I make one for you.”

“You want to make one for me?”

She nods seriously and drags him to the kitchen table where an assortment of string and beads sits in a plastic bucket.

“Scarlett was going to make bracelets with her last night but ran out of time, so she left her supplies.” Bree crosses the

room to pull Charlotte from her daddy. “We watched her very carefully to make sure any beads didn’t wind up where they don’t belong.”

“I appreciate that.”

Lucy’s bossiness is already hard at work. Jack sits beside her at the table, his arms around Bennett, and Lucy lies halfway across the top of the workspace to direct him.

“Pink next.” She waits patiently for him to thread the bead before pointing at another. “Dis one.”

My smile wobbles.

“Here.” She holds out a golden bead shaped like an amorphous blob. “It’s a bear.”

“I like bears,” Jack says, plucking the bead from her tiny fingers. His much larger ones struggle to string the bear onto the bracelet.

“Bears are strong. Like you,” Lucy says seriously.

Silence overcomes the room at her innocuous comment. Oblivious to the adults listening intently, she plucks a sparkly pink bead from the pile and hands it to him. “One more.”

As the last piece of plastic settles into place, Lucy beams at him. “There.” Pride is evident in her tone. “Put it on!”

Serious gray eyes flicker over to mine where I stand motionless watching the two of them work together.

“Can you help?” Jack lays his wrist flat against the table.

I swallow hard before stepping forward. I knot the end of the string and measure the size over his wrist. I cut the excess and quickly tie the ends into a double knot, ignoring the way my fingers brush against his skin.

“Oh shoot,” I whisper beneath my breath.

“What’s wrong?” Jack asks, equally quiet.

“I made it too tight. You won’t be able to slip it off.”

He blinks slow and heavy. “It’s fine. I’ll fix it later.”

As I step back, Lucy practically crawls on the table to look down at his hand. “It fits!”

“You did a good job, Luce.” Jack twists his wrist, making the beads shake together.

Something about this big, strong man wearing a pink bracelet does my head in.

“Lucy, honey, get off the table. It isn’t polite, and I don’t want you to fall.”

“Sorry, Momma.” She plants her palms flat and pushes herself backward until her feet touch her chair. “Can I have a snack?”

“We have snacks back at—” *home*. I almost said home. “Jack’s. Come find your boots. We should get going.”

I quickly stash the rogue beads back into their bucket and close the lid. The remnants of the hangover are playing havoc with my emotions.

Jack stands beside me, and I hold out my hands. “Here, I’ll take Bennett.”

Without much more than a cursory glance, he deposits Bennett in my arms. The solid weight of my youngest lightens the heaviness in my chest. Bree chatters away about a great place to bring the kids to see Santa while I tuck Bennett into his car seat, and I file the information away for something to do later.

Christmas shopping for the kids just got a whole lot more complicated if Devon is hanging around. What if Lucy sees him? What if he tries to hold Bennett? A cold shiver races up my spine like a bucket of ice water being poured over my head.

“Maybe we can plan something together,” I tell her with a tight smile.

I usher Lucy out into the cold. Before I can take a step out of the door, Jack wraps his fingers around the handle of Bennett’s car seat with a gentle, “Let me carry him,” and follows her outside.

Bree comes up beside me and nudges me with her shoulder. “Just accept his help.”

“What?” I turn my neck to catch her eye, but she’s watching her brother-in-law saunter down the driveway at a speed appropriate for Lucy’s little legs.

“You’re making him feel useful. I think sometimes he feels like he’s not doing enough because he’s not an integral part of the Sanctuary.” She crosses her arms and leans against the doorframe. “I don’t know how I’d take care of Charlotte if I didn’t have Corjan. Jack feels good helping you, and if it takes a bit of the load from you, it’s okay to let him.”

I fiddle with a button on my jacket. “You don’t think it’s sending a certain message?”

“God, no. He just wants to feel useful.”

“It is nice getting to eat with both hands again.”

Bree laughs. “Then enjoy it as long as you can. I’ll see you soon?”

“I’ll text you.”

With her parting observation replaying in my head, I hustle down the driveway to my car. Clouds of exhaust curl from the tailpipe, an indication it’s already warming up.

Lucy sings a song from some TV show in the back seat, but the drive to Jack’s is otherwise silent. I keep thinking about last night, this morning, and what Bree said.

The car in front of me slows as we approach Jack’s driveway. He pulls to the right side, leaving me room to drive up beside him. I shove the car in park, and he appears at my door, drawing it open.

“I’m going to leave you guys here. I’ll unlock the door for you, but I want you to lock up again behind me.”

I bite back further interrogation. He’s free to come and go as he pleases. “Okay.”

He turns fully to me, his eyes dropping to my mouth before slowly rising to my eyes. “I just have a few things to

take care of. I'll be back this afternoon."

"No problem. You've done quite a lot this morning already." A flush hits my cheeks as the memory of us in bed rushes to the forefront of my mind.

His eyes heat, and he smirks.

This time, I grab Bennett, and he helps Lucy out before walking us to the door. He waits until we've deposited our coats and shoes before he steps out with his hand on the doorknob.

"Need anything?"

"We're all set."

"Lock up," he orders, pulling the door shut behind him.

I immediately step forward and twist both locks. The weight of this new situation settles firmly on my shoulders.

"Snack time!" Lucy cries and takes off down the hallway.

At least my kids are the perfect distraction.



JACK

DIM LIGHTS GREET me as the garage door creaks open. Three fucking hours later than intended, I finally arrive back home.

Until those security cameras are installed, I don't like leaving Whitney and the kids here longer than necessary. Not until that piece of shit is caught or makes his way out of town. Even then, I can't say I'm confident he won't return.

Which meant I had errands to run. Several of them that took all afternoon and into the evening, leaving Whitney and the kids home alone after dark.

I didn't like it.

I don't want to analyze why.

Heavy boxes weigh down my arms, but I manage to get through the door without dropping anything. I set them on the ground beside the recliner, straightening just as Whitney appears from the end of a hall, tugging a sweatshirt over her shapely hips.

"Is it too cold in here? I can turn the heat up."

"What's all this?" She surveys the boxes and the three bags I let fall from my fingertips.

My hands settle on my hips as I look down at the mountain of purchases behind me. "Just some stuff."

Her eyes narrow. “Why does the back of that box have a picture of a car seat?”

“Because I bought extras. One for Lucy and one for Bennett.”

“Why?” Her hands find her hips, mirroring mine. She tilts her head.

Does she know how endearing she looks like that? Swallowed by her sweatshirt, acting stern like she has a say in what I do with my own money.

Fuck, it’s cute.

“We might need them.”

“Why?” I know I’m about to be in trouble as she crosses her arms over her chest.

“I didn’t like the thought that you might need me, and I won’t have a way to safely transport the kids. With your ex around, I thought it’d make things easier.”

Her honey eyes flick back to the boxes. “That’s really thoughtful, Jack, but you have to be careful picking out car seats. There’s research involved and safety ratings.”

“I spent three hours at that store searching the ratings. Do you think that’s enough?”

I sat on the floor of that department store on my phone with ten different tabs open reading crash test data and reviews. Maybe I didn’t look at the right websites. Maybe I should have asked her first.

“Y-You spent three hours researching car seats?” Her brows rise in disbelief.

“Yeah, I mean, isn’t that what you’re supposed to do? You just said to check the research.”

“No, it’s, I mean, you did the right thing. I’m just surprised is all.”

“Babe, guys act dumb to get out of doing shit they don’t want to do, but I promise you, most aren’t as stupid as they

pretend to be. I have a phone. It isn't hard to google a few questions."

"They had me fooled." She huffs a laugh and runs her hand over her ponytail. "Anything else you plan to surprise me with?"

I shrug. "Just an indoor camera. I plan to put it up over this window so that it can see the entire room and the kitchen." I gesture above the window facing the front of the house. "You can turn it off when you're here with the kids. I'll help you set it up on your cell phone."

"That's a good idea," she says quietly.

"Hopefully, it's temporary, but I'd rather be overcautious than not cautious enough."

She seems to curl in on herself with exhaustion.

"Why don't you go head off to bed? I'm sure you could use a bit more sleep after yesterday."

"I don't know. I could help."

"Go lie down, Whitney. Go rest with the kids."

Her gaze flits around the room before settling back on me.

I tilt my lips in an encouraging smile. "Go on."

"You're probably right. I do have to work in the morning."

"How's that been going? You started this week, right?"

One shoulder lifts in a shrug. "It's a job. I'm sure once I settle in, things will get more comfortable. Right now, it's just training and paperwork."

"Of course."

"I'll see you in the morning?"

"I'll be here."

She lingers, her hand on the corner of the hallway as if she wants to say more before she appears to give up. "Good night, Jack."

"Good night."

With a sleepy smile, she returns to the bedroom. The door shuts with a final click between us.

I feed Cooper a semi-late dinner and let him outside. A chill crawls down my spine that has nothing to do with the winter cold and everything to do with that prick out there causing her problems. The darkness of a Minnesota December sprawls the acreage behind my property, and for the first time since I moved in here, I feel unsettled when I gaze out into the trees. Not because I think he's out there physically on my piece of land. But because the safety she deserves to find in Fairview Valley has been shattered.

It's not my business what she does at this point. She needs to take care of herself and the kids. But for some reason, I can't help but hope it doesn't send her running again.

Cooper comes at my whistle, and I lock up for the night. He settles onto his bed by the door, my personal security alarm. His bark sounds vicious. When you're on the other side of a door you can't see through, you'd have to be really dumb to take your chances against him.

To the tune of a quiet house, I open the car seat boxes and set them by the door to go in my SUV tomorrow. I already decided at the store I'll just install them and get it done with. That way, if they're needed, I don't have to waste time fucking around getting them in.

One faces forward, and the other faces the back of the seat, but unlike the one Bennett has now, these aren't removable each time he gets in and out. I figured if Bennett's with me, I prefer to hold him in my arms rather than lug that thing around anyway.

I set up the security camera next. The open plan of my house means I'll be able to capture all the possible entry points—the front door, the garage, the hallway to the bedrooms, the sliding door, and half of the kitchen. As long as the camera is turned on, nobody will walk into this house without us knowing.

I tuck the instructions for installing the app under the car seat strap and retrieve the bags of items I bought. My phone

vibrates with a text. I dump the contents on the kitchen table before tapping the messages open.

SUTTON STONE

No sign of him. Canvassing businesses on the north and south side of town for CCTV footage in the morning.

ME

I appreciate it. Got time tomorrow evening for me to bring her car by? I want to sweep it for a tracking device. Need to know how he followed her here from Arizona.

SUTTON STONE

I'll have time around lunch. Otherwise, after six.

ME

I'll see what works best for her and let you know. Thanks.

SUTTON STONE

Sounds good.

WITH ANOTHER THING taken care of, I leave my phone beside the boxes of cabinet locks and set out to babyproof the kitchen. Bennett can't even crawl yet, but I need to make sure both he and Lucy are safe from cleaning supplies and sharp objects.

Turning my mind off while I work proves to be a difficult task. My thoughts are a revolving loop of Whitney, her kids, sex with Whitney, her ex, and every once in a while, I'm reminded of the busy check-out we have planned at the motel tomorrow. The snowmobile races were a hectic success. I've been through this for enough years that I had the foresight to

bring on one of my part-timers to help Hunter and our cleaner turn over rooms, so at least I won't be needed first thing in the morning.

Thoughts of the motel freeze my hands mid twist of a screwdriver. The tool clatters loudly to the floor as I rush back to my phone and call Hunter.

“Hey, boss.”

“Sorry if you were sleeping.”

“You know I run on only about four hours.”

“Can you do me a favor? Check through the check-ins this past week and look for the name Devon Thompson.”

“Yeah, give me one second.”

We've been booked solid so I didn't even consider the idea that her ex would have a room at my motel, but if he's been planning this for a while, it's possible he put in a reservation weeks ago before I knew who he was and paid in cash.

Less than three minutes later, Hunter says, “I don't see anyone by that name.”

Tension releases with my exhale. At least that's one more place he's not hiding. “Thanks. That's all I needed. I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Later, Jack.”

I drop my phone back to the table and resume fastening locks to cabinets. Once those are finished, I stick padded bumpers on all the table edges and corners before calling it a night.

At one o'clock in the morning, I sit in my recliner in the dark living room with only the flicker of dying flames in the fireplace for company. I smile at the padded bumpers everywhere, but then the reminder of why I'm doing all this wipes the smile clean away. My fingers wrap tightly around the bottle of a full beer, and I stare at the embers, unable to turn off my mind.

MY CHIN BOUNCES off my chest at the sound of a door closing. The beer bottle in my hand grew warm some time ago, and now I hold on to it purely from muscle memory. It's one involuntary twitch away from smashing all over my floor. Scrubbing a palm over my gritty eyes, I stare at the entrance to the hall.

Whitney appears wearing the same sweatshirt as earlier. Her hair is twisted into a messy blond knot on top of her head. At first she doesn't seem to notice me as she scans the darkened living room, the fire long ago stopped producing useful light.

"Jack?" She inches closer. Her shoulders fall from her ears as we lock eyes. "Have you been awake all night?"

"Couldn't sleep." My voice is stained with grit and lack of use.

"That can't be comfortable."

It's not. I'm too fucking old to sleep in a chair, but for some reason, I'd do it for her. "It's fine."

"Then why are you awake?"

"I heard you."

"I didn't make that much noise."

I take a deep breath. "The outdoor security cameras will be installed tomorrow. I can sleep then."

"You slept just fine last night."

"It was just you and me last night," I tell her honestly. "The kids are here now. More people I need to protect."

"That's crazy." The words float on her breath as she leans forward. I flinch.

"Have you been sleeping well?"

"I—yes."

“Good. That’s all that matters.”

Silence stretches between us filled with silent heartbeats. “Are you going to stay here with us even after the cameras are installed?”

I dip my head slowly. “I plan on it.”

Whitney wraps her arms tight around herself. “Then I expect you to sleep in the bed tomorrow.”

“I’m not taking the bed from you, Whitney,” I protest her suggestion.

“I meant with me.”

My mouth falling open clicks in the otherwise quiet room. “That’s not necessary.”

“It’s what I want.”

How in the hell am I supposed to refuse that? “What about Lucy?”

“What about her? She isn’t going to be damaged just because you’re sleeping on the far side of the king-sized bed.”

“You don’t know that,” I mutter beneath my breath.

“I actually do because I’m her mother. She’ll sleep on one side, I’ll take the middle, and you can hug the edge like you’re afraid I might bite you while you’re sleeping.”

I lean forward and set the warm bottle of beer on the ground. “If you insist. I’ll be there tomorrow.”

“You could come now,” she says softly, her voice warm and inviting.

I shake my head. “Tomorrow. After the cameras are installed.”

Seemingly undeterred, I watch her hips sway as she crosses the room. She stops in front of me, and I hold still as if I just got caught with my hand inside the cookie jar.

“May I?”

I don’t even know what she’s asking, but I nod anyway. If she’s smart, she’ll catch on quickly that I’d give her just about

anything she asks for.

She places her hand on my shoulder to steady herself and gently lowers her ass to sit on my thigh. She curls her arm around the back of my neck, carefully situates her thighs across my lap, and tucks her toes beneath the armrest. Her head relaxes against my shoulder.

“Is this okay?”

Once her body sags against mine, I wrap an arm around her middle and hold her secure. This is...

warmth

light

perfection

“It’s fine.”

Her fingers twitch against my sternum. Warm breath fans against my neck. “I couldn’t sleep any longer knowing you’re out here.”

The arm around her twitches. “I’m comfortable.” More so with her snuggled secure on my lap. Christ, I don’t think I’ve ever done this. My fingers drift along a patch of skin on her low back where her sweatshirt rides up.

“Are you?” She wiggles closer, her ass brushing across my cock, and I still her with my hands on her hips. “Like this?”

“Yes,” I answer, though it comes out rough.

“Then a little platonic cuddling should be okay. You’ve opened your house to us. The least I can do is make sure I don’t leave you cold and stiff in the living room every night.”

An unrestrained bark flies from my mouth. “Whitney, I’ve explored every inch of you. Naturally, I find myself a little stiff around you. Not cold, though. Never cold.”

“Shut up,” she mumbles with her face tucked against my neck.

I cinch my arm tighter and inhale the scent of her flowery perfume.



WHITNEY

OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, Jack and I settle into an amicable routine. I complete training at work and become more familiar with the day-to-day of my job. The work itself is easy enough, but there's an undercurrent of stress that wasn't present before. This job was meant to provide for my kids in addition to the money I had saved. With Devon's sudden reappearance, I can't help but wonder if it'll be enough now that he's swept my potential safety net away.

Jack had security cameras installed then spent an evening setting up apps on my phone and showing me how it all worked. He took my car to be swept for a tracking device down at the police station, which turned up empty.

Between staying at his house, his dog, and the extra security measures, I feel safer than I have in probably years. But I also decided that I need to retain a degree of normality. For my sanity and for the kids.

Devon never threatened me, not outright, not physically. He's an asshole of epic proportions, but I don't think he'd ever lay a hand on me or the kids. For that reason, Jack and I agreed that I leave the house for work and bring the kids to daycare on my own. We finally exchanged phone numbers with the promise that I would call him immediately if Devon

showed up to give me trouble. Jack would then send the police to my location while heading there himself.

Ultimately, this plan seemed like the best way to retain some autonomy while not putting myself in danger.

After living under Devon's thumb and the eyes of his *business partners*, the last thing I want to do is find myself in another situation without control. Jack seems to understand and has been giving me a wide berth.

Like *wide*, wide.

We wake around the same time. I take the kids to daycare, and he goes to the motel or to help one of his family members. I leave the hospital around four to pick up the kids. Most days, we head straight home, where Jack and I dance around who's cooking dinner. There's a flurry of activity while I soak in every precious moment with my kids—I feed them, bathe them, and settle them into bed. Then I tend to read or shop or surf on my phone until Jack creeps in around ten o'clock.

And every night, as if we've been doing this for a decade instead of a week, he slips into his sleep clothes, lifts the top comforter, slides in, drapes his arm over my waist, his face in my hair, and falls asleep.

Rinse and repeat.

It's been great, really. A good compromise. He's warm and comfortable, and I get to feel him against me, but that's also the problem.

I get to feel him against me, and nothing more.

Jack lit a freaking fire under my libido, stoked the flames, and left it to burn. But rather than burning out, it just keeps on burning brighter.

For a bit, I thought maybe we could be going somewhere. Testing the waters. Flirting with this mutual attraction. My blood sizzles in his presence, deprived of his touch.

But it feels like he's pumped the brakes on anything other than bedtime snuggles. Maybe he's realized that my kids and I are a little too much.

I mean, what content bachelor takes one look at a single mom to a toddler and an infant, moves them into his house, and thinks, *yep, this chaos is exactly what I had in mind for my future.*

Not a one of them.

