



BURGERS & BREW
BOOK EIGHT *INC.*

WITHOUT *you*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LACEY BLACK

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Without You

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Index

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Lacey Black](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

Chapter One

Kinsley

“Did you hear about the big custody blowup between Joey and Sasha?” Amber asks as she adds the finishing touches to my hair.

I’m preparing for my final show in Charleston, South Carolina. The first tour to headline my own name. It’s been an amazing ride, visiting numerous cities along the East Coast over the last four months, and even though I’m super excited for tonight’s show, I’m even more thrilled for a little break. It’s been nonstop since we started, hitting major cities and venues almost every weekend since September. Now we’ve reached the end of this leg, and that means I get a little R&R for a while until it’s time to get back in the studio to record new music.

“I haven’t heard anything,” I tell the woman who has been with me at every stop along this incredible four-month journey.

“How can that be?” she asks, turning and grabbing the television remote off the vanity. “They’ve been all over every entertainment program since they announced their separation last month.”

I want to tell her following the latest A-lister celebrity gossip isn’t my thing, but that’d be a lie, and she knows it. The truth is I’ve been pulled in so many different directions over the last few months, I barely have time to myself or to breathe. There’s always something someone wants, and while this tour has been everything I’ve dreamed about since I was a little girl and realized my voice wasn’t half bad, it’s much more exhausting than I ever anticipated.

“I don’t watch a lot of TV,” I state, following her movement in the mirror.

“But social media? Girl, they were trending for weeks. *Weeks*. And Joey Barnes is *H.O.T.*” she proclaims, fanning her face with her hand.

I can’t help but chuckle at the extra drama she added at my expense. “You know Erika handles all my social media and PR stuff. Sometimes it all just gets so overwhelming, so it’s easier to stay off.”

She stops and holds my gaze in the mirror. Reaching down, she squeezes my shoulder in support. “I know. I couldn’t imagine living my life in a fishbowl like that. Plus, most of those gossip reporters are just fat, jealous cows.”

I smile at my friend and nod in agreement. We both know she’s referring to the vicious stories pointing out sudden weight gain or accusing me of lip-syncing during my shows. I’ve heard them all over the last few months, including a few that would make your mama cry. Not that I wasn’t the recipient of gossip headlines before my tour, but when my latest single, “Tell Me Now,” landed at the top spot on the top of the country charts, my name suddenly was thrust into a bright spotlight and my life under a microscope.

“Come on, girl. Let’s find out what’s going on with Joey and Sasha,” she proclaims, finding an entertainment news program and setting the remote back down. “This hairstyle is so beautiful on you,” she adds, twisting a few of the beach wave curls and pinning them toward the back. One thing I hate is having my hair hang in my face while I’m trying to sing.

“It’s your magic touch,” I tell her, hoping she knows how much I truly appreciate her expertise *and* her friendship. We’ve gotten close over the last few months, talking for hours as she helps me get ready for each show. She’s not only a valuable part of my team, but a close confidante too, and let’s be honest, in this industry, it’s hard to find someone you can truly trust.

While the television goes to commercial, we continue to chat. “So, are you anxious to go home for a while? I’m sure it was hard being away from your family during the holidays,” she says, knowing how close I am to my older brother.

“For sure. We talked on Christmas, but it’s not the same. Mom and I are going for a visit in January,” I confirm. “And I’m super excited to see Cameron again. We talk a lot on the phone or text, but I’m anxious to see her. I mean, she’s gotta be a saint for putting up with Kellen, right?”

Amber shakes her head and laughs. She’s met my brother and his girlfriend when they came to one of my shows a couple months back. I’m not sure you could technically call them dating, since it was originally set up as a fake relationship, but one look at them and I knew it was real. Their feelings were written all over their faces, and I haven’t told them yet, but I wrote a song about them called “*When You Smile*.” I’m planning to sing it for

them when I'm home in a few weeks.

"Zander isn't going?" Amber asks, her hands stilling in my hair. Clearly, she picked up on the fact it's just me and Mom going for a visit.

"No," I reply shortly, looking down to pick at one of the rhinestones on my denim skirt. When I look up and meet her gaze, I say, "I've tried getting him to come with me, but he's so busy. He refuses to take a break from the business, even when a break is exactly what we need."

I met my husband, Zander, during an audition for my band. He's my bass player and works very closely with Jimmy, our stage manager, as well as Roger, the band manager. We started off as friends before we kindled a romance while working on my first album, and within a year of dating, we were married. We celebrated our third anniversary earlier this spring, but because of our hectic lifestyle, our celebration keeps getting pushed back. I'd love to take a trip somewhere, but it never seems to be the right time. When I finally thought we could steal a few weeks away, I was offered the chance to headline my own tour, and that took precedence over any potential anniversary trip I wanted to plan.

Her eyes narrow. I'm not so sure Amber is a fan of Zander's. She's never outright said, but I've picked up on little facial expressions before she schools them or comments that lead me to believe she's not Team Zander. "Too busy to spend a few days with his wife and her family?"

I swallow over the sudden dryness in my throat and look away. What am I going to say? My husband always seems to have some excuse as to why we can't spend time together? He'd rather work than spend time with the people who mean the most to me? Yeah, neither one of those would go over well, I'm sure, but that doesn't make the statements any less untrue.

Sensing my distress, she starts talking again, playing with my hair and making sure it's stage perfect. "You know, I think you're going to have an amazing time with your brother. You're always talking about Stewart Grove and how much you loved it there. I'm sure the slower pace will do you good for a bit. Think of all the songs you'll get to write."

I nod in agreement, my mind filling with images from a time gone past. As much as I love Nashville, there's nothing like Stewart Grove, Ohio. It's the best kind of small town, where everyone knows you *and* your business. In Nashville, no one offers to carry out your groceries or mow your lawn when you're out of town, and while Stewart Grove isn't on any list proclaiming it

one of the best cities in the world to live, it's still safe and offers all the comforts of home.

"I am looking forward to a little chill time. I already have three songs written for my next album," I tell her, even though she probably already knows. I'm sure I've been talking about it for the last month.

"Well, you're going to have a great time," she says. "There. Finished."

I glance in the mirror and take in my appearance. My dark brown hair is down in big waves with pieces twisted and pinned at the back of my head. My makeup is dark and sultry, the colors she used causing my blue eyes to pop like sapphires. A smile sweeps across my dark lips. "You make me look so amazing."

She waves off my compliment. "You do that on your own. I just enhance your natural beauty." Amber leans in and hugs me from behind, careful to not mess up the hair she so expertly styled.

The television program comes back from commercial break and our eyes move to the screen. It's just off to the right and in clear view of the chair I'm sitting in. I only have a few minutes before I'll be called to go on stage, but I admit it feels good to just sit here and watch mindless entertainment programs for a few minutes before the chaos begins.

"Oh," I start, reaching for the necklace sitting on the vanity. It's my nana's cross, and I wear it every time I perform, as a way of keeping her with me. She was a big part of my life when I was young, considering my parents' marriage was a hot mess, and Kellen and I found comfort at her house. There was no fighting, no accusations, no backhanded comments meant to tear the other down. There was only peace and love...and chocolate chip cookies.

When she passed, my brother and I were each given an opportunity to pick a piece of her jewelry. I chose the cross necklace she wore daily, and Kellen picked her ruby and diamond earrings. I smile thinking about them, because I believe he's giving them to his girlfriend, Cameron, tonight.

"Want me to help?" Amber offers, holding out her hand.

"If you don't mind." I know she doesn't. She's done this on numerous occasions throughout the tour.

The moment it's clasped around my neck, the sound of my name grabs my attention. Only, it's not coming through the door as expected. My eyes are pulled to the TV, where I see the show host sitting at a desk. My name is

flashing across the bottom of the screen as he says, "What you're about to see contains sexually graphic images."

Then the video comes on and a gasp fills my dressing room, but it's not from me. It's Amber.

"Country singer Kinsley McGregor's bass player, and husband, was caught backstage before tonight's concert in a very compromising position," the entertainment show host says, playing more of the video.

My husband is there, front and center on the screen for the entire world to see. "Is your friend recording us?" Zander asks, clearly screwing the woman bent over a cabinet used to house our stage equipment.

"I wanted to have something to remember you by after you leave," she purrs, making my stomach roll and bile rise in my throat.

"And I'm next!" another woman hollers. She must be holding the phone and videotaping the action because the screen bounces as she talks.

My husband just smiles. "Hell yes, you are, darlin'." Then he grunts, and I have to close my eyes and not watch the rest.

"Reportedly, that's Zander Houston, husband of Kinsley McGregor, who is set to perform her final show in her very first headlining tour this evening in Charleston, South Carolina. This video was sent in exclusively to our studios just moments ago, and something tells me we haven't seen the last of this unfolding drama. We'll be back with more entertainment news after this."

I sit in stunned silence, a single tear slipping from the corner of my eye. It's quickly followed by another and another. My mind is spinning as it keeps replaying the images I just saw on the screen. And not just me. Everyone. Everyone watching just witnessed my husband's affair, thanks to that video.

Arms wrap around me again, this time uncaring about messing up my hair. "What the absolute fuck?" Amber whispers, her question harsh and full of venom.

Before I can even begin to process what I just saw, there's a knock on the door. "Kinsley, you ready?" Roger, our band manager, hollers, deciding to join us for tonight's final show of the tour.

"Just a minute," I croak out, swiping at my eyes to remove any remnants of moisture.

Amber stands there staring. "You don't have to go out there," she

insists, grabbing a Kleenex from the box and shoving my hands out of the way. She delicately blots at the wetness without undoing all her hard work from just a short time ago.

“Yes, I do,” I mumble, taking a few deep, calming breaths. “It’s not the fans’ fault my husband is a cheating, lying asshole. They still deserve to get what they paid for.”

Sympathy mixed with sadness mars her pretty face. “This is wrong, Kins. You’re not a performing monkey.”

“Aren’t I, though?” I ask, a bit too harshly. Softening my features, I look up at someone I consider to be one of my only friends. A wave of uncertainty and paranoia hits me, and I can’t help but ask, “You didn’t know...”

Her mouth falls open. “What? Hell no! If I did I would have kicked him square in the balls before I marched my happy ass straight to you and told you exactly what kind of douche canoe you were married to.”

A bubble of laughter spills from my lips, and within a moment, she’s joining me. “He really is a douche canoe, isn’t he?” I ask through my giggles.

“The most epic douche canoe I’ve ever met, and considering my line of work, that’s saying something,” Amber notes. I can recall her sharing a few stories from other tours and shows she’s traveled with, and if she thinks my husband is a raging jerk, it must really be bad.

With a sigh, I look at my friend in the mirror. “I really know how to pick ‘em, huh?”

“That man doesn’t even know how badly he’s fucked up.”

I give her a small smile, one I don’t really feel. Another knock sounds on the door. “Kinsley, it’s time.”

“Do I look all right?” I ask, giving myself one last look over in the mirror.

“Are you kidding me? You look absolutely amazing, and do you know why? Because you’re a badass bitch, Kinsley McGregor. Beauty, brains, and badassery, all wrapped in one.”

I hold her gaze for a moment and nod. I don’t feel nearly as confident as she does, but I don’t have time to wallow in the misery threatening to consume me. A sold-out stadium is waiting for me to give my best performance to date, and I refuse to disappoint them, so even though I’d rather grab a pint of Ben & Jerry’s and have a good cry, the show must go

on.

I'll deal with my cheating husband afterward.

I take another deep breath and step out into the hallway. It's full of people, all waiting for me so we can move toward the stage. Scanning the faces, they're all familiar, but do I really know any of them?

Zander steps forward, as if right on cue, wearing the exact same shirt from the video I saw on television. He didn't even have the decency to change his clothes, which means he still smells like another woman. Or *women* in this case. He's the one man I thought I knew, but clearly that's not the case. The man I hoped to spend the rest of my life with is not the person I thought he was. Our marriage is nowhere near perfect, but it was comfortable and ours. Now all I see is him having sex with some random woman just a short time ago, and all that hurt and devastation transforms into anger.

"There she is," Zander says, throwing his arm around my neck as if he has not a single care in the world. I suppose orgasms will do that to a man.

Instead of responding, I turn to face Roger and Jimmy. Roger has been with me since I got my first record deal, and Jimmy since the start of this tour. I trusted them both, and need to know how deep their betrayal runs too.

Looking at Jimmy, I ask, "Did you know?"

He seems dumbfounded at first, his mouth hanging open as he asks, "Know what?"

Then phones start blowing up around me. Roger pulls his out and looks down at the screen. I watch as his face goes ashen white before he risks looking up at me. It's in that moment, when our eyes meet, I feel another monumental punch to the gut. *He knew*. Not needing confirmation, I ask, "Were you ever going to tell me?"

"Tell you what?" Erika Parks, my PR and social media manager, asks approaching from behind and pulling her buzzing phone out of her pocket.

"Babe, what's going on?" Zander asks quickly.

I keep my eyes trained on Roger. "Well?"

He clears his throat. "No. These things happen in this industry."

I slowly nod, taking in his statement. His words leave me with no other choice. "You're fired."

Chaos erupts around me. Roger starts arguing about contracts and

obligations and Zander steps in, asking me to calm down. Jimmy looks around, panicked and guilty. Even though it's the final show and his job will be complete when we return to Nashville, I need him to know how I feel about his betrayal as well. "When we return home, I will no longer be needing your services." Sadness washes over his face as he nods solemnly.

Still ignoring my husband, who is now looking down at his own phone and must realize his amateur porno went viral, I turn to Erika, who is typing rapidly on her phone. "Did you know?"

"Of course not," she insists, her eyes glaring daggers into my husband before they return to me. I can tell by the surprise and hurt she clearly feels as well that she wasn't aware of his infidelity.

I nod briskly. "Well, then, you better get to work. As you can see, my husband's affair is all over the news. You have your work cut out for you."

"Babe," Zander starts, but I hold up my hand.

"Stop right there. I'm not your *babe*. Not anymore." Closing my eyes, I see everything I've built, everything I thought we were working for together, swirl around the bowl and slide right down the toilet. Returning my angry gaze to him, I state, "Get your cheating ass in gear. We have one show left, and then we're done."

Done.

Then, I hold my head up high and start to walk toward the stage, passing everyone who seems rooted in place. Everyone averts their gaze, as if the floor is suddenly the most interesting floor in the world. If they knew about my husband's wayward penis, not one of them had the balls to tell me.

"Where are you going?" Erika hollers, causing me to pause.

I glance over my shoulder, meeting her concerned eyes. "I'm going to perform my final concert. I'm giving these fans an unforgettable night, and then..." I pause and consider my options, knowing in my heart there's really only one left. "I'm going home."

Chapter Two

Tucker

I'm still fuming mad. I can't get the images of Kinsley's asshole husband fucking some chick out of my head. It doesn't matter I saw that damn video hours ago. It's the reason I'm still pacing my house well after I should have gone to bed. I can't even imagine how her brother feels right now, having sat next to him while that entertainment news story broke.

Shit, I can't imagine how *Kinsley* feels.

I run my hands through my hair and lean back against the wall. I've traveled down the hallway no less than a dozen times since I got home from the work Christmas party. What started off as a fun, festive celebration just two days post the big holiday turned into a huge uproar, as we tried to keep Kellen from driving to South Carolina to murder his brother-in-law. Not that I think he'd really do it, but he's incredibly protective of his younger sister, and watching her be cheated on on national television was enough to send the guy into a tizzy.

I've known Kellen McGregor almost my entire life, and because of that friendship, Kinsley too. There was a time I thought she might be my forever, but that was a long time ago. One thing I've learned is a lot can change in a short amount of time, and we've both lived a lot of life since our time together. She has her music career, which I'm super proud of, by the way, and I have my son.

Speaking of, I push off the wall and peek inside Grayson's bedroom once more. Mom met me at home at the end of my work party so we could begin our nightly routine of preparing for bedtime. My four-year-old loves bedtime, just not the bathing part. But after spending hours outside, playing in the dirt, skipping a bath isn't an option.

He's curled up on his side, his brown hair matted down on the side of his head, and I can't help but smile. His room is full of green and red, because when it comes to tractors, Grayson doesn't care what color it is. As long as it can be used in farming, he's happy. He probably has close to a

hundred tractors already, but he doesn't care. He plays with all of them.

His fixation on them started when he was two and saw a combine harvesting corn on the edge of town. Ever since, he's been obsessed. We make regular cruises around the county to see them in action, but he doesn't quite understand why they don't farm year-round. Part of that is because he's only four, but a big factor is the Down syndrome he was diagnosed with before birth. He gets super emotional or upset when things don't go his way, or he doesn't understand something.

Becoming a dad at twenty-six wasn't planned, but I never shied away from my new, unexpected role. Even when things between Grayson's mom and myself got...*complicated*. Upon his diagnosis, I knew he was going to face numerous challenges growing up, and I was determined to provide a loving, safe environment for him as we dealt with the difficulties he'd have together.

It hasn't been easy, but raising Grayson has been the greatest gift in my life.

I just wish Evie were around to help.

But I'm not dwelling on that now. It is what it is, and the most important thing is Grayson is loved, healthy, and happy. Even if he only has one parent, I'll do whatever it takes to fill both roles throughout his life for as long as I'm able.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, so I quietly step back away from my son's bedroom door and pull the device from my jeans. When I spot Kellen's name, I swipe my finger across the screen and bring it to my ear. "Lo?"

"Hey," he states, getting right to the point. "I talked to her."

"How is she?" I ask, picturing Kinsley's gorgeous, smiling face from her latest music video I caught online.

"Devastated. Embarrassed. Angry."

I can only imagine. Kinsley was always a feisty little thing, and if she was upset about something, she wasn't afraid to tell you. She also wears her heart on her sleeve and always sees the good in people first, which often results in her getting hurt somewhere along the way. Personally, I think it's one of her best attributes, and I can only imagine the pain she felt after she saw that video.

"Does she need anything?" I ask, even though I probably have no right to offer. We don't talk anymore and haven't since she left town at the young

age of eighteen to follow her dreams, but I can't just sit back and do nothing, knowing she's in pain.

"I don't know, man. I'm torn. She says she's fine and is dealing with a few things there. It's taken every ounce of self-control I possess to not get in my truck and drive to Charleston, just to kick that fucker's ass."

Get in line, my friend.

"Well, that and Cameron won't let me," he adds. There's a mumble near the phone, which tells me his girlfriend is nearby.

"Probably a good thing," I reply. Kellen was never much of a fighter in school, but when it comes to his sister, I imagine he'd go to about any length to protect her.

"Anyway, she's not hanging around Charleston and riding back on the tour bus. Her PR manager was there and is driving her home to Nashville as we speak. Then, it sounds like she's coming here. I thought you'd want to know."

I swallow over the sudden lump in my throat.

Kinsley's coming home.

I have to force myself not to get too excited. It's not like this is a vacation. It won't be two friends catching up over drinks and maybe dinner. She just went through a traumatic ordeal in her personal life, and the last thing she's thinking about is seeing an old friend.

But that doesn't stop my heart from dancing in my chest a bit too eagerly.

"Yeah, thanks," I reply, glad he's letting me know. Sitting there beside him at the party and watching her husband's affair play out on television wasn't something either of us will ever forget.

After a few long seconds, he sighs. "You're a good man, Tucker Dunn."

I snort, unable to stop myself. If he knew all the things I used to do to his sister—naked things—he'd probably change his mind on that.

The truth is, she's never too far from my mind. Over the years, those memories haven't dimmed in the least. After she left, from time to time, I kept track of her career online, even though it hurt like a bitch. Not because she was happy and succeeding, but because I was so damn proud of her and knew she was destined for greatness. She was a star at eighteen, and I had to let her go be great, despite knowing my heart was never going to be whole again.

Now, I can't help this overwhelming sense of protectiveness coming over me. I have no right to feel that way anymore, but it's there, nonetheless. The thought of her dealing with the fallout of a public spectacle and the implosion of her marriage doesn't sit well with me.

"No, you are," he continues, pulling me back to our conversation. "I bet you were still up, pacing your living room, right? Because you're a good dude, and even though what happened between you and Kins ended years ago, you still care enough to not want to see her hurt."

Okay. Get the fuck out of my head, Kellen McGregor.

"Yeah," I finally end up saying, because there's nothing else I can say. He's right. He's been my friend long enough, knows me better than most.

He exhales loudly. "I need to try to get some sleep, but I don't think I can."

"I bet Cameron can help you with that," I tease.

He chuckles. "Yeah, she's the perfect distraction." After a beat, he asks, "You all right?"

"I'm good. Glad she's got someone there with her."

"Me too. That's one of the only reasons I'm not on my way. She's pretty close to her PR manager, Erika, and her stylist, Amber. I guess she pretty much fired everyone else."

A gravelly laugh draws from my mouth. "I bet she did."

"She'll have a mess to deal with for a while, but she won't do it alone."

I nod, grateful she's still close with her brother.

"All right, have a good one," he says.

"Night," I reply before tapping my screen to disconnect the phone.