When my moving truck arrived on Friday, I felt relieved just to have something distracting to do. Jack helped me pile boxes high in his garage in smothering silence, and I decided then and there to give him a little space.

With that in mind, I took the kids Christmas shopping and for a playdate at Bree's over the weekend and left him alone.

Either he didn't notice or he was relieved to finally have some breathing room.

But Sunday night, like he's been doing since I found him sitting awake in his recliner, he quietly crawled into bed, pulled me close, and fell asleep with his face in my hair.

I wake on Monday morning to silence. I quiet my alarm and find the bed empty between myself and the nightstand. Lucy must have snuck out at some point, a habit she's becoming more and more familiar with. Sensing the cool sheets behind me, Jack must be out with her in the other room.

With a few minutes to myself, I stretch my arms over my head and pick up my phone to fire off a text.

ME

Any word from him?

ALICE

None. He's avoiding me, but he's been talking to mom. I can tell because she's acting cagey

ME

Isn't she always cagey?

ALICE

More cagier than usual

ME

I think it's only fair to let you know the police are looking for him

ALICE

That's fine. I'm planning a trip soon so I can look for him too in order to wring his fucking neck

ME

I hope you're serious about coming to visit because I miss you. I need my best friend to talk to

ALICE

Looking at flights as we speak!

WITH A FINAL STRETCH, I extract myself from the comfortable bed. Bennett whines from the portable crib. I gather him close to my chest, where he immediately nuzzles against my neck.

“Good morning, my sweet boy.”

He grunts and whines on my way to the kitchen.

“Monday mornings aren't your thing either, are they?”

He palms my face and twirls a chubby fist in a lock of my hair. I retaliate by kissing his little chunky cheeks.

The crackle of sizzling bacon accompanies the mouthwatering smell.

“Good morning, Peanut.” I lean down and kiss Lucy on the top of her messy bedhead. “Are you excited for daycare this morning?”

“I see Robert,” she says seriously.

Jack whips around from the stove with a spatula clenched in one hand. “Who’s Robert?”

“He’s her new friend at daycare.”

He purses his lips and stares at the back of Lucy’s head. “Hey, Luce?”

She turns to look at him with soft, brown eyes.

“Do you know any girls at daycare?”

Her eyebrows pull together, and her nose scrunches. “I just know Robert.”

I purse my lips to disguise a grin.

“Aren’t boys gross?” he asks seriously.

“Only Bennett ‘cause he pooped on me one time.” She gives a little fake shudder.

Jack cuts his gaze to mine. “You should visit Charlotte more.”

“She’s younger than Bennett. I don’t think Lucy finds her all that entertaining.”

He waves the spatula before turning back to the pan. “Other playdates then. With girls.”

“Thank you, Jack. I will not take your advice into consideration.” I move beside him and steal a piece of bacon from the paper towel. “But I appreciate the concern.” I wink at him.

“That’s where she gets it! You girls don’t know how cute you are.”

My heart swells in my chest. “If you say so.”

“I’d say I’m an expert at this point.”

“Mm-hmm. Lucy, did you finish your breakfast?”

She nods, eyes glued to the table. I move around her chair to see what’s captured her attention, and my breath catches.

“Where did you get that?” My voice is barely above a whisper. The center diamond of my wedding ring glints in the

light above her head.

“Found it.” She spins the ring in front of her.

“Where did you find it?”

“The floor.”

The floor. That doesn’t make any sense. “Here? At this house?”

Her wispy hair flies around her face with her enthusiastic bob.

That can’t be true. I’m almost positive I packed the ring away in a box with the rest of my jewelry before we left Arizona. It would have arrived with the boxes this weekend, but I haven’t unpacked anything. Our stuff is stacked in Jack’s garage.

“What’s wrong?” He steps up beside me, so close I can feel the heat of him radiate across my shoulders and his breath fan against my neck.

“She has my wedding ring. I haven’t been wearing it. Not for months now.” I turn to look up at him. “I need to see the boxes in the garage.”

“Hold on.” Without waiting for a response, Jack prowls around the corner and down the hall. I bounce Bennett while I wait, trying to rack my brain for a memory of taking the ring out.

Jack returns, immediately holds his hands out for Bennett, and secures him tight against his chest. “Go on. I’ll check on you in a minute.”

A lump in my throat swells tight at his concern. “It shouldn’t take long. I know what box it was in.”

I slip on my coat and boots before rushing into the garage.

The box is near the bottom of a stack. I shift off three other boxes before I can access it. The heavy cardboard scrapes loudly across the floor as I drag it to a more accessible location. I tear through the tape and sort through the contents.

I double-wrapped the few jewelry boxes to conceal them in case someone else came rifling through. The second layer of taped boxes looks exactly as it did the day I packed them. Leaving the rest open and disorganized, I carry the small package back into the house where it's warm.

Jack's gaze finds me the second I emerge from the hall. He's gently running a damp comb through Lucy's hair while she plays with the ring. Bennett rocks on his knees on a blanket in the middle of the room.

"Find anything?"

I hold up my hand. "I have to look in here."

I don't bother with scissors. Instead, I tear through the tape with my fingernail. Velvet box after box emerges, each one contains its proper item nestled securely inside. I line the trinkets of my past on the kitchen table. All except the box where my wedding ring should sit.

Did sit.

Didn't it?

I don't know what I expected to find, but disappointment sags my shoulders. Maybe I didn't put the ring in its proper place like I thought. Maybe I was interrupted or distracted and tucked it in a pocket only for it to fall out later. Maybe Lucy's been carrying it around for weeks and dropped it at some point when we got here, only to rediscover it his morning. Toddler narration can be terrifyingly inaccurate.

Whatever happened, I don't like it. I feel a little crazy. Both for being suspicious and for trying to dismiss where it came from.

My gut is telling me I put the ring in this box. Then why does this box look untouched?

"Whitney?"

"It doesn't look disturbed."

"What are you thinking?" Those beautiful gray eyes search mine. I love that he doesn't try to offer solutions. He doesn't

try to explain away my confusion with excuses that discredit my memory.

Maybe you forgot to put it in there.

Maybe you kept it out on purpose.

Maybe you're under a lot of stress.

I brush my fingers over one of the velvet boxes. A string of pearls necklace my grandma bought me for my eighteenth birthday. "I think I put the ring in this box with all my other jewelry. But I don't have any proof of that."

"Your gut feeling is enough."

Suddenly, I don't want to look at the jewelry anymore. I don't want to think about that stupid ring. I start to shove it all back into the cardboard box. "I'm going to clean up the mess I made in the garage."

"Leave it," Jack says, stilling my hands with one of his own. He turns to the side to hand off Bennett. "I'll take care of it. You guys need to finish getting ready and head off to work."

"Thank you." Avoiding his eye, I hold out the poorly repacked box of jewelry. I study the small, white scar on his jaw instead.

"Will I see you later?" Concern leeches from his tone.

"We'll be back around five."

"See you then." With a dip of his chin, he moves purposefully to the garage.



JACK

CHRISTMAS MUSIC IS PIPED through the speakers in the ceiling, a stark contrast to the thrumming bass playing when I was here a week ago. Mom rented out a portion of The Rocks for our annual family Christmas party. A weird tradition, seeing as we all still get together on the actual holiday, but she likes to have one day a year to celebrate and not have to provide all the party fare. I won't complain. Ruben's cooking is phenomenal for a small town restaurant cook.

We've been here for about forty minutes. Everyone managed to show up on time, including Aiden, which is a Christmas miracle in and of itself. I scan the group, my fingers tightening around the beer in my hand.

Almost everyone.

"Where's Sebastian?" Lee asks Cortney. She leans against a booth with Charlotte bundled securely in her arms.

"He's running late, but he'll be here."

"Late to a Christmas party?" Lee nudges her shoulder, but she just rolls her eyes.

"It is a Tuesday morning. Not all of us own our own businesses and can take the day off." She strokes Charlotte's fine, dark hair.

“I think the only people that’s true for are your boyfriend and Juniper, and she’s banging her boss, so she gets as many days off as she likes.” Lee winks.

“Lee Powell!” Juniper shouts from halfway across the room where she hangs garland from a buffet table.

“Seriously, man. Don’t talk about banging my sister when I’m in the room.” Lincoln sets down his plate, and he and Oliver walk away.

Lee simply grins and tips his beer back for a drink.

“Do you mind watching her?” Bree asks Cortney, peeking over her shoulder at her little girl.

“Not at all.”

“Thanks, I’ll be right back.” She rushes off with a rosy flush painting her cheeks.

I raise an eyebrow at Corjan. “She alright?”

“She’s good. New mom stuff. Charlotte’s been going through a growth spurt so we’ve been taking turns getting up at night. Last night was a little rough.”

“I don’t have any idea what that’s like,” I say.

“Really?” Jude bumps into my left elbow. “There aren’t any babies keeping you awake at night?”

I frown. “Actually, no. Bennett’s been sleeping great, as far as I’m aware. That night at the motel appears to be a one-off.”

“Lucky for you. It’s a lot more intense when you’re in the middle of it,” Cortney says, giving Charlotte a little bounce.

I eye Corjan as he stalks off down the hall. “I’m prepared if it happens again.”

“Prepared how?” Jude asks.

I glance over at him and smirk.

“I’ll never tell.”

“Sounds like a load of bullshit to me,” he replies.

“What’s bullshit?” Mom pops up on the other side of Lee. Her red lipstick matches her sweater, and she has a Santa hat tilted on her head. Her eyes glitter beneath the red and green lights strung across the ceiling beams.

“Just Jack here thinking he can manage a crying baby,” Lee joins in.

“I’m sorry, who’s the only one who’s watched Charlotte overnight? Me.” I paste on a smug smile.

“Would you like an award?” Cortney tilts her head.

I scratch the bridge of my nose with my middle finger. She laughs so loud Charlotte startles.

“I’m sure Jack is doing a fantastic job with those kids.” Mom pats my shoulder.

Tension creeps up my neck. “Whoa, I thought we were talking about Charlotte here.”

My siblings mutter lines of defense. After that the conversation trails off to other holiday plans.

Bree and Corjan reappear, missing the discussion of their baby by minutes. Bree strokes her fingers over Charlotte’s hair. My tense expression melts into a contented one.

“I have to hand it to you. The two of you did good with this one.” I study a sleeping Charlotte over Cortney’s shoulder.

My sister turns her chin to me. “Why do you say it like that?”

I take a swig from the blue beer can in my hand and shrug. “Kids aren’t really my thing.”

I lick my lips and feel heavy eyes on me belonging to Bree, Corjan, and Mom.

Three weeks ago, they would have laughed, joking about how I was allergic to children. They would have asked if I’d ever even held one and grilled me over my knowledge of diaper changes. Now, they see right through the phony facade.

A shriek from the front door halts any rebuttals to my erroneous assertion. A blast of frigid air accompanies the noise

inside. Our eyes swing in that direction as Whitney and the kids take shelter from the cold.

I can't help the way my eyes trace her body from her black winter boots along the curves of the denim clinging to her legs. Her black jacket is cinched tight around her waist and zipped to her collarbones, hiding what I know to be underneath.

With Bennett tight to her hip, she approaches our group, flushing and frazzled. She brushes a stray hair away from her mouth, holds Lucy's hand, and like a magnet, her eyes find mine in through the faces.

It's like someone turns down the dial on the noise. The chatter from my family and the strains of Christmas music fade into the background.

"I really hate to bother you all, but do you think you could watch them for a second so I can use the restroom? We just got done visiting Santa, and I need a second before we sit down for lunch."

"Yeah, sure. No problem," I answer instantly. Twisting, I discard my beer can on the nearest table and take Bennett from Whitney. "C'mere kids. Give your mom a break for a few minutes."

Whispers rise from my siblings, drowned out by the music overhead.

"Is this the daycare?" Corjan asks.

I bite back a smile. It sure looks that way. "What do you think, Luce? Can I get you a cookie before your mom gets back?"

Her brown eyes take in the adults surrounding her, and she nods. This shy side of the three-year-old isn't something I've seen before.

"Okay. Come with me, but we have to be fast." I pretend to move quick, and she jogs in her tiny pink boots to keep up. A smile cracks her serious mask when we lose the onlookers. I slow as we near the buffet table, not wanting her to trip and crash into it.

The whites of her eyes expand, and her mouth drops open. “Cookies,” she says low, beneath her breath.

I chuckle and start naming the excessive spread of treats as she points each one out.

“I want all of them.”

“You can have one. But after lunch, if your mom says it’s okay, you can come back for another one.”

She curls her tiny fingers around the edge of the table and peers at the platters. After a full minute of contemplation, she points out a sugar cookie decorated to look like Santa. “That one!”

“Great choice.” I hand her the sugary treat.

Crumbs stick to her lips and cheeks as she bites into the large Santa.

“Thanks for watching them.” Whitney appears to my left, and I hand Bennett back over.

“It’s no problem. Do you want to have lunch with us?” I scrub the heat from the back of my neck. “Since you’re already here, that is. The food is free.”

“Oh, that’s okay. I don’t want to intrude.”

“You’re more than welcome. Nancy Powell isn’t the type of woman to turn anybody away. Especially not kids.”

Tightness creases the corners of her eyes. “Maybe next time.”

I slide my hands into the pockets of my slacks. “Right.”

“I’ll see you later then?”

“I told her she could have a cookie for dessert if you said it’s okay.”

“Looks like she’s already doing that.”

“Uh, I said she could have another one.”

She widens her eyes at me. “She better eat her full lunch, or you’ll be in trouble later.”

Her threat doesn't land the way she intends it to. Being in trouble with Whitney sounds like a whole lot of fun.

"Just feel free to walk over when she's finished and help yourselves."

"Thank you."

Rather than watch her walk away in a room full of my family members, I use the bathroom while it's free. After relieving myself, I stop in front of the mirror to brush my hair back. The top is getting a little long. I could use a trip to the barber.

I flick on the water and drop my gaze to locate the soap. It's not soap I find pushed back into the corner of the countertop.

It's a pregnancy test.

From the opening in the foil wrapper, I can just make out the word digitally scribed on the screen.

Pregnant.

My gaze darts to the mirror before returning to the test. Whitney was the last person in here. I know it because I had a view of the hall for the three minutes we talked before I handed over her kids.

Immediately, I start to count backward. It's been two weeks since we hooked up. Is that enough time for a person to show up pregnant? Cortney explained pregnancy math to me once when she first found out she was expecting Oliver, but that feels like a million years ago as I stare at the blue stick in front of me.

I whip out my phone and google *how soon after sex can you take a pregnancy test*. Answers vary, but the general consensus is that the longer someone waits, the more accurate their results are, but article after article mentions a two-week rule.

Two weeks.

It's been two weeks since we...

I blow out a harsh breath and pocket my phone. I grip the edge of the counter and sort through the facts.

We used a condom every time.

For penetration.

There was the first time when she nestled her sweet pussy over my cock and rode my lap until she came. But I wasn't inside of her then. All the warnings about precum swirl inside my head.

Could she be pregnant from someone else before she arrived in town?

The mere thought twists my guts. I find it highly unlikely. She doesn't seem the type to leave a trail of one-night stands behind her. Not with how needy she was for me. How beautiful and desperate she was to feel my hands. For me to make her feel good.

The test might not even be hers. But there aren't a whole lot of other women here who the life-changing stick could belong to.

She rushed in and went straight into the bathroom. The idea seems possible, likely even, that she picked up the test and wanted an answer so she didn't have to take it in my home where I might find the results.

Ironic, considering my current position.

The signs point in one direction, and that direction says it's very possible I might have knocked her up.

The air leaves my lungs like I took a well-aimed punch.

Me. A father.

What the fuck do I know about that title? My own father was an unending source of pain. I have emotional scars that match the ones along Jude's back.

A tremor starts in my hands. It's subtle enough to hide. I wait for other effects from that thought. Nausea, maybe, or a desperate feeling to climb into my car and drive out of town.

I wait and stare at myself in the mirror. At the flush on my cheeks and the glassy look in my eyes, I realize it's not coming. The fear isn't there.

I'm... fine.

I feel nervous, almost delirious with the possibility. But I don't feel like I need to run.

What the hell am I supposed to do now?

I clear away the test with a few paper towels to protect my hands. The last thing I want is for another member of my family to stumble on the stick and raise questions. I wash my hands and stare unseeing into the mirror.

Do I bring it up to her? How would that even go? Oh, hey, I found your pregnancy test in the bathroom at my mom's Christmas party. I know we just had sex a few times, but I'd like to explore this with you. I shake my head. That wouldn't work. It's almost as bad as asking her outright. Are you, by chance, pregnant?

Fuck.

The only solution is to wait for her to come talk to me. I can only hope she does soon.

Someone's going to investigate if I don't return to the party. I straighten my shoulders, clear my throat, and lift my chin. Ready as I'll ever be to leave this room.

No one appears to notice as I slip back into the party. As if I didn't just spend at least fifteen minutes in the bathroom. I grab a fresh beer and plant my feet beside Jude.

"You alright?" He gives me a quick once-over.

The can cracks open loudly, and I chug a good third of the beer. "I'm great."

I mean it. Reentering the room where my family is has settled the swirling storm inside. These people have loved me since they picked Jude and me off the streets in our teens. We fuck up from time to time—we're all human—but never have I felt like they'd turn their backs on me. Not once.

This thing with Whitney will need to be discussed, but it doesn't have to be today. I can give her a little while, try to suss out her mood, and find a way to bring the test up in a couple of days. The only thing for certain is the possibility of her being pregnant doesn't scare me in the way it used to.

"Is that her?" Mom slinks up to my shoulder, quiet as a cat. I nearly jump out of my skin.

"Yeah," I mutter, not bothering to argue with the implication of her statement. "That's Whitney."

"She's as pretty as I remember."

I don't bother giving her statement a response.

"And her kids? They've all been staying with you?"

I look down to find Mom's eyes twinkling at me, humor flashing in the depths. "Well, I wasn't going to make them sleep outside, but now that you mention it..."

She smacks me backhand across the chest. I grunt and smile. "Jack, you might be a grown man, but you will respect your mother."

I wrap my arm tight around her shoulders and draw her into my chest. She's so much smaller than she seemed growing up. Her head tucks nicely beneath my chin. For a moment, I just hold the woman I owe my entire life to. She seems to understand words aren't necessary as she squeezes me back around the middle.

I always appreciated her methods. Nancy Powell raised five boys into strong men. She taught us values and the meaning of hard work. She built our confidence from the ground up, brick by brick, and not once did she impose her wishes onto us as a burden. She didn't pester us with talk about girlfriends and wives or about having kids and making her a grandmother. I appreciate now more than ever that she didn't make us feel rushed into a future we weren't ready for.

"I'm proud of you," she says quietly, punctuating her words with a gentle squeeze. I cough at the onslaught of emotion rushing up my throat.

“Thanks, Mom.”

As easily as she snuck up on me, she meanders away to tell another of my siblings how much she loves them.

Nancy Powell is a never-ending well of unconditional love. That woman is an angel on earth.

I flit my attention through the space filled with my family. Corjan and Bree whisper with their heads together at a table. He strokes her knuckles and gazes at Charlotte sleeping in her mom’s arms. Lee sits on the edge of a booth with Juniper on his lap while they talk to Aiden. My youngest brother looks beat, circles beneath his eyes, his skin a little wan in the yellowed lights overhead, but nothing can remove the exuberant smile from his face. Juniper’s brother, Lincoln, and my nephew, Oliver, laugh about something over the buffet table where they fill their plates with all the appetites of two teenage boys.

Cortney and Sebastian talk quietly off in a corner, her back to the room, his expression serious. I shake my head and move on. My sister is a big girl and can decide what’s best for her, even if I think something about that guy is off.

Mom stands a few feet to the right of me, coaxing one of the rare smiles from Jude. He gazes down at her with all the adoration we’ve felt over the years.

These are my people. I don’t know where or who I’d be without them.

With that sentiment secure in my chest, I allow myself to seek out the other person I know in this room. The one I spot in a booth near the front. She’s on a knee, picking something up from the floor. Bennett is tight to her hip, and she looks up at Lucy with a dazzling smile.

She removed her jacket at some point. The satiny red shirt dips at her cleavage and hangs slightly away from her chest before tucking in neatly at her waist. The line of her curves is perfectly accentuated by the clingy material and the denim stretched over her hips.

I pull out my phone and line up the shot, waiting patiently until she tips her head back again with that smile. I click the shutter button, preserving the moment of the three of them on my phone. I check the image. Satisfied, I tuck my phone back into my pocket and resume drinking my beer.



WHITNEY

“WHITNEY! YOU OUT THERE?”

The garage door shuts loudly behind me as the kids and I get home Thursday evening. Another round of snow began falling this afternoon, making the roads slick but not unmanageable. Unfortunately for me, I only have about three years of experience driving on snowy roads before I moved out of Minnesota, so I drove slow with a white-knuckled grip the entire way back to Jack’s house.

“I’m here,” I yell back, emerging from the hall to find the main part of the house empty. “Where are you?”

“Bedroom.” The wooden door separating us muffles his voice.

I make quick work of Bennett’s hat and blanket while Lucy works to pull off her wet boots by herself. The toddler independence has kicked in strong, so I leave her to accomplish her task.

She struggles with her zipper, her little tongue poking out of the front of her lips before she finally gets it unstuck with a triumphant smile. I hover behind as she climbs the small footstool Jack bought just for her to reach the hooks, and she hangs up her jacket.

“I have to go talk to Jack. Do you want to come with me?”

“I color?”

“Go ahead. I’ll be there in a minute.”

She bounces her way to the kitchen table with all the exuberance of a three-year-old. I feel much more confident leaving her for a few minutes since Jack toddler-proofed the house.

I knock on the bedroom door, waiting for Jack to invite me inside.

“I’m in here.” His voice floats out from the closet.

“Did you lock yourself in?” I tease, opening the door to find his lower half sticking out of the ceiling, held up by a retractable ladder.

“Funny. Can you take this bin from me? I have two more.”

I set Bennett in the portable crib and return to take the light plastic container from his hands. “What is this?”

“I had an idea for something to do tonight. If you’re up to it.”

A jolt of anticipation strikes me in the chest. The distance between us from the prior week has vanished, almost as if it never existed.

“Sure. Are you going to tell me what it is?”

He emerges with two more containers stacked in his arms. My stomach slips into my throat as he descends the ladder. “It’s Christmas.”

I lick my lips, my mind flashing to the presents I bought and wrapped over the weekend. “It is.”

He shakes the bins gently in front of me, a small tinkling sound coming from inside. “That’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to set up Christmas.”

“You have Christmas decorations?”

He laughs, warm and rich. I want to bottle the sound for bad days. “Mom wouldn’t let any of us move out without a

holiday starter kit. That woman loves a reason to decorate and celebrate.”

I follow his long paces into the living room. He deposits the bins next to a bare artificial tree beside the fireplace camouflaged by the dark corner. Next to...

“Is that a new couch?”

“Just arrived today.”

I turn to lift a roguish brow at him. “I didn’t even notice any of this when I came in.”

“Good. I was still able to surprise you. I didn’t want to waste time dragging the tree down from the garage rafters while you guys waited. This way, we can get started.”

“Smart.” And thoughtful. How he went out of his way to surprise my kids and me isn’t lost on me.

“Hey, Luce!”

“Huh!” she yells back with a giggle.

“Want to help decorate a Christmas tree?”

The whites of her wide eyes are clear from across the room. “A real Christmas tree?” She plants her palms flat on the table and shoves. Her chair scrapes across the floor, and she runs clear across the room before Jack can answer.

“Your mom and I can’t hang all the pretty ornaments ourselves.”

“I can help! I can do it!” Lucy bounces on her tippy-toes.

“You take a look through the boxes with your mom. Find which one you want to hang up first.” Jack looks at me. “Can I get you anything while I’m up?”

“I’m good, thanks.”

Jack disappears into the bedroom.

Lucy kneels beside me on the floor as I lift the lids off the three bins. An assortment of baubles and ornaments are nestled carefully between crumpled sheets of bubble wrap and newspapers. Traditional colored spheres in silvers, golds, reds,

and greens. Dated ornaments. I carefully pull out a glass one in the shape of a house, the words *our first home* inscribed on the bottom. I flip it over, and my breath catches in my throat at the words written in permanent marker.

Jack's first Powell Christmas 2001.

It isn't a secret he was informally adopted into the family. All the Powell kids were. Back in high school Corjan shared some of his upbringing over a bonfire and beers, but I have no idea what circumstances led to Jack and Jude joining the family.

As my heart clenches, it strikes me how much I want to know.

Suddenly, the task is all the more daunting as the sentimental value of these priceless ornaments skyrockets.

"Be very careful, Lucy," I admonish. "Wait for Jack before you touch anything."

A happy squeal precedes the man into the room. My pulse takes off at a gallop, and my eyes blow wide at the sight before me.

Jack Powell is hot. It's an indisputable fact.

Jack Powell wearing my baby against his chest in a hands-free carrier makes my legs so weak I'm glad I'm already sitting down. Three attempts later, I finally unstick my tongue from the roof of my mouth. "Where did you get that?" I croak.

"I picked it up the same day I got the car seats."

Bennett's fingers wrap around Jack's pinky. He bounces their hands.

"Thought it might be useful if you have another night when he's crying and just wants to be held."

None the wiser to my inner disquietude and the fact I could really use a glass of wine or a shot of tequila, Jack crosses the room. "Find one you like, Lucy?"

"Dis one." She jabs her index finger at a silver bauble.

“Go ahead and pick it up. You can put the first one on the tree.”

She snatches up the silver sphere and bounds to her feet. “Watch, Momma!”

“I’m watching, Peanut.”

She surveys the tree with a seriousness beyond her years. Seeming to settle on the perfect spot, she stretches on her toes and secures the thin wire around a branch.

“Another?” She tilts her head, eyes on Jack.

“Have at it, kiddo. We have to hang all of them.”

Her eyes light, and she races back to the bin.

Jack busies himself with the Christmas spirit and begins selecting his own ornaments to hang. Bennett swings his feet happily. As they near the tree again, Bennett latches onto a branch in front of his face and tugs. The seven-foot tree rocks in its base. With a warm chuckle, Jack untwists Bennett’s fingers and hands him a bauble to hold instead.

“It’s plastic.” Jack shrugs and returns to preening over the tree.

I sit on the floor and help Lucy select appropriate ornaments. Ones that seem generic to prevent her from breaking something with sentimental value.

Jack returns to the bins and leans over to catch my eye.

I startle.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. I’m great.” I swallow hard. “This is... this is really nice of you, Jack.”

A pink flush appears on his cheekbones. “It’s not much. I just thought you deserved to spend Christmas the right way. I set up a tree at the motel for the same reason. So my guests can sit by a tree and a fire, and maybe the holiday won’t feel so cold.”

Jack holds out his hand. A candy cane-shaped ornament rests against his palm. He looks at me, then jerks his head at the tree. “Come on. It’s your turn to hang something up.”

I pick up the light object, but he doesn’t remove his hand, waiting for mine so he can help me up from the floor.

Suddenly, I’m eight years old again, helping my parents decorate our tree. The smell of cinnamon infuses my memories, and the strains of Christmas music float through the air. I hang the candy cane, then find a Christmas playlist on my phone.

The first strains of “It’s Beginning to Look a lot Like Christmas” fill the air.

“Now it’s perfect.”

I set my phone on the fireplace mantel. Looking back at the scene, I find Jack’s gaze steady on my face.

“Yeah,” he says gruffly.

I think he might be talking about something other than the Christmas cheer.

WHITE SNOWFLAKES DRIFT LAZILY to the ground through the window beside the Christmas tree. I sit in the dark room lit only by the yellow lights on the tree and the flames dancing in the fireplace. The haphazardly placed ornaments draw a smile to my face.

Lucy worked tirelessly on the left side of the tree, covering a small group of branches about waist high where she could reach best. The rest of the tree where Jack and I placed ornaments is sparse. All the breakable ones sit near the top.

I love it. It’s the best Christmas tree I’ve seen in my entire life.

I unwind a strawberry sucker a coworker passed out at work today and tip my head back against the recliner. The crackle of the fire serenades me, distinct from the faint sound

of the shower running. Cooper sits beside me, his warm body pressed along my legs. I drag my fingers over his fur and close my eyes as the strawberry flavor explodes on my tongue.

I think I'm falling in love.

How couldn't I? His effortless care for my kids and me is attractive in and of itself. But it's so much more than how he helps with Bennett and how he calls Lucy, *Luce*. How he's concerned himself with our safety, first from the weather and then with Devon.

It's a hundred percent him.

The men who get it *get it*. And the ones who don't never will.

And that's effort.

I'm not asking for Jack to perform cartwheels around me. I haven't asked him to perform anything. And that's just it. It's like he knows the things that might make my day easier, so he goes out of his way to take care of them for me. Holding Bennett so I can eat with both hands, or keeping an eye on the kids so I can take a shower and not accidentally forget to shampoo my hair because I'm in such a rush to finish. It's taking turns with the cooking and cleanup without arguing about whose turn it is. It's coexisting yet being aware of one another's needs without having to ask him.

It's being heard without speaking.

It's being seen without putting on a show.

It's everything I would have asked for if I knew how to ask and everything I'm not sure I'll be able to hang on to when this temporary situation is over.

I can say with certainty that Jack Powell didn't just set the bar. Jack Powell *is* the bar, and it's constantly moving in an upward direction. There's not a chance I will ever settle for less.

The bathroom door clicks, prompting my eyes to open. Steam billows out into the dimly lit hall. Jack steps through the mist, and I nearly groan.

He's shirtless. Even from a distance, I can see lingering water droplets cling to his skin. As he moves, they lose their hold and drip down over the ridges of his abs into the waistband of his gray sweatpants. His inked bicep bunches as he towels off his wet hair, cell phone extended in his other hand.

"Hey. I have news." He quickly crosses the room. I'm too busy ogling for the words to fully register.

"News?"

"Sutton Stone just called. He said they pulled CCTV from the businesses in town. Devon was seen leaving the morning after he showed up at the bar, and he hasn't been seen since."

A stone settles in my stomach as my shoulders sag. "He's gone?"

Jack's jaw clenches as he swallows. "It appears so."

"He could come back."

"Since they got him driving, they now have a make, model, and license plate. He has a warrant out now. I think it will be difficult for him to keep sneaking around."

I close my eyes and blow out a breath. I finally might be able to put this nightmare with Devon to rest. But that means this situation with Jack will be over before it begins.

Popping the sucker in my mouth, I twirl the stick. I focus on the strawberry flavor and not the way my heart feels like it's ripping into two.

"Can I ask for one last favor?"

"Of course."

I remove the sucker and spin it in my fingers, looking at the way the red candy glints in the light from the fire. "If it's alright with you, I'd like it if we could stay until after Christmas. When I tucked Lucy into bed, she mentioned how excited she was for Santa to see all our decorations. I mean, if it's too much, you've already done more than I could have ever asked for, and I appreciate it—"

“Whitney.”

Two heartbeats pass before I drag my eyes to Jack’s face. The intensity there is startling. Brows drawn close and low, eyes hooded. He scans my face in search of something.

“Please,” I ask quietly as the silence stretches. The corners of my eyes begin to burn.

“I want you here for Christmas. I’m not asking you to leave.”

“It’s sort of implied, isn’t it?”

“Is it?”

My lips part.

“Do you want to leave?” he asks.

Shock permeates my body, but right on its heels is the first threads of hope. I lick my sucker to buy time. “No.”

The floorboards creak beneath his footsteps. He draws near. Slow. Predatory. “Have I given you any indication I want you to go?”

Not trusting my voice, I shove the sucker in my mouth and shake my head. Because right now I’m on the verge of telling him how I really feel, and I’m not certain that’s the best idea given everything that’s going on right now.

He stops in front of me. His bare feet in my line of sight.

“Have I?”

Agile fingers grip the end of my sucker stick. He draws the candy out of my mouth. The strawberry rubs along my tongue, and I give in, allowing my muscles to relax. My eyes flick up to his. He gazes down at me intently, watching my mouth as he draws the sucker toward my lips. Just before the candy pops out of my mouth, he slides it back in. Out. In. The gesture is obscene, yet I can’t help the way my nipples tighten beneath my shirt as he runs the sucker around my lips.

On the next outward glide, he takes the candy from me and pops it into his mouth. “I want you to stay.”

My breath rushes from my lungs, and I drop my gaze, only to come face-to-face with the bulge in his sweatpants. What an opportunity to waste. He wants to play with my mouth? Turn me on?

Well, Merry Christmas to me.

I bite my lip to contain a smirk and settle my palms on his muscular thighs. He tenses beneath my hands.

“Then I guess I’ll stay.” I skate my palms upward.

He grunts around my stolen sucker. “I guess you will.”

“Mm-hmm.” I brush my fingertips across the bulge, and he groans low in his throat. My fingers curl into the waist of his pants, and I methodically peel them down. His cock bobs free, semi-hard and heavy. I wrap my palm around him and pump once.

“Whitney,” he mutters my name on a stilted groan.

“You took my sucker,” I pout.

“Do you want it back?” He holds the candy in front of my face.

“I think I found something better.” Leaning forward, I swirl my tongue around the head of his cock. It hardens beneath my fist.

His thighs tense. “You don’t know how much I’ve been dreaming about your fucking mouth.”

I play with him like he’s my candy. My much thicker, harder candy. The strawberry flavor lingers on my tongue, mixing with the smoky, salty flavor of his precum. With a hum, I take him deeper, drawing his cock to the back of my throat. It touches the back, and I convulse around him.

“Fuck,” he bites out sharply. A fist in my hair draws my face back. “You okay, pretty girl?”

“Yes.”

He cups my jaw in one hand and his cock in the other. “You take me so well.” His voice is ragged. He dips his shaft back between my lips. Slow and controlled. I suck along the

hardness, and my underwear dampens with each stroke. “You know just how to make me feel good.”

I light beneath his praise. His words touch something deep within me. Something new and intimate and profound. The men of my past only concentrated on how they felt, not on how I *made* them feel. As if I were nothing more than a wet hole, and any wet hole would do.

Not with Jack. His adoration reaches levels I never knew existed, and I crave more.

I open my mouth wide to take him deeper. Jack drags along my tongue, dipping in once more before pulling out.

“As good as that feels, I’m not going to come in your mouth.” Then his hands are beneath my armpits, and he hauls me off the floor.

He still has my stolen sucker in his mouth. Maybe I sucked him so well that he forgot it was there. Before I can ask, he hauls me around, twisting me until I’m on my hands and knees on his brand-new couch. I feel him sink to the ground behind me and peel my leggings over my hips.

“My turn.”

He attacks me with his tongue and lips. His large hands palm my ass, spreading and kneading my glutes as he licks a broad stripe from my clit to my entrance. I clench around nothing, gasping as he tastes and dips and swirls.

“You taste much better than candy.”

I register the sound of the sucker shattering on the hardwood.

“Ah!”

“You’re so fucking perfect.”

He attacks me between my legs as if his life’s sole mission is to make me come. I’m so wet he slides a thick finger inside of me with zero resistance. My back arches, and my hips pump, pushing back against the intrusion and his mouth.

I grip the cushions and bury my face in the couch.

His palm flattens along my spine, tracing upward between my shoulder blades. He presses down just as he buries his tongue with his finger.

“Fuck.” The cushion disguises my muffled moan. “More.”

He licks me leisurely. “I could spend all day right here eating you.”

A blush burns my cheeks.

“You have a gorgeous pussy.” His finger slips out, and I clench around the loss. He traces up to my clit, swirling the wet digit around the sensitive bundle before running it along the outer lips. “Swollen. Pink. Wet. Waiting for me to fill it.”

I’m acutely aware of his eyes feasting on my most intimate parts. I fight the urge to tighten my thighs and dispute the compliment. Doesn’t he know that I had two kids? That things don’t look the same down there anymore? I rest my cheek against the cushion and open my mouth. Only a silent gasp releases as he runs his tongue along my slit.

He moves away. The condom wrapper crinkles, and then he’s there, lining himself up. “Are you ready for me, beautiful?”

All thoughts of self-consciousness vanish as his thick erection presses against me. His words swallow the doubts. My skin prickles with anticipation as arousal zips through me like a strike of lightning. “Yes. Please.”

He eases his way inside. I appreciate the way he savors the buildup and doesn’t feel the need to ram his way in as if I’m some conquest to claim, even if that’s exactly what he’s doing.

Claiming my body.

Claiming me.

One of his hands grips the back of the couch beside my head. The other wraps around my torso, between my breasts to the opposite shoulder. He yanks my back against his chest. The wiry hairs brush deliciously against my sensitive skin. He presses deeper. As he seats himself fully, pelvis crushed

against my ass, he groans gutturally, the sound in his chest vibrating against my back.

“So goddamn tight, baby.” He drops a kiss on my shoulder. “So perfect. Like you were made for my cock.”

He begin to thrust, slow at first, building toward a hard piston of his hips against mine. He holds me tight against his chest, slamming wildly into me, and I throb around him.

“Oh god,” I pant, fingers wrapping around the arm across my chest. My nails dig half-moons into his skin. His next thrust hits something inside that liquifies me. My head rolls back onto his shoulder, and he buries his face in my neck.

“You feel too good, pretty girl.” He thrusts harder, deeper, slamming me down as his hips snap up. “Fuck, I love—”

Time stops.

My eyes widen.

The breath stalls in my chest. His movements turn erratic, his breath ragged in my ear.

“I love fucking you,” he murmurs into my sweaty hair.

I’m still not breathing as my mind tries to work out the words.

I fucking love you.

No.

I love *fucking* you.

The cinderblock falls away, and I drag in a strangled breath.

“Yes.”

“Need you to come with me. Not going without you.”