My mind starts to spin once more, but I force myself to move. Grayson will be up early, and if I don't try to rest, it'll be a very long day. Stepping into my bedroom, I move straight for the en suite bathroom. Stripping down to my boxers, I toss my dirty clothes in the hamper and brush my teeth. I pop out my contacts and grab the cheap black plastic glasses and slip them on my face. I've learned the hard way, when you have a small child with a fast hand and a curiosity for miles, go cheap. It makes replacing them not sting as bad. Finally, I flip off the light and head for my bed.

I crawl beneath the covers and try not to think about Kinsley, but like most nights her memory creeps in, I'm not strong enough to fight it. Will I always carry a torch for my first love? Probably. Even though our time

together ended nearly a decade ago, there has yet to be another woman who makes me feel the way she did. Don't get me wrong, I'm not lying here, pining away for the one that got away, but she's always there in the back of my mind.

I'll never stop caring for her.

Rolling onto my side, I do my best to get comfortable, but it's not easy. After ten or so minutes, I grab the remote and flip on the television, hoping it helps settle me. Thankfully, the channel is still on a sports station where there's no risk of witnessing that damn video again. It's already burned into my retinas. I don't need the instant replay now.

Or ever again.

For the next thirty minutes, I watch the highlights of today's football games, but if you were to ask me who actually won the games, I wouldn't recall.

Why?

You guessed it.

Kinsley McGregor has once again rooted herself in my brain and seems to be making herself comfortable.

This is going to be a long night.

"Daddy!"

A smile spreads across my face as the sound of running feet echo on the hardwood floor. "Grays," I reply, popping my head out of my bathroom just in time to see my favorite little guy climb onto my bed and bounce. "Are you supposed to be jumping on the bed?" I ask, a stern look in my eyes but humor laced in the words.

"I not!" he declares, still bouncing on his knees with that ornery grin that looks so much like the photos of myself when I was that age.

The moment he stops moving, his arms go up. He's ready for his morning hugs. I set my comb down on the bathroom counter and go to him, bracing for impact as soon as I sit on the bed beside him. He leaps, and despite being told multiple times not to jump at someone, I choose to keep my comment to myself and just let it happen. These moments won't last forever, so I might as well enjoy them while I can.

Once he gets done squeezing on me, he flops back on the pillows and giggles, his big blue, almond-shaped eyes full of laughter and happiness. That's the look I long to see on his face every moment of every day. Of course, dealing with a preschooler isn't for the faint of heart, especially one with Down syndrome.

"Ready for breakfast?" I ask.

He nods eagerly. "Puffs."

"All right, and then we'll get dressed for Grandma and Grandpa's."

Confusion crosses his face. "School!"

"There's no school today, buddy. It's Christmas break."

"School!" he hollers, and I can tell this is going to be rough, even though we had this discussion yesterday.

"You get to go back to school next week, Grays. This week you're still on break. All week, you get to hang out with Grandma while I go to work," I say gently, knowing this could turn into a major temper tantrum.

Tears well in his eyes, and before this can erupt into a major issue, I scoop him up and settle him on my lap. "I bet Grandma will make you a PB&J sandwich for lunch, and maybe when I get off work we can play with your building blocks."

His big eyes widen with excitement. "Blocks?" he asks, seeking confirmation as he snuffles.

"Yep, blocks," I agree, making a mental note to mention this to my mom, since he'll most likely talk about his new brightly colored building blocks all day in anticipation.

"Kay," he agrees, running his hands across my cheeks. This is something we've been working on lately, but I don't have the heart to stop him. Grayson isn't good with personal space, especially with someone he is comfortable with and loves. He thinks he needs to be touching me at all times.

"Ready for Puffs?" I ask, referring to his favorite Cocoa Puffs cereal. It's not exactly a nutritious start to the day, but he refuses to eat anything else, and sometimes, it's just not worth the fight.

"Yep!" he hollers, slipping off my lap and stumbling from the bed before I can help him down. The near fall doesn't slow him down, though. He's off to the races, running down the hallway toward the kitchen.

"Don't run," I instruct, even though it's fruitless.

Shaking my head, I get off my bed and try to straighten the ruffled comforter. I was never a man who felt the need to make my bed in the morning. I mean, the next time I was near it, I was climbing back inside, so what was the point? But now that I have Grayson, I definitely take the time to smooth out the wrinkles on our beds, especially his. He gets himself hung up in blankets so easily, I'd feel terrible if something like that caused him to fall.

When I join him in the kitchen, he's already sitting at the table, waiting. I pour two bowls of the chocolatey cereal and grab the gallon of milk from the fridge. When both bowls are ready, I place them on the table and grab two spoons. There was a time not too long ago I wondered if he'd ever master eating properly with silverware. One of the traits of Down syndrome is poor fine motor skills, but with a lot of practice and help from his special preschool, he's finally got the hang of it.

It still tends to be a bit messy, but he feels like such a big boy when he feeds himself.

He talks while he eats, wearing half the bowl of milk down the front of his pajamas before it's said and done, and when he's finally finished eating, I grab the washcloth to start the cleanup process. I take care of him first, removing his long-sleeved pajama top with John Deere tractors on it, before moving on to the table. Once the mess is moved to the sink, we take off for his bedroom to get dressed for the day. I've become a pro at making sure his favorite outfits are clean by morning, considering he likes to wear only certain pieces.

Today, it's his favorite pair of bib overalls and a long-sleeved T-shirt with a red tractor on it, which doesn't surprise me in the least. Grayson is a creature of habit, and since his obsession is farming and tractors, his attire usually falls within a certain wardrobe. He even has new boots to complete the look, thanks to my parents. They were definitely one of his favorite Christmas gifts to receive three days ago. He's worn them nonstop since.

When he's ready, I leave him to play in his bedroom for twenty minutes before it's time to head out. I slip back into my own room and finish getting ready, then hurry to the laundry room to start a load of clothes. There's nothing worse than the smell of sour milk when you walk through the door after a long day.

Once the laundry is in the washer and the dryer empty from the night

before, it's finally time to go. I grab our coats from the hall closet and holler, "Grayson, time to go to Grandma and Grandpa's."

He comes running, a happy grin on his face. "Yay!" he bellows, coming to a complete stop in front of me.

"No running in the house," I remind him.

He nods eagerly, making me smile, even though I know I'll be reminding him later this evening too.

The moment I have him in his coat with the zipper pulled up and a John Deere stocking cap on his head, he gives me the sweetest smile that always seems to melt my heart. "Love you, Daddy," he whispers, rubbing his thumb across my cheek.

"I love you too, Grays," I reply, leaning forward and placing a kiss on his forehead.

I slip on my own coat and pat my pockets, making sure I have my keys and phone. Then, I take his hand and lead him out to the garage. I inhale the cold late-December air and blow out a long breath. No, this may not have been the life I envisioned for myself, but I wouldn't trade it for anything. I have a great job I love, a family who supports me, and a son who is my everything.

Grayson and me.

It's us against the world.

Chapter Three

Kinsley

Usually, I enjoy the scenery surrounding me as I drive the familiar roads that lead me home. Today, however, they don't hold the same luster and beauty as normal. Maybe it's the dreary December day with the gray skies, the cold nip in the air, and the lifeless, leafless trees. It all looks so sad and uninviting. Or perhaps it's just this dark cloud of doom and gloom that seems to follow me wherever I go.

Like the paparazzi.

With the help of my PR manager, I was able to sneak out of Nashville without anyone tailing me. Of course, I had to jump through a few hoops to make it happen—considering the press has been on stakeouts everywhere I turn since that damn video went public—and leave in a rental SUV, wearing a disguise, but it worked.

It might have helped not staying at my actual house the last few nights. Not with Zander there. I know he was there because of the security code entered in the front gate. I'd love to change the code and essentially lock him out, but his name is on the deed just like mine, and Erika is insistent I remain calm and aloof where my *husband* is concerned. As much as I'd like to come out swinging with cameras rolling, she knows he's the one who already looks bad in this situation. The best action for me is a cool, collected reaction.

Believe me, the reaction I've been feeling has a little more to do with a sharp knife and his favorite appendage.

I pass the Welcome sign at the edge of town and steer my rental toward my brother's house. I haven't visited since last summer, before we started negotiating the tour that changed my life. I had been on the road before as opening act for some of country music's biggest names, but this was my first big show with my name prominently positioned on the marquee.

Now, my name is still front and center, just not for the right reasons.

I pull into my brother's driveway shortly after arriving to town, thanks to the fact Stewart Grove only contains about eight thousand people. I park the Ford Edge I'm using for the foreseeable future beside his truck and turn off the ignition. I sit there for a few minutes, taking in the familiarity of my surroundings, even though I've never actually lived in this house. My brother bought it a few years ago, well after I moved to Nashville, along with our parents, but besides my own house, it's my favorite place to chill and unwind.

Of course, that could have a lot to do with him too.

My brother and I have always been close. Growing up, our homelife wasn't the best, especially when we got into high school. The verbal fighting and constant bickering we grew up listening to between our parents only became worse. I've never seen two people so miserable. Like oil and water, they just didn't mix. Surprisingly, that wasn't enough in either of my parents' eyes to consider a divorce.

Adultery was, though.

Funny, I ended up marrying a man quite similar to my own father.

A knock on my window has me jumping in my seat with a yelp. My brother's smile is small but genuine, and it has me releasing my seat belt and practically leaping from the SUV within seconds. His arms are familiar and welcome as he squeezes me against his chest, rendering me speechless and unable to breathe.

"How was your trip?" he asks, his warm breath tickling my ear.

"Fine. No one followed me," I assure him with a shrug, even though I'm still wrapped in his arms.

"Come on," he says, turning me under his arm and guiding me toward the house. "Cameron ran and bought breakfast-y stuff."

"It's after noon," I remind my brother with a smile.

He shrugs as we walk side by side up the back steps. "She says cinnamon rolls and other pastry things are acceptable all day."

I can't help but chuckle. "She's not wrong."

He flashes me a grin filled with relief. "I'm glad you're here, Kins."

My arms go around his waist once more as I close my eyes. "Me too. There's nowhere else I'd rather be to lick my wounds and hide from the paparazzi."

His eyes harden just a bit. "They may still find you here. No, they

probably will. It's no secret you're from here."

I suck in lungs full of the cool December air and exhale it slowly. "I know. I'm just hoping they give me a few days before catching up with me. I couldn't get any peace in Nashville, and it's only been a few days."

He nods. "You'll get peace here, Kins. We'll do whatever you need, and you're welcome to stay as long as necessary."

"I don't want to impose," I say, but anything else is cut off.

"Stop it. This is your home away from home. Always has been, always will be," he counters, reaching for the screened door and pulling it open.

"Yeah, but that was before you fell in love and moved your girlfriend in. I don't want to risk hearing...*things*." That's one line a sister never wants to cross.

A wolfish grin spreads across my brother's face. "Oh, we love to do the *things*, Kins. Maybe you should invest in earbuds."

"Oh my God, are you talking about what I think you're talking about?" Cameron appears in front of us, reaching for my arm and pulling me away from my brother. There's no missing the blush on her face as she leads me into their kitchen and pulls me into her arms. "I'm so happy you're here," she starts, stepping back and giving me a once-over. "Well, I mean, I don't *like* it. Wait, you know...the reason, not that I don't want you here..." she stammers, looking a little panicked.

Understanding what she was saying, I give her a small and sisterly hug. "I know. The reason I'm here early sucks donkey balls, but I'm happy to be here nonetheless. I promise not to overstay my welcome."

"You're not bothering us," my brother insists, entering the kitchen with a bag in each hand he just went and grabbed from the car. "You were going to come in a few weeks anyway, right?"

"Yeah, but now I'm putting you out longer. Plus," I start, turning to Cameron, "your parents are going to be here in a few days."

"And they are more than happy to stay at the hotel, really," Cameron insists. "My dad snores like a freight train, and my mom was worried about keeping us awake. This is a win-win for everyone."

"You're sure?" I ask, hating to put anyone out.

"Absolutely," Cameron reassures me. "Now, come check out these pastries I got from Lyndee's bakery this morning. She makes the best stuff, but I have to warn you. I've gained five pounds from all the sweet treats I

now eat. I blame your brother.”

“What? Me?”

Cameron turns a mock glare at my brother. “Yes, you. You keep buying all these yummy pastries and iced coffees for me,” she counters, placing her hands on her hips. “I’m going to weigh twice as much before I know it.”

Kellen drops my bags on the floor and takes two steps forward until he’s directly in front of his girlfriend and pulls her into his arms. “You could weigh a thousand pounds, and you’d still be beautiful.” He taps her on the nose with the tip of his finger before placing a kiss on her lips.

“Gross,” I mutter, making a gagging noise like I used to when I was younger.

Kellen chuckles and steps away from Cameron. He grabs the two bags left on the floor and says, “I’ll take these to your room and grab the last one.”

“I can take them,” I argue, but I know it’s fruitless. He’s already marching down the hallway toward the room that has always been dubbed mine.

“Come sit,” Cameron insists, opening the box of treats on the table.

As soon as I’m seated at the small table, I reach for a jumbo cinnamon roll and a plastic fork. My stomach growls, a reminder I haven’t eaten yet today. In fact, my diet hasn’t been so good since the whole viral video thing.

Taking a small bite, the sweetness and gooeyness of the icing hits my taste buds and explodes. “Wow, these are amazing,” I mumble the moment I swallow the deliciousness.

“Aren’t they? Even when they’re a day old, they’re still soft and scrumptious,” she says, taking her own bite and savoring it.

Kellen walks back through the kitchen, grabbing a bear claw donut from the box as he passes, and heads outside to retrieve the last of my things.

“So,” she starts, clearing her throat. “How are you?”

I sigh deeply, the food in my stomach settling like lead, but I refuse to stop eating. I really need the food, even if it’s a sugary cinnamon roll. “Okay, I guess. I mean, I go from sad to angry at the drop of a hat,” I confess, shifting in my seat. “Actually, I do have something I wanted to ask you.”

Cameron nods just as the back door opens again. “I think this is everything,” my brother states, passing by us as he walks toward the guest

room.

“Thank you,” I holler before returning my gaze to her. “Umm, I need a suggestion. I want to...well, I need to see a gynecologist.” Realization flashes in her eyes. “I want to get tested. It appears there were many women my husband has been with, and I’d just feel better if...”

“Say no more. I’ll give you the name of the woman I see. I’m sure they can get you in ASAP,” she assures me with another sad smile.

“Get you in where?” my brother asks, reaching over my head and stealing a donut that looks like it has crumbled bacon on the top and shoving half of it in his mouth.

“The dentist. Kinsley’s overdue for a cleaning,” Cameron replies. I should be worried how easily she lies to my brother, but I know the only reason she did it was for me. No one wants to talk about sex stuff with a sibling, and having a conversation with him about having an STD test isn’t anywhere near the top of my to-do list.

I give her a small, grateful grin and focus on eating my roll. It’s a small step, but one I can control nonetheless, and when you feel like everything around you is spinning, these little things can mean the world.

First up: finish my cinnamon roll.

Next: take a moment to just breathe.

The following Monday, I exit the doctor’s office and take a few calming breaths.

It’s January fourth.

The start of a new year.

Usually, I’d feel a sense of renewed purpose and energy at the beginning of a year, but not this one. Instead, my chest feels heavy with worry and my shoulders weighed down by the demise of my marriage.

It hasn’t been perfect, but no one’s is, despite the persona they may portray on social media and in the public. I didn’t go into our marriage wearing rose-colored glasses. I knew it would take two, and in this day and age, it wouldn’t be easy. Cheating seems to be so easy now. Every time you turn on the TV or scroll through your social media feeds, you see stories accusing so-and-so of being unfaithful. Add in the fact our careers have us

regularly in the spotlight and women and men are constantly throwing themselves at us.

I'm not naïve. I know the temptation is there. I've seen it. But I also respected my husband and my marriage enough not to indulge in what was offered. Unfortunately, he hasn't felt the same and has been doing just that for what appears to be our entire time together, and worse, he's been doing it directly under my nose. I'm not the little wife at home, while my husband is off traveling the world and performing in front of the masses. I was on the road with him. On the stage beside him. Telling the world we were solid and trying to prove we were unlike all the other married, traveling couples.

I thought we were Tim and Faith.

Johnny and June.

Turns out, we were more like Shania and Mutt.

Miranda and Blake.

Now, I'm leaving the gynecologist's office after having been humiliated by an invasive swab down under, as well as a blood draw. The doctor was professional, don't get me wrong, but I still saw the pity in her eyes. She knew who I was and why I was there. So did everyone else who worked there. The office staff and the nurse couldn't hide their excitement at seeing me in their clinic, and I think if I were there under any other circumstances, I would have been taking fan photos. But nothing about this situation screams "Let's take a selfie together!"

The good news is the testing part is over. Now, I just wait a day or two for results.

Yay me.

A shiver sweeps through my body as I stand on the sidewalk in front of the doctor's office and readjust the ball cap on my head. I'm not sure if this chill is from the cold January air or the realization I now have to wait for the results of said testing.

What will I do if it's...

No. I will not go there.

Not now.

I'll cross that bridge if and when I need to.

I turn to head to the small parking lot beside the building and stop dead in my tracks. Standing in the middle of the paved walkway is a blast from the past. A man I used to know like the back of my own hand, and

likewise, he knew me just as well.

“Tucker Dunn,” I whisper his name, as if afraid saying it at regular volume might make him disappear. A smile spreads across my face as I take in the man before me.

“Kinsley McGregor,” he replies, his voice deep and gravelly. It rakes over my body like a caress and causes my blood to stir in places it has no business stirring.

I don’t know who moves first, him or me, but I’m engulfed in a pair of warm, strong arms moments later. The embrace feels incredibly welcome. Good. Right.

Pushing that last one out of my head, I pull back and look him up and down. “I can’t believe it’s you.”

He smiles that same boyish grin I fell for all those years ago as a sixteen-year-old girl. “I could be saying the same about you,” he says, shoving his hands in the pockets of his jeans.

I take him in for the first time in nearly a decade, appreciating the man he grew to be. His jeans are well-fitting, and his shirt molded to his chest beneath a brown leather coat. His face is rugged, with a day or two worth of dark stubble on his cheeks, and those blue eyes I can still picture when I close my own eyes hold a hint of weariness. But then I recall hearing he’s a dad now, so the tiredness would be fitting for that of a father with a young boy.

A smile takes over my lips once more. “It’s so good to see you,” I confess, feeling his eyes on me once more. I’m sure he’s not very impressed with what he sees before him. Today, I’m not Kinsley McGregor, country music star, in fancy clothes and professionally styled hair and makeup. Today, I’m a normal jilted woman who had to slip on comfy clothes to visit the gynecologist. A ball cap on my head, black joggers, and an oversized crewneck sweatshirt with a turtle on the front, as well as a pair of comfortable slip-on shoes and a light layer of mascara on my lashes. The entire time I was getting ready to leave, I heard Erika chirping in my ear about always being presentable and photo ready when I go out in public, but I just wasn’t feeling it today. Hell, I haven’t put on normal clothes since I arrived at my brother’s house last Thursday, but now that I’m standing here in front of Tucker, I’m sort of wishing I had heeded her advice and at least put on a nice pair of jeans and brushed my hair.

“You look good,” he says, his eyes brightening as he meets my gaze.

I snort. “Now I know you’re just being polite. I look like shit,” I state bluntly.

He shakes his head and rocks back on his heels. “You could never look like shit, Kins. Never.”

A flutter stirs in my stomach, and I brush it off as the excitement of seeing Tucker after so long, though I’ve always had that reaction to him. Ever since I was a freshman in high school and pined after my older brother’s best friend, I’d get all jittery and butterflies would take flight in my stomach. I’m sure it’s just the nostalgia of seeing his face again.

“Listen, I’m on my way to work, but maybe we can catch up sometime?” he asks. “How long are you in town?”

“A while,” I state noncommittally. The truth is I have no idea how long I’ll be here, and replying with “until my brother kicks me out” doesn’t seem like the right thing to say at the moment.

“Good,” he responds, his lips turning upward in a lazy grin. “I hope to see you around.”

Nodding, I reply with an honest, “Me too.”

He lifts his hand and waves before continuing on his walk and climbing into a crew-cab, black Chevy truck parked on the side of the road. As he pulls away, I realize I’m still standing here, watching him go. He honks as he passes, and I’m left wishing the sidewalk would open up and swallow me whole. But that’s how it’s always been where Tucker Dunn is concerned. He had this natural ability to render me stupid and speechless without even trying.

Seeing him now, after nearly a decade, only proves he still has a way of affecting me.

I’m twenty-seven, not seventeen, which means I’m too old for butterflies.

Keep telling yourself that.

Chapter Four

Tucker

Damn, she's as pretty as she was when she was eighteen, and I find myself smiling my entire drive to work.

Until that moment, my morning wasn't going too great. I was running late, thanks to being unable to find Grayson's favorite pair of bib overalls and him throwing a fit and refusing to wear anything but. After finally finding them—apparently, they fell behind the dryer when I was folding clothes last night—we were able to get out the door and to his preschool only a few minutes behind schedule.