Callused fingers slip over my stomach and between my thighs. He finds my clit easily and rubs the delicate nerves.

I reach behind my head and run my fingers through his damp hair. “Keep going.”

He lifts his head, flitting stormy gray eyes over mine. Something swirls there. A hidden emotion I can't name. I blink, and it's gone, his lips crashing against mine.

He takes my mouth like he takes my pussy—deep, punishing, and desperate. Those fingers swirl faster, harder over my clit. His actions proving his words that he needs me to fall apart with him.

The coil in my belly cinches tight, higher than ever before. This orgasm might just kill me. I feel myself clench tight and stall, clamped around his cock. It's as if all time stops with me hovering on the precipice, waiting for the free fall.

Jack thrusts erratically, swelling impossibly hard inside me. He shoves deep, stilling, a guttural growl ripping from his chest as he strokes me almost angrily, shoving me over the edge. A scream tears up my throat, and he smothers it with his hand.

“Fuck, Whitney. Come on my cock, pretty girl.”

My throat feels raw once the noise stops. Moisture drips from my eyes, and my shoulders heave where they're held tight against Jack's sweaty chest. His hand falls away, slinking over my chin to cup my jaw, and his fingers soothingly stroke my throat.

I sag against him, and we collapse against the cushions.

“I think I've died.”

His hand presses over the left side of my chest, where my very alive heart pounds against my ribs. “I think it's still beating.”

“Thank god for that.” I gulp in a lungful of air. “Ugh, I don't want to move.”

“So don't.” Jack drags a blanket from the arm of the couch and tosses it over our naked bodies. He settles onto his back and turns me over so that my cheek presses against his chest.

“What about the kids?” I yawn. Lucy has a bad habit of sneaking her way out of the bedroom in the morning when Jack gets up.

“I’ll wake you with plenty of time to get dressed.”

Between the warmth of the fire and Jack’s body, my eyelids flicker heavily. I’m comfortable, so I nestle deeper into his side.

And as I drift off to sleep, I wonder if this could be the last time.



JACK

ON CHRISTMAS EVE, I find myself at the Sanctuary with Lee, Jude, and Corjan, bathing a new intake of puppies that managed to roll around in their own mess before we could get them out of their travel crate. It doesn't necessarily take four men to clean up seven puppies, but I needed the excuse to get out of the house.

I thought I could give Whitney a week to bring up the pregnancy test, but five days in and I'm ready to crack. I've thought about asking her nearly a dozen times, but I can't come up with a sentence that doesn't make me sound like a total ass.

The tires on my SUV crunch along the snowy driveway up to the Sanctuary. Jude's Samoyed, Ashe, dances around the front gate, howling in excitement. The other dogs, those brave enough to step outside, watch from the cleared steps next to the house.

I punch in the code and creep forward. The big ball of white fluff greets me as soon as I step out of the car.

"How come you haven't been adopted yet?" I stroke her head. My cold fingers warm where they press against her thick coat. "We need to find you a home."

She woofs in agreement.

I enter the intake building to find my brothers waiting, gathered in a small circle probably gossiping like a bunch of old women.

“Took you long enough,” Jude grumbles.

“As if you have anything to get back to.” I slap him on the shoulder, gripping a second longer than necessary in our version of a hug. We save the real affection for saying goodbye.

“He might not, but I do,” Lee adds, pushing away from the desk he’s leaning against. “Juniper’s cooking tonight. Her version of a Christmas dinner since we’ll be at Mom’s tomorrow.”

“Can’t fucking wait for tomorrow.” Corjan shuffles a packet of papers on his desk. “I told Bree she’s not cooking this year. She’s tired enough as a new mom. That woman needs to learn how to take a break.”

He and Lee both work here at the sanctuary during the week, handling paperwork and other day-to-day things. Jude is the main caretaker for the dogs, and Aiden and I help out with random tasks like intakes and tracking down reports of strays. Cortney offers her vet services, and I run a special promotion on rooms at the motel if a partner or potential adopter comes from out of town to visit our facility.

“Maybe stop talking and start on these puppies so you can all get out of my house,” Jude grouches.

“We aren’t even in your house,” I toss back on my way to the intake room. The minute I step over the threshold, I gag. “These babies stink.”

“The guy said his heat went out on the truck about two hours away. He could have stopped to get it fixed, delaying him until after the holiday, or keep going. He decided to power through but left them in their mess. He was worried they’d freeze if he got them wet and left them without heat for too long,” Jude says.

I’m not the only one shaking my head at the story. I peer into the crate. Seven pairs of eyes glow back at me. “What are

they?”

“Some sort of Beagle mixes,” Lee answers.

“You guys are cute.” I stick my fingers in through the bars. The door to the room closes with a soft click. I take that as my cue to open the latch. “Brace yourselves.”

In a mad rush, shit-covered puppies push their way through the swinging door. We form a line, and one by one, they get handed brother by brother until Corjan deposits them into the waist-high tub along the back wall.

“How do we want to do this?” I ask.

“I’ll clean this crate up.” The metal clangs as Jude lifts their temporary housing from the room.

“If you two want to wash them, I’ll begin the paperwork. We can set them up in two stalls and have Cortney run by as soon as she’s free for an assessment.”

We break apart into our tasks. As Lee leaves the room, Corjan and I get to work soaping up the squeaking, wiggling dogs.

“How’s your girlfriend?” Corjan drizzles soap on the cute black-and-tan puppy nearest him.

I do the same to a red-and-white one trying to chew on my hand. “Ow. She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Why not?”

I open my mouth and snap it shut. My brows dip, and I stall by scrubbing my fingers through the suds. “I don’t actually have an answer to that. She’s just not.”

I frown.

I’d say we’re both too busy to start something, but that isn’t exactly true. She maintains her schedule, and I have mine, but we’ve settled into a relatively easy evening routine. Sure, I try to stay out of her way most of the time. Dinner can more often than not be chaotic, but we’re still sleeping next to one another in the bed, the four of us sharing the same room as if it’s the most normal thing in the world.

It's almost as if we skipped straight over labels and moved in with each other. Neither of us has broached the subject.

Except the night beneath the tree, when she asked if they could stay until after Christmas. Could her asking to stay mean something more, and I missed it?

If the question had been posed a few weeks ago, before I even met Whitney and her kids, I would have argued that I liked my solitude. My life was comfortable and quiet, minus a few bitchy lovable brothers and some dogs. But things have changed.

I damn near told her I loved her while I was buried up to the hilt between her legs, and I'm still not sure if I was thinking with my head or my dick at that moment.

"Sorry to spring the question on you like that. Don't give yourself an aneurysm."

"What about you? How's your family doing?" I drag the first puppy out and wrap it in a towel to dry off.

"We're good. We've both been a bit tired lately..."

I narrow my eyes at his back as I pawn the first puppy off to Lee and return to the basin.

A current of adrenaline zips through my limbs. "Everything alright?"

Corjan searches his arm for a clean space to rub his face against, clearing the sweat from his brow. "Ah, yeah. Things are great. Just extra busy with the holiday."

That protective instinct starts tingling. "And why's that?"

"It's nothing."

"Someone sick?"

"No, really, I shouldn't have said anything."

I reach for a fawn-colored pup. "You sure?"

"Bree's pregnant."

A beat of silence passes between us. Then the sound of my blood rushing in my ears infiltrates the space like a wave

crashing against the shore.

“Charlotte’s only seven weeks old,” he continues, filling in for my absent words. “And we’re ecstatic. Truly, I’d want Bree to have ten of my kids if we didn’t get such a late start. But I’m worried about her.”

His concern drags me to the present. “Why are you worried? Charlotte’s pregnancy was pretty easy, right?”

He gathers his puppy in his arms, scrubbing a towel over its head. “It’s not the pregnancy itself. She’s just so tired already, and that first trimester has nearly knocked her out. I just don’t know how it can be good for her, ya know?”

I lick my lips. “When did you find out?” I stare unseeing at the tri-colored pup squeaking at my hands in defiance.

He laughs. “At the family Christmas party.”

I suck in a slow breath through my nose as my eyelids slip closed. “Funny place to take a pregnancy test.”

“I guess she couldn’t wait any longer to find out. I found her in the bathroom crying, and she told me right then and there.”

I fight to release my shoulders from my ears. “I’m happy for you guys.” A disbelieving laugh. “A second kid. You’re a lucky man.”

His footsteps sound across the room. The door opens, and Corjan moves closer.

“Are you alright?”

“Me?”

“I don’t exactly see anyone else in here. Do you?”

I finish rinsing the fawn puppy, secure it in a towel, and walk it over to Lee to process. As I return, I spin my back to the basin, ignoring the remaining four dogs splashing in the inch-deep water. Resting my hips against the edge, I cross my arms over my chest.

“I saw that test,” I admit quietly.

“How?”

“In the bathroom. It was on the counter.”

Corjan stares at me. “I didn’t realize she left it out.”

I tip my chin to my chest.

“You’re mad that Bree’s pregnant?”

“No, dumbass. I saw it after Whitney left the bathroom and thought it might be hers.”

Corjan’s anger deflates like a pricked balloon. “Fuck, Jack, I’m sorry. Wait, is this relief or something else? I can’t tell.”

“It’s not relief,” I say. The emotion for what this fucking is is still processing, but it feels a hell of a lot like disappointment.

“Then I am truly sorry. I take it you didn’t ask her about it?”

I cut my gaze sharply to him. “There wasn’t a way to bring it up.”

“Right. Well, you should do that.”

My nostrils flare as I stare at my boots. “Doesn’t really matter now.”

“You never know. Might be good for you.”

The door creaks open across the room. “You two got any more pups in here, or what the fuck are you doing?”

“Sorry, there was a distraction.” I cut my glance to Corjan, deciphering correctly that he doesn’t want to share the news around when he just mutters his assent.

“If Juniper’s potatoes get cold, you’ll pay,” Lee says. His timing provides the perfect levity to the heavy conversation.

“We’re on it, boss.” Corjan steps up beside me and fishes out a stinky dog.

I clean the tri-colored one with the sad eyes. We work at an accelerated pace, toweling off our dogs at the same time.

“Still think you should tell her,” he mumbles beneath his breath.

I shake my head in warning. I love my family to death, but if they catch wind of this fuckup, I’ll never hear the end of it. Word would definitely get back to Whitney once their wives and girlfriends heard about it.

“You could always give her a dog to soothe things over. Chicks love apologies in the form of dogs.” He picks up our final one and looks it head-on. “You wouldn’t even have to say much. One look at this face, and you’d receive instant forgiveness.”

“Is that how you won Bree back?”

“She loves my old-ass dogs, but no. I think Lee’s the one you’ll want to ask about that. He practically proposed to Juniper with a dog. Got her to accept the dog and then told her they were a packaged deal.”

I raise a brow. “There’s no way in hell she fell for that.”

“They’re living together, aren’t they?”

A DIM GLOW lights the windows beyond the curtains of my house, revealing Whitney’s still up. My boots weigh a hundred pounds as I trudge through the garage. A clammy sweat coats my palm as I turn the knob and open the door, stepping into my house that feels more like a home with her in it. Despite all the tough talk on my drive over here, my heart still beats like a steady drum.

I toe off my boots, hang my coat, and walk through the hall with the weight of the last couple of hours on my shoulders. The smell of cinnamon hits as I emerge from the hall, along with the soft strains of a Christmas ballad. It strikes me then how alive she makes my house feel. How alive I feel when I’m with her.

I like it a fuck of a lot more than I ever thought I would.

I find her curled in the corner of the new sofa, her feet tucked under her body, head resting on her hand. Her eyes are closed, but I can't tell if she's sleeping from this distance.

Stockings hang above the fireplace. A letter adorning each for our names. They're plump with gifts meant to be opened in the morning. Even the one with a stitched letter J. Her thoughtfulness has no boundaries. I just wish I knew if this is her way of thanking me or if she's developing feelings for me too.

Quietly, I move into the kitchen to retrieve the gift I stashed yesterday. I place it behind the small pile she must have moved out of hiding while I was gone.

“Jack?”

I glance up in my crouch to find her sleepy eyes searching mine. “Hey.”

“What time is it?”

“It's just after ten.”

She sits up and rubs her eyes. “I didn't mean to fall asleep. I didn't know if you'd be here tomorrow, so I wanted to give you your gift.”

My lips part on a surprised breath. “You didn't have to get me anything.”

“It's not much.” She reaches beneath the tree and extracts a small box from the pile. “Really. Don't get your hopes up.”

The box feels like air between my fingertips. I stare at the carefully wrapped present, the sharp creases in the shiny green paper. “Thank you,” I say stupidly.

“You're supposed to say that after you open it.” She pats the open cushion beside her. “Come sit. I don't bite.”

Her words draw my attention straight to her mouth. She bites her lip.

“Unless you want me to.”

“You can't tease a man like that,” I rasp. I tear through the wrapping and open the box to find a silver key chain. A long

rectangular shape with the words Christmas Blizzard 2023 etched into it. I flip the cool metal over in my palm. On the back it says W+L+B

“This is for me?”

“I have one too. Everyone around here always remembers the Halloween Blizzard of 1991, but this was a much better experience. I just thought this has been a fun memory that started when, you know, when you were determined to drive yourself back to your motel in a historic blizzard for me.”

The etching on the key chain burns itself into my brain. I don't remember receiving a gift from someone who wasn't in my immediate family. She didn't just pick this out from a shop, she actually had it custom-made.

“This is...” I clear my throat. “Thank you. I love it.”

“It's silly, I know. I just thought it was cute and wanted to get something for you.”

It slams into me then that she doesn't even know. She doesn't get what it means to be damaged goods and have someone like her, light and beauty and kindness, pick out a gift with a meaning behind it. It doesn't matter that it's small. It's personal. She put thought into it.

She thought about me.

Clarity empties my mind like the clouds leaving after a violent storm. The key chain and box clatter to the floor as I surge toward her, bury my fingers into the hair on the back of her head, and kiss her.

God, I fucking kiss her.

If I didn't have to come up for air, I never would. I'd bury myself in her and drown. I'd live off the taste of her lips. Instead, I pour myself into the kiss. I nip at her lips and soothe them with my tongue, and I taste her. I swallow down her gasps and her moans.

She presses against me, reacting to my desperation, so I haul her into my lap. Her thighs part, and she straddles my hips, settling her center above my aching cock. My hands

squeeze her waist, tracing her curves lower until I can press her flush against me. All the while, I keep kissing her. Deepening it.

I drag my fingers along her scalp, causing her to shudder in my arms. She wrenches from my mouth with a stuttered gasp, and I guide her forehead to rest against mine. We breathe against each other.

“It was just a key chain,” she pants.

And all my secrets tumble out on a handful of clunky words.

“I’m falling in love with you.” I practically yell them at her.

“Wh-what?”

I swallow hard and tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “I don’t want there to be any decisions between us without you knowing that somewhere along the last couple of weeks, I started to fall in love with you and the kids. And if you want to stick around and see where this might go, I’m all for it.”

Her eyes widen at my confession. Dainty fingertips come to rest on my stubbled cheeks. I feel as if she sees straight inside my soul.

“You’re a big softy in there, aren’t you?”

I gaze at her with a serious expression. My heart thunders on the edge of a catastrophic fall. “You bring it out in me.”

“I’m falling for you too.”

“No kidding?”

A disbelieving laugh flies from her mouth. “No, I’m not kidding!”

I release a strangled huff. “You’ll have to excuse me for not being cooler at this moment, but I need you to say it again.”

She strokes my cheek. “I’m falling in love with you.”

I take her lips again, breathing in the heavenly words spilling from her.

We break apart after a few minutes.

“I have something for you too.” I keep her in my lap and dig beneath the tree to pull out her gift. “I was going to give it to you tomorrow, but since you already gave me mine, it’s only fair you open it now.”

She sits back, her ass to my thighs. She rotates the flat square in her hands. “I’d berate you for going out of your way to get me something after you’ve already done so much, but you just said you might someday love me so...”

“You’re starting to get it.”

“What’s that?”

But I don’t answer. She’ll just have to keep experiencing it to figure it out. I watch as she tears through the gold wrapping paper. The ripped pieces flutter to the ground.

“Jack.”

I flex my fingertips into her thighs bracketing my hips.

She flips the book open, and I wait patiently while she studies each page. I coast my hands up and down her thighs to distract myself from the nerves.

“When did you do all this?”

One shoulder rises in a shrug. “I took this one here during the blizzard.” I point out a picture of Whitney and Bennett in my kitchen. He’s leaning back in her arms with a big smile while she makes a kissing face at him. “I meant to share it with you at the time, but I got distracted and forgot about it. When I remembered it a few days later, I thought it’d be a nice surprise to take some pictures of you with your kids.”

“It’s so thoughtful.”

“You deserve to not always be the one behind the camera.”

Her breath hitches, and when she lifts her head, her eyes are red. Wetness gathers along her lower lashes. “I have so few pictures of me with my kids. I try to take selfies, but it’s just

not the same. You've managed to catch so many candid moments, and I didn't even notice. I feel like thank you is inadequate."

"Thank you is exactly perfect."

In the stretching silence, Corjan's words come back to me. I think about telling her about the test.

Then I think about how it doesn't matter.

It wasn't hers, and I don't want her to feel pressured that my feelings run deep. Deeper than hers.

Because I told her that I'm falling in love with her.

But the truth is, I think I'm already there.



WHITNEY

THE HOSPITAL HAS BEEN BUSY, which I'm told is normal for the day after Christmas. People get up to holiday fuckery, playing around with their new toys, and accidents are bound to happen. I was moved from the ER to radiology after someone called in sick, and while patients have been steady, this department is nothing like what's going on downstairs. That's not to say I haven't seen my fair share of carnage.

Two boys have already come in this morning, brothers, both with suspected broken arms after crashing into each other on hoverboards. Their mother could only purse her lips and shake her head as I clarified she was sent up with orders for both of them. I'm certain she's used to their antics.

Another was a fifty-year-old man being x-rayed for a suspected rib fracture after he crashed into the corner of a countertop while playing some VR headset game.

While I'm grateful to have the job, that's all it is. This isn't my passion. I'm here to support my kids. Kids who I miss deeply each moment I'm away from them.

Our Christmas yesterday was beyond my expectations.

After Jack and I exchanged gifts on Christmas Eve, he pleased my body until I was a boneless, shaking mess. Even then, he wrung one more orgasm out of me before he fucked me steady and slow under the glow of the fire and our

dilapidated Christmas tree. We snuggled naked on the couch and whispered to one another until the early hours. Before dragging ourselves to bed, he kissed me deep and slow while I clung to him.

We decided that Jack would be there when the kids woke up and opened their gifts, but he'd spend Christmas with his family without us.

Joining the Powells felt like a step too big. We have feelings for each other, but I'm not quite ready to get involved with his family if this is going to run its course when the snow melts. He seemed to agree. Or at least he didn't put up an argument.

He brushed aside my guilt, kissed me once, and promised he'd see me later that afternoon.