Then, I had to drop off a prescription at the pharmacy, and while waiting in line, spotted some of those gossip magazines sitting on the counter beside the register. Of course, the covers were filled with still images of Kinsley's douche-y husband from the video, the headlines painting her as a terrible wife to drive her husband to cheat, and what little bit of my pleasant mood I was clinging to went right out the window.

So when I walked outside and found her standing on the sidewalk, well, that was the last thing I expected. She's been in town since last Thursday, according to her brother, without so much as a single buzz or sighting.

Until now.

Finding her standing there took me right back to a time I had long ago moved on from. A time where she was my everything, and all I wanted to do was see her smile. After that hug, in which the scent of her shampoo hit me square in the gut like a sucker punch, I had to shove my hands in my pockets, because the need to take her into my arms again was strong. So fucking strong I had almost given in.

Twice.

But I didn't.

Despite the overwhelming desire to shield her from the terrible things being said about her and the chaos I'm sure is consuming her life, I kept my

hands to myself. I'm not exactly a friend, even though I'd do just about anything for her. It's been nine years since we last spoke directly, and in that time we've both moved on. Both started lives with someone else. Both followed paths that ventured away from each other, and I have always been okay with that.

Until now.

Until seeing her standing there, looking slightly broken, despite the familiar fierceness reflecting in her eyes. I don't even want to know why she was at the clinic. I know there are two physicians in that particular clinic. Evie went there when she was pregnant with Grayson, and as far as I know both physicians are OB-GYNs.

An overwhelming sense of protectiveness comes over me. The thought of her being pregnant leaves my stomach in knots. Not because she doesn't deserve to be happy and pregnant, but for the simple fact her husband doesn't. A man like him doesn't deserve to be a father, not when he's making the mother's life a living hell.

Of course, there's another reason she could be visiting that place on a Monday morning that doesn't involve being pregnant, and that thought angers me. For her to have to worry about diseases at a time like this is fucking nauseating. Not only is she watching her marriage explode publicly, but she most likely has to get herself tested to make sure her cheating spouse didn't give her anything.

What a sick fucking mess.

As I pull into the brewery parking lot, I do everything I can to shake off this ire that feels heavy in my gut. It's not my place, and even though my heart calls me a liar, she's not my concern. That doesn't mean I won't be there for her if she needs me, but I can't just insert myself in her life and ride in like a knight in shining armor just for the sake of fixing her problems.

Even though I really want to.

I key in my code and step through the heavy metal door of Crüe Brewery, the place I've worked for more than a year as an assistant brewer, and do you know what? I fucking love this job. I've always had hands-on, blue-collared jobs since graduating high school, and when the construction company I was working for went belly-up, thanks to the owner's gambling problem, I took a shot at applying for a different type of working with my hands. I get to make beer all day in an air-conditioned facility.

It's a pretty sweet gig.

Plus, I have an awesome boss. Jameson Tankersley is no-nonsense and as tough as they come. A lot of people go out of their way to avoid him, but I've learned over the last year, he's incredibly talented, fair, and genuine. He's a damn good boss and an even better brewer. The recipes he's come up with since starting Crüe Brewery are top-notch and some of the most sought-after beer in the Midwest. I'm damn proud to be a part of it and hopefully am contributing to the company's success.

"Hey," Jameson says by way of greeting when I knock on his office door.

"Morning," I reply, heading for the coffeepot I know is already brewing. Jameson is a creature of habit and is always here before me, with fresh coffee waiting.

"How was your weekend?" he asks, turning his attention from whatever he is working on to me.

"Good. Grayson and I hung out at home all weekend. Heard we have a chance of snow later this evening," I state, taking a sip of my black coffee.

"Rumor has it," he replies, running his hands through his hair. "Madelyn wants me to go buy one of those baby sleds. You know what I'm talking about, right? Little red things with a seat in the middle and a buckle to strap them in?"

"Yep," I confirm. "I had one for Grays when he was about that age. It's probably still in my garage. You can have it if you want it," I offer.

He watches me for several moments, and like usual, I can't tell what he's thinking. The man's a closed book when it comes to trying to get a read on him. "You sure? No more kids in your future?" he asks, the corner of his mouth ticking upward.

I can't help but laugh. "That usually requires a female, and unfortunately, any free time I may have away from Grayson usually involves working or sleeping."

"You know, if you need help finding a woman—" he starts, but I cut him off.

"No thanks," I state with a chuckle. "I'm good."

He nods. "Speaking of babies, BJ and Ryker were discharged this morning," he says, referring to his sister and new nephew who was born late Saturday night.

“Yeah? That’s good news. Everyone doing okay?”

He stretches his arms over his head. “Yeah, all good. Numbers called me just a bit ago with the news. They’re anxious to get home and get into a new routine. He’s gonna be working from home for a few days, so I’ll have to go next door and check on things there from time to time.”

I nod, even though I’m sure him checking on the other business is not necessary. Between the four owners and Garreth, the manager, that place is run like a well-oiled machine. However, I know when one needs something, they all jump in and help in any way they can. That’s one of the main reasons for so much employee longevity at the bar and restaurant, because the men who own the business truly care about it and their employees.

“How’s Rorik taking the big brother gig?” I ask, referring to BJ and Numbers’ five-year-old son.

“He’s a fucking rock star. Coolest little dude ever and going to be one hell of a big brother,” he states proudly.

“I’m not sure what’s better. Having a longer break between kids like them or having them back-to-back,” I state, almost absently to myself. My own son is four, and while I enjoy these new stages he’s in, I imagine it’d be challenging to start over again with a newborn.

“I’ll let you know.”

His comment catches my attention. His daughter, Rose, will be a year old at the end of the month, and so far, they only have the one child. Unless...

“Madelyn’s pregnant?”

I’m rewarded with a rare Jameson smile. “Yeah. Due in August, but we haven’t told anyone yet. She didn’t want to take away from all the excitement surrounding Mallory and BJ.”

“Wow, congratulations, man. That’s exciting.”

He blows out a deep breath. “Two under the age of two. And I’m forty. Not exactly a spring chicken anymore.”

I wave off his concern. “If anyone can do it, you can.”

“Only because I have an amazing wife.” He holds my gaze. “I can’t imagine doing it alone, man. Single dad ain’t for the faint of heart.”

I shrug my shoulders and take another sip of my coffee. “You’d be surprised what you can do when you have no other choice.”

He continues to stare at me before giving me a single nod. “I

understand that, Tucker. Probably better than most.” He looks away and something dark and sad passes in his eyes. I’ve heard all the rumors about Jameson. He had a rough life and did some questionable things in his youth, but from what I know of the man, he turned his life around in the last decade or so, especially since he met and married his wife, Madelyn.

Our situations are completely different, but the premise is the same.

Life is hard, and sometimes you have to do whatever it takes.

“How’s Grayson?” my boss asks.

“He’s good. I’m not sure who’s happier to have him back in school this morning, me or him,” I tell him with a chuckle, leaning against the doorjamb.

His mouth doesn’t completely turn upward, but I can see the faint grin on his lips. “I’m glad he’s doing good. Listen, we’re doing Rose’s first birthday later this month and Madelyn and her grandma are going all out. We rented the community center and some bounce houses. I’ll get ya a formal invite, but I wanted to give you a heads-up. We’d love for you and Grayson to join us.”

I clear the sudden thickness of emotion from my throat and nod. “Okay. We’ll definitely try to make it.”

“All right,” he says, sitting straight and grabbing the paper he was working on when I arrived. “We’re expecting that big shipment of hops today.”

“I’ll be ready. The storage is already set.”

Jameson nods, and I know the conversation is over. I quickly top off my coffee cup and head out to the main brewing facility to start checking readings. Of course, in true Monday morning fashion, nothing seems to be going right. First off, I spilled my cup of coffee all over the log I was filling out, which rendered the stack useless. Jameson is a stickler on cleanliness, especially with the threat of bacteria growing and risking an entire batch of brew. Then, one of the carbonation meters appears to be off, which isn’t good if it’s accurate. That means this batch will be shit, and nothing pisses Jameson off more than a bad batch of beer or equipment failure.

By the time lunch comes and goes, I think we’re finally back on track. The good news is, I haven’t had time to rethink my exchange with Kinsley this morning. Between dumping the beer, fixing the part of the machine having issues, and then cleaning the equipment so we can start it up again, it ate into a big chunk of my day. The entire process is long and time-

consuming, but the results of not following proper protocol could be catastrophic to a small business, especially one regulated by the FDA.

I'm about to run next door and order a burger when Jameson appears in the doorway, holding a file folder. "I have to run over for the Monday meeting. I texted Jasper and told him to make mine to-go and can tell him to add one for you too. I'm not staying long, just gonna give my report and see if they need me for anything pressing. We have a lot to catch up on from this morning's delay."

"That would be great, thanks," I reply.

He nods before heading for the back entrance and exiting the building. I start loading the pallets with cases, something the other employee, Reggie, usually does when he's working, but there's so much backlogged, thanks to the shift in our focus this morning, I want to help clear some out. Plus, that'll give him more time to move the kegs and make sure they're marked properly before rotating the stock.

It doesn't seem like too much later, Jameson returns, carrying a bag. I follow behind him to the small conference room that doubles as an employee lounge, and the moment I catch a whiff of the grilled beef and fries he's carrying, my stomach growls.

"I'm not sure what's in here, so don't get mad at me if you got something weird," Jameson states, pulling two Styrofoam containers out of the paper sack. We both know Jasper will make whatever Jasper wants, and sometimes that means we're the guinea pigs when he decides to play around with new ingredients.

I snort in laughter as he opens the top meal and makes a face. "Fucking onions. This one's yours," he grumbles, passing over the container.

I happily take the burger. Even if I wasn't a fan of onions, I'd just pick them off. Jameson refuses to do that, stating the burger is tainted with their flavor if they were placed on it, even for the briefest moment.

I'm not sure I even taste the food, but I know it's damn good. I've never had a bad meal from next door, especially when Jasper is the one manning the grill. His food, despite being as simple and classic as a burger, is the best around, and it's one of the main reasons the restaurant is so successful.

"How'd the meeting go?" I ask, taking a huge bite of my burger.

"Numbers had positive things to report from fourth quarter."

“That’s always good,” I reply while we both dive into the food in front of us. We eat in comfortable silence for several minutes, but that’s nothing new. I’ve learned Jameson is a man of few words.

“I heard Kinsley is back in town,” Jameson says, breaking the silence.

I glance his way, but his focus is on his food. “I heard that too,” I confirm, deciding not to mention the fact I ran into her earlier this morning.

He shoves a fry in his mouth and chews, keeping his attention straight ahead. Just when I think he’s moved past the topic of Kinsley, he asks, “You seen her?”

He must feel my eyes on him, because he slowly looks my way and continues to eat. “Why?”

Jameson shrugs his broad shoulders. “Saw the shit her husband pulled in that video. Hope she’s doing okay.”

I don’t know why I’m irritated by his questions, but I am. “Why don’t you ask her brother?”

Again, he lifts his shoulders casually. “Thought I’d ask you.”

We stare at each other, waiting to see who cracks first. There’s something incredibly hard and intense about the look in his eyes. I’ve never felt threatened by my boss, and I don’t now, but I can definitely see why his demeanor and gaze would cause someone to squirm a little under his scrutiny.

“She looks tired, like she hasn’t been sleeping the best. She’s trying to fly under the radar too. When I saw her this morning, she had on a ball cap pulled down low and baggy, relaxing clothes. It reminded me of a way to guard herself, like wearing a protective shield of comfort and anonymity.” And because I can’t seem to stop talking now that I’ve started, I add, “Despite all that, she still looks amazing. The most beautiful woman in the world.”

“That wasn’t so hard,” he states, shoving three or four fries into his mouth.

Exhaling loudly and relaxing in my seat, I grumble, “You gossip an awful lot for someone who barely says a word.”

He barks out a laugh but doesn’t reply.

He also doesn’t deny my comment.

After we finish eating our late lunch, we both get back to work. He helps me catch back up from this morning’s clusterfuck mess, and by the

time the delivery of hops arrives, we're able to take the time it needs to unload the large vacuum-sealed bags of hops from the refrigerated truck and move them straight to the walk-in freezer. They'll last up to five years in this condition, even though it won't be nearly that long before they're used.

Once that task is complete, the distribution truck finally arrives to ship today's orders. He's only two hours late, but who's counting? Jameson gets on the forklift, while I jump in the truck and grab the jack and move the full pallets once they're loaded in the truck. Again, we work in unison, both understanding our job and knowing how to load effectively.

Finally, when the clock hits five, the end of the workday is here, and I'm more than ready to call it a day. I clock out, throw a wave at my boss, who usually stays a little longer to make sure he's caught up on paperwork, and head outside. It's cold and calm, the gray sky already falling dark. That's one of the worst parts about winter in the Midwest. Daylight saving time is the stupidest shit ever.

I just make it to my truck when the first snowflake falls. A smile crosses my lips as I start the engine and let it warm up for a few minutes. Grayson loves the snow. He'll be happy when we leave my parents' house to head home, and since I ate a late lunch, I'll do a lighter dinner tonight of mac and cheese, Grayson's favorite. That'll give us a little time to go outside and play in the falling snow. I can practically hear his laughter now as he runs through the flakes and tries to catch them on his tongue. Maybe then he won't fight me so much at bath time.

A dad can hope.

Chapter Five

Kinsley

Zander: Can't ignore me forever.

Wanna bet?

It's Wednesday afternoon, and as much as I'd love to just continue on with my life without so much as a thought about my *former* bass player and *future* former husband, I know that's not possible. There are a lot of battles ahead of me to fight, and something tells me my husband won't make it easy.

There's a big difference between what I want to do and what I have to do, and that's the only reason I tap on his name at the top of the screen. There are conversations that need to be had, plans that will need to be made. Marriages to dissolve. Okay, one specific marriage for those keeping track.

"Kinsley," my husband's Southern drawl sings through the phone. I used to love the way he'd say my name, but now it disgusts me. How many other women's names did he croon while he was stepping out on our marriage?

"Zander."

When I don't continue, he sighs. "I see you're still milking the drama."

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up and flames practically shoot from my ears. "Drama? You call being humiliated in front of the entire world *drama*?"

He tsks, which continues to just grate on my nerves. "You act like I'm the first man to blow off a little steam on a Sunday night."

Red.

I see red as my mouth drops open.

"Blowing off steam? You call screwing women before my show blowing off steam? And how many have there been before you got caught, Zander?" I ask, venom dripping off my tongue and fire races through my veins.

"I don't know. I don't keep track, Kinsley," he states blankly.

My heart drops into my stomach, the realization hitting like a sledgehammer of pain. Yes, other women came forward, claiming to have had a sexual relationship with my husband, but hearing him be so blasé about it crushes every ounce of confidence and courage I possess into dust.

The confirmation cuts deep.

"Well, perhaps you should. That seems like something a man would want to know when he's repeatedly cheating on his wife, right under her nose."

"Everyone does it, Kinsley. *Everyone.*" He's so casual about it, doesn't seem bothered at all. If anything, he's more upset I'm creating more of an issue than the fact he's been having affairs for probably our entire marriage. Hell, as far as I know, it could have been happening before. I'm just the stupid, naïve woman who was so wrapped up in kicking off her music career, she was blind to what was happening right under her own nose.

But I won't be that woman anymore.

"I'm going to a lawyer."

He's silent for a moment, and I start to wonder if he's finally understanding the gravity of his actions, of how badly he's hurt me. "You're making a big deal out of nothing."

Okay, apparently not.

"I can't believe you're so casual about this. You've been sleeping with random women. You could have brought diseases home to me. You could have fathered children, Zander. Do you understand that?"

"I'm always careful. I bag up," he counters, as if my reasons are completely absurd.

Shaking my head, I can't get over the fact he was still willing to risk me and my health, despite the fact he claims to have worn condoms. Those things aren't foolproof. "I can't be married to someone who doesn't respect me enough to keep his dick zipped in his pants."

"Jesus, Kinsley, this is just a *thing* we do! Every musician on the road blows off steam before or after a show. You act like I'm the first man to find some release during a high-stress moment in my life."

My mouth is hanging wide open now. "That's the problem, Zander. You should have come to *me* when you needed *release*. I'm your wife. You don't think I was stressed and needing some *release* too?"

“You were always busy,” he argues.

My head starts to pound. “Yes, preparing for a show! A show you were participating in with me!”

“Stop yelling. Come home. This has gone on long enough. There are photographers outside the gate. We can go to dinner, show the world we’re fine.”

“We most certainly are not fine. I will be seeking the advice of an attorney. I can’t be married to someone who would so easily cheat on me, after vowing to love and protect me. That’s not love, Zander.”

“What is love?” he counters, and that’s when the realization hits me.

Our marriage is a sham. Just like my parents’. Sure, there were good times, but I turned a blind eye to the difficult ones and pretended we were fine when deep down, I think I knew we were anything but. Even then, I didn’t think he was cheating on me. We had an active sex life. Always had. I just didn’t realize he was also actively screwing the groupies.

“Please let me know the name of your attorney so mine can be in contact.” My heart breaks, but I know this is the right step. There was something deeply flawed with our relationship, and it has taken this to bring it to light.

He sighs. “This is your brother’s doing, isn’t it?”

Now I’m angry again. “What? Kellen isn’t the one who cheated on me, Zander. It has absolutely nothing to do with my brother.”

“He’s always hated me. I’m sure he’s done nothing but chirp in your ear about how terrible I am.”

“Actually, Kellen has barely said a word, other than to make sure I’m okay. *That’s* love.”

Zander sighs. “I see you’re going to make this difficult. I had hoped with a little time, you’d see I’m not the bad guy here.”

Fury is once again leading the race of emotions coursing through my body. “Who is? Me?”

“Of course not. This is just a common circumstance based on our lifestyle.”

I pause my pacing, not even realizing I’m moving from one end of the bedroom to the other. “Our divorce?”

“Well, that too, but I was referring to what you saw on the video.”

“I’m not married to everyone else. I’m married to you. Or at least, I

was. The trust is broken, and let's be honest, there was something lacking in our marriage. You were my friend, my bandmate, and maybe that gave me the false façade of love."

"I was taking care of you. We had a good life. Still can."

"As long as I agree to turn a blind eye to your infidelity," I deduce, knowing that's exactly what's coming, because there's no way he'll ever stop cheating. Not when he doesn't think he's done anything wrong in the first place.

"Perhaps."

"No." My answer is immediate. "I won't be in a marriage like that."

"I'll give you a few more days to think about it. When are you coming home?"

"I'm not."

"Kinsley."

"Zander," I mock in the same exasperated tone. "I'll be in touch," I add before tapping my phone screen and disconnecting the call. I spin around, needing a little fresh air, and find my brother in the doorway. "Oh."

"Sorry, didn't mean to startle you or eavesdrop. I just heard my name," he states apologetically.

"No, it's fine," I reply, tossing my phone onto my bed.

"Zander?"

"Yeah." Rubbing my temples where a headache is raging, I add, "I told him I was seeking an attorney. He suggested it was your idea."

Kellen leans against the doorframe and snorts. "If it were up to me, I would have suggested it a long time ago. I've never really liked the douchebag."

Hearing confirmation of what I suspected breaks my heart a little. Even though I got the feeling Kellen wasn't a fan of Zander, he's never voiced his displeasure or outright told me he didn't like the man I married. Knowing he didn't like him, was just getting along for me, makes me sad. I always thought my brother and my husband would be close, considering they are two of the most important people in my life, but unfortunately, that hasn't been the case. "I'm sorry."

Kellen's left eyebrow shoots upward. "Why are you apologizing?"

I shrug, dropping my ass onto the bed. "I guess I'm just sorry I didn't pick a better man. After I moved to Nashville, and you know, everything was

such a mess with Mom and Dad, and they both followed me to help me. I was working full time in the office at that music studio, singing at whatever karaoke club or open mic night I could find, and just trying to survive. Then, I met Zander and found comfort in his friendship. Looking back now, I'm afraid that's all it really was. Don't get me wrong, I love him and will probably always miss the comfort he offered, but I don't know. There was never really that...spark. Does that make me a terrible person? Because I didn't see it before now?" I ask, looking up at my big brother just as I always have. For guidance.

"Absolutely not," he replies, pushing off the doorframe and joining me on the bed. He takes my hand in his and gives it a squeeze. "It makes you human, Kins. Part of growing up is growing as a person too. You're continually learning and sometimes, as you grow, relationships can change. It may have been just what you needed then, but over time, it changed."

"Or maybe over time, I was finally ready to see us differently."

"Maybe. I'm sure going through this mess is making you examine everything a little closer."

I nod in agreement. "Definitely, and I think, deep down, I really knew we weren't right together."

He throws his arm around my shoulder and draws me into his side. "I may not have liked Zander Houston, but he seemed to make you happy, so I was willing to put my feelings aside because it was important to you."

Resting my head on his shoulder, I whisper, "I'm not very happy now."

"No, you aren't, and that makes me hate him even more." He kisses my forehead, just the way he used to when we were younger, as he asks, "What now? You know you're welcome to stay here as long as you want, so don't think I'm asking because I don't want you here."

I think about my options, and while I have a few I could consider, I really only want to be here. Since Kellen bought this place, it has been my home away from home, and since my cheating husband is currently at the house we share together, I'd rather not go back there. "You don't mind?" I ask, knowing what his answer is going to be.

He gives me a face, telling me he's annoyed by my question. "You know I don't."

"I do know that, but you have a girlfriend now, which I'm very happy about, by the way. I love her to pieces, and I think she's perfect for you. I'm

so glad your stupidity didn't ruin your chance with her forever."

He snorts a laugh. "Tell me how you really feel, Kins."

"I just did," I state. "And I appreciate you letting me stay here. I promise not to get in the way or overstay my welcome."

"Never, Sister. You could never overstay."

"You may be singing a different tune when I've been here six months and you get no peace."

He chuckles. "Six months is nothing. I lived with you for sixteen years, remember?"

I smile at the memories flooding my mind. My brother is three years older than me, and when he was nineteen, he moved out and got a small apartment on his own. It was a tiny studio above the old movie theater, and it was always noisy, which was why it was so cheap. Kellen didn't mind, however. He was proud of his first place, and more importantly, he was away from the constant fighting that took place at home. "Oh, I remember. I specifically recall one morning when that girl—what was her name? Chelsea? Christy?"

"Charity," he replies with a hearty chuckle.

"Yes, Charity. I remember finding her sneaking down the hallway wearing the same clothes from your date the night before."

"That was a good night," he replies softly with a smirk on his face. "My point was, you can stay as long as you want. This is your room, Kins. Always."

I bump his chest with my shoulder. "I don't know, you might need it some day for a nursery."

I don't miss the wide smile spreading across his lips. "Someday, yeah, but not right now. It's yours until then, all right?"

I nod in reply.

"What's on deck for the rest of your Wednesday?" Kellen asks.

"Well, I have a big afternoon of lying around to get to," I tease, even though that's not really what I plan to do.

"You deserve it, Kins. Take a few hours, a few days to just chill. You've been on the move since early fall, and then that bullshit with the douche happened. So, do what you need to do for yourself."

"Thanks. Actually, I need to call Erika and see if she can get me the names of a few divorce attorneys. I would have contacted Roger, but that's

out of the question since I fired him.”

“I bet the label could assist,” he suggests.

“I’ll reach out to them if Erika thinks I need to, but I’m hoping I don’t.”

He nods and gently slaps the top of my leg with his palm. “Well, I’ll leave you to it. We both work tonight. Come on up for dinner if you feel like it.”

I shrug, not really wanting to go out in public quite yet. I know it’s Stewart Grove, and I’ve known a good chunk of everyone here my whole life, but I’m just not ready for the pity looks and the behind-my-back murmurs. “Maybe.”

He shakes his head. “How about I send you some food?” he offers, knowing me well enough to realize I’m probably not ready to go out in public like that yet.

“I can’t ask you to do that,” I reply.

“You didn’t. I offered. I’ll text you when it’s on its way,” he says, approaching the door.

“I didn’t think this place had Uber Eats yet.”

“We don’t, but I promise you, there’ll be someone there who’ll watch the bar for a bit while I run it to you.”

A smile spreads across my face as I step toward my brother and wrap my arms around him. “Thanks, Kel.”

“You don’t have to thank me. That’s what family is for.”

I nod, but I know that’s not entirely true. Not all family is close or would drop what they’re doing to help someone in their time of need. I know if I called either of my parents, they’d be at my side in a heartbeat, but sometimes a person just needs the love and support of their big brother, no strings attached.

I just hope he knows I’d do anything for him too.

He kisses my forehead and punches me lightly in the upper arm before walking out of the room. When I’m alone once more, I grab my phone and pull up my PR manager’s name. I tap the screen and wait two rings for her to answer.

“How ya holding up?” Erika says by way of greeting.

“Not too bad. Of course, I stay off the internet and television. That helps,” I answer with a chuckle.

“I bet it does. To be honest, the chatter is starting to calm down,

thanks to a certain television star caught dipping her toes in the proverbial water with her much older sitcom director. Of course, like you, that's how his wife found out, so the focus has shifted a bit."

"Thank God for small favors," I grumble, taking a seat on the bed once more. "Listen, the reason I was calling was to see if you had any names. For divorce lawyers."

She's silent for a moment, but I can hear the subtle clicking away on her keyboard. "Yes, I can give you a few names." After another pause, she asks, "Are you sure this is the route you want to take?"

"Yes." No hesitation. "I've been doing a lot of thinking for the last week and a half, and there has always been something missing in our marriage."

"That doesn't excuse his cheating," she counters.

"Of course it doesn't," I reply immediately, "but it might explain why I'm upset, but not...well, torn up the way I thought I'd be if I was ever the subject of my husband having an affair publicly. Maybe the shock has just worn off, but I just want this whole mess to be over with. I've realized that while I love him, it's not the kind of love it should be."

"All right," she states, followed by more typing on a keyboard. "I'm sending you two names to your phone. One specializes in high-asset divorces, which I think you fall under. Kimber Jones used her when she divorced Tanner Tate." Both names are well-known country superstars from Nashville, who recently divorced after nearly fifteen years of marriage. "The other is for another powerhouse law firm. A group of four men, known for being ruthless in the courtroom and getting maximum compensation for their client."

"I don't need maximum compensation, Erika."

"Maybe not, but you still need someone who will protect your ass."

I don't disagree with that point. "I'll research both firms and make some calls."

"I've also talked to the label. They're emailing you a few agencies they recommend you talk to for representation. You don't want to go long without having an agent, Kins. Again, you need your ass protected professionally too."

"Thank you."

"Don't sweat it, friend. Take some time, make calls. I'm here when you

need me. I'll continue to monitor the social media buzz, but fortunately, it seems to be dying down for you. Of course, when news breaks about you filing for divorce, it'll stir the hornet's nest again. The positive is most of the heat has been directed at Zander, not you."

"The sad part is you said most of it," I grumble.

"Yeah, well, that's show business, babe."

I let out a sigh.

"Check your emails. Call me if I can help with anything," Erika says before signing off.

As much as I'd like to set my phone aside and maybe take a little nap, I pull up my email and click on the first one from Erika. The sooner I get these issues resolved, the sooner I can move forward. Until then, I'm left feeling like a duck on the water. What you can see resembles calm and collected, but beneath the surface, feet are spinning like crazy. Except, it's my mind doing the spinning.

And it's just spinning and spinning and spinning.

All I know is I'm more than ready to get off this ride.

I'm ready to find peace.

Chapter Six

Tucker

I enter through the back entrance of Burgers and Brew after inputting my code and let the door close firmly behind me. A shiver sweeps through me, even though I'm wearing a coat. The bitter cold outside is nothing we're not used to in the Midwest, but I sure as hell don't care for it much.

The music that greets me is low, the murmur of the patrons in the bar filtering down the hallway to where I stand. It's nothing like the lively Friday and Saturday night vibe this place is known for, but I think this is better. I prefer to hang out, have a few beers, and be able to talk comfortably without the loud crowd and music.

"Hey, man," Numbers greets as he descends the stairs.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, extending my hand when he stands before me.

He grips my hand and gives it a friendly shake. "Just stopped by to grab some food for Beej and myself, and thought I'd grab a few things from the office while I was here."

"Well, congratulations. Can't wait to meet your little guy," I state.

"I think you'll get your chance at the end of the month. You're going to Rose's birthday party, right?" he asks, referring to Jameson and Madelyn's daughter.

"I'm planning on it. As long as Grayson behaves."

The man who works in the office upstairs laughs. "Jameson rented the community center and is bringing in bounce houses. I'm pretty sure there'll be almost a dozen screaming kids running around the place, none of them behaving the way we hope."

A smile spreads across my lips at the picture he paints. "Cake and ice cream will do that to them."

Numbers nods. "And Jameson. He'll make sure they're all riled up, screaming their happiness at the top of their lungs, and then send them all back home to us sugared up and having missed a nap."

I can't help but bark out a laugh. "Sounds about right."

"All right, well I'm going to see if our food is ready so I can head home. I'll see you soon," he says before turning to his right and heading toward the kitchen.

Since I'm here for the same reason, I make my way to the bar so I can place an order for dinner before heading to my parents' house to pick up my son. I'm damn lucky to have the mom I do. When Grayson was born and I was learning to navigate life as a father of a special needs child, she was right there, offering her help every step of the way. It got really tough when Evie passed away. We weren't together anymore, but we were co-parenting to the best of our ability.

Then, all of a sudden, I was thrown a curveball. I became the sole parent to a four-month-old. My mom offered to quit her job to keep Grayson during the day so I could work, and while I didn't want her to at first, I do admit, knowing he's with her during the day has been a huge relief. Grayson loves spending his time outside of school with her, and she's even willing to help me out by picking him up when his daily morning class is done. I'll never be able to repay her for what she's doing for us, but I suppose if I were in the same position, I'd do whatever I could for my son too.

"Hey, man."

Approaching the bar, I look up and find Kellen standing there, that familiar grin on his face. "Hi."

"Come in for a drink?" he asks, tossing a coaster onto the bar in front of a stool.

"No, I'm gonna order some food to go, if that's okay."

"Of course. Have a seat," he replies, placing one of their menus in front of me.

I slide onto the barstool and scan the menu, even though I'm pretty sure I already know what I'm ordering.

"We have a new item not officially added to the menu, but Jasper started making a homemade mac and cheese with four different kinds of cheese. Apparently, one of Walker's kids started complaining about not having it on the menu, so the master in the kitchen whipped it up one night. Word has already gotten around about it, so they're adding it to the kids' menu as an entrée or as a side for the regular menu."

“Wow, never thought I’d see anything but the steak fries. Those are legendary.”

“They are. He still won’t tell anyone what seasoning he uses.”

I shake my head and smile. I don’t know Jasper too well, but I can definitely see him guarding his secret recipe with his life, refusing to share it with a single soul. “Well, I think I’ll take the Between the Sheets burgers with the fries and a kid’s mac and cheese.”

“Want bacon or anything added to the mac and cheese?”

“Nope. Add some fries to that order,” I reply. Grayson loves fries and ketchup.

“You got it,” he states before moving to the monitor and inputting my to-go order.

“Want anything to drink while you wait?”

“Just a water, please.” As much as I’d love to have a beer, I don’t want to drink and then have to drive on slick roads to get my son.

The glass is placed in front of me moments later, and I take a long drink. Working next door in the brewery is both a physical and mental job. There’s a lot of variables to making beer, in addition to moving the final product, but even though it can be stressful at times, I love my job and wouldn’t trade it for anything. Plus, Jameson is sensitive to my situation as a single dad and if something arises and I have to adjust my schedule, he’s more than willing to work with me.

After a few minutes, Kellen returns over to where I sit. “So, how’s your sister holding up?” I ask. Even though I’ve thought a lot about her since I saw her Monday morning, I haven’t reached out to Kellen to see how she’s doing.

“Not too bad. Called a divorce attorney today and hired her. I think she’s optimistic it’ll move forward smoothly and swiftly. I don’t trust that bastard she’s married to. I think he’ll drag this out and fuck her over every chance he gets.” There’s a fierce look of annoyance and vengeance in his blue eyes, one that I feel in my chest when it comes to the man who screwed her over.

“Such bullshit,” I grumble.

“Yep. How’s Grayson?”

“Happy to be back in school. He’s a creature of habit, and winter break was two weeks of not understanding why he couldn’t go to school and play

with his friends,” I state.

Kellen grins. “He must really like it.”

“They really help him with his fine motor skills, so there’s a lot of hands-on crafts, counting, and sorting things. It’s all right up his alley,” I confirm before taking a drink of my water.

The truth is, I’m incredibly grateful for the preschool program he’s in. It focuses on kids with learning disabilities, disorders, or physical handicaps and has a small seven-student class size. He goes Monday through Friday from eight to eleven, and they’ve been a godsend from day one. Grayson loves going there and especially loves his teacher, Mrs. Farris, and the class aides, Miss Courtney and Miss Lilly.

“Happy to hear that,” Kellen replies as someone from the kitchen walks up with two bags of food. “Thanks, Sam,” Kellen says to the young man, checking the first bag and the ticket attached to it. “This one’s yours.” Before Sam can walk away, he asks, “Numbers still here?”

“No, sir. He left a few minutes ago.”

“Shit,” Kellen mumbles, glancing toward the restaurant.

“What’s wrong?” I find myself asking as Sam returns to the kitchen.

“Nothing. I was gonna see if he could run this order over to my sister on his way home. I’ll just have Garreth come back and cover for me for twenty minutes.”

Without even thinking, I open my mouth. “If you just need someone to drop it off to her, I can do it on my way.”

“Yeah?”

I nod, pulling my wallet from my back pocket. “I don’t mind.”

“Put that away,” Kellen states, sliding the check beneath the counter. “If you’re willing to run that to Kins, then I’m buying your dinner.”

“That’s not necessary,” I counter, pulling cash from my wallet.

“It is. You’re doing me a favor, so I’m buying your food as a thank you.”

I can tell by the look in his eyes, he’s not going to budge. So instead, I pull enough cash to cover a hearty tip and shove it his way. “Tip.”

He narrows his eyes my way, probably knowing I’m giving him way more than the standard percentage. “Thanks, man.”

“No problem,” I reply, standing up. “She’s at your place, right?”

He nods. “I’ll send her a text and let her know you’ll be there soon.”

I glance at my watch and realize I'm cutting it close to grab Grayson before my parents need to head out to their church meeting. "Hey, would it be all right if I grabbed Grayson first and then dropped it off? It'll only take me five minutes, promise."

"Of course. I'll tell her you're making a quick stop but will be there shortly."

"I don't want her food to get cold," I insist, realizing it might not have been my best idea to offer to help.

"It'll be fine," he replies, waving off my concern.

"If you're sure." I'm still hesitant, but not because I don't mind dropping it off to her. I really don't want to be the jerk who brings her cold food because he had to make a stop beforehand that took longer than anticipated.

"Go. Thanks, again." Kellen gives me a quick grin before walking down the bar to take care of some customers.

I grab both bags and make my way out to my truck. As soon as I'm inside, I turn over the ignition and kick on the seat warmers. Once I heard about Madelyn using the ass warmer on the passenger seat to help keep a pizza warm I've used the technique ever since. It's brilliant, really.

Before I back out of the parking spot, I fire off a quick text to my mom, telling her I'm on my way and asking her to get Grayson ready to go. As soon as she replies, I pull out and head for their house. Fortunately, they live pretty close, and in less than four minutes, I'm pulling into their driveway.

The front door opens right away, and my son comes flying out, already in his hat and gloves. Of course, my mom is right behind him, holding up his coat and telling him to stop. He doesn't listen though and is reaching the side of my truck as I open the door.

"Daddy!"

"Why are you outside without your coat?"

He just laughs and looks back at my mom. "I go bye-bye!"

"Yes, you're going bye-bye, but you have to wait for a coat, okay? It's too cold to go outside without one," I instruct my son and help put the warm layer on him.

"Okay!" he proclaims, waiting for me to put him in the truck.

As soon as he's buckled into his car seat, I turn to Mom. "Thanks."

"Sorry about that. I was waiting to put on his coat so he didn't get too

hot," she says, shivering herself since she didn't have time to grab her own coat.

"Go inside," I instruct, closing the back door so my son stays warm.

"I will. Everything all right?" she asks, crossing her arms. "You seem like you're in a hurry."

"I grabbed food from the restaurant, and while I was there, Kellen asked me to run some food over to his place for his sister."

Why'd I say that?

I could have left that last part out. I'm not sure why I said it, especially because she's looking at me now with stars in her eyes at the mention of my first love.

"Kinsley? Have you seen her?"

Sighing, I shove my hands in my pockets and rock back on my heels. "Once, only for a minute, but when I was at the restaurant, Kellen was looking for someone to run food to her. I volunteered."

A slow smile spreads across her mouth, and I know I've probably said the wrong thing. Not that she'll have a problem with me stepping up for something like that, but because she's always loved Kinsley McGregor and has faithfully followed her career since she left for Nashville in search of a singing contract.

"Hmm," she replies, still grinning from ear to ear.

"Don't start thinking," I chastise, stepping forward and placing a kiss on her cheek. "I'm just helping out by dropping off her dinner."

"Hmm."

"Stop that."

"I didn't say a word."

"You don't have to," I tell her, opening my driver's door. "Go inside before you freeze to death."

"Tell Kinsley I said hello," she practically coos as she waves.

I shut the door and throw the car into reverse, slowly backing out of their driveway. "Did you have a good morning at school?"

"Yep! Robert dranked my milk."

"He did? Did you get a new one?" I ask, glancing into the rearview mirror to check on him.

"We shared."

I blink a few times, trying to make sure I heard him correctly. "You

shared?”

“Yep!”

“Grays, you’re not supposed to share drinks or food, remember?”

“Dats what Mrs. Farris said,” he replies with a giggle, covering his mouth as if he said the funniest thing ever.

“Well, let’s make sure we’re listening to Mrs. Farris, okay?”

“Kay!”

After a few seconds, I add, “Hey, buddy? I have to stop by a friend’s house and drop off some extra food, okay? I’ll run up to the door, and you have to promise me to stay in your car seat. I’ll only be a second and then we’ll go home and eat dinner. I got you some fries and mac and cheese. Sound good?”

“Yep!” he hollers, kicking his feet against the back of my seat, but before I can say anything, I’m pulling into Kellen’s driveway.

The front porch light is on, so I park near the front walkway and release my seat belt. “All right, buddy. Stay put and I’ll be right back,” I tell him, reaching for the smaller of the two bags of food and climbing from my truck. “Here, you can watch a video on my phone,” I add, handing my cell phone back to Grayson’s extended hand.

His attention is instantly pulled to the Colors of the Farm YouTube video playing, and I know that’ll buy me a couple extra minutes. Quietly, I close the door and head for the front door. As I approach, the door opens and my breath catches in my throat. I’m sure it has everything to do with the cold air I’m inhaling and not because of the gorgeous woman stepping out onto the porch.

“Hi,” she replies softly, her familiar voice washing over me like a spring rain.

“Hey. I brought you food,” I tell her, holding out the bag.

“Thank you. Kellen mentioned you were dropping it off.”

I shove my hands into my pockets to keep from reaching out to her. I never thought this overwhelming desire to touch her would hit me square in the chest like this, but here I am, standing in front of the most beautiful woman in the world, the one who shares most of my firsts, and all I can think about is holding her in my arms. “It was no big deal.”

She rocks back on her own heels and glances around the neighborhood, despite the darkness surrounding us. “Umm, do you want to

come in?" she offers, a hint of uncertainty in her question.

"Oh, I can't. My son is in the truck, and I picked up food for us too. I should get him home to feed him."

She nods in understanding and quickly glances over at my running truck in the driveway. "Well, he can come inside too. I'd love to meet him." I don't miss the hope reflecting in her beautiful blue eyes as she turns her attention back to me. "As a thank you for bringing this over. It's been a while since we've shared a meal," she adds, a gentle grin moving her lush lips.

Shit.

I should not go inside.

I know the right thing to do is to climb into my truck and head home. I don't have his booster seat he uses for meals, which means he'd have to sit on my lap to contain the chaos that comes along with eating a meal. It would definitely be much easier to slip back home and continue on with our evening as I had originally planned. Yet, there's this familiarity surrounding me, and having Kins in my presence feels a little too good. Too comfortable. What harm could it hurt to have dinner with her?

"He can be messy," I feel the need to say, even though I would never leave her to deal with cleaning up after him.

She shrugs. "Aren't all kids?"

My heart does this weird tap dance in my chest. There has always been something about her. Something unique and decent. She's always been way too good for me, but that doesn't stop me from nodding. "Okay. If you don't mind."

Kinsley McGregor smiles at me. A real one that touches her lips, her eyes, and every piece of her. She reaches into my soul, and I feel something stir to life. Something I haven't felt in a long damn time.

This evening could be a great little trip down memory lane.

Or it could lead me straight into a whole world of pain, because watching her walk away the first time almost killed me. No way could I survive it a second time.

I'll just have to make sure that doesn't happen.

What happened between us is in the past.

That's where I need to keep it.

Chapter Seven

Kinsley

I'm not sure what possessed me to invite Tucker into my brother's house, but here we are, and I don't regret it. Truthfully, it would be good to catch up with him for a bit, even though I'm not sure how much catching up we'll get to do with his son in the mix. I am eager to find out what's been going on with him over the last few years.

He shuts off his truck and pulls another bag out of the passenger seat before moving to the rear driver's seat. I can hear him talking, but not specifically what he's saying, but a few long seconds later, a little boy is jumping out. He waits for his dad and takes his hand before slowly making his way up the steps of the porch and toward me.

"Come on in," I say quickly, holding the door open for them. Once both father and son are inside, I secure the door, confirming it's locked. Even though I'm sure it would be fine in Stewart Grove, I've lived in the city the last nine years and old habits die hard. "Here, let me take your food."

Tucker hands over his bag and gives his attention to the small boy staring up at me. "Let's take your boots and coat off, buddy, and then we'll go see what Jasper cooked up for us to eat."