My heart flips over itself as I think of Christmas morning. Jack bought my kids gifts, simple plushies. Lucy hugged hers to her chest while Bennett immediately started to chew on the dinosaur's tail. I appreciate that he didn't try to pick out something sentimental. This is too new, and if things don't work out between us...

It will be hard enough to explain to Lucy why she can't see her Mr. Jack anymore. It'd be worse if I had to take a beloved item away from her too. A plushie isn't all that meaningful unless someone puts meaning behind it.

While Bennett tasted his new puff snacks and Lucy chewed the end of her first ever candy cane, I walked Jack to the garage door for a long, slow kiss before he went to his family's for the afternoon.

The kids and I watched *The Polar Express* and ate way too much candy, and for the first time in years, Christmas actually felt like Christmas. White, snowy, and filled with love.

A shrill ringing phone pulls me from staring unfocused at the computer screen. My pen clicks loudly as it falls from my hand. I mutter beneath my breath and snatch it back up. The last thing I wanted to do this morning after rolling out of bed

was come to work and leave the cozy bubble of the weekend behind, but here I am, plied with iced coffee and M&M's.

"It's so boring up here today." A willowy blond sits in the empty chair beside me. I think her name is Greta.

"It was much more exciting downstairs," I agree. Movement pulls my focus from the computer screen to her hand. She holds out a small bag of Hershey's kisses wrapped with a bow.

"Merry Christmas. You started too late to join in the gift exchange, so I picked this up for ya."

I blink in surprise. "Thank you. That was really nice of you."

A red tag glints from behind the silver bow. I flip it over, confirming her name scrawled in black pen.

"You're welcome." She smiles kindly. "I've only been here about a year myself, so I remember what it's like."

"You didn't grow up in Fairview Valley?"

"Nope. I come from farther up north. Near Canada."

A smile tilts my lips. "I can hear it in your accent."

"What accent? Hand me that bag, will you?" She winks as she stretches out the a-sound and lands on a hard g.

I laugh and pass it over.

"I hope you don't go anywhere. I like you."

"I don't plan on it." I pick up my iced coffee, finishing a sip just as a new patient walks in.

More than ever, I finally feel like I'm somewhere I belong.

MY FEET nearly weep as I trade out my work shoes for my winter boots. I wiggle my toes in the extra room. I need to ask Greta what she wears because the shoes I bought last minute in

Arizona suck. There are at least two blisters on my right foot and another forming on my left.

I settle in my cold car, waiting for the heater to warm up before I leave. I toss a handful of M&M's in my mouth, ravenous after the long day. Lunch was over four hours ago, and it'll be another hour or two until dinner unless I find a fast-food joint to pick something up.

I dig my phone from my purse to search the area when the device rings in my hand. The screen flashes *unknown*, not even an unsaved number.

With so many things up in the air since the move, I don't hesitate to answer the call.

"Hello?"

"Don't hang up."

The familiar silky voice slithers into my ear. "Devon," I hiss.

"Just don't hang up."

"What do you want?"

"I need to talk to you."

My right hand twists around the steering wheel until the knuckles blanch. "Start talking."

"Can we meet sometime this week? I want to talk face-to-face."

"No, we can't meet! God, Devon, I don't know why it's so hard for you to understand that you pretended to die, and I don't ever want to see you again. I don't know how you could be so heartless. I was your wife—"

"Oh, cut the shit, Whitney." He gives a humorless laugh. "I was at the bottom of your list. We were husband and wife in name only."

My voice breaks into a whisper. "How can you say that?"

"It was all about the kids for you. I was just the means for you to get them. So I thought if I could get us into a better

situation, maybe you'd pay me more attention again. If I could give you a bigger house and vacations, you could hire a nanny ___”

“That’s so insulting. I didn’t want any of that. I never gave you that impression.”

He continues as if I didn’t speak. “So when this business opportunity fell into my lap, I took it. I did it for you. I thought if I could hire you some help, maybe I’d get to fuck my wife again.”

The M&M’s sit in my stomach like lead. A picture swirls in the front of my mind, one I don’t recognize. This twisted tale of events is a distant cousin to the reality we lived. “What business opportunity?”

“It’s not important,” he snaps.

“It is if you want to see me.”

“I was gambling,” he spits as if the words cling to his tongue.

A startled gasp precedes a laugh without humor. “Oh my god, gambling isn’t a business opportunity, you asshole!”

“It was when I was good at it!”

“Let me guess, you got yourself into debt, so your brilliant idea was to fake your death.”

“I did it for you,” he fights weakly.

“Oh no. This was pure selfishness. How does this explain the men watching the house?”

He gives a defeated sigh. “That was to put pressure on when I started to rack up debt.”

My palm hits the steering wheel. “I’d say the pressure was there, wouldn’t you?” The fear he instilled in me without clueing me in makes me sick. “This is your mess to figure out, Devon. I’m not helping you.”

“I need the money.” His voice turns hard, so different from the quiet tone a moment ago.

“No. I have to return that money so I don’t wind up in a jail cell beside you for fraud.”

“You can’t. It’s mine!”

“No, it isn’t. Because you’re supposed to be dead. You can only blame yourself for this mess.”

With shaking fingers, I yank the phone from my ear and disconnect the call.

I’m numb. The heat blasting from the vents feels like wind against my face. I focus on the snow swirling across my windshield rather than his voice replaying in my head. I gather my fraying nerves enough to put the car into drive and pick up the kids from daycare on autopilot.

I’m grateful for Lucy’s upbeat energy as she sings and chatters away in the back seat. Bennett’s squeals and slight sniffles. He seems to be coming down with a cold, or maybe it’s the change in weather causing his nose to run. My children distract me enough to get us all safely home.

I take note of Jack’s SUV missing from the garage. My fingertips tingle, and it takes me three tries to unlock Bennett’s seat from the base. I wander inside at a sluggish pace, lost in a sea of anxiety.

I have to talk to a lawyer and get the money back to the insurance company. I need to get ahead of anything Devon might try to pull. He has a warrant for his arrest, so it’s only a matter of time until he’s caught. It’s hard to pretend to be dead when you’re in front of a judge, tangled in a pair of handcuffs.

Bennett cries as soon as I pull him from his car seat. I bounce him on my hip and kiss his head.

Dammit, Devon.

I need to make dinner and take care of my kids, not continue to be harassed by his shit.

The baby carrier Jack bought sits on the mantel. I haven’t used it yet, but Bennett seems to like it when Jack wears him on his front. I set the baby down and wrap the fabric around my back, but my fingers shake too much to clasp it. The

buckles clack together, seeming to repel one another as my frustration mounts.

And that's how Jack finds me. Cursing beneath my breath at a plastic buckle, tears welling on my eyelids, Bennett crying from the couch cushions, and Lucy shoving a square of melting chocolate in her mouth.

"What's wrong?" he demands, crossing the living room to Bennett with Cooper dutifully at his side.

"N-nothing. It's fine. I just can't get this to clip together." I sniff, mounting another fruitless attempt.

Jack moves in close, his warm hand stilling both of mine behind my back. He squeezes my fingers. "Whitney, what's wrong?"

I shift my eyes to Lucy and tilt my chin to my shoulder. "Devon called me."

"When." The baby carrier falls away from my waist.

"After work. Before I got the kids."

Insistent fingertips on my waist turn me into Jack's torso. I have to tilt my head back to look at his face.

"What did he say?"

"He wanted to meet. He still wants the money. H-he blames me for this mess he's in."

"F—Eff that," Jack says. The glower aimed my way seems to pass right through me.

"I know. It just caught me off guard. I swear I'm fine."

Bennett cries softly against Jack's shoulder. He bounces my son and grabs my hand, tangling our fingers. "Did he mention he's back in town?"

"No. He said he wanted to meet me later this week, so I assume he's staying away but close enough to travel."

"You're not meeting him."

"I know that, Jack. I'm not an idiot."

“You’re not. What you are is a protective mother who wants this infection neutralized so you can keep your kids safe and get on with your life, and that makes me nervous.”

His words produce the first smile I’ve felt since this afternoon. “Is that my sentiment or yours?”

“I think I speak for us both.”

I rise on my tiptoes and brush my lips against his. “I’ll be safe.”

He growls deep in his chest, a sound of reluctant acceptance. Leaning down, he captures my lips again. Warmth suffuses my cold fingers and toes.

“You better be.”

He hands Bennett over, slings on the carrier in ten seconds flat, and takes my boy back.

“Show off,” I mutter.

He catches me around the back of the neck, his hand firm. “Go pour yourself a glass of wine, sit your ass on the couch, and find yourself a good lawyer. I’m cooking dinner.”

“Anything else you’d like to order me to do?” I smirk.

From this close, I see the way his gray irises swirl into the clouds of an oncoming storm. “Babe, there are about fifty things, but we can explore those when the kids are in bed.”

The smirk wipes clean from my face. I think I have a mini-orgasm right then and there from the dark promise in his tone.

“Can I put that into my schedule, or are you just joking around here? Either way, I think I need to go change my underwear.”

“Only if you leave them on my pillow.”

A blistering heat sweeps through me. With one last look, I leave the room to get changed out of my work clothes.

And I leave my underwear on his pillow, just as he asked.



JACK

“WHERE ARE WE GOING?” I ask as I drive us into the center of Fairview Valley.

“Patience isn’t your strong suit, is it?” Whitney bites back a smile.

“I’d say I’ve done pretty well so far. Except now I’m about a mile from town and need to know where you want me to take you, baby.”

“Maybe if you hadn’t insisted that you drive, I could be taking you where I want to take you without having to give instructions.”

It’s my turn to bite back a smile. I did do that. Because when the woman I’m seriously into wakes me up by whispering in my ear to meet her in the kitchen so I can fuck her gently while we wait for our coffee, and while I’m inside her she tells me she’s taking me out for the day, I might be willing to give her just about anything. Except letting her drive me around town in her little sedan.

“It’s winter driving,” I say by way of explanation.

“It’s sexist.”

“In all the ways you’ve let me take care of you over the last month, and this is the one you want to throw a fit about?”

“It’s ruining my surprise,” she pouts.

Reaching across the console, I settle my palm on her thigh. “It’s definitely not since you still haven’t told me where we’re going.”

She huffs and turns to look out the window as I roll up to a stoplight.

“Baby, I need to know which direction I’m going.”

She laces our fingers together and sets them back on her thigh. “Straight. There’s a white canopy tent and parking on the right-hand side.”

As I roll down Main Street, the banners draped across the street make our destination clear. Unease awakens in my gut.

“We’re going to the Fairview Valley Winter Festival?”

“Have you ever been?”

I shake my head as I turn into the lot. “It always felt too coupley.”

She grins. “Good. I haven’t, either. I thought you and I could spend the day together since I have the day off and the kids are at daycare.”

I lick my lips, closing my eyes slowly before opening them. Face carefully blank. “What about your ex?”

Whitney blows out a breath. “I can’t let him control my life. He’d be really stupid to show up and try something at a festival crawling with witnesses.”

Fuck, I don’t like it. But how can I let her down when she’s looking forward to this with so much excitement?

“Come on. I hear they have the best hot chocolate.”

The creaking of her door opening snaps me into motion. I hop out of my seat and meet her at the hood. She smiles up at me, the cold already pinkening her cheeks. I adjust the cream-colored knit hat on her head while she pulls on a pair of black gloves. Using the action to soak in her beauty.

“Ready?” I ask. She nods.

I lift her chin enough to kiss her, not even noticing that I did so in public for the very first time with more than a few pairs of eyes on us. Then I take her gloved hand in my bare one.

“Aren’t your hands going to freeze?”

“Hot chocolate will warm them up.”

What I don’t say is that if I need to fight someone, I want to make sure my punches hurt a fuck of a lot, and they won’t do that if the fabric hides my knuckles.

Hand in hand, we walk to the hot chocolate stand at the start of the block. The black lampposts have silver and gold garland twisted around them. Vendor booths covered in holiday decor line the sidewalks on both sides, and the crowd spills into the middle of the street. Holiday music sounds crisp and clear overhead.

We snag our drinks after waiting in a short line and meander hand in hand. Once the piping-hot steam diminishes, I take a tentative sip.

“This is...” My eyes widen. I move the cup to my mouth for another mouthful. “Jesus, what do they put in this?”

Whitney laughs. “Greta from work told me it’s addictive. I don’t know what’s in it, but it’s good, right?” She tips her cardboard cup to her mouth.

I swing my neck around to study the booth we just left. “I might have to stop on the way out for the stuff to make it at home.”

“I think I saw a jar of it you can purchase back at the booth.”

We continue down the block. A few people stop to say hello, but I don’t linger long. My jaw works as I scan the multitude of faces passing by on the crowded street.

An insistent tugging on my hand has me drawing my attention back.

“You’re too tense.”

“I’m fine.”

“I can feel it by how tight you’re squeezing my hand.”

I immediately loosen my hold.

Whitney pulls on my arm until I turn to face her. My teeth clench as I look down.

“He isn’t here,” she says quietly. “And if he was, you wouldn’t let anything happen to me. You have to trust yourself on that because I do.”

I look over her head at the blur of faces passing by. When I look down at her again, I relax. “You’re right. I care about you, and when you’re with me, you’re mine to protect.”

She loops her arm with mine and pulls me toward a vendor selling Christmas wood carvings. “Here.” She picks up an eight-inch-tall carved Christmas tree. The star on the top meets at a sharp point. “Get this. That way, if we come across him, you can shove it up his ass.”

My lips twitch. “So vulgar.”

She rolls her eyes and puts the carving down, missing the disapproving look of the vendor behind her. “Where do you think I learned it?”

I roll my tongue across the back of my teeth, yanking her arm until she’s flush against my body. With my eyes trained behind her, I lower my mouth to her ear. “But I only taught you to be vulgar when we’re in bed.”

She twitches against me, and I drag my teeth over her ear before letting her go.

“Are you hungry?” She pretends to walk beside me as if I didn’t just make her underwear wet.

“For you? Always.”

She slaps my chest and walks ahead of me, giving me a perfect view of her curvy ass.

I don’t bother to catch up. Not with this magnificent view. Not until she takes a hard left to a food truck selling turkey and cranberry sandwiches.

She places the order, and I pay for our food. We find a secluded table beneath a canopy away from prying ears. I also have an uninhibited view of the festival to keep an eye on our surroundings.

We eat the first few bites in silence, huddled together against the chilly air. It's a cold December day, but with the sun shining, it's tolerable.

“What happened to your parents? If I remember correctly, they left town around the same time you did.”

Whitney wipes her mouth with a napkin. “They did. Um, we just lost contact. We all went out east so that I could go to college, but after the second semester, I decided it wasn't for me.”

“I bet they didn't like that.”

She takes a drink of her hot chocolate. “They pretty much unofficially kicked me out and told me to come back when I was ready to be an adult. Of course at twenty, I was rebellious and moved in with a friend and got a job instead. That friend moved to Arizona at the start of the next term, and I went with her. My parents stopped calling a few weeks after I moved, so I did the same. I figured I shouldn't have to beg them to support my choices.”

“You shouldn't,” I agree.

“Anyway, that was that. I've had the same phone number since high school, so it isn't like they couldn't get in touch with me.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Don't be. The people who want to be in your life will make an effort to be there. I don't want to be loved with conditions.”

The sandwich bread sticks in my throat. “I don't either.”

“What about you?” She sips her drink, eyeing me above the black cover. “What made you come to live with the Powells?”

A hundred excuses fly through my head. I scratch my forehead with my thumb and adjust my hat. “It’s not a nice story.”

“Oh. That’s okay. You don’t have to tell me.” She balls up her trash.

I wrap my fingers around her gloved hand. “I want to, if that’s okay,” I say quietly. I’ve never shared with anyone outside of my family, but suddenly I want her to know it all. “I just feel like it needs to come with a trigger warning.”

“Jack, no. I’m sorry for asking. I’ve heard Corjan’s story before and thought it was similar. I didn’t mean—”

“They used to beat me. Me and Jude.”

It’s as if my brain rushes to get it out now that there’s an opportunity. I want her to know this about me. I want to see if the dark parts of me will push her away.

She covers her mouth with gloved fingers before dropping them to squeeze mine, still resting on her arm. “I’m so sorry.”

“It was over the dumbest things. I remember we were small when it started. If we made a mistake, we were to lay across my father’s lap, and he’d give us one hit across the bare ass with his belt. Jesus, he was so scary when he started to undo the buckle.”

Her fingers cinch tighter around mine.

“Things ramped up when we were seven. I didn’t finish my dinner like I was asked because I didn’t like it, and I got caught sneaking into the kitchen for something else to eat later. My mother caught me and brought me to my father. When he started to undo the belt, I dropped my pants, but he told me to remove my shirt instead and stand in the middle of the bedroom. Then he beat me.”

I ignore the hitch in her breath and stare at our hands.

“It hurt so bad I couldn’t get out of bed the next day. I could just lay there on my stomach and pray for the pain to go away. They kept me out of school because they were afraid I’d tell somebody, but when I didn’t want to go on the third day,

they brought in Jude and said if I didn't get up, they'd beat him instead. And that's when it started."

"How bad did it get?" she whispers. I feel the touch of her bare finger against mine and realize she removed her glove. She laces them together, and I squeeze her back.

"It turned into their way of controlling us. They'd force me to watch them beat Jude. Sometimes he'd volunteer to stand in my place because I was so much smaller than him, and if I cried, they'd hit him more. It messed us both up for a long time. Jude still struggles with it."

"I had no idea, Jack. I'm so sorry." She looks at me with red lining her eyes. I give her an apologetic smile and cup her face.

"Don't cry for me, pretty girl."

Her bare fingertips dance along my jaw. "I can see you're here, so I know you got out and you're safe, but my heart hurts to think of you and Jude going through that. You were just children."

"I'm okay." I press a soft kiss to her cold lips.

"What happened to them?" she asks as I pull back.

I stare unfocused over her shoulder. "When I was a teen, I turned the tables. I beat the shit out of my father, and Jude and I ran. Nancy found us after we'd gone a week without food or shelter and took us in. I heard they both died of an overdose a year later."

"It makes sense now why you're so protective. Your control was taken from you while growing up. And the way you are with my kids makes a lot more sense too."

"Figuring me all out now, are you?"

She quirks an eyebrow at me. "I think so."

"I take it as a good thing you haven't run for the hills?"

"It's going to take a lot more than that to send me running. Nice try, though." She pokes my chest with her index finger,

and I wrap my fingers around it to tug her into my chest. Relief crawls through my veins.

“Good.”

I kiss her long and deep, dragging her in my lap to warm us both. I slip my hands beneath her coat, toying with the hem of her shirt until she shudders against me.

“Come on. There’s more of the festival to see. You can make out with me after we see the goats in sweaters at the petting zoo. I might even let you cop a feel.”

WHITNEY MADE good on her promise.

We shopped the Christmas vendors and tried the famous town fudge. She bought a pack of sugar cookies to surprise Lucy with later.