"Kay," he says shyly.

When the coat is off and Tucker's removing his son's gloves, boots, and hat, the boy turns his complete attention to me. "Hi, I'm Kinsley," I greet, a small smile on my lips.

"Can you say hello to Kinsley?" Tucker asks, giving his son a little time to adjust to his new surroundings.

The boy nods his head, those big almond-shaped blue eyes gazing up at me. I know he was diagnosed with Down syndrome before birth. I recall my brother mentioning it, a couple years back, during one of our reminiscing phone calls when I wanted to know everything about everyone back home. I remember being shocked to find out Tucker had a son, and while I really wanted to know more about his relationship status with the boy's mother, I

realized knowing would probably hurt more, so I let it go. I didn't ask questions about Tucker, even though I really wanted to.

Squatting down to meet the boy's height, I say, "I bet you're hungry. Want to go eat?"

He nods quickly before reaching for my hand. My heart starts to pound so loud I'm certain the others in the room can hear it as I stand and place my hand in his much smaller one. I have very little experience with kids. Hardly any of my Nashville friends have them, and the ones who do, don't exactly travel around and adapt to the musician lifestyle.

Once we reach the kitchen, Tucker and I place the bags of food on the table, and he helps the young boy onto a chair. "Sit still so you don't fall," Tucker says to his son as he starts to pull the containers of food out of the bags.

"What would you like to drink?" I ask, knowing our drink selection is probably pretty slim.

"Water is fine," Tucker replies as the little guy hollers, "Milk!"

I can't help but giggle as I head for the fridge. "I think we can accommodate both requests," I state, pulling out two bottles of water and the half-gallon of milk from the door.

Tucker joins me at the counter and finds a small cup in the cabinet and pours in just about an inch of milk. I can't get over how easy he handles his role as a father. Of course, I shouldn't be surprised. He was always loving, patient, and incredibly supportive when we were together as teens, and I can't see him changing in the time since we broke up.

"Ready for this?" he asks, his blue eyes dancing with humor.

"Ready as I'll ever be," I quip, taking the two bottles of water and moving to the table.

I watch as Tucker uncovers the small bowl of mac and cheese, as well as the container of fries, and places them in front of his son, who immediately reaches for a French fry and holds it up. Before Tucker can say a word, I'm jumping up and going to the refrigerator for ketchup.

When I turn around, Tucker is watching me. "How did you know?"

I shrug, handing over the bottle. "Don't all kids love ketchup with their fries?"

"No." He makes a face.

I can't help but laugh. "I forgot you hate ketchup on your fries." I'm

returning to the fridge to get the bottle of mustard before I ask if that's still how he takes them.

When I set it on the table in front of him, he smiles. "You remember."

I can feel a blush settling in my cheeks, so I give my focus to my container of food, squirting my own blob of ketchup on the lid. I can feel his eyes on me, but I refuse to look his way. If I do, I know I'll say something stupid or completely embarrass myself, so instead, I turn to the young boy who already has ketchup and cheese smeared on his face. "What's your name?"

"Crud, Kins, I'm sorry. I didn't introduce you," Tucker replies.

"I Grays. I four." He gives me a wide, toothy grin as he scoops up another bite.

"His name is Grayson, but I often call him Grays, and he's four years old."

"Well, Grayson, it's nice to meet you."

"Kay!" he replies before shoveling the cheesy pasta in his mouth.

"Manners," Tucker murmurs quietly, earning another grin from his son.

I dive into my burger, while he does the same, and even though he's keeping close watch on his son, I can still feel Tucker's eyes on me every now and again. We eat in comfortable silence for a few minutes, and while there are a million questions I want to ask, I'm not sure now is the time. How much of someone's life do you get into when their son is sitting right next to them?

Finally, deciding it couldn't hurt to ask a few simple questions, I wipe my mouth and take a drink of my water. "So, what do you do?"

"I work at the brewery," he replies after cleaning his mouth. "I've been there a little over a year as the assistant brewer, and I love it."

"Really? That's really cool."

He shrugs his shoulders and runs a fry through the glob of mustard. "Before that, I worked a few construction jobs."

"I can see that. You were always really good with your hands."

And cue the blush.

The innuendo hangs between us like some sexually charged bolt of lightning, ready to strike the first person who blinks. Then suddenly, we both burst out laughing as I drop my face into my hands.

Clearing his throat, he says, "I appreciate that," with a wink. "I wasn't sure how I'd like factory work, but it's a great company with good pay and benefits. Plus, Jameson lets me take time for Grayson if I need it."

"That's a great benefit," I agree, knowing it has to be hard being a single dad.

"And every once in a while, I get to see your brother. It's not nearly as often as I wish, but working close by does ensure we run into each other every now and again."

A grin touches my lips at the thought of the two of them still communicating after all these years. Granted, they've only been out of school for about twelve years and neither left their hometown, but life can always carry two people, even close friends, in opposite directions. "Please tell me you give him a hard time."

That familiar smile lights up his entire face. "Every chance I get," he boasts, sending my heart pitter-pattering in my chest.

One of the first things I noticed about Tucker Dunn all those years ago was his smile. Well, that and the fact he's gorgeous. Dark hair, mesmerizing ocean blue eyes, and a body that made all the girls in high school silly over it. Don't get me wrong, I was right there with them, swooning and fawning over the gorgeous older guy, but I saw so much more than his hard muscles and his baby blues.

"Good. He deserves it," I tease, eating another French fry.

Suddenly, Grayson turns to face me and says, "I a farmer."

Taking in his John Deere green sweatshirt and bib overalls, I can't help but smile. "I see that. Do you like tractors?"

His blue eyes, the ones the same color as his dad's, stare up at me with excitement. "Tractors!"

"He's a huge fan," Tucker states with a snicker, as Grayson starts babbling about red ones and green ones. For the next several minutes, he talks all about tractors, including making noises that sound like the engines, and every time I glance over at Tucker, he's sitting there with a faint smile on his lips.

Yeah, fatherhood looks good on him.

When there's a lull in the conversation, I ask, "How are your parents?"

"They're good. Dad still works at the lumberyard, and Mom quit the school four years ago to help me with Grayson. They say hello, actually. I

mentioned running into you and she asked me to say hi next time I saw you.”

Marge and Ray Dunn are some of the best people I’ve ever known. Their son’s amazing qualities come straight from them, and over the years, I’ve thought of both often. His mom worked in the school office, and his father worked outside, moving, loading, and cutting the lumber sold at the large yard at the edge of town. When my own parents were being especially salty to one another in my teen years, I would always picture what it would be like to live in their house, surrounded by their love and laughter. Not to diminish the love and support my own parents gave me, but there was always tension hanging in the air and a snippy comment on the tip of someone’s tongue.

“Man, I haven’t seen your parents in ages. Please tell them I say hello too.”

He nods, closing his empty container. “I will, but you know they’d love it if you visited,” he suggests. Then adds, “If you wanted to, that is.”

“I’d love to. I just wasn’t sure if it was appropriate, you know, considering...us.” Again, I feel my cheeks heat up.

The left side of his mouth curls up slightly as he meets my eyes. “That was a long time ago,” he says softly, making my heart hammer in my chest.

“It was,” I agree, wishing there weren’t a wave of sadness crashing over me. It must be because my life is such a disaster at the moment and he’s here, being as sweet and amazing as I remember. So much has happened since we dated. It was years ago. Yet, there’s this little bubble of awareness in my chest that reminds me of how great we were.

“Stop by.”

I consider his words for a few moments before replying. “You wouldn’t mind?” I don’t know why I’m asking. He did suggest it first. However, I’ve seen enough pettiness in the music industry that sometimes I struggle with taking someone’s word at face value. I’ve seen plenty of people say one thing but mean the complete opposite.

His blue eyes are soft as he replies, “I wouldn’t have mentioned it if I did. They’d love to catch up with you and hear all about life in Nashville.”

That’s the closest we’ve gotten to the other elephant in the room, but now isn’t the time to get into that aspect of my life.

“Done!” Grayson proclaims, smiling from ear to ear with the biggest

macaroni and cheese and ketchup smile I've ever seen.

I think I just fell in love.

"All right, Farmer Jack, let's get you cleaned up."

"I not Jack. I Grays," his son argues, getting up from the table with the help from his dad and walking toward the sink. While Tucker works to clean his son's face and the front of his shirt, I grab a few napkins and scoop up dropped macaroni noodles and a few fries from the floor.

"Sorry about that," Tucker says, stacking the containers back into the bags and tossing them all in the trash.

"Don't apologize. It's not a problem. Besides, have you seen my brother eat?" I joke, wetting a washcloth to wipe down the table.

When the kitchen is put back together, I turn and face the man and his son. They're holding hands and both watching me with so many of the same features, it makes my breath hitch in my throat.

Tucker Dunn, the man, is nothing short of magnificent.

But Tucker Dunn as a father? Well, that just boosted the appeal a thousand percent.

"Thank you for inviting us in, but we should probably head home. It's almost bath time."

"Noo," Grayson whines, making me smile.

"Not a fan?"

"Hates it," Tucker grumbles, turning his attention to his son. "You know we have to. You were wearing half your dinner on your face not five minutes ago."

Grayson starts to giggle, as if he said the funniest thing. "Boats?"

"Yes, you can play with the boats, as long as you leave the water inside the tub this time."

Wide innocent eyes beam up at his father. "Assident."

A bark of laughter flies from Tucker's mouth. "Yeah, I know it was an accident. Why don't you tell Kinsley thank you for inviting us to join her for dinner, okay?"

Grayson releases his dad's hand and walks toward me. I expect him to be shy, to quietly thank me as instructed, but that's not what happens. Instead, when I crouch down to put myself at his eye level, he throws his small arms around my neck and practically launches himself into my chest. I almost stumble but am able to keep myself upright as I wrap my own arms

around him. "Tank you," he whispers before kissing my cheek.

"You're most welcome, Grayson. It was nice to meet you."

Sweet eyes look up at me as he brings his hand up to touch my face.

"You wike tractors?"

How could I not smile? "I do enjoy them, but I've never ridden in one. Have you?"

He shakes his head no, and I wish I had someone nearby who was a farmer to help make that happen.

"Grays, remember what I said about touching people's faces? Not everyone likes to be touched," Tucker says softly.

Big blue eyes bore into mine. "I touch you?"

I gently run my finger across his cheek. "You can touch me, yes."

"Kay!" he hollers, startling me a bit.

I'm definitely a novice at this whole kid thing.

Tucker leans in a bit closer as we start to head for the front door. "Sorry about that. Grayson is a toucher. He doesn't understand boundaries, and trying to teach him he can't just reach out and put his hands all over someone can be a struggle. It's completely innocent, but there are some people who can get offended because they don't understand who he is and how he tends to communicate by touch."

When we reach the front door, I turn and face him. "You're a great dad, Tuck."

He smiles the same soft grin that makes his eyes bluer than the ocean and brighter than the sky on a cloudless summer day. "Thank you. It hasn't always been easy, but there's no greater job in the world."

Tucker double clicks the key fob in his hand to start the truck, and then turns his attention to his son. I watch with odd fascination as he helps Grayson into his boots, coat, gloves, and hat, and when he's slipping his old worn leather coat on, he turns my way. "Thank you again. I had a great time."

"Me too," I reply honestly, surprised by how comfortable and relaxed tonight was, despite the time and distance between us.

He opens the door and takes Grayson's hand. "Maybe," he starts, but stops for a few seconds. My heart beats wildly in my chest as I await to find out if he'll continue or not, and just when I'm about to say something, he adds, "Maybe we can get coffee sometime?"

“Coffee would be good,” I reply immediately, fighting hard not to smile.

“Okay,” he says with a nod. “I’m sure I’ll run into you again.”

“Yeah. Stewart Grove isn’t that big,” I state with a chuckle.

“No, it’s not.” As they step outside, our eyes meet once more. “Have a good evening, Kins. Make sure you lock up.”

“I will.”

“Can you tell Kinsley goodbye?” Tucker asks his son, who spins around and grabs my leg in a hug.

“Bye-bye,” he hollers, squeezing my leg with his little arm, all while still holding hands with his dad.

“Bye, Grayson. I’ll see you around.”

“Kay!”

Tucker and I both laugh as they descend the steps and walk toward the truck. I watch as he lifts the boy into the back seat and fastens him in his booster, the kid talking nonstop about something I can’t quite hear. If I had to guess, I’d say tractors.

When the rear door shuts and the front door opens, Tucker stops and faces me once more. “Go inside before you catch a cold.”

A wide smile spreads across my lips. “I’m fine.” I won’t tell him how warm I feel just by being in his presence for less than an hour.

“Go. I’m not leaving until you’re securely back inside the house.”

“I’m a big girl, Tuck,” I counter, crossing my arms across my chest casually.

His eyes slowly drop, taking in my body, and despite being covered by clothing, I feel his gaze like a touch all over. “I can see that, Kins. Now go inside.”

Playfully, I roll my eyes and step inside the front door. Before I close it, I lift my hand to wave goodbye and smile when he does the same. Finally, I close the door and lean back against it. My breathing is a bit labored, and my heart is galloping in my chest. Just a short amount of time in his presence, and I’ve turned into the girl I once was. The one who drooled over the gorgeous older boy and dreamed of the day he’d be mine.

Only, he’s not mine.

Not anymore.

And I have too much baggage right now to even entertain any other

thought.

Yet, that doesn't stop me from thinking about what could have been. If maybe he had gone with me to Nashville, or I had stayed behind. Where would our lives have taken us?

Doesn't matter.

Those roads are in the rearview mirror, and the only path to travel is the one laid before us. I need to focus on what's right in front of me. On my future.

On healing.

And what better place to do that than Stewart Grove?

Chapter Eight

Tucker

“Park!” Grayson bellows from the back seat of my truck as we pass the city playground he loves to visit.

I sigh as I pull into the parking lot for the grocery store at the end of the block. “Buddy, we’re not going to the park today. It’s not exactly summer weather outside.”

While we haven’t seen any more snow, the temperatures have dropped to a very chilly ten degrees high, and the sky is a lifeless gray color. Yet town is hopping with traffic and apparently everyone and their brother is shopping for groceries on this cold Sunday afternoon.

Finding a spot, I park my truck and shut down the engine. “All right, Grays. We don’t have a long list, so this won’t take very long. Then, we’ll go have pizza at Firehouse.”

“Yay! Peeeee-zzzzaaaa!”

I’m hoping the pizza joint isn’t very busy, but if the grocery store lot is any indication as to the number of people out and about this afternoon, I’m probably in trouble. Firehouse Pizza is a favorite of ours. The owners purchased the old, abandoned firehouse building three years ago and transformed it into an Italian eatery, and the kids in town love it. There’s an old game room at the back, complete with arcade machines they had brought in from a closing business in Illinois.

“All right, let’s get inside and grab the little bit of groceries on the list, run them home, and then go have pizza uptown,” I state, releasing my seat belt and shutting off the truck.

“Kay!”

I help Grayson out of the truck and take his hand. He’s back in his little John Deere work boots since the snow has mostly melted. What’s left has turned into frozen brown slush, but for the most part, the sidewalks and roadways are clear. We step through the automatic sliding door, which always makes my son giggle. There’s just something about them he finds

funny.

“Riding in the cart or walking with me?”

“Riding,” he announces, holding up his arms for me to pick him up.

The fit is a little snug, but he still loves to sit in the seat, so I’m not going to complain. Once he wiggles down into place, I clasp the belt around his waist and off we go. Grayson is pointing at items on the shelf and talking a mile a minute, but I keep my focus on what’s on my list. I make decent money working at the brewery, but being a single parent to a special needs child isn’t easy. A portion of my check every week goes into my savings account, as well as a fund I’ve set up for Grayson’s future, and while I have a little bit of mad money each week after the necessary bills are paid, I try not to get into a habit of overspending.

My parents were sticklers for teaching me the value of a dollar, as well as making sure you’re only spending what you could afford.

My first stop is the produce section for red grapes. They’re one of the few fresh fruits I can get my son to eat, so I make sure to get some every week. “Which one?” I ask, holding up two bags that look similar so he can choose.

He considers the bag in each hand before pointing to my right. “Dat one.”

Smiling, I zip the top of it before placing the bag into my cart. “Good choice. Let’s go check out the lunch meat and cheese,” I say, heading toward the next section.

“Tractors go brrrrrrrrrr,” he announces, making a sound with his mouth that mimics an engine running.

“They do,” I reply, selecting a package of ham I know he’ll eat, as well as sliced cheese. I also toss in a bag of string cheese, which is another favorite snack.

Over the next twenty minutes, we move up and down each aisle, adding what is listed. I’m even able to successfully avoid a meltdown in the aisle containing small toys and a large variety of candy, thanks to a quick reminder of our pizza trip if he behaves.

As we approach the final aisle with the frozen foods, I notice a woman standing in front of the ice cream at the far end of the aisle. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I try not to stare at her backside, but I can’t seem to pull my eyes away. She’s wearing a pair of black leggings, short little

boots, and an oversized sweater that covers her ass, but something about her just catches my attention.

I force myself to concentrate on the remaining products from my list, but each time I place something in my cart, I'm looking her way. When it happens a third time, she turns a bit more toward me and realization hits me square in the chest. Despite the ball cap hanging low over her eyes, I know it's Kinsley McGregor and can't help but smile.

Slowly, I head in her direction, pausing only long enough to grab the two bags of frozen vegetables I need. When my cart nears, I quietly state, "Ice cream is a big decision. You have to make sure you get the right flavor."

She startles and turns stunned blue orbs my way. When our eyes meet, she relaxes as she smiles. "It really is."

"I'm more of a chocolate guy myself, but Grayson is a fan of vanilla with sprinkles."

Kinsley grins down at my son. "Me too, Grays."

"Kin Kin!"

A chuckle spills from her beautiful mouth. "Well, hello. Are you buying anything good?"

"Grapes." He points to the bag.

"Yum. I love grapes. And pineapple."

He pulls a face that makes us both chuckle. Finally, she looks my way again. "You looked like you're contemplating a major life decision, not choosing ice cream."

She blushes the faintest shade of pink before glancing over to the freezer section. "This is really embarrassing to admit, but I was having a really hard time choosing which flavor."

"Why?" I ask, leaning against the cart casually.

"Well, Zander, my ex," she says, averting her gaze, "was pretty picky. He would only eat chocolate chip cookie dough, and even then, one or two brands. He complained about everything else, so I usually stuck to just that one kind."

My eyes narrow a bit. "But you weren't a fan of cookie dough," I say before I can stop myself.

That faint blush turns pretty dark. "I know," she whispers.

Glancing at the huge selection, I point to the cherry chip she used to always favor. "I remember keeping a carton of that in the freezer just for

you.”

Kinsley smiles the moment she sees what I’m pointing to. “I still prefer it,” she confesses. “But it’s been so long since I’ve gotten to choose, my decision-making abilities practically shut down. All I could do was stare at the choices as if completely overwhelmed.”

Reaching out, I turn to her so she’s facing me. I hear her breathing hitch and try not to focus on the warm puff of air or the way my body responded to it. “Now, what’s your first choice?” I ask, holding her gaze.

“The cherry chip.”

“And a second?”

“Something with caramel.”

“Well, there you go,” I reply, opening the door where I can find the cherry chip ice cream I used to buy for her, as well as a salted caramel and chocolate drizzle flavor.

When I turn around holding a container in each hand, she’s smiling from ear to ear. “You made that so simple.”

Shrugging, I set them in my cart so she doesn’t have to hold on to them and freeze her hands. “It’s ice cream. No reason to make it complicated.”

She nods, as if realizing she was doing just that. “Yeah, you’re right. Anyway, thank you. You probably saved me from having some sort of anxiety attack and someone catching it on camera to sell to the tabloids.”

Just then, a woman approaches, her eyes scanning the freezer before doing a double take when they land on Kinsley. Kins drops her head to avert her gaze, and while I’m sure the woman passing by us at a snail’s pace wants to stop and get confirmation Kinsley is *the* Kinsley McGregor, she doesn’t and slowly continues on her way.

“I think you’ve been busted,” I mutter when the woman has passed.

She sighs loudly. “Yeah. It was only a matter of time before my secret was out. Honestly, I’m surprised no one has been pounding on my brother’s door or camping out on his front lawn yet.”

“Well, thank God for small favors,” I say, but I know our time to chat is up.

Grayson is getting restless and is talking loudly now. I’m about to excuse us so we can finish up our shopping trip, when my son hollers, “Peeeeee-zzzzzaaaaa!”

Kinsley, not missing a beat, asks, "Are you having pizza for dinner this evening?"

Grayson nods eagerly. "Games."

"I promised him Firehouse Pizza tonight, as long as he behaves well at the store."

"You," Grayson says, pointing at Kinsley. "Pee-zza."

I realize immediately what he's saying, but before I can reply, Kinsley says, "Yes, I love pizza."

"You go!" Grayson states eagerly, his big blue eyes wide with anticipation.

"Ohhh," Kinsley sings, understanding what he's saying. "Oh, I shouldn't. I have...ice cream."