We rode in a freezing horse-pulled carriage, snuggled together beneath a thick blanket, and she raced me down a man-made hill on an inner tube. She pulled me into a slow dance in the middle of the street despite nobody else dancing.

And only once she saw the goats in sweaters did she let me lead her into a corner of the heated barn and feel her up while we made out behind the hay bales.

On the way out, we bought a jar of the best fucking hot chocolate in the world.

Just as I thought it was totally coupley.

I never thought I’d want to go to the winter festival.

But the Fairview Valley Winter Festival with Whitney was fucking magical.



WHITNEY

“TELL me again what time you get in tomorrow?” I bite down on my club sandwich on my lunch break Friday afternoon.

“My flight is supposed to land at three. I’ve already booked a rental car, so don’t you worry that pretty little head about coming to get me,” Alice says.

“It wouldn’t be a problem,” I argue.

“Yes, it would. The airport is two hours away. You need to be safe in that little town of yours until my dickhead brother stops his stupid games.”

“I take it you still haven’t heard from him?”

“No. But I found out Mom has, so I’m no longer speaking to her.”

“How long do you expect that to last?”

“Fucking forever.”

I cross my legs and take a sip of my iced coffee. “You can be pissed on my behalf and still speak to her. I promise I won’t hold it against you. She’s your mother. He’s her son. I’m sure she had her reasons.”

A harsh breath comes across the line. “Oh no. Don’t do that and pretend all mothers have your golden heart. She did it for her own selfish reasons.”

“Such as?”

“He promised her a cut, Whit.”

“A cut? Of what?”

“He promised to give her fifty thousand dollars if she let him stay with her. And she did, all the while she was begging you to come home so that they both could get their hands on that money.”

My jaw drops. “She did not. How do you even know that?”

“She told me. Said if I helped her get you back to Arizona, he promised to throw in an extra ten grand for me.”

The sandwich turns to ash on my tongue. “He must really be desperate.”

“Time’s running out. Seeing as I turned that information over to law enforcement, the two of them will wind up in neighboring cells soon enough.”

“I’m so glad you’re sane.”

“It won’t be much longer.” Alice’s voice sounds serious as the bitterness bleeds away. “Multiple agencies are looking for him at this point. You said yourself that Jack is close to the police in your town. Everyone’s got an eye out for him.”

“Right. He can’t do this forever.”

“He’s stupid to try.”

I swallow down the lump in my throat and ball up my trash. “I hate to leave this conversation in a shitty place, but I have to run. I’ll see you Saturday night.”

“I’ll text you when I’m in town. I’m staying at the cozy motel. Maybe I’ll meet my own blue-collar man.”

I laugh. “I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you.”

We hang up, and I pack up my lunch, returning to the second half of my shift.

At four fifteen, I switch into my boots and slip on my coat. The weekend is finally here. That means extra time with Jack and seeing my best friend for the first time in a month.

There's also the Powell New Year's Eve party to look forward to Sunday night. Unlike Christmas, I agreed to attend this adult-only event.

At Jack's insistence, I had a new little black dress delivered. His sister, Bree, and Juniper assured me it was the right call. They'd all be dressing up too. Bree hired her babysitter, Scarlett, to watch our kids at Jack's house, and all the adults each pitched in a hundred dollars to ensure her evening would be well compensated.

An icy wind whips against my cheeks as I step out of the hospital. I tuck my hood tight around my face. The twilight sky is a deep lavender mixed with a cloudy gray in the sunset. I can't wait for the days to get longer again, although it's easy to convince the kids it's time for bed when the sky is dark out at an earlier hour.

Kicking on the heat in my car, I tear open the fun-sized pack of M&M's Jack left on my console this morning. A treat I forced myself to save until after work. The frozen milk chocolates melt in my mouth as I put the car in drive and head to the daycare.

A bell rings above the door. The wind abruptly cuts off at my back as the door swings shut behind me. The room beyond the security glass seems quiet. The daycare closes in half an hour, but a few more kids are usually wandering around. With the way Bennett's nose has been running all week, I wouldn't be surprised if an illness is going around.

The receptionist, Jen, looks up with a wide smile at my approach. "Did you guys forget something?"

"Forget something?"

Her smile remains firm. "You must have your schedules crossed. The kids were picked up an hour ago by their dad."

My steps falter. "I'm sorry, what?"

Her eyes blow wide, and the expression falls from her face. "I-I, their dad showed up. Didn't you know?"

Their dad? No. There's no possible way. She must mean Jack. "What was his name?"

I have my head down, digging my phone out from my purse. The numb cold overtaking my fingers makes me drop the device twice before I finally pull it out.

“I don’t remember.”

“You let my kids go home with some strange man, and you didn’t get his name?” I snap, pressing the ringing phone to my ear.

“He had the proper information,” she says, but the words don’t register.

“Hey, babe,” Jack answers.

“Did you pick up my kids?”

“No,” he replies immediately.

“Jack,” I whisper.

“Whitney, what’s happening?”

A strangled gasp tears out of my throat. “He has my babies, Jack. I think Devon has my babies.”

“Where are you?” he barks, the sound of movement mingling with his roughened voice.

“I’m at the daycare,” I wheeze. Like an invisible fist crushes my windpipe, my next breath is ragged. “They aren’t here. He took them.”

“Stay there. I’m coming for you.”

The receptionist and I lock terrified eyes.

“I’ll call the cops.” She lifts the receiver of her phone.

Another ragged breath. “Jack.”

“I’m coming, Whitney. Hang on, baby, I’m on my way right now.”

“I can’t breathe,” I gasp. My body shudders so hard I feel like the taut muscles will snap my bones clean in half.

“Four minutes. I’m four minutes away.”

The receptionist leaps from her chair, and a moment later, the other daycare workers crowd around the front desk. The

owner, Leslie, comes through the security partition to wrap her arm around me.

“Hang on.”

My chest spasms with the painful inhale. “I can’t breathe, Jack.”

“Almost there.”

“*Hurry.*”

Adrenaline zips through my veins. My mind reels with possibilities I fight against acknowledging.

“We’ll get them, you hear me? Lucy and Bennett will be okay.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and struggle to breathe.

“Okay, Whitney? I’m going to get them back.”

A keening cry tears up my throat as I fight to hold myself together. The arm around my shoulders tightens. “I can’t.”

Flashing red and blue lights illuminate the window. Someone rushes around us to shove open the door. The blast of cold air seems to knock some of the adrenaline out of me, and I suck in a lungful of freezing air just as Jack says in my ear, “I’m here.”



JACK

THE LAST TIME I drove this fast, I was a dumbass reckless teenager. Snow skids beneath my tires as I slide to a stop in front of the daycare next to a police cruiser. The blue and red lights twist atop the car.

I fire off a text to the group chat.

ME

Whoever's available get down to the daycare center on Main. Whitney's ex took her kids.

THEN I'M out the door.

Whitney's pale, terrified face stares at me through the glass, and I lock down whatever emotion is working its way through my chest. I yank open the door. Not even two steps inside, she slams into me so hard we nearly fall back outside.

And I hear her gulp down a ragged breath for the first time in five solid minutes.

My palms settle on the sides of her head, lifting her face from my chest. I stare down into her terrified honey eyes.

“Breathe for me,” I murmur gently, stroking her cheek with my finger. “That’s it, nice and easy,” I coax.

She squeezes her eyes shut. “I’m so scared.”

“We’re going to get them back.” I swear on my fucking life.

I turn my neck to the two officers behind me, Silas and Sutton Stone. “What happened?”

It’s the receptionist who starts talking.

“I swear he had all the appropriate paperwork.”

“Just tell us what happened.” I force my tone to remain even.

“A man walked in and said he was here to pick up Lucy and Bennett Thompson. I asked who he was, and he said their father. And he produced copies of their birth certificates and his driver’s license and said their mother told him he needed to bring them as proof to pick up the kids for the first time. I’m sorry,” she sobs. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know. He seemed so genuine.”

“How did he get the kids?” I ask.

Whitney shudders, and I hold her head tight to my chest. Her arms shove into my open coat, and her fingers twist into the sides of my cotton Henley.

“I went and got them. He had paperwork. The file didn’t say anyone wasn’t authorized to pick them up, so I let him sign them out.”

“What time was this?” Silas asks. His radio crackles. He dips his chin to his vest to respond.

Someone behind the desk removes a log sheet. “He signed them out at 3:58.”

“I’m going to need to see your CCTV footage,” Silas says, then he looks at me. “Others are on the way.”

“There’s only one way in and out of this town. You need to get a man on each side of the highway. Start an Amber Alert

and send out a BOLO to all state agencies. He also has ties to Arizona. He could be anywhere by now,” I demand.

The door opens with an icy wind at my back.

“Stand down, Jack. You have to let us do our job,” Sutton says.

“My kids are out there!” I snarl. Whitney shivers in my arms, and I tuck her tighter against me. “You’re fucked in the head if you think I’m going to just stand around.”

A hand grips my shoulder. I twist my neck and meet Jude’s stormy gray eyes. A sudden lump swells in my throat at having him here, literally at my back.

“We’ve got this. We’ve got officers moving around. As soon as we confirm his details, the alerts will go out,” Sutton replies. He drops his gaze to the back of Whitney’s head. “Does he have any ties to the area?”

“No.” Her voice is hoarse. “He grew up and lived in Arizona his entire life. He followed us here. Me and my kids.”

Sutton nods and turns to follow Silas behind the security glass.

I twist Whitney around with me to face my brother. The wind knocks out of me when I find my entire family standing behind us.

“Tell us what to do,” Lee says. His face is hard and locked down tight.

“Once we know what he’s driving, I want you on the road. Paired up. Lee with Aiden. Corjan, you’re with me. Nobody knows the roads in this town better than us five. Check in with everybody you know. Ask them to keep their eyes open.”

“You think he’s still around?”

I look down at Whitney trembling in my arms. I drop a kiss on the top of her head, breathing in her floral perfume. “I think she has something he wants, and he won’t leave until he gets it.”

“What is it you think he’s after?” Corjan asks.

“Money,” I answer, feeling the reality sink into my bones.

A heavy silence passes between us. “Got it. Text us any descriptions you have.” Lee and Aiden depart.

“Brother,” I say, my voice hard.

Jude moves forward.

“I need you to take her to Mom’s. Stay with her. Round up the girls and keep an eye on her. Nobody leaves until I get there.”

He closes his eyes and inhales. His lips move silently for a count of eight before he opens his eyes again. “Got it.”

“Whitney, go on with Jude.”

“No, I want to stay with you.”

I slip my hand beneath her chin and tilt her head. Wide, horrified eyes look wrong on her pale face. The expression is one I’ll remember for the rest of my life.

“I need to know you’re safe so I can get them back. Go with Jude, baby.”

“Bennett’s probably so cold,” she whimpers. “He doesn’t wear a coat because it’s not safe in the car seat straps, so I only put a blanket over his carrier. But it’s not meant to stay outside for very long.”

“Don’t think about that. He’s warm, and he’s safe. We just have to go get him.”

I press a tender kiss to her forehead and unwrap her arms from my middle. I squeeze her cold hands. “Go with Jude.”

My brother wraps my woman in his arms and holds her close.

Silas and Sutton return from the back. “Stay back, Jack,” Sutton says.

A phone ringing from behind me cuts off my rebuttal.

The ringer ends as static takes its place. I turn to find Whitney holding her cell in her palm, the call on speakerphone.

“I know you’re there, Whitney.” Devon’s voice expands in the quiet room. A poison sucking away the clean air.

I lock eyes with her over the phone.

“Did you find your ring?” he asks.

She presses her fingertips against her lips. A look of horror in her stare.

“I’ve been keeping my eye on you. You should really learn to change your passwords. All I had to do was log into your cell phone account, you know, the one we used to share, and use the lost phone locator to track you.”

Crackling comes across the line as he continues.

“Pretty cozy place you’ve been staying at. My kids and my wife all lying in some bed together with that bastard you just met. The one who thinks it’s okay to brag to my face about fucking *my* wife.”

“Devon, please bring my children back.”

He continues as if she didn’t even speak. “But he doesn’t know, does he, Whitney?”

Tension snaps my spine straight, and red coats my vision. I don’t want her to listen to a thing he has to say, but this might be our only chance for him to slip.

“He doesn’t know how fucking frigid you are when you decide you’re too good to spread your legs anymore.” He laughs. “But he’ll learn. You’ll take that away too just like you took everything away from me. I think it’s time I take something important away from you.”

Her inhale wheezes with a god-awful sound that settles into my bones. I won’t ever forget the agonized rasp.

“You forced me to do this.”

“Please don’t hurt them,” she begs, moving the phone up to her lips.

“I don’t want to hurt them. I just want my money.”

“You can have it. Take it. Where can I bring it to you?”

“Figure out a way. One that doesn’t involve your guard dog or the fucking cops.”

“You have to tell me what you want me to do!”

“Momma!” Lucy screams, her voice wet and choked with tears.

Everyone in the room stops breathing.

Pain slices through my insides as fury coats my veins.

“Momma’s here, Lucy.” Whitney lunges forward as if she’s about to climb straight through the phone. Jude catches her around the waist and yanks her into his chest.

A white-hot rage sears through my gut. I look down at the pink bracelet with beads wrapped around my hand. The very same one Lucy made for me weeks ago that I never take off. The gold bear charm glints in the light overhead.

Bears are strong. Like you.

The line goes dead, cutting off Lucy’s sobs.

LEAVING Whitney with Jude is one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. She only puts up a minor fight before sagging with exhaustion in my twin brother’s arms and letting us lead her to his truck.

Just before I tuck her safely inside, she grips my forearms through my coat with surprising strength.

“I need you to promise me you’ll find them.”

I lift her chin and give her my eyes. “I’ll find them.”

She rattles in a shaky breath and nods.

“I mean it. I’ll do whatever it takes to find them.”

“Whatever it takes?” The gravity of my statement weighs on her words.

I slide my fingers beneath her chin, pressing them against her pulse. Satisfied with the rapid thrum, I tell her, “Whatever

it takes.”

I kiss her quick yet deep in a harsh press of my cold lips against hers.

“Be safe.”

“Always, baby.”

“Make sure all three of you come back to me.”

I tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear, hoping like fuck I’m not lying when I say, “I will.”

I leave Jude with strict instructions to let me know the second Devon calls back, and Corjan and I take off in my SUV.

The time we spent at the daycare getting details down was long enough for the sun to set. Corjan drives us along snowy roads on the outskirts of town with only the headlights illuminating the way. I ride passenger, my fingers flying over the keyboard as I text damn near every contact in my phone the make and model of the vehicle Devon was seen driving outside the daycare center.

After reviewing the footage, it became clear how arrogant this piece of shit is. He didn’t even bother to hide anything. Parking at the curb, he waltzed right in and came back out with his kids in his hands as if he were a model father. At least that was how Silas relayed it.

“We’ll find them.” Corjan breaks the silence for the first time since I told him to head north an hour ago.

“Yeah.” I scan every foot of the ditch that we pass.

The muscles of my fingers cramp where I have them in a tight fist.

This will only end one way—with Lucy and Bennett in the back of my SUV on the way to their mother. The problem is I have to stop myself from winding up in prison for murder to make that happen.

A distant whoop has me straightening in the passenger seat. “You hear that?”

“Yeah.” Corjan scans the rearview.

I swivel in my seat, straining to hear it again. My gut clenches as I catch sight of red and blue behind us.

“They’re coming up fast.”

Corjan slows to the side of the highway.

I brace my hand on the dash to watch the unmarked police SUV whip past us.

“Follow it,” I demand.

Gravel and ice kick up beneath the tires as Corjan steps on the gas. “Fuck. You think...?”

“I don’t want to think anything right now. I just want answers.”

My blood zips through my veins as Corjan races after the flashing lights. He catches up as my phone rings in my hand.

Silas Stone.

“Yeah?” I bark, eyes glued on the vehicle in front of us.

Sutton’s voice comes across the line. “I’m not going to tell you again, Jack. Stand the fuck down.”

“Did you hear something?”

“Pull over before I send someone to pull you over.”

“You want me to back off? You’re going to have to arrest me,” I growl. Up ahead, a second pair of flashing lights joins the first. “Tell me what’s happening.”

“A state trooper is attempting to pull over the suspect.”

“Just tell me if my kids are in that car.” Corjan meets my eye before flickering his attention back to the road. Adrenaline floods my system. The SUV speeds up.

A tense sigh comes over the line. “He appears to be alone, but we haven’t gotten close enough to confirm.”

“Jesus. What did he do with them?” I mutter to myself.

“We’re trying to figure that out.”

“I’m not leaving until you do.”

“Jack.”

“If they’re in that car, I need to be here, and if they’re not, I’ll leave as soon as I know.”

A thought, Jesus, a fucking terrible thought slams into me.

“Back off him.”

“You have to let us do our job.”

“I don’t know this guy, but I know him better than you do. Lucy and Bennett are his leverage. He won’t stash them somewhere in town and has nowhere to stash them, even if that was his plan. My gut says my kids are in that car, and I’d guess he doesn’t have the first fucking clue how to secure the seats, so they’re probably down on the floor, which is why you can’t see them.”

“You want to take that gamble?”

“It’s better than gambling with the idea he might not have them and causing him to drive like a reckless fucking asshole.”

“Jack—”

“You’re one of my oldest friends, but swear to god, if you cause harm to come to my kids, I’ll make sure you regret it for the rest of your life.”

My knuckles blanch against the dash as I watch the scene unfold in front of me. Red illuminates the dark stretches of highway in front of me as brake lights activate.

“We’re still tailing him.”

I swallow around the thick lump in my throat.

“Good.”

HE LEADS US ON FOR OVER AN HOUR.

More squads join the chase, enough that the entire highway lights up in blue and red. The knot in my chest

remains ever-present. Having eyes on his vehicle loosened it a fraction, but not enough to take a proper breath. That won't happen until Lucy and Bennett are both back in my arms.

I send the rest of my brothers back to Mom's once assisting officers arrive. I want everyone to be waiting in one place when I bring Lucy and Bennett home. These kids need to see all the faces of the people who love them to ease the fear of what their monster of a father is doing.

And if I know my family, which I like to think I do, even without meeting Whitney and her kids, they already love them simply because I do.

I stretch my legs, shifting in the passenger's seat as a text comes in.

SILAS

Hang tight. Speed change to thirty-five at the next town. Blockades in place. Deploying strips up ahead.

"FUCKING HELL." I scrub my palm over my face and straighten.

"What's going on?"

"They're using the strips."

"That's a good thing. It means this will be over soon."

"I hope this crazy fucker doesn't have any other surprises."

The lights from the nearing town brighten the road up ahead. Fear jolts through me in a zap the likes I haven't felt since childhood. Not since I was forced to sit and watch my brother take a beating for me have I felt so scared and helpless. It's like I've been transported back in time.

"Where do you want me to go?"

"Keep going. I want to be close."