I can see the hesitation on her face. "I'm running my groceries home, and then we'll go. You're welcome to join us, but no pressure," I find myself saying, even though I really hope she agrees. I'm not sure why, other than the fact I've always felt a deep connection to her, and there's still so much I want to know about her life these last nine years.

She glances between my son and me, nibbling on her bottom lip. That one little action causes my cock to jump in my jeans, a reminder of how big of a fan that bastard was of her sexy mouth. When she looks my way, she asks quietly, "You're sure you won't mind?"

"Of course not, Kins." I don't push her, even though the desire to beg is on the tip of my tongue.

"Well, it would be nice to get out for a little bit. I know there's a good chance I'll get recognized, but I'm starting to go crazy at my brother's house. Not because there's anything wrong with it, but I'm used to moving from place to place all the time, and now I feel like the walls are closing in on me. Hence, stealing my brother's truck to come get ice cream on a Sunday afternoon," she replies with a chuckle.

"In that case, I insist you come with us. My treat," I tell her.

"That's not necessary, but," she starts and stops, thinking for another moment. "Okay. I'll join you, but only if we make plans for ice cream in the near future."

My heart does this weird extra beat in my chest, and if I were in any other situation, it might cause me some concern, but not when it's because of Kinsley. She's always been the one woman who could cause a whole

barrage of unpredictable emotions. "Deal."

She smiles widely and reaches over and ruffles Grayson's hair. "All right, little man. I would love to meet you for pizza."

"Yay!" my son hollers, his eyes lighting up with excitement.

Reaching into my cart, she picks up both containers of ice cream. I watch as she reaches into the freezer and grabs a pint of vanilla too. "What time?" she asks, glancing at her watch.

"Is five okay?" I ask, noting that'll give me an hour to go home, put everything away, and go to the pizza joint.

She grins softly. "That's perfect. See you then."

I nod, suddenly unable to talk over my dry throat.

"Bye-bye," Grayson hollers, waving to her as she heads toward the checkout.

My eyes follow her, especially the gentle sway of her hips, until she rounds the corner. Sighing, I move the cart once more, ready to check out myself. "Let's take this stuff home, and then we'll go have pizza. Yes?"

"Yes!" he proclaims, throwing his arms up in victory.

I have to admit, I'm just as excited as he is. I'm incredibly grateful for running into her today, especially since that chance encounter has turned into a dinner date. Well, not a date per se, but you know.

Dinner.

Together.

Again.

Only this time, it's a public setting, and our town is good for one thing.

Gossip.

Grayson is practically dragging me toward the front entrance of the pizzeria. I pull open the old, red door and we step inside, immediately wrapped in warmth and the scent of marinara sauce.

"Hey, guys," Hailey Stein greets from the podium near the entrance. "Hi, Grayson."

"Pee-zza!" he replies, practically vibrating with excitement.

The high school girl chuckles, reaching under the stand for a menu. "Are you going to eat pizza?"

He nods and proclaims, “Kins!”

Hailey looks at him with a question, but before I can answer it, the door behind me opens again. The girl glances behind me and within seconds, her eyes widen in recognition. “Oh my gosh, are you...you’re...”

Kinsley doesn’t miss a beat. She gives the young girl a polite smile and quietly replies, “Hi, I’m Kinsley.” Even though she’s wearing minimal makeup, a ball cap pulled down low on her head, and those same comfy clothes from earlier, she’s easy to recognize. One look at her beautiful face and magnetic blue eyes, and if you’re a country music fan—or if you’ve seen the dozens of reports and tabloids with her photo over the last two weeks, thanks to that video—there’s no denying who she is.

“Holy shit,” the girl states, her mouth hanging open in shock. “I can’t believe it’s you.”

Kinsley steps forward. “Nice to meet you...”

“Hailey. Hailey Stein. I’m a huge fan,” she gushes.

“Well, it’s wonderful to meet you, Hailey. My friends and I were hoping to have a quiet dinner tonight. Do you have someplace not in the middle of the room?”

Hailey begins to nod, looking over her shoulder into the dining room. “There’s a corner booth available by the arcade room.”

“That’s perfect, Hailey, thank you.”

The young girl grabs an extra menu before looking back up at Kinsley. I can tell she wants to say something else but is torn between being professional and freaking out because there’s a professional singer about to dine at the restaurant.

We follow her through the dining area, most of the patrons turning and looking as we walk through. Part of it is just the standard small-town nosiness that runs rampant in this place, and everyone wants to see who’s entering, but I know that’s not the main reason. Everyone wants to see who’s with me.

I don’t date. I can’t say never, because I gave it a try about a year ago, but it didn’t go anywhere. About two months’ worth of hanging out after Grayson went to bed and casual dates when he was with my parents was enough for us both to realize it wasn’t going anywhere past that. Sure, we could have continued to see each other, but that’s not what she was looking for. Victoria Dawson was husband hunting and made no attempt to hide it,

and while a few months of spectacular orgasms was fine and dandy, that wasn't her ultimate goal. So, we parted ways amicably, and I decided dating was too much work for this single dad.

So, there's a woman with me and my son, something that never happened when I was dating Victoria, and the entire room is here for it.

Wait until they realize who the woman is.

"Thank you, Hailey," Kinsley says when we stop at the farthest booth away from the entry.

"You're welcome." After a moment, she says, as a few other employees linger at nearby tables. "Umm..."

Kinsley instantly smiles. "How about this. Why don't my friends and I enjoy our pizza, and when we're finished, I'd be happy to take a few pictures with you and any staff member who wants one."

Hailey beams. "Really?"

"Of course," Kinsley replies, turning her attention to me and Grayson. "Who's hungry?" she asks, looking down at the little boy by my side.

"Me!" he proclaims, holding his other hand up in the air. His excitement courses through his veins, radiating through our connection and striking me square in the chest. I know exactly how he feels. There's this positive energy that wraps around you anytime she's near. It was that way when she was younger and apparently is the same now.

Like a halo, she's surrounded in beauty and light.

Kinsley grins at my son as she slides into the circular booth. "Me too. Come on, Grayson. Let's order some pizza. Extra cheese."

Chapter Nine

Kinsley

I slip just far enough into the seat where my back is to the rest of the room. Not that I don't want to face everyone, but maybe I'll have a better chance of not getting recognized any more than I already have.

Tucker lifts Grayson into the booth, who runs around and plops down beside me. Before I can even say anything about his nose barely being above the table, Hailey returns with a red plastic booster seat. "Here ya go, Grayson," she says, handing the seat over to Tucker.

The little boy waves in return, standing carefully on the seat with my assistance so his dad can place the seat on the booth bench. Once Grayson is back in the seat and is a better height for dinner, he giggles. Looking to his dad on his left and me on the right, he smiles so widely you can't help but grin in return.

"Hey, guys," another high school age girl says as she approaches our table. "Can I start you off with some drinks?"

"Chocy milk, pwease!" Grayson declares, taking the crayons the girl is handing across the table.

"I got ya, buddy. And for you two?" she asks, first glancing to Tucker before her eyes move to me. The recognition isn't quite as swift as it was with Hailey, but I can tell the moment she realizes who I am. "Oh. My. God," she mummurs in a very Janice fashion from the TV Show *Friends*.

I give her a polite smile. "I'll just have a water, please."

"Me too," Tucker says, but the girl doesn't pay him any attention.

"I heard you grew up here, but I've never actually seen you before. I can't believe you're sitting in my section right now," the girl gushes, looking two seconds away from passing out. "Oh my," she says, sucking in a big breath of air. "I need to call my mom."

A giggle spills from my lips. "That's probably not necessary."

Her eyes are comically wide. "Oh, it is. We're both huge fans. Like, the biggest. She promised to take me to a concert later this year for my

graduation gift.”

“I’d love to see you on the road sometime.”

She waves her hand in front of her face to fan herself. “I’m Ella, and my mom’s Nina. Seriously. Your biggest fans.”

“Well, I’d love to take a photo with you after our dinner, if that’s all right.”

Her jaw practically hits the floor. “All right? Are you kidding me? I would die.”

Tucker’s grinning from ear to ear, watching our exchange, while Grayson blissfully colors on the white paper place mat in front of him. “No need for that, Ella, but we can take a picture and I’d even sign something for your mom.”

“Shut the front door. Yes. Yes!” she whisper-yells, bouncing where she stands. After a few long seconds in which she tries to compose herself, she asks sheepishly, “Okay, so...what did you want to drink?”

“Just water, please,” I reply, trying not to outwardly laugh at the flustered girl. This is the part where Zander would have gotten irritated, but I refuse to make a scene where fans are concerned. I’ve seen it happen too many times over the years and it’s always caught on camera.

“Me too, Ella,” Tucker adds.

She finally looks his way again and blinks a few times, as if finally coming back to reality. “Of course. I’ll be right back with your waters.” She spins around and scurries off to the back by the kitchen area, almost tripping over a chair leg as she goes by.

“This how it always is?” Tucker asks, the corners of his mouth turned upward.

“How what is?” I ask, stopping a red crayon from rolling onto the floor.

“This. Fans. All losing their minds.” This time he openly grins, and that one little gesture sends me right back to a time gone past, when life was much simpler and my biggest worry was if we’d get busted parking behind Sheffler’s corn cribs or if I’d make it home by curfew.

Lifting my shoulders, I concentrate on making a heart on my place mat with the red crayon. “Sometimes, yes. In Nashville it’s not so bad because everyone there is used to seeing musicians out and about, but it can be a little overwhelming at times. This is really the first I’ve been out since the whole video thing,” I tell him, reaching for a pink crayon to color in my

heart.

“I’m glad you ventured out today, and even more so you’re here with us now.”

Looking up, I meet his gaze and give him a small grin when the familiar sensation of butterflies takes flight in my stomach. “Me too.”

“Kins!”

I glance over at Grayson, who is furiously coloring on his place mat. He points to my heart and says, “Pwetty.”

“Thank you. I really like your picture too,” I tell the boy beside me.

He nods, his little tongue slipping out as he concentrates on his masterpiece.

“Here we are,” Ella announces as she returns with a tray of drinks. Two waters and a chocolate milk in a lidded cup. “Are you guys ready to order?”

I realize we haven’t discussed our order, so I just look over at Tucker and say, “Order whatever you usually get. I’ll eat about anything.”

“Okay. We’ll take a large cheese pizza with mushrooms and sausage on half, an order of breadsticks with cheddar sauce, and two side salads.”

“Dressing?” she asks, making the necessary notes on her order pad and stealing glances my way.

Tucker holds my gaze as he says, “French and ranch.” Clearly, he recalls my favorites, because he ordered exactly my preferred pizza toppings, as well as my two favorite salad dressings.

“Is that it?” she asks the table.

“It’s perfect,” I reassure both her and Tucker.

“I’ll get this order in and bring out the sides in a few minutes,” she says, disappearing once more to the kitchen area.

“You remembered,” I say, warmth spreading through my chest and up my neck.

He lifts his shoulders in a casual shrug. “I wasn’t sure if they were still your favorites, but I figured you’d stop me if that was no longer the case. Besides, you’re the only weirdo I know who mixes ranch and French dressing together.” He makes a face and sticks out his tongue.

“It’s delicious,” I argue, sticking my straw in my glass of water, balling up the wrapper, and throwing it at him.

He laughs when it hits him in the nose. “To each his own, weirdo.” He winks and takes a long drink of his water, eyes locked on me the entire time.

Now it's not just the warmth of his remembrance spreading through my veins. There's something else happening between my legs that leaves me a bit tingly and needy.

"Color?" Grayson asks, pointing to the paper in front of me.

"I'd love to color with you, Grays," I reply, taking a blue crayon and doodling across the bottom. At least now I'm switching gears to focusing on Grayson and not the way Tucker makes me feel. There's no need to let my lady bits do any thinking, because they'll just remind me how underused and neglected they've become.

Our breadsticks and salads arrive shortly after, and I try not to pay any attention to the people milling around, slowly moving from their tables to the arcade room not far from where we sit. I keep my attention at our table and chat with Grayson while he eats a breadstick dipped in cheese sauce. There seems to be a permanent smile on my face as I watch him. He has this positive light and energy surrounding him, and it makes me happy just being near him.

I can feel Tucker's eyes on me as I finish my salad. When I look up, there's curiosity in his gaze, and while he doesn't shy away from the connection, he doesn't outright ask about whatever's caused that look. That's why I find myself asking, "What?"

He blinks and lightly blushes. When he doesn't say anything, I remind him, "You've known me longer than almost anyone in this town, Tuck. You can ask me anything."

He doesn't break eye contact as he asks, "How are you doing? I've been trying to respect your privacy about...well, everything, and if you don't want to talk about it, tell me to zip it."

Instantly, I realize I'm comfortable sharing details with him. I've always been somewhat secretive, only because you never know when someone is eavesdropping or they'll sell you out to the highest paying tabloid, but I know I can trust Tucker. "Actually, I'm doing all right. Besides going a little stir-crazy at Kellen's, I'm okay. I hired a divorce attorney, and she's working on filing on my behalf and is hopeful to submit the paperwork tomorrow."

"Wow, that's fast."

"She's had many high-profile clients in Tennessee and comes recommended. The filing isn't the biggest issue, however. There's a sixty-day waiting period I didn't consider, but it, fortunately, begins with the filing."

“Sixty days? That’s a long time,” he replies in understanding.

“If he contests it, it will take longer,” I confide. “He’s told me he’s not letting this happen without a fight. He says it’s ‘just something people do.’”

Tucker looks upset as he stares back at me. “You’ve got to be *shitting* me?” he whispers so little ears between us can’t hear.

Shaking my head, I add, “And my attorney is certain the fact we don’t have a prenup is going to bite me in the ass. That’s why we need to try to settle everything in mediation.”

His eyes widen like saucers. “You don’t have a prenup?”

“No. My brother has already made his feelings on the subject known, but you have to understand, when we got married three years ago, I was barely an opening act. I played at a lot of bars around Nashville and traveled a short distance around Tennessee for shows. He was in my band, and I thought it would last forever. Against all advice, I didn’t think I needed one.” My confession burns my throat and my chest tightens because, even though I saw him as my forever, I should have still protected myself.

Stupid girl.

“I’m sorry.” He’s quiet for a moment, watching his son color, before asking, “Since he…wasn’t faithful, that should help your case, right?”

“Yes,” I state, taking a sip of my water. “It’s grounds for divorce for sure, but that doesn’t mean he won’t put up a fight.”

“Asshole,” he mumbles, but not quietly enough.

“Bad!” Grayson bellows, certainly drawing attention from the entire restaurant.

“Yes, I said a bad word, but you’re not supposed to yell inside, remember?”

“Oh,” Grayson states sheepishly, giving his father a toothy grin.

Before we can say anything else, our pizza is delivered. “Here we are,” Ella announces, placing the pan in the middle of the table. “Can I get you anything else?”

When I shake my head, Tucker replies, “I think we’re all set, Ella. Thanks.”

She beams at us both before turning away to head to her next table. Tucker takes the spatula and scoops up a slice of cheese, placing it on a plate for Grayson. I take the plate and turn my attention to the boy. “Do you like it cut up?”

He nods insistently.

“I can do that,” Tucker says, seeming a bit surprised by my assistance.

“I can too,” I tell him, reaching for a fork to cut up the slice. “Unless you need to?” I ask, looking his way once more.

“No, I’m just used to doing it myself.”

“Well, I don’t mind helping,” I tell him, already using the fork to cut the food into small pieces. While I do that, Tucker scoops up a slice of mushroom and sausage onto a plate for me and two slices for himself. “This good?” I ask Grayson, who is watching me with rapture.

“Yep!”

I set the plate in front of him and smile as he picks up the first small piece and shoves it into his mouth. “Slow, small bites, buddy,” Tucker informs his son before looking my way once more. “Sometimes he gets in a hurry when it’s something he really loves, like pizza.”

“I love pizza too,” I announce, picking up my slice and taking a bite.

“Dood?” Grayson asks while he chews.

“So good,” I confess, knowing I’ll probably have to do a thousand hours of cardio just to work off all the extra calories I’ve been eating since returning home to Stewart Grove a week and a half ago.

When we’re about halfway through our meal, I continue our conversation from earlier. “After the sixty-day waiting period, as long as we come to an agreement during mediation, the courts sign off on the divorce. It could happen as quickly as day sixty-one, but my attorney said that rarely happens. Usually within a week or two after.”

I take a sip of my water. “There’s one other waiting period she told me about. I’m unable to remarry before thirty days after my divorce.”

His left eyebrow shoots into his hairline. “Really?”

“Not that I plan to remarry,” I quickly add, feeling the need to say that for some reason.

A look crosses his eyes I can’t decipher. “Ever?”

Since my tongue is suddenly dry and thick, I shrug. I don’t want to even think about getting remarried at this point. It’s been exactly two weeks since my entire life imploded, with the whole world watching with front-row seats.

“I know you’re just getting started on the process and your first attempt at marriage didn’t exactly end well, but don’t rule it out, okay?”

Somewhere down the road. You'll make someone very happy someday, Kins," he says, making my heart skip a beat. Mostly because, for a brief moment, I wonder if he's referring to himself.

But then my mind focuses on the fact he said *someone*, and all I can think about is he meant *someone else*. We had our shot at love, and it didn't work out for us. Not because we weren't right for each other, but it simply wasn't the right time. We were young and had our whole lives ahead of us. Dreams to chase and obstacles to conquer.

Not really knowing what to say, I nod in appreciation and return my focus to my pizza. Grayson is chattering about his pizza and the cheese, making me grin between bites. I answer a few of his questions, but for the most part, just sit back and enjoy his company. I've never been around kids before, at least not on this level, and I'm finding I enjoy it quite a bit.

"So, you can't get married for thirty days. What about dating?"

His question surprises me, and I'm certain I fail at hiding my reaction. Clearing my throat, I wipe my mouth unnecessarily and shift in my seat. "Well, my attorney said dating isn't forbidden, but she cautioned about entering a sexual relationship within the thirty days. Until the divorce is finalized, it can affect things like alimony and other terms of your divorce."

Tucker slowly nods before finishing his own slice of pizza. When everyone appears to be done, Ella returns to collect our dirty dishes. "Would you like that boxed up to go?" she asks.

"Yes, please," Tucker states, handing over the pan with the remaining three slices of cheese pizza.

When she returns with the box and the check, Tucker takes care of paying for it, and doesn't balk when I pull some cash out of my purse for the tip. I know what's going to happen next, so I look up at Tucker and say, "I'm going to hang around for a few minutes and take some pictures."

He nods. "We'll wait for you. Grayson hasn't played pinball yet." Grayson gets excited and practically jumps out of the booth to go play games. "Wait for me," Tucker instructs, holding out his hand for his son. Together, they walk to the small game room, while I look toward the kitchen area.

A group has gathered, all eager employees hoping to say hello and possibly grab a photo. I head in their direction, and for the next fifteen minutes, take photos with employees and patrons who request them.

“I love your music,” an older woman who looks vaguely familiar says after I take a photo with her and her husband.

“Thank you so much.”

“I just think it’s so cool our hometown girl hit it big,” she gushes with excitement.

I give her a polite smile. “I’m not sure how big I’ve hit it, but I’m having a great time, loving what I do.”

“Well, you’re the biggest thing to come from this county, and we’re all so proud of you.”

“I appreciate that. This place will always be home to me, and the support I’ve received over the last few years has been monumental.”

“And it will continue,” the woman assures me with a grandmotherly smile that makes me miss my own. Without even realizing I’m doing it, I reach up and touch the cross around my neck, wishing the woman who originally wore it were here with me.

“Thank you.”

I take a few photos with Ella and Hailey, and even pose for a group shot with the staff, as well as the husband-and-wife owners. “We’ll print that off and hang it on the wall,” the wife assures me.

“I’m honored to be on the wall.”

She gives me a sheepish grin as she asks, “I’m Kelly, and my husband is David. Would you mind if I post it on our website and social media pages? I know you have a lot going on in your personal life, so if you tell me not to, I would understand.”

Once the photograph goes public, there’s a good chance the press would descend upon the town, and while that doesn’t scream good time to me, I also understand there’s a potential for positive PR for this small business. There’s no way I could extinguish the hope reflecting in her eyes. “That would be fine. Your pizza is outstanding, by the way.”

Smiling widely, she asks, “This may be taking it a step too far, but could I quote you on that?”

I can’t help but chuckle. “I would be honored.”

“I’ll let you get to the rest of your evening. Thank you for agreeing to take some photos with us all. When Hailey and Ella each came back and said you were here, everyone sort of freaked out a little. Sorry if they were lurking nearby while you were eating. I made them promise not to take any

photos before you were ready.”

“I appreciate that, Kelly. You have a great business here with good staff. I’m sure I’ll be back while I’m in town.”

The owner grins before rounding up her staff and leaving me be. I turn toward the game room where Tucker and Grayson are and move in their direction. “Hey,” I say, entering the room.

“All done?” Tucker asks, his eyes bright with happiness.

When I glance down at his son, I see the same look reflecting back in his matching blue eyes. “I am.”

“Perfect timing. We just finished our game,” Tucker says, lifting Grayson off the stool and slipping his winter coat on him.

“I won!”

“You beat your dad?” I ask, dropping to my knees in front of the happy boy. When he nods emphatically, I ruffle the hair on his head. “Good job, buddy.”

Then, he throws his little arms around my neck and squeezes me tightly. “I love you,” he whispers, kissing my cheek.

My throat is instantly clogged with emotion as my eyes tear up. “I love you too,” I tell him, realizing I mean it completely. In just a matter of a few hours of being in his presence, I’ve fallen helplessly for this little boy. He’s pure joy, the good this world so desperately needs, and I really hope to see him again soon.

Tucker doesn’t say anything as he holds up my own coat and I slip my arms in, but I swear I hear him inhale as I pull my hair out from beneath the collar. Once he’s in his own leather coat, we walk through the pizzeria and exit. The evening air is bitter, but I don’t seem to mind. In fact, the cold air feels good against my overheated cheeks.

“Thank you for inviting me,” I say as he picks Grayson up and stops at his truck.

He nods, unlocking his door and helping secure his son in the safety seat. I’m about to tell him good night when Grayson hollers, “Bye-bye!”

Smiling, I reply, “Good night, Grayson. I’ll see you soon.”

“Kay!”

Tucker shuts the door and starts the truck, cranking up the heat before turning to face me. He seems a touch nervous, kicking a rock at his foot and fidgeting with his keys. “I had a good time,” he finally says, looking up at me.

“Me too.”

“So,” he starts, pausing for a moment, “dating is out, not that I blame you for not wanting to risk another public shitstorm, but what about talking to an old friend later this evening after he puts his son to bed? Is that allowed?” There’s this boyish hopeful glint in his eyes that takes me right back to when I was eighteen and completely smitten with this man.

“Umm, I think that would be all right. Do you have my number?”

“Did you get a new one?”

I shake my head. The cell phone number I have today is the same one I’ve always had.

“Then, I have your number,” he responds.

“You kept it?”

“Yes.”

Grinning like a lunatic, I step forward and place my lips against his cheek. I catch a whiff of his masculine, woody scent and it goes straight to the apex of my legs. “I still have yours too, Tuck.” And then I step back, even though I’d rather burrow farther into his embrace. “Good night.”

“Night, Kins.”

I feel his eyes on me as I make my way to my brother’s truck and climb inside. With a smile on my face I couldn’t pry off with a putty knife, I start the engine and wait a few minutes for it to warm up.

Tucker’s going to call me.

And there’s no way I can ignore the anticipation and excitement I feel at the thought.

Chapter Ten

Tucker

I'm trying not to be too anxious, but my eyes keep going to the clock on the wall. Grayson fell asleep about thirty minutes ago, and it's taking all the composure I possess not to pick up my phone and tap her name. But I don't want to appear too eager, even though that's exactly what I am.

Patience is usually one of my strong suits, but tonight I seem to be lacking.

I fire off a text to my mom, confirming tomorrow's schedule with Grayson. It's unnecessary, really. Mom and I have this down. We know exactly what needs to be done. My son attends preschool in the mornings, and I drop him off on my way to work. Then, she picks him up before lunchtime, takes him to her house, and he spends the rest of the day with her until I'm off work for the day. We rarely deviate from the normal schedule, especially since Grays doesn't always adapt well to change, so the fact I'm texting her just to waste a little time before I can call Kinsley is completely pointless.

She replies quickly, confirming the usual schedule, and doesn't call me on the stupidity of my text. I'd like to think she assumes I'm just thinking ahead, but I know that's not the case. Mom can read me better than anyone else, mostly because we've spent a lot of extra time together in the last four years. I've always been close to my parents, but since my son was born and his mother passed away, they stepped up for me in a way I could never repay.

Finally, when the clock strikes nine, I can't handle the wait any longer. I bring up my contact list and find her name. To be completely honest, it's been years since I pulled her up on the screen. When she first left Stewart Grove, I did it frequently, wanting so damn badly to give in and call her. To beg her to come home. But I never did. I wouldn't be that man. I let her go for a reason, and that reason was so she could follow her dreams. She did just that too. Kinsley McGregor started at the bottom and worked her way

up, playing and singing in small dive bars and clubs until she was noticed by the right people. From there, she let her talents elevate her to where she is now.

A fucking star.

I tap on her name for the first time in nine years, listening to the device ring. After three rings, she answers. "Hello?"

"Hey. It's Tucker."

Did I really just say that? She already mentioned she kept my number in her phone, so I'm pretty sure she already figured out who was calling.

"I know," she replies softly, a smile evident in her voice. "Grayson sleeping?"

"Yeah, he fell right asleep," I tell her, pacing my living room to try to expel all this excessive energy I suddenly feel.

"Good. He's such a great kid."

"He is," I confirm, pausing in front of the framed photograph of me holding him in the hospital the day he was born. "He can be a handful sometimes, but I'm sure they all are at this age."

"Can I ask you something? Something really personal?"

I walk over to the couch and have a seat. "You can ask me anything."

She seems slightly hesitant, but eventually asks, "When did you find out? About his Down syndrome?"

"One of the blood draws when Evie was about eighteen-weeks pregnant came back abnormal, so we went for an amniocentesis. We received confirmation then."

"I've done a little research," she whispers, as if she's not sure she wants to make the confession or not.

"Yeah?"

"Yes, after I met him the other night, I got online and read up on it."

"He's had some developmental issues, but the preschool he's in really helps. And he loves his teachers. He gets upset when we break routine and he doesn't get to go to school," I tell her, kicking my feet up onto the coffee table.

"May I ask you something else?" she asks, a hint of nervousness in her question.

"Of course."

"Where's his mom?"

I suspected this question would come up soon, and I'm prepared for it.
"She passed away."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Me too," I reply, exhaling deeply. "Evie and I, well, we were like oil and water from the very beginning. I was twenty-four, and she was twenty-two. We dated for about six months before she got pregnant. It wasn't exactly planned, but we were both excited. We gave it our best shot, but ultimately, we were just too different and broke up when she was around seven months along. We co-parented from the start, but it wasn't easy. We had recently split and were each living in our own households, and right when Evie went back to work around seven-weeks postpartum, she hurt her back."

I don't talk a lot about Evie, mostly because I'd never want to paint her in a bad light. Despite her faults, she was a good mother to our son, and I hate she's missing watching him grow up.

"She started using pain meds for the injury and very quickly got hooked. When the prescription ran out, she turned to getting it illegally. When Grayson was four months old, she took too many and accidentally overdosed. Fortunately, he was with me that night, but when she didn't show up the next day to pick him up, I went looking for her. Found her in bed. They say she had passed sometime during the night."

"Oh, Tucker, that's terrible."

"Yeah," I reply, thinking back on that time in my life. "I had just started to notice a change in her but didn't get a chance to say or do anything. It happened so quickly. Her back seemed to be better. She was back at work. I never suspected she was still taking pain meds. Right before she passed, she seemed...I don't know, jittery? Like she was full of energy one minute and then practically passed out the next. I had planned to talk to her that morning when she picked up Grayson, to find out what was going on, but never got the opportunity."

"The worst part is Grayson doesn't remember her. He doesn't really ask about her, but I know it's coming, and I'm dreading that day. It's not a conversation I ever thought I'd be having with my child."

"I can't imagine," she says gently. "Sorry to have brought it up."

"No, don't be. You have every right to ask. Everyone here knows what happened, and honestly, I'd rather you hear it from me than someone else."

There were tons of rumors going around after it happened about her drug use, but most of them were exaggerated. She made a fatal mistake and paid the price. I refuse to let it completely tarnish her memory, because at the end of the day, she gave me the greatest gift of my life, and she really was a good person.”

I’m met with silence for a few very long seconds before she clears her throat.

“I’m pretty sure my husband was cheating on me during our entire marriage. Possibly before then too.” Her confession is like a kick to the chest. I hate she was treated that way. In fact, it makes me want to punch Zander Houston square in the balls so hard he’s unable to get an erection for the rest of his life without them shriveling in pain.

“Fuck him,” I state venomously. I’m usually calmer, more of the lover type of guy, but knowing this jackwagon hurt her the way he did makes me see red.

She snickers lightly through the phone, and the sound washes over me like a cool, spring rain. “I agree.” There’s another pause before she says, “I went to get tested. You know, for STDs?”

My breath hitches in my throat and my lungs refuse to draw in oxygen.

“The results came back clear, but the doctor suggested I get tested again in six months, since some take a while to show up. Can you believe that? I went from what I thought was happily married, living my dream, to hiding at my brother’s house and getting tested for sexually transmitted diseases, all because my husband was screwing anything with a hole while we were touring together.

“That’s the hardest part, Tuck. I had no clue. What kind of self-involved woman doesn’t realize her husband is sleeping with other women?”

“Hey, this isn’t on you. Apparently, he was good at hiding his... indiscretions.”

She snorts. “No shit,” she grumbles. “Still, I feel like I failed.”

“Honey, I know you’re not perfect, but you could have done everything exactly right and he still would have cheated, because he’s an asshole. A lying, cheating, self-centered prick, who only thought of himself instead of his marriage.”

“He told me it just happens in this industry,” she says sadly.

“And maybe it does, but that doesn’t make it right.”

After about ten seconds of silence, she says, “You’re right.”

“Of course I’m right,” I state, hoping to make her smile once more. “I’m always right, Kins. Remember when I told you we’d get stuck out by the Martinezes’ campground after that big rain?”

She giggles the sweetest sound. “If you had better tires on that old crappy truck of yours, we wouldn’t have gotten stuck,” she counters, bringing a huge smile to my face.

“Don’t talk bad about Gertie,” I reply with fake disbelief.

Again, she snickers lightly. “Who names their truck Gertie?”

“Her name was Gertrude,” I state unnecessarily. She’s well aware of my old truck’s name.

“Yes, I know. What ever happened to ol’ Gertie?”

“Sadly, she drove her last mile when I was twenty-three. It was a sad day when I had to take her to the junkyard.”

“Aww, poor baby,” she coos, the sound going straight to my dick.

Shifting where I sit, I say, “I’ll never forget Gertie, but I have Mabel now.”

“Oh my God,” Kinsley replies through her laughter. “Mabel?”

“Hey, now, Grayson helped me name her. We bought her a year ago, and she’s been a good, dependable girl.”

“Men are weird,” she mumbles.

“We are. I bet if you ask your brother, he named his truck too.”

She gasps. “He didn’t,” she says but then waits a moment before asking, “Did he? I’m going to have to ask Cameron when they get home from work.”

Smiling, I lean my head back against the couch and close my eyes. “This was nice.”

“It was. Sorry I dumped all my marriage drama on you.”

“I’m not,” I reply right away. “And stop apologizing. We both have baggage, and that’s all right.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

“I should let you go,” she says just before yawning.

I glance at the clock and it’s almost half past nine. Even though we’ve only chatted for thirty minutes, I don’t want to keep her up too late or

monopolize all her time. "Yeah," I state, even though it's the farthest from what I want. What I'd like to do is keep talking, get to know her all over again, but I know I should take a step back. Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither was a solid friendship.

"I hope we can chat again soon." Her words make me happy.

"Me too. I'm always a phone call away, Kins."

She's silent for a moment before adding, "Maybe we can chat again tomorrow night. After Grayson goes to bed?"

"I'd like that," I say, but I don't think she hears me.

"Unless you have other plans."

"My only plans after Grayson goes to bed are laundry and picking up the house. I'd love to chat with you again," I insist.

"Okay," she replies, and there's no denying the smile in her voice. "All right."

"I'll call you tomorrow night," I tell her.

"Sounds great. Good night, Tuck."

"Night, Kins."

Hanging up the phone is hard, but I do it with a big grin on my face. I never anticipated this overwhelming feeling of contentment talking to Kinsley again would bring me, but here we are. Just sharing a meal and a short talk on the phone has me tied up in knots, resurrecting emotions long buried.

Perhaps talking to her again isn't in my best interest, but I'm certain, at this point, I'll take the chance. It's evident she needs a friend, and if that's all we can ever be, I'm okay with that. Because at the end of the day, I realize I need a friend too. Being a single parent who has little interaction with other adults outside of his immediate family, boss, and the occasional conversation with Kellen can be lonely.

So I'll grab the olive branch she's extending and see what happens.

I just need to remember her time here is temporary.

My cock is throbbing.

I'm doing everything I can to not take it in my hand, but it's no use. Every time I close my eyes and try to sleep, I picture her. I remember what it

was like to be a young, late-teen boy, exploring sex with the first girl he ever loved. For months after she left, it was her memory that had me hard, aching, and jacking off nightly. Over time, those memories started to fade but never diminished completely. They continued to lurk in the shadows, ready to pop out at the most inconvenient moment.

Like tonight.

My brain merges the memories of the girl I once loved and the woman who returned in her place. She's...different. Sexier with her feminine curves, soft and delicate in all the right places. Her giggle, so light and carefree. The same sweet sound it was a decade ago when we were together.

Reaching into my lounge pants, I squeeze my cock and let the pleasure sweep through my veins. Moments later, I'm shimmying out of my pants, shoving them past my knees and re-gripping my dick. I already know this will be embarrassingly quick, thanks to the fact I've been thinking about her since the moment we got off the phone. For hours, I've lain in bed, lightly sleeping off and on, being woken up by a hard-on that won't quit.

Closing my eyes, I picture her. She's on her knees in front of me, gazing up at me as she licks her lips. Her pretty pink tongue slips out once more, licking the liquid off the end of my cock. I groan as my blood zings through me, the anticipation so thick you could cut it with a knife.

Then, she leans forward and takes my dick into her mouth. She's warm, hot, and wet as she glides along my hard length. That devilish tongue of hers swirls around the head of my cock, drawing another long groan from my chest.

Wrapping her hand around the base of my cock, she slowly glides it upward until she meets her mouth, repeating the motion as she gently twists her wrist. Oral sex is great, but no one has ever had the ability to take me from zero to ready to fucking blow as fast as Kinsley could. As much as I'd try to just sit back and enjoy the view and the way she made me feel, it was always more with her.

She slowly picks up the pace, working her hand and her mouth simultaneously. My balls are already drawing up, the tingle shooting up my spine. I thread my fingers into her hair, holding on for dear life as she works on swallowing my cock.

My eyes are glued to her as she gazes up at me. The intimacy reflecting back is too much and combined with the pure euphoria of the

blow job, I'm about to explode down her throat. "Kins," I whisper, a warning of what's about to happen.

She doesn't pull back, though. If anything, she doubles down on her efforts to make me come, moving her hand faster and taking me even farther into her mouth. The head of my cock brushes against the back of her throat, and even though I feel her gag, she keeps at it.

"I'm going to come," I warn her one last time, but she refuses to relent. With my eyes locked on hers, I come all over her tongue and down her throat, watching as she swallows everything I give until I'm left shaking and ready to fall over.

Except when I glance down at my bare chest, I only see the mess I left while fantasizing about my ex-girlfriend. I gulp in a deep breath and just lie here, waiting on my racing heart to slow to a normal pace. It takes a few minutes, but eventually, I get up out of bed, pull up my discarded lounge pants, and go to the bathroom. It only takes a minute to clean myself up and return to my bed, this time much more relaxed.

I hate the fact I had to jack off thinking about her like that, but she's always been a page straight out of my wildest dreams. Even when we were dumb teenagers, she was so much more than I ever expected. It shouldn't be any different in my fantasies too.

The moment my head hits the pillow, I feel my body give in to the exhaustion. I close my eyes without looking at the clock to see how much sleep I'll actually get tonight, and with a smile on my face and thoughts of her, I drift off to sleep.

Chapter Eleven

Kinsley

“Good news. Everything was filed with the court, and your sixty-day waiting period has officially begun,” my attorney, Gretchen Foster says.

“That’s good,” I say, shoving the clean towels into the bathroom cabinet. “So, what’s next?”

“He’ll be served, probably tomorrow, and we’ll start mediation. You’ll need to prepare yourself for that. I want you to think through your joint marital assets and make a list of the things you want or don’t want. It’ll come in handy when the negotiations begin.”

“I’ll need to be there for that part,” I deduce, feeling my heart drop in my chest. The thought of going back to Nashville right now doesn’t really sit well with me.

“For that, yes, but not until we sit down with them. I’m hoping his attorney will be open to discussions via video conference and whatnot, since you’re not in the state at the moment,” Gretchen says.

“That would be nice.”

“What are your plans?” she asks.

“I want to stay here for a while. It’s a nice change of pace,” I tell her, appreciating the slower lifestyle and laid-back feel of my hometown.

“At your brother’s?”

“Well, maybe not here. I’ve been doing some thinking, about possibly renting or buying a place. My brother would be fine if I stayed, but I feel bad, considering he’s living with his girlfriend now too.”

“I understand. I’m going to start a deep dig into your financials, since we know those will be a big topic in this divorce. Is the list of accounts you sent me still accurate?”

“It is,” I reply, thankful Zander and I kept our accounts separate throughout our marriage. Of course, now I understand he was probably attempting to hide things he didn’t want me to know about.

“When his lawyer contacts me, I’m going to suggest a fifty-fifty split of

all marital assets, including property and vehicles. Everything in your banking accounts would stay yours and the same for his, since there is nothing joint on that end. However, I'm guessing he won't be happy with that, considering your income from shows, merchandising, and songwriting royalties is sizably greater than his."

"I'm not giving him everything, but I'm not going to fight him tooth and nail either, Gretchen. I want this done."

"His infidelity will help your case," she says. "It places a lot of weight on him."

"How soon?"

"Once I hear from his attorney, we'll schedule mediation and I'll let you know."

"Thank you," I reply.

"You're welcome. If you need anything before then, call my office or send me an email. If you do end up purchasing a home or new vehicle prior to the settlement being reached, keep records of all large purchases and make sure it comes out of your solo accounts."

"It will."

"Good. Let me know if you have any questions. I'll check in soon."

"Thank you," I reply before signing off.

My mind spins and I instantly want to call Tucker, but I refrain. It's the middle of the afternoon on Wednesday, and I know he's at work and unable to talk. Instead, I go in search of my usual sounding board, knowing he'll always listen without judgment. He's always been amazingly supportive, even if he didn't completely agree with my decision.

I find Kellen in the kitchen with Cameron. They're making cold cut sandwiches together, and watching them work in tandem, doing the most basic, mundane thing like making lunch, sends a pang of longing into my chest.

"Oh, hey." My brother is smiling at me, and I can see the happiness radiating from him. I am thrilled he found Cameron, especially after he swore off love years ago. She snuck in under his radar and is showing him how it's supposed to be.

I want that.

"Hi," I reply, entering the kitchen slowly. "Can I talk to you about something?"

A hint of worry flashes in his blue eyes, and he turns to Cameron. "Can you give us a minute?" he asks her.

Just as she's nodding and setting the butter knife used to spread mayo on the bread, I stop her. "No, please stay. It's nothing you can't hear too. In fact, I might need your help with this one," I state, nodding toward my big brother.

His eyes narrow and he crosses his arms over his chest. "If you're planning to gang up on me for something, I don't think I want to be a part of this conversation."

"It's not that bad, just finish making your lunch and have a seat," I suggest, taking one of the empty chairs at the table.

A minute later, Cameron and Kellen both join me, Kellen grabbing three bottles of water from the fridge before taking his seat. "All right, what's up?" he asks, twisting the top off and taking a small drink.

"I just talked to my attorney. All papers have been filed, and Zander will be served very soon. The sixty-day waiting period has officially begun," I start, watching as Cameron reaches across the table for two napkins, handing one to my brother.

"Good. In two months' time, you'll be rid of the fucker," Kellen replies, his mouth full of ham and cheese on white bread.

My lips curl upward, cracking into a smile at his comment. "That's the plan."

"And you're okay? Really okay with that?"

"Yes," I reply instantly. "I've thought a lot about me, him, and us together, and everything I thought we had was a mirage. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't all bad, but it wasn't real. I wanted the happily ever after, and I jumped at the first chance to have it, despite looking deep in my heart to know if he was right for me. We made great friends, and I should have kept it that way, but he offered me security and affection, and it felt like the right step to take."

"It can be hard to see who someone really is at first. Usually, it takes you looking at them from the outside of the bubble they've created before you see who they really are," Cameron says, our eyes meeting from across the table.

I've heard all about her past with an ex who was not who she thought he was. He was dealing drugs and left town, taking money and merchandise

with him when he went. She was left behind, cleaning up his mess and paying back his debt. Then, one day, after more than a year of being away, he returned. That's when my brother stepped in, offering her a place to stay when she needed it the most and an out when her ex was hinting at them getting back together. Their fake relationship bloomed into the real deal, and now they're together and make it look so easy.

I nod, understanding her statement completely. While our situations are different, there are similarities too.

"Anyway, I want to work on me. I want to find who I truly am, and I want to do that here. In Stewart Grove."

My brother smiles widely at me, clearly excited by the fact I might be hanging around for a while. "Really? That's great! I'm thrilled you're hanging around."

This is the part where he might object. "Actually, I think I want to get my own place."

I can tell the moment realization sets in. He sits up straight, the confusion written all over his face. "What? Why?"