Suddenly, it feels like we're underwater. Everything moves in slow motion. I'm holding my breath, waiting for the potential fallout.

The red of brake lights splash color in front of us. The sound of screeching tires. Devon's car doesn't stop in time to dodge the steel spikes bisecting the road. A loud pop. Then another.

The officer to the right drags the spikes away so the responding officers can continue to follow without bursting their tires. Devon attempts to continue down the highway, but the flat tires on his car slow him to a complete stop.

I throw my seatbelt off, and my feet hit pavement before Corjan can come to a complete stop. I brace a hand against the hood, watching around the cruisers as the officers emerge with guns drawn.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

Corjan exits, standing behind his open door, eyes trained in the distance.

A god-awful sound rents the air. The tires spin on Devon's car, rims against the asphalt. A shower of sparks sends the cops back a few steps.

"He's still trying to drive out of here," Corjan says.

"He won't get far," I remark. Not with those tires. Not with how close I am to Lucy and Bennett.

More officers appear, surrounding the car. They're shouting at him to exit. To stop hitting the accelerator.

My lips part as I see movement in the back seat. A little head of blond hair pops up in the window.

"Lucy." Her name chases my exhale.

I don't even realize I've moved until a hand clamps tight around my bicep. "They'll get her, Jack."

I wrench my arm free and take two steps forward.

The sparks continue and arc high, a gold shimmer in the distance. The engine revs again, and suddenly, the sparks flash

in a burst of yellow light, and the car catches on fire.

And that's when I lose it.

Shouts in the distance. The sound of feet slapping on the pavement. Another set follows me as I race toward the burning vehicle. A flurry of activity and crackling radios as officers make calls for backup and grab fire extinguishers.

I don't stop. I keep running with Corjan on my heels, not giving the first fuck about what I'm running into and how much trouble I'll get into for doing it.

The back doors are flung open before I get there. Someone in a blue uniform drags Lucy from the back seat. The tears on her cheeks making them shine in the flashing lights.

But I still can't breathe. I can't breathe until I see that Bennett is okay too.

"He's stuck back here!" someone shouts. A second later, the cop stumbles backward to the ground with Bennett's car seat against his chest.

Devon flops out of the front onto his hands and knees, choking on the smoke as flames engulf the car.

I skid to a stop by the officer on the ground, grip him beneath his pits, and drag him twenty feet away from the car while he hangs on to Bennett.

"Give me my baby."

"Goddammit, Jack, help a guy up first," Silas says without a trace of humor.

I tear Bennett from the straps and settle him against my chest, my cheek to the top of his fuzzy hat. My heart goes a mile a fucking minute. His weight only halfway settles the racing pace.

Corjan helps Silas to his feet as I march in the direction I last saw Lucy.

I scan faces, my heart pumping. The whoop of more rescue vehicles arriving on the scene rings in my ears, drowning out

everything except the sound of blood rushing through my veins.

“Mr. Jack!”

I jog around the side of an unmarked cruiser.

“Luce,” I breathe her name and drag her from Sutton. She has a black smudge across her forehead, and her cheeks are still wet with fresh tears. “I’ve got you, honey.”

Her small arms wrap around my neck, squeezing so tight I sway beneath the force. Her head follows, burying beneath my chin where her scared little breaths fan against my throat.

“You’re safe,” I murmur. With them both tucked in my arms, the entirety of my heart settles.

Her back bows with a hitched sob. “I want my momma.”

I cut a glance to where Devon’s being cuffed on the ground, seriously considering killing him.

“We’re going back to your momma right now, okay?”

She lifts her head and gazes at me with tear-filled brown eyes. “You come?”

My arms flex around both of their small bodies. “I’m coming wherever you are.”



WHITNEY

THE POOL of headlights through the front window stops me halfway across the living room. I hop into the biggest pair of boots, belonging to one of the boys judging by the size, and stumble toward Jack's SUV in the drive.

I bypass the men in the front seat, yank open the back passenger door, and drag Lucy into my arms.

"Baby girl," I sob, shoving her head against my throat as hot tears spill down my cheeks. "Oh my baby, I'm so sorry."

Tiny fingers twirl into my hair, tugging until it hurts, and she bursts into tears. "Momma."

I squeeze my eyes shut as my body bucks. "Is she okay?"

"The medics checked her out on scene, but said it isn't a bad idea to take her in for a full checkup or to call her regular doctor," Jack answers.

She crawls into my arms, wrapping her legs around my hips and her arms around my neck. I reach across the back seat, brushing my fingers against the other car seat Jack had bought a couple of weeks ago.

"Can you get him for me? I-I need to hold him."

Jack's palms settle on my shoulders, and he twists me out of the door. "Go inside with Corjan. I have Bennett." He kisses

the side of my head. “I’ve got him.”

We’re ushered into another pair of strong arms and led up the stairs back into the brightly lit house where Jack’s entire family waits. Freezing in the doorway, I bury my face in Lucy’s neck.

“Why does she...?” I sniff again. “Why does she smell like smoke?”

Jack steps inside with Bennett against him, closing the door to the cold at our back.

“You should sit down.” Corjan maneuvers me into the nearest recliner. Jack drops to his knees at my side and sets Bennett in the crook of my arm.

“I’m going to start fresh coffee for everyone,” Nancy says.

“I’ll help.” Juniper rushes from the room.

Jack relays the story to me, his hand clenched tight around mine the entire time. In a roughened voice, he tells the room how Devon led them on a chase. How they didn’t know if the kids were in the car for certain, but they didn’t want to take any chances of Devon losing control. He says they used spike strips to deflate the tires, but Devon still wanted to escape and kept spinning his wheels.

As he tells us about the fire, I feel sick to my stomach. My nails create half-moons on the back of his hand as images of my children trapped in a burning car assault me.

“Silas Stone is the one who pulled Bennett out. When he shouted that the car seat was stuck, he thinks Devon released the position of the front seat to create room. They both fell out of the car at the same time,” Jack says.

“I guess we should be thankful he found his conscience just in time,” I say with a sardonic lilt.

“We aren’t thanking that bastard for a damn thing,” Jack snarls.

I turn my watery eyes on his face. My palm settles against his hot cheek. “You got them. You got them back for me.”

He turns his face into my palm and closes his eyes. His nose brushes against my fingers as he kisses my palm.

“I love you,” he murmurs there, lips brushing my skin with every word. “And I love these kids. The last few hours fucking felt like someone ripped my heart straight out of my chest. There’s no more fighting the inevitable, Whitney. I wave my white flag. I surrender to you. You’re mine, and if you want me, I’m all yours.”

“Jack,” my breath hitches. “Of course, I want you. We love you too.”

His stormy eyes meet mine, and his lips part as if he can’t quite believe it.

“I don’t know how I got so lucky. But I promise I’ll do everything in my power to be worthy of the three of you.”

Lucy lifts her head from my chest, finds Jack, and crawls straight into his lap, burrowing against his chest. She tucks her thumb in her mouth, something she hasn’t done since she was a year old.

His eyes slip shut.

His shoulders relax from his ears, hand resting flat on her back, and the corners of his lips tip.

TWO HOURS LATER, after Jude dragged Jack into a hug that had the women sniffing, and after Corjan took his turn getting the fear off his chest of how he felt watching Jack full-on sprint toward a car engulfed in flames, a car he knew without a doubt that Jack would have thrown himself into if necessary to save my kids, we head back home.

My body sags with exhaustion, yet I find the strength to carry Lucy inside the quiet house with Jack on my heels. Cooper greets us at the door, his posture stiff as he sniffs Lucy’s shin. A throaty whine breaks the quiet, and Jack orders him to his bed.

“I know I need to clean them up and get them out of the smoky clothes, but it breaks my heart to wake them.”

Jack settles his palm low on my back and guides me to the couch.

“We can wait a while longer.”

I sit in the corner, and he settles at my side with Bennett curled up on his chest. I brush some of Lucy’s smoky hair off her face.

Jack fixes his eyes on the empty, dark fireplace. “I thought you were pregnant.”

“Why would you think that?”

“The day of my family’s Christmas party at The Rocks, I found a positive pregnancy test on the bathroom counter shortly after you were in there.” He shakes his head. “I found out not long after it wasn’t yours.”

“I saw it too. I thought it was kind of funny,” I admit softly.

“It’s Bree’s.” He runs his fingertips over Bennett’s fuzzy hair.

I swallow my surprise. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Before I found out it wasn’t your test, I spent some time contemplating what that might mean for me if you were. It was the first time I even let myself consider what being a dad might be like. It used to be a hard no in my mind. But then I saw that test and thought about you, and I want a life with you, Whitney.” He licks his lips. “I want a life with all three of you. And after today, I realized I’m already there with Lucy and Bennett. Loving them is easy. If anything had happened to these kids...” He closes his eyes. “I would have given up my life for them.”

“I don’t want to think about that.” I say quietly.

“The point is that I love them and I love you. Easy as breathing. The three of you are all I need, but I wouldn’t be opposed to more.”

“I wish you looked at yourself and could see what I see,” I reply softly, tears pricking my eyes.

He opens them. “And what’s that?”

“A good man.”

He grunts.

I lean heavily into him and rest my head against his shoulder. “It’s a good thing I don’t plan on going anywhere. I’ll have plenty of time to work on that.”

“I’m just a man, Whitney.”

“You are by far the most selfless, incredible, caring man I’ve ever met in my life, Jack. And I’m not just saying that because you love my kids. If you asked any one of your family members, they’d tell you the same. And if this keeps going the way it’s been going, and by that, I mean perfect, then I’d be honored to carry your baby someday.”

Jack growls.

“Don’t talk like that when I have an infant sleeping on my chest.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t do anything about it.”

I lick my lips. “And what is it you’d like to do about it?”

His eyes drop to my mouth. “Practice.”

EPILOGUE



THE NEXT MORNING...

Whitney

THE MORNING after Jack brought my kids home safe to me, we snuggled in his bed.

All four of us.

Jack on the far side with Bennett curled against his chest, Lucy in the middle, and then me.

Beyond the blackout curtains, the sun shone. Not because I could see it but because I could tell we slept long into the morning.

The night before, after snuggling on the couch, we woke the babies around one in the morning, quickly washed away the smoke clinging to their skin, dressed them in fresh pajamas, and moved our little group into the bedroom.

Three of us promptly fell asleep while I knew in my heart Jack would keep watch over us until he felt content enough to let his own eyes close.

Now, he stares at me across the pillows above the sleepyheads between us.

Those gray eyes I love are warm, roving over my face with a contented laziness I could bask in for hours.

“Good morning,” he mouths quietly.

“Good morning,” I say back.

His gaze flits to my lips, watching as they curl around the vowels.

A crashing knock on the front door bursts our intimate bubble. Cooper barks a storm from the living room. His nails clack loudly on the hardwood as he bounces around.

Jack quickly deposits Bennett on the bed, and his long strides carry him from the room before I can even sit up.

My heart glides firmly in my throat at the intrusion. I throw on a sweatshirt from the floor and move Bennett to his portable crib in case he wakes from the noise.

Voices rise above Cooper’s alarming bark, and I rush from the room just in time to hear a screeching, “*Where is she!*”

My sock-clad feet slide around the corner of the hall as Jack rumbles, “If you take one more step into my fucking house, I’ll have to physically remove you.”

“Listen, handsome, I really love the whole protective vibe you have going on, but I need to see my best friend right now, and I will tear your arms off if you don’t get out of my way.”

Oh shit.

“Alice.”

Jack stands as an immovable wall between us. He twists his neck to me. “This is the sister?”

I nod and move to his side. He stops me from stepping forward by curling an arm protectively around my waist, positioning himself slightly in front of me.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, taking her in.

She looks terrible. Her black curls are twisted into a sloppy bun on her head. Purple rings blemish the skin beneath her eyes, standing out starkly against her pale skin.

The brittle smile on her face nearly cracks. “Seeing as you wound up on national news, the minute I heard what that asshole did, I got on the next flight here. Unfortunately, that flight wasn’t until three in the morning.”

“Oh, Alice.” Tears fill my eyes at seeing my best friend standing before me after all that’s transpired.

“I’m so sorry,” she bursts into tears. She slaps her palms over her eyes. “That *motherfucker*. I’m so sorry he did this to you.”

I move around Jack and drag her into my arms. “Shh, it’s okay.”

Jack shuts the door behind her. Her sobs swallow the sound.

“Is everyone alright?” She hiccups into my shoulder.

I rub her back with soothing strokes. “Everyone is safe.”

“I got a call from him this morning. Can you believe that? He used his one phone call on me,” she scoffs and scrubs at her eyes. Alice hates to cry. “I told him the prosecution would have my full cooperation. I’m done with him and my mother. Maybe I’ll move here and leave it all behind.”

“It’s not the worst idea.”

“Worked out pretty well for you.” She jerks out of my arms and holds me at the shoulders, searching my face with red-rimmed eyes. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“With Devon in custody, I’ve never been safer.”

“And this is him? The blizzard hottie?”

Jack chokes on a startled laugh.

“Yep, this is Jack.”

“Nice to meet you.” She roves her eyes over him and gives his hand a quick shake before shoving into the room. “Now, I’m sure you’re all tired, and I gave you a hell of a wake-up call, so I’m going to start breakfast, and then we can all celebrate my asshole brother finally going to jail where he belongs over some eggs and bacon. Do you have eggs and bacon?”

As she practically skips her way across the room, Jack cuts a sharp glance to me.

“She always like this?”

“Yep. Her humor’s always been a bit morbid, and she pretty much does what she wants.”

“Great,” he mutters, but the corners of his lips twitch.

I lean closer. “Don’t worry. She’s only staying the weekend.”

Jack presses a kiss on my forehead. “She’s welcome to stay as long as you need her to.”

“I love you.” I twist my fingers into the fabric at his waist, tugging him closer.

His eyes soften into molten steel. He dips his head, his mouth an inch from mine. “I love you too, pretty girl.”

Another round of banging echoes through the living room. My flinch has Jack yanking open the door again with stiff shoulders.

“Sutton,” he rumbles.

“Jack. Whitney. Got a minute?”

Jack wraps his hand around my hip and tugs me close. His thumb strokes a patch of bare skin between the hem of my sweatshirt and leggings, eliciting a round of shivers. “Come in.”

Sutton crosses the threshold and pulls the winter cap off his head. He runs his fingers through his thick brown hair.

“How are the kids?”

“They’re getting much-needed rest,” I say softly.

Sutton Stone might have made my return to Fairview Valley an anxious nightmare, but as far as I’m concerned, he’s a decent man and a good officer.

And his brother, Silas...

I can’t bear to imagine what would have happened to Bennett without him.

I press myself tighter against Jack’s side.

“Glad to hear it.” He clears his throat. “Devon Thompson is being transferred to county this morning. We’ve got him on kidnapping and fleeing a police officer. He also gave the names of those he was working with to forge his death certificate. Officers in Arizona are currently serving their warrants.”

A lump swells in my throat. “Who did he say he was working with?”

Sutton’s gaze darkens. “A sheriff and the town’s medical examiner. You know them?”

“No.”

“According to Mr. Thompson, they were apparently wrapped up in the same business as he was and planned to share the life insurance payment to settle their debts in exchange for helping him.”

An involuntary shudder rips through me.

“I know you were there last night, Jack, but I want to make it clear that you can rest easy knowing he won’t be a problem any longer.”

“Good.” Jack’s voice is rough.

Sutton tips his head at me before turning his eyes on Jack. “Also to say, Jack, you might also be one of my oldest friends, but if you ever get in the way of my job like that again, I will arrest you, and I’ll do it with a damn smile on my face.”

Jack stands a little taller, his hand tensing on my side. “I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

“Just to say, if you’re looking for someone to arrest, Officer, I’ve got two free hands. Silver bracelets really work with my skin tone.”

We all turn to find Alice standing at the entrance to the kitchen with her hands extended at her waist and her wrists touching.

“Who are you?” Sutton barks a little too loud.

“Alice Thompson. My brother is a convicted felon, but I know how to stay out of trouble.”

She retreats into the kitchen, but not before I hear her say, “Mostly.”

THREE MONTHS LATER...

Whitney

“WHEN DO I get to know where we’re going?”

Jack cuts a glance at me from the driver’s seat. “Isn’t it you who once said payback is a b-i-t-c-h?”

“You’re going to be in a lot of trouble when she learns how to spell. Better start curbing those f-bombs.”

He flicks his attention to where Lucy gazes happily out her window, a soft smile on her face.

“I’ve got a few years until then.”

Years. I gulp. My heart pounds at the thought of still being together years from now. I settle my round black sunglasses over my eyes to block out the sun and bite back a smirk.

Spring has begun to tease us with warmer weather. Snow piles slowly melt away, and I can finally leave the house without being fully bundled in gear. There’s always the potential for a late-winter snowstorm this time of year, but I’m manifesting an early summer. I’ve seen enough snow to last until next Christmas.

Jack makes a turn down a familiar street. While I recognize the location, I can’t recall any purpose for being in this residential area.

“Is that...?” I follow the house nearing through my window. My fingertips tingle with nerves. “This is Third Avenue. I was going to rent this house.”

“You were,” Jack confirms.

A thrill runs down my spine. Just as quickly, the single-story dwelling disappears as we crawl past the property.

“The For Rent sign is gone.”

“Yep.”

“You passed it.”

“Yep.”

I can't hold back an eye roll. “What else could we be doing here if we're not seeing that house?”

He follows the bend in the road to the left and stops at the curb of a dead end.

“We're seeing a different house on Third Avenue.”

Something awful pinches my lungs. “You're bringing me to see a rental?”

I lick my lips, my gaze freezing on the house before us.

Over the past three months, the topic of moving hasn't come up. As far as Jack has let on, the four of us moved in together the day of the blizzard and made it official the night my kids came home safe and sound.

Jack kills the engine and glances at me, but my eyes are hidden by my sunglasses. He tips his head toward his door. “Come on and see.”

I fight against a jolt of panic and force myself to sit through a deep breath.

Someone once told me that excitement and anxiety are the same emotion. Our reaction depends on whether the brain interprets the situation as a positive or a negative.

Right now, I'm having a hard time deciding which one I should feel.

I lift Bennett out of his seat while Jack releases Lucy. She immediately raises her arms, and he hoists her high onto his hip. She clings tight around his neck, and she lays her head on his shoulder, thumb popping into her mouth.

Ever since the night of the kidnapping, Jack has become her favorite person. She does this every time we go somewhere new.

And even if I'm uncertain he should encourage her, I can't deny the sight of them doesn't fill me with a feeling of contentment and warmth. She has complete and total trust in him, much like I do.

Usually. This might be the exception.

I follow him to the sidewalk and stop dead.

A sign declaring the property for rent blows gently in the wind. The log cabin-style house sits near a row of towering snow-topped pines like an image from a Hallmark movie. The melting snow sends glittering drips of water running off the gutters. Huge windows, dark against the shining sun, cover the front right half of the house while a wide porch wraps around the left to the back.