"Before you say any more, I need you to know how much I appreciate what you've done for me, and not just since that video went viral. You've given me a place to lay low for years. You gave me your guest room. But things are different now for you. You have Cameron," I say, and when he opens his mouth to argue, I hold up my hand. "Just hear me out, all right?"

He holds my gaze for a few long seconds before slowly nodding. Cameron reaches over and takes his hand below the table. No, I can't see the action, but I recognize the movement and see the way he instantly relaxes in his seat, as if just the feel of her skin calms him.

"Like I said, you have Cameron, and while I've loved being here with both of you, I can't keep taking up any more of your space, especially what could be long term. I want my own space. I want to bring some of my musical instruments here and play and write music. I want to walk around naked," I quip, earning the exact result I expected.

"Stop," he mutters, closing his eyes for a moment and shaking his head. "You know you can do all that here. Just maybe keep the nakedness inside the bedroom."

I'm already smiling. "I know I can do most of that stuff here, but the fact remains. I think I want my own place."

“You think?” he asks, his sandwich all but forgotten.

“No, I know. This is the right step for me.”

He considers what I said for several minutes, and I wait him out. One thing I love about Kellen is he doesn't just flex his big brother muscles and demand something from me. He always ponders my side, my feelings, my wants, even if he may not completely agree. It's why he's always been my person, the one I go to when I need advice, or at least he has been since I moved to Nashville. Before that, Tucker was the one I talked about my hopes and dreams with, the one who always encouraged me to live for me and not anyone else.

“What are you thinking?” he asks, finally giving his sandwich a little attention.

“Well, I thought I'd either rent or buy a place in Stewart Grove. This way, I'll have my own space here, and when I'm ready to go back to Nashville, I'll look for a house there too.”

“You're not keeping the house you bought with dick wrinkle?” he asks, his eyes taking on that fierce look again as he mentions my ex.

“No. I don't care what happens to it. He can have it or we can sell it, but I'm not going back there again.”

“He doesn't deserve half of anything,” Kellen replies, shoving the last quarter of his sandwich in his mouth and chewing.

“I agree, but I'm not letting this divorce drag out because of possessions. We're going to start mediation, splitting everything fifty-fifty, but something tells me he's going to fight that. My income is considerably higher than his, so they'll use that as leverage.”

“That's because it's your talents that got you where you are. He was just along for the ride,” Kellen counters.

Another grin spreads across my lips. Kellen has always been nothing but a proud, supportive big brother. “Thank you.”

“All right,” he starts, pushing his empty plate aside. “What do you want to do first?”

“I'd like to check properties for sale before moving to rentals. I think buying a place is the way to go. I can just pay someone to help maintain it while I'm in Tennessee.”

“You'll do no such thing,” he counters. “I'll do it.”

“I can't ask you to do that.”

He levels me with a bright blue gaze. "You didn't ask."

"And I'll help anyway I can," Cameron adds, seeming a little excited. "You're clearly the decorator here, but I'm more than willing to do what I can."

I look around the kitchen I helped my brother remodel—and by helped, I designed it and he paid for it, despite my grumblings. A thrill sweeps through my blood. The current Nashville house was new when we bought it and required only a bit of personalization, but I've always wanted to get my hands dirty and take something old and make it new again.

"When do you want to look at listings?" he asks.

"Now?" I ask, grinning from ear to ear.

Kellen laughs and stands up. "I figured that's what you'd say. Let me grab my laptop and you can look through the local realtor's site."

He's up before I can even suggest I grab my own. "Kellen?" Once he pauses at the doorway and turns to face me, I add, "Thanks. I love you. Even if you're stupid all the time."

He snorts and rolls his eyes. "I love you too, brat." And then he's off to grab his electronics.

"You know you really can stay here," Cameron says after he leaves the room. "I hope I'm not pushing you out."

I look up, my wide eyes meeting her worried ones. "Seriously? Oh, God, Cameron. Please don't think that. I adore you and am so happy my brother pulled his head out of his ass. You're like the sister I never had," I tell her, feeling the emotion of my statement clog my throat.

"Me too," she replies, reaching out and grabbing my hand. "I just didn't want to be the reason you're looking for somewhere else to go."

"I promise you're not." And then I add, "Well, not directly. I'm sort of hoping you and my brother will need the room soon for a nursery."

"What?"

I look up and find Kellen standing in the doorway, his eyes wide. His gaze zeroes in on his girlfriend, who just shakes her head. "I'm not pregnant."

"Oh." He places his laptop on the table and turns to face her. "You know, I think I'm a little sad you're not."

"What?" she asks, gaping at him with shock-filled eyes. "Seriously? We haven't talked about this."

My brother shrugs. "Well, maybe we should," he states casually, while booting up his system.

"Yes! Talk about that. I'd make the best auntie ever. *Ever*, Kellen. I will be cool, fun Aunt Kins and spoil them rotten," I tell him proudly, practically vibrating in my seat.

"Let's see what kind of houses there are available, and Cam and I can discuss the baby thing," my brother replies.

"All I'm saying is it should definitely be a thing." I give them both a pointed look, which makes them laugh.

Moving my chair around to the front of the table, Kellen taps away on the keyboard and brings up the website for the local real estate office. "Anything you're specifically looking for?" he asks when the screen to refine our search pops up.

"No, not really. I'll consider about anything. Obviously houses here are a little less expensive than where I was living before, but I don't need all the square footage."

"No, maybe not, but you need it to be safe," he replies, scrolling through the listings.

"Agreed. First thing I'd do is put in a security system, like the one here," I tell him. When Kellen bought this place and I started staying here on long weekends, we put in a good system for security. He's never had anyone try to get into his place, but considering my semi-high-profile status, we didn't want to take any chances of there being a problem.

We look through a dozen or so houses, most of them looking familiar despite the almost decade since I lived here, and I start to wonder if I'm going to need to broaden my search radius.

"You could always build," Cameron says, pointing to a decent-sized lot with a small piece of timber adjacent to the back of the property.

I realize where that piece of land is located, mostly because I used to travel down that particular roadway often when I was a teenager. It's on the opposite side of the trees from my favorite house in Stewart Grove. As a child, I'd ride my bike down that road, just to see it. It's one of the bigger homes in town, but it wasn't just the size that caught my attention. The dormer windows and the brick façade, along with the large wraparound porch with swing did that. The couple who owned it was older, their kids long gone to live their own lives.

“Wait.” My eyes are drawn to the photograph on the screen. “That one.” My heart is beating a million miles a second as the first picture pops up on the screen. It’s the house.

The house.

I practically push his hands out of the way and make a grab for the laptop, turning it fully facing where I sit. My fingers start tapping, moving through photo after photo. I’ve never seen the inside of the house, and here it is.

For sale.

“I think she found her house,” Kellen quips at Cameron, but I pay them no attention. I’m too busy poring over the information on the screen.

Snapping my fingers, I say, “Hurry! Get my phone!”

“Why? Is it going to explode?” he teases, reaching across the table for the electronic device.

“It might if you don’t hurry,” I argue, taking the phone from his hand as soon as it’s within reach.

I dial the number on the screen and ask for Jeremy Dirks, the listing agent.

“This is Jeremy Dirks,” the older man says when he comes on the line.

“Hello, Mr. Dirks. My name is Kinsley McGregor, and I’d like to make an offer on the Holstead Place property.”

He doesn’t reply right away, but when he does, he asks, “Do you mean you want to schedule a tour?”

“No, sir. I’d like to make an offer. Cash. And I’d like to take possession as soon as possible.”

“She doesn’t waste any time, does she?” Cameron whispers to my brother, who just sits there and smiles.

“No, no, she doesn’t. When Kins wants something, she goes after it.”

Not always, but I’m working on that.

I’m working on me, and it’s time I put me first for a change.

Chapter Twelve

Tucker

When my phone rings on Saturday night, chances are, it's Kinsley.

We haven't spoken on the phone since the previous Monday night, but we've texted almost nightly. I know her Mom was due to arrive today, so the elation I feel when I see her name on the screen is short-lived. Worry that something's wrong quickly replaces it, and that's what has me tapping the device to accept the call a little harder than normal.

"Hello?"

"I've had the best day ever," she replies by way of greeting.

My smile is instantaneous. "Yeah?"

"Seriously, the best."

"Did your mom make it to town okay?" I ask, even though the roads aren't bad at the moment, thanks to a rise in temperatures.

"She did, yes. Thanks for askin'," she replies quickly before changing the direction of the conversation back. "So, ask me why my day has been so great."

"All right, why was your day so great, Kins?"

"Two things. One, my soon-to-be ex-husband responded to the papers. He's agreed to mediation."

"Yeah? Excellent news," I reply, even though I don't feel as jubilated as she does. Agreeing to enter mediation is a hell of a long way away from reaching a settlement and finalizing the divorce.

"And...I bought a house." She squeals in excitement, making me laugh.

"A house?" I ask, hoping the tightness I feel in my chest doesn't come through my words. The fact she'll be leaving, returning to Nashville again, makes my stomach churn.

"You'll know exactly which one too. I talked to the realtor Wednesday, and he agreed to take my offer to the clients. They jumped on it immediately, so I requested to see it before I signed anything. Mom, Kellen, Cameron, and I went, and—"

“Wait,” I interrupt, my brain struggling to catch up. “You bought a house...here?”

She pauses, as if trying to catch up herself. “Yes?”

My heart does this weird flip in my chest, and I can’t help but smile. “Really?”

“Yes, Tuck, really,” she chastises with humor. “Is that okay?” This time there’s worry in her question.

“Yes, of course. I just assumed when you said you bought a house it would be in Nashville.”

“Oh, yeah, that’ll come next, but this one is here. In Stewart Grove.”

“That’s great news, Kins. Your own place while you visit,” I say, taking a seat on my bed.

“I want to divide my time between Nashville and here, and this feels like the best way to do that. Kellen and Cameron need their space and not having me underfoot all the time. I’ve missed home, to be honest, and going through this mess with Zander has just proven to me my people, with the exception of a handful, are here.”

“What have your parents said about all this?” I ask.

“Mom was happy I filed and got away. She confessed she wasn’t a huge fan of Zander’s but like Kellen, tolerated him for my sake. And my dad, well, he’s vacationing on some island with his barely legal girlfriend. But he says he’ll call me when he gets stateside.” I can practically hear her rolling her eyes.

“So, you’ve found a house here already. That’s awesome. Which one?”

She doesn’t reply right away. “Actually, can I show you?”

“Now?” I ask, glancing toward my bedroom door. My son is sleeping just down the hall, and there’s no way I’d wake him up at this time of night.

“No, not now. Maybe tomorrow? We can’t go in without the realtor, but the sellers agreed to the deal. Since I’m paying cash, the title company is already working on the paperwork and my bank is sending me a cashier’s check for the purchase and fees.”

“Tomorrow works, but can you do that? Can you buy a house without it sending up red flags all over the place where your ex is concerned?”

“Actually, I can. We kept our finances separate, much to his dismay. He tried for years to convince me it was easier and more convenient to just have one account, but I never caved. All I kept hearing was years’ worth of

my parents arguing over money. As soon as it was put into their joint account someone was spending it, usually my dad.”

“Thank God for small favors,” I reply, leaning back against my headboard and tossing one arm behind my head.

“Right? Of course, all our big purchases came out of one of my accounts. The only time he spent his money was on one of his large, unnecessary expenses like his extra sports car and the boat we never used, and that was because I refused to pay for them. He had a newer Mercedes SUV that I bought, so if he wanted another car, it was coming out of his money.”

“Good for you,” I state, impressed with the fact she was so mature and responsible with money at a young age. Most early twenty-year-olds who receive even a portion of the money she’s earned would have gone out and spent it on elaborate, excessive things.

“The only bills we have are the house and the SUVs, which my mom brought mine down here for me so I can stop stealing Kellen’s truck or Cameron’s car.”

“You had something else too?” I say, recalling seeing another vehicle here on the night I delivered her food from Burgers and Brew.

“I used a rental to get down here because the press was camped outside my house, and I returned it about a week ago, since Mom volunteered to bring my SUV,” she informs me.

“How will she get home?” I inquire.

“I’m flying her. She has a friend, Stephanie, who agreed to pick her up at the airport next weekend when she goes back.”

“So, tell me more about this mediation.”

She sighs into the phone. “I don’t know much yet, other than he’s agreed to meet. And I don’t want to talk about him right now. Tell me about your day. What did you and Grayson do?” she asks, her voice much more eager than it was.

“Well, we played with the tractors this afternoon,” I reply with a chuckle, since that’s all we seem to do lately.

“Aww, that sounds like fun,” she sings. “I might have to write a song about a tractor.”

“It would be a hit, I’m sure,” I insist. “And Grayson would love it.”

“Hmm,” she says, as if truly contemplating writing a song.

“Anyway, we watched a movie this evening and had popcorn and chocolate milk. He fell asleep before the credits started rolling and has been out ever since,” I tell her.

“Which one?”

“*Cars*. He can’t get enough of Mater and the tractor tipping scene.”

She giggles through the phone and the sound goes straight to my gut like a punch. “I love that part, and Mater is my favorite character. Why wouldn’t he be? He’s the world’s best backward driver.”

I’m grinning, as she does her best Mater impression. “I should have known you’d have seen it.”

“I love animated movies,” she replies.

“I remember.” My words are barely above a whisper as I’m transported right back to a time when life was much simpler. A typical Friday or Saturday night had us snuggled up on the couch in her parents’ living room, watching whatever film she wanted to see that week. Often, I used it as an excuse to hold her close, copping the occasional feel of her boobs or ass, and stealing as many kisses as she’d let me.

When she yawns, I check the time. It’s after ten, which means it’s probably time for me to let her go to get some sleep. “Where’s your mom?” I ask, wondering how the sleeping arrangements are planned. As far as I remember, Kellen’s house only has two bedrooms set up.

“She’s sleeping already. I’m in the storage room.”

My mind kinda blanks out for a minute as I consider her words. “The storage room?”

Again, she giggles softly. “The third bedroom he uses for storage. We went and bought a mattress and a secondhand nightstand so there’s more space. I wouldn’t mind sharing with Mom, but the bed is a full-sized one and I’m not looking to be her big spoon. So, I convinced Kel to let me throw one of those thick air mattresses in the storage bedroom. He, of course, said no, but I was relentless. Mom tried to take the air mattress, but that wasn’t going to happen. Her back isn’t the best, and even though this mattress is *thick*, I wasn’t letting her sleep on it. You know, it’s kinda fun being in here. Like camping, but with mountains of Kellen and Cameron’s crap.”

A gravelly chuckle flies from my mouth as I picture her surrounded by stacks of boxes and resting on an air mattress. “You’re something else, you know that?”

"I hope you mean that in a good way."

"I do. Not many country superstars would be caught dead sleeping on an air mattress anywhere. They would have booked the closest hotel with room service."

"I'm not a superstar, Tuck. Far from it. My name will never be on the same level as Reba or Faith or Garth. But that's not what I want anyway. I want to write and sing amazing songs and have fun doing it, you know?"

"And you've done that."

"I have," she replies before she yawns again.

"Get some sleep, Kins. Enjoy your glamping in your brother's storage room."

She giggles.

Fuck. That sound.

"I will. What time do you want to see the house tomorrow?"

"Whatever time you want to show me."

"What fits Grayson's schedule? I don't want to disrupt that."

There she is again. The sweet, considerate woman I remember. She always thinks of others, often before she thinks of herself. "Anytime after three would work. He lies down after lunch and naps," I tell her. Three o'clock would give me plenty of time to get him up, pottied, and a small snack in him before we head out. "You're okay with him coming with me?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

I shrug, even though she can't see me. "Not everyone understands what it's like to be friends with a single parent."

"I may not have a lot of experience with it, but he's an extension of you, and I understand he's with you the majority of the time when you're not working. Besides, he's an awesome little dude and I enjoy spending time with him."

Now I'm the one smiling. "Thank you."

"How about three thirty? That gives you time to see the outside of the place before it gets dark. Kellen already gave me a few suggestions on a couple things I want to change, but I'd love to know your opinion too."

Warmth spreads through my chest. "All right. Three thirty it is. Will you tell me where I'm going?"

"I'll pick you up."

"We'll take my truck," I state, knowing it'll take longer for me to switch

Grayson's booster seat from the truck to her SUV than necessary.

"I don't mind driving," she counters.

"Grayson's seat is already in my truck."

"Oh. That makes sense. Okay, I'll be at your house at three thirty."

"Sounds good, Kins. Can't wait."

"Me either. See you tomorrow, Tuck."

"Night, love," I whisper, the sentiment out of my mouth before I can stop it.

Old habits and all that.

Silence greets me on the other end, and I wonder if I've already fucked up this new chance at friendship. Then, she replies, "Night, Tucky."

Smiling, I tap on the screen to disconnect the call.

Tucky.

Kinsley McGregor was the only person to ever get away with calling me that. In fact, when it fell from her lips, I started to like it. During our time together, she'd only use it when we were alone, and often, when we were naked. Hearing her use it now has my cock hard and my mind taking another unexpected trip down memory lane.

Running my hand down my face, I realize I'm in for another long, sleepless night.

"Remember when I told you I had a surprise for you?" I ask, helping Grayson into his John Deere cowboy boots.

"Yep!"

"Well, in just a few minutes, we're going for a ride with Kinsley. She's going to take us to see something special, and I'm going to need you on your best behavior, all right?"

"Kay!"

Ruffling his hair, I stand up and place my hands on my hips. "Maybe if you're a good boy while we're gone, we'll order dinner."

"Mac-n-cheese!"

"We have mac and cheese here, buddy. Let's think of something different," I state, heading over to the front entry closet to retrieve our coats.

“Fwench fries!”

“I can work with that,” I reply, slipping my old leather coat on before turning to Grayson. “Come on, little dude. Let’s get your coat on.”

Just as he’s sliding his second arm into the sleeve, there’s a knock on the front door. “Me!” he hollers, wiggling out of my grasp and running to the door.

“Wait,” I state with authority. “Are you supposed to open the door?”

Shyly, he shakes his head.

“Let me look to see who’s there first,” I instruct, going through the motions of looking through the peephole, even though I already know it’s Kinsley on the other side. Then, I release the deadbolt I always keep engaged, because too many times in the last handful of months, I’ve caught him trying to open the front door, and since he’s not strong enough yet to release the deadbolt, it’s one of the major safety features I have in my arsenal to protect him.

The moment I pull open the door and Grayson spots Kinsley, he practically leaps up into her arms. “Kins!”

“Howdy, Grayson. I’m so happy to see you,” she replies, kneeling in front of him. “Did your dad tell you we’re going for a ride?”

Grayson nods eagerly, his hands already touching her face.

“Well, should we get going then?” she asks, earning another nod from my son. When she stands, he extends his hand toward her, and all I can do is stare in adoration as she slips her hand around his and smiles.

“Are you ready?” I ask, drawing her gaze my way.

“I am. Are you?”

“Yes,” I reply, making sure I have my keys and wallet before holding open the door.

As she walks past me, my eyes take a moment to drink her in. She’s wearing a pair of skinny jeans, fuzzy little ankle boots, and a fluffy blue winter coat. Her head is covered in a tan knitted stocking cap with a ball on the top of her head, and her brown hair is braided down her back. She looks as sexy as she does adorable, and I’ll tell you, I’m here for it.

When we reach my truck, I help Grayson into the back seat and get strapped into his booster, and as Kinsley moves toward the passenger seat, I stop her by saying, “You might as well drive. You know where we’re going.”

She pauses and turns my way. “Seriously? You’re letting me drive?”

I shrug, as if her question is the silliest one I've ever heard. "Why wouldn't I? Don't you have a license?"

Smiling, she angles her head to the side. "Of course I do, weirdo. I'm just not used to getting to drive anywhere, especially someone else's vehicle."

"Well, that's just silly. And didn't you drive your brother's truck for a while before your car got here?"

She walks my way and takes the keys from my hand. "Yes, but that's different. That's my brother. He's required to let me use his things."

"And you're allowed to drive my things while you're here," I insist, suddenly blushing a little at my comment. My dirty mind goes straight into a detailed list of all the *things* she can use. At the top of the list is my...

"Good to know I can use your stuff," she teases, clearly having read into my comment too.

We climb into the truck, and Grayson starts chatting about Kinsley driving the truck. He's full of questions, wondering where we're going, and if there's a swimming pool there. Weird, because to my knowledge, he's never been swimming. There must have been a TV show or movie with a swimming pool in it.

I'm listening to her talk to my son, all while keeping my eyes on our surroundings. She knows exactly where we're going. Even though she hasn't lived here in nearly a decade, these streets are as familiar as the back of her hand. She pulls down one of the roads I rarely go down. There are only a handful of houses, but the road really doesn't lead anywhere but back into town. Plus, there's a house down here she's always loved, and it was a little painful to see it and not think of her.

Wait.

We're slowing down as we approach one thirteen Holstead Place, and my eyes are glued to the brick home. "You're kidding me," I say as she turns into the driveway and parks behind a compact vehicle. A man gets out, someone I recognize as one of the realtors in the office on the main drag, and