Jack doesn't give me much time to gawk at the house. His long legs stride up the steps, and I run to catch up to them. He holds the door open by the time I reach the landing.

"After you, pretty girl." He swoops down to kiss my cheek as I pass. Lucy giggles as she hangs onto his neck.

"Did you know your momma is beautiful, Luce?" he murmurs to her behind me.

"Uh-huh," she says.

"Just like you. Prettiest girls I've ever met."

My heart enters a free fall.

I step into the large foyer of a rustic open-plan home. Huge windows let in natural light from all sides. A staircase sits straight ahead between a living room and the kitchen area, leading to the second floor. Everything is exposed beams and rustic wood. A large fireplace to my right reminds me of the nights with Jack on the floor beneath an orange glow.

"What are we doing here?"

He slips his warm hand in mine and tugs me up the stairs to the second floor.

“When you came to town, your plans fell apart, and I took you into my home. Right from the get-go, we skipped a bunch of steps.”

I swallow hard. “Okay.” My voice is filled with nervous anticipation.

“My house is too small for the four of us.” He grips the knob of the first room on the left and pushes the door open. “I think it’s time we make things right,” he says carefully.

I can’t focus on the space around me as his words sink in. My heart flutters painfully in my chest.

He gently ushers me into the bedroom with a hand on my lower back. Pale pink paint coats the walls, and a small bed overflowing with plushies is pushed against the far wall.

“Do you want us to move out?”

I spin to face him with my heart in my throat.

Jack frowns. “Look behind you, Whitney.”

He presses his chest against my back as I twist around. His warmth seeps into my jacket and settles some of my nerves.

Across the room, on the wall above the bed, is a wooden sign that I missed at first glance. The name Lucy is carved into it.

“I thought we could all move out. Together.” His lips brush my ear as his breath fans against my neck.

My breath hitches in surprise.

“Of course, I’m ready to buy this place outright if that’s okay with you.”

“You want to buy a house with me?”

That was probably the dumbest question, but as he pointed out, we did skip a lot of steps. Even though we went straight to living with one another, I had figured Jack would need some time to stay in that stage before we moved on to the next one.

I begin a mental tally of my savings account. I'd be able to put up some money for a down payment, but not as much as I'd like to contribute. Certainly not half.

The life insurance company completed an investigation last month, and thanks to a deposition, bank statements, and sworn affidavits from Devon and me, I was able to return the money to them and avoid any charges.

“I told you I want to spend my life with you.”

I guess I might have been wrong. Jack doesn't need any extra time.

“I don't want you to feel like you have to move fast,” I reply.

Those gray eyes heat as he gazes down at me, churning with a storm. “I don't think there's such a thing as too fast with you. If anything, we're not moving fast enough.”

The grit in his voice sends my pulse tripping over itself. I search his face, seeing nothing but the love and adoration he's shown me over the past few months.

“This house is beautiful. It's big too.”

He brushes his thumb along my jaw. “I figured we could fill it together. It might take some time, though. If you're up to it?”

With Lucy snug in his arms and Bennett content in mine, I rise on my toes and kiss him.

“I'm up for anything with you.”

TWO WEEKS LATER, I walk into our newly furnished rental after work, looking for Jack and the kids. We stopped using the daycare center after Devon took them for my peace of mind. At least that was what we told everybody.

But it was really Jack who put his foot down.

Between him, his family, and Bree's babysitter, Scarlett, we have all the hours covered when I need to work. With a few leftover so the two of us can go on a weekly date.

My purse lands on the bench with a thud. I smile at the tiny pile of kid shoes. In a few years, the mess will probably drive me crazy, and I'll probably yell at Lucy and Bennett and whoever else to pick them up, but for right now, it feels like we're making our house a home.

The smile on my face freezes as I turn around. Cooper meanders off the couch to greet me, his nails clicking across the hardwood. A small ball of black-and-white fur squeaks along behind him in a clumsy frolic.

"Jack?" I call into the emptiness, my voice bouncing off the high ceiling.

"Momma!" Lucy barrels into the room from our main floor primary bedroom. Behind her, Bennett stomps slowly on wobbly feet, having learned to walk just the week before.

"Hey, Peanut." I scoop her up and dip her low as I kiss her face.

"We gots a puppy!" She palms my cheeks. Her brown eyes bore seriously into mine. "His name is Bo!"

"I see him. Bo is very cute."

"Mr. Jack said he is my doggy!"

"He did, did he?" I flick my gaze beyond her ear and find Jack leaning a shoulder against the wall as Bennett teeters around his legs. A humorous smirk tilts his lips that traced my body late into the previous night.

"Technically, he's a family dog, but I couldn't say no when she asked if he was hers."

Lordy, we are in trouble if he's already giving her whatever she wants.

Lucy wiggles in my arms. I set her down, and she falls to her knees and scoops Bo into her lap. He licks her face, and she giggles.

I quirk an eyebrow. “I thought I was supposed to be the one to bring home random animals?”

“Kind of hard when my brother owns a dog rescue. These guys came in yesterday, and I just couldn’t help but take one.”

“Is that why you pleased me within an inch of my life last night?” I say low so Lucy can’t hear.

“I had to soften you up somehow.” He moves into me, hands settling low on my hips with a squeeze that has my belly flipping. “Besides, you said we could fill this place up. I figured this was a good start before we fill it up in other ways.”

I have just enough time to see his eyes darken before he dips his head and kisses me, cutting off my response and making me forget to argue.

A YEAR and a half later

Jack

THE FULL MOON cuts through the darkness as I stare off into the barren trees beyond the deck, nursing a beer. Leaves crinkle where Bo and Cooper wander through the night. The approaching autumn brings a chill I grew numb to about thirty minutes ago.

Almost two years have passed since Whitney appeared in my life. Two incredible, thrilling, unexpected years. Despite the amount of time, I’m still getting used to having her.

We purchased this house after renting for a full year, and I still wake up most mornings surprised to find her warm body curled against me, the scent of her floral perfume permeating the sheets. Surprised at the way her hand reaches for me as if she can’t stand the few inches between us.

It’s me she’s reaching for. It’s me who she wants.

And her kids—*our kids*—because that’s what they are. Her ex agreed to sign away his custody rights, and I moved to adopt them at the first chance, officially making me a father.

Fuck, that word still feels foreign even six months later.

With the single flourish of a pen, we removed the final traces of her ex as the three of them became Powells.

Every first moment I’ve been lucky enough to experience with them I want to remember forever.

I was there for Bennett’s first steps. His first word. His first time trying green beans, and when he spit them out all over my shirt with a look of toddler betrayal on his face.

Just last week, I brought Lucy to her first day of kindergarten, brimming with pride at the tag on her desk that read *Lucy Powell*.

After I sat in the parking lot for an hour, debating whether to go back into that school and bring my little girl home, I nearly cried like a fucking baby all the way back to the house while Whitney laughed through her own tears.

Everything I thought I never wanted is suddenly all I could ever need in this world.

I thought I was happy with my life before, but I realized that wasn’t happiness.

I lived a life of passivity.

I can see the difference now, and it’s fucking startling.

The sliding door opening sends a thrill up my spine, but I don’t move. My elbows remain planted on the deck railing, bottle dangling from my fingertips over the edge.

“Are you coming to bed?”

Warm palms run over my shoulder blades and curl on either side of my neck. Whitney fits herself to my side as best as she can.

“It’s cold out here.” My palm settles protectively over her swollen stomach as if I can warm the little one inside with my touch.

“Which is why you should come inside.”

I catch her left hand and run my thumb over the diamond situated on her fourth finger. The jewel glints beneath the moonlight.

“I love you.” I press down against the ring I slid on her finger in a ceremony in this very backyard. “I wish I could marry you all over again.”

“I love you too.” That little line crinkles across the bridge of her nose with her confusion. “Is something wrong?”

I shake my head. “Nothing is wrong. Everything is exactly perfect. Sometimes it’s hard to believe that I did something right to deserve you.”

“Do you mean besides sheltering me from a deadly storm, protecting me from harm, saving my kids, or the hundred other things you’ve done since then?”

I clench my jaw and swallow hard, eyes searching hers in the moonlight.

“I should be asking what I ever did to deserve you, Jack.”

“You loved me.” I look down at her, filled to the brim with the unconditional love she gives me every single day. “Despite the damage, despite the hesitation, you looked deep and let yourself love me. You found something good.”

“All of you is good.”

I settle my hands flat on her stomach between us where our baby grows, a little brother or sister for Lucy and Bennett.

“Yeah.” I drop my forehead against hers, our breaths mingling in the brisk autumn air. “Earning the love of a woman like you makes it impossible not to believe it.”

Want to read Jack’s Christmas proposal and the gift Whitney surprises him with in return? Sign up for A. M.’s newsletter and have the extended epilogue scene delivered straight to your inbox!

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WHAT TO READ NEXT

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JUNIPER'S STORY NOW

Lee

There's not much I despise more than wearing soggy, wet socks. A year on the streets as a kid, some twenty-five years ago, humbled me to the benefits of basic, properly fitted footwear. Something I could kick my own ass for neglecting as I stand in an inch of water at the foot of my stairs first thing on Monday morning. Not like a pair of house shoes would spare me from this shit. I need some rubber boots.

“Son of a bitch.”

I drop the olive-green-and-beige tackle box in my left hand to the bottom step. I meant to go to the lake today and enjoy some quiet fishing, but the lake apparently found its way to the main level of my home. Slopping my way through the mess, I dig my phone out of my back pocket and text my brother, Corjan, to meet me at Mary's Diner in an hour for breakfast instead. The peaceful day I had planned will have to wait until after I clean up this mess.

The culprit to my sideways morning, a very obviously burst pipe, resides in my laundry room just off the kitchen. Remnants of soggy drywall litter the floor, and the gaping hole in the ceiling is more than a neon sign. Sometimes I wonder why I stay in this old, collapsing rambler when I have more than enough money to afford a brand-new, custom build on a private plot of land. As I've argued with my six family members over the years, this place suits me just fine.

Suited.

After this rude morning mess? I'm damn near about to torch the place to the ground and start fresh on a plot of land far away from here.

I call the local plumber, only half listening while he informs me he can't make it until this afternoon. After shutting off the main water line, I lay out damn near every towel I own, turn on a couple of fans, and change into fresh socks before hitting the road. My place is only fifteen miles out of town, but with my mood, the drive feels like an hour with nothing but my bitter thoughts.

The tinkling bell above the door to the diner heralds my arrival. As does Corjan's booming laughter, where he sits at the counter flirting with a couple of mature ladies. The wide smile stretched across his scruffy face is genuine. Despite his wife ripping his heart straight from his chest with her departure only a year into their marriage. Ten years later and indefinitely single, he's managed to remain Mr. Sunshine around the opposite sex.

"Hey, about time! Any longer and Stella was about to take me home for lunch." Corjan winks.

"You scoundrel!" Stella swipes her brown suede bag at him with a laugh and a light blush on her wrinkled cheeks. "Lee, take your brother before he earns what I'm about to give him."

"He'd probably like it," I grumble and jerk my head at the door to the patio since Minnesota decided to finally grace us residents with her summer temperatures. "Got time for a bite, or am I too late?"

The mask never leaves his face, but the moment Corjan clocks my mood is obvious. We might not be blood related, but I spent enough time learning how his mind works to know the thoughts disguised behind the smile in his eyes.

"Ladies, thank you for the company. Lunch is on me." He swipes their check and tucks the paper into the breast pocket of his plain black cotton tee.

I fold my frame behind the red and white checkered table in the warm sunshine and turn back in time to see Dora appraise Corjan's backside before it disappears out the door. "You have admirers everywhere."

He palms the table and slides in with his attention on my face. "What's wrong?"

"What do you think?" I pin my younger brother with a hard stare. The guy wears rose-colored glasses most of the time, but even he can understand what might have me a little irked this fine morning.

"You're always so uptight." He flags down a server from behind the counter with a wave. "It'll work itself out."

"My main floor is flooded."

"So we can skip fishing, and I'll bring over a wet vac."

I grit my teeth. A steady throb begins in my temples.

"What can I get for you?" A woman with reddish hair wearing a rolled apron tight around her curvy hips hinders my response.

My brother gives her a slow once-over. Not sure if I want to roll my eyes, laugh, or slap him for being such a dog, I resolve to simply observe the exchange.

"A black coffee, three eggs, medium, six slabs of bacon, and toast, please, darlin'."

An elongated pause follows his order.

"And for you?"

"Same." I grunt with hardly a glance. Corjan's undivided attention is probably more than enough testosterone for the poor girl. The quick peek upon her arrival spoke of her allure and also to the fact she's young. Way too young for an old man like me to be checking out while she's just trying to earn a paycheck.

But in the privacy of my own thoughts, I can admit she's downright gorgeous. Beautiful, and soft, and supple in all the places women complain about. Hips and thighs and *ass*. Full,

pouty lips. Lightly freckled skin. And dark eyes the color of my morning cup of coffee.

“I’ll be right back with your drinks,” she says sweetly and departs.

Corjan snorts with derision and smacks his palm against the wooden table. “What’s really crawled up your ass this morning? And don’t say fishing. We both know you don’t like it that much.”

I give my brother my eyes. His playful exterior doesn’t fool me. Only a few of us are privy to his hidden pain, which is reason enough for me to share. He’s one of the few people in this world I trust. Even then, I keep him at a smart distance.

“Nancy.”

“What’s Mom got to do with this?”

The server returns to drop our coffees and scampers off.

“She’s always harping on me to relax.” I wrap my palm around the hot ceramic. “Ever since I received the call last year my biological brother died of a sudden heart attack at forty-five, she thinks I’m knocking on death’s door and I work too hard. If she finds out I didn’t make it to the lake today... I cannot handle another conversation about my impending doom.”

Corjan runs his hand through his short, dark curls. “She’s just worried about you.”

“She shouldn’t be.”

“Good luck telling her that. She didn’t take in six unrelated kids off the street to not give a fuck about them.”

White tendrils of steam curl in the space between us. A welcome sip disguises my need to confirm he’s right. “I’m nearing my forties. She’s not raising a wild, angry teenager anymore. I can take care of myself. Hell, at her age, I should be taking care of her.”

“You’ve worked hard your entire life.” Corjan cuts me off, his face a mask of seriousness. “After Dad passed away, you helped her raise us. You stuck around long after you needed to

so Aiden and I didn't grow up missing what it was like to have a dad. We all think you need to take a break."

When our adoptive dad passed away, Corjan and Aiden were barely preteens and new to our mismatched family. They didn't really get to know Terrance before we lost him. I put my college plans on hold in order to take half the load from Nancy, and finished my degree in business a few years later than I had originally planned, which I ultimately used to help launch our family run dog rescue, Powell Sanctuary, not long after.

"This morning feels like a bad omen," I grumble, lowering my tone so the pretty server approaching our table doesn't hear how miserable I am.

"When's the plumber coming?" Corjan slides his mug to the side to make room for his breakfast platter.

I answer over the waitress's arm. "A couple of hours. He has a pretty cozy gig being the only plumber for miles surrounding Fairview Valley. I envy his workload, except when I'm the one in need."

"Can I get you two anything else?" our server asks.

Her sweet voice lures my attention away from the greasy plate waiting to be devoured. She reminds me of Nancy when she first took me in. Young and overworked but full of determination. The tired expression on her young face prompts a twitch to my lips. "We're all good here. Thank you."

"Great. Here's your check, and if you need anything else, holler."

"Slipper!" Corjan snaps and leaps to his feet. The stray white husky we've been tracking for weeks dashes onto the patio with a high-pitched bark, her elevated nose pursuing the smell of food. With hunger driving her senses, the dog races straight for our table and the fresh breakfast plates waiting to be consumed.

"Watch out!" I shout.

One moment our waitress is beside the table, arm extended forward with our receipt. The next, chaos ensues.

She doesn't have time to dodge before the dog's front paws land on her back. She gasps as her feet fly out from under her, and her fist slams into my junk in order to brace against her fall.

I wince and grunt, blinking back real tears as my balls crawl inside my abdomen for protection. The first time a woman literally falls in my lap, and I can't even appreciate her softness spread across my thighs.

"I am so sorry!" Her muffled cry sounds somewhere beneath the table near my aching dick.

"First day with your land legs, little mermaid?" I gasp. I attempt to lighten the mood despite the throbbing in my balls.

Her weight shifts, and the heat from her body starts to leave me. "I'm sorry," she mutters again.

Corjan's quick movement rattles our plates against the aged table. In one effortless tug, he helps slide her from the awkward position. Once she's on her feet, he makes a grab for the dog, who manages to slip right out of his grasp.

"Fucking hell, Slipper," Corjan groans and watches the animal sneak away with a piece of toast.

As if my morning misfortune just had to prove it wasn't through with me yet, the hand she sets on the table to steady herself lands perfectly on the edge of my plate. The dish executes a single flip. Creamy egg yolks and glistening, greasy bacon take no prisoners and land in the spot she just vacated.

My lap.

Fucking hell.

"Shit!" She claps a hand on her mouth as if she remembered she's on the job.

Not that I care about the blunder. A string of expletives dance on the tip of my tongue. I muster the remaining ounce of my willpower to lock it down and release a measured breath. She made a mistake.

"I'll get a towel." Corjan takes off, leaving the two of us stranded in an awkward hell.

“I’m—”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and cut her off. “If you say sorry one more time...” The unspoken threat trails into an awkward silence. I flip the plate over and start tossing breakfast items back onto the ceramic dish.

“I’ll put in a fresh order right away.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I grunt, angrier than my unfed stomach. Once I scrape my jeans off the best I can get them, I return the plate to the table and glance up, half expecting her to be gone.

A red hue covers her unblemished cheeks and the pinch between her eyebrows hasn’t lessened. Concern wars with embarrassment as the dominant emotion.

Helping Nancy raise a couple of displaced kids more than prepared me to deal with the minor inconvenience of spilled breakfast. But the look on the pretty server’s face reveals I must have forgotten how to use a gentle hand in the ten plus years since my youngest brothers grew up.

I sigh. “Hey. It’s fine.” I wave my palms at her. Fuck, I don’t do tears. She better not cry. “No harm done. Go ahead and get back to work. Don’t let this ruin your day.”

“I can comp your meal.” She shuffles from foot to foot while massaging her side.

My brow furrows, zeroing in on her hand. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine. I just bumped it a little on the table,” she rasps. I bet she has an incredible laugh.

“Juniper.” I read her name on the white tag pinned to her chest, testing out how it feels on my tongue.

Her breath hitches, and she wrings her hands at her apron-clad waist.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A. M. Wilson is a *USA TODAY* Bestselling Author. She loves infusing her stories with real life—the good, the bad, and the steamy parts. There’s something special about that pivotal moment when two characters realize their love for each other, but she likes wading through a little angst to get there. When she isn’t furiously typing on her computer, she can be found searching for her next all-consuming read. A. M. lives in the Midwest with her husband, two children, and two dogs.

Visit her website at <http://amwilson.net>

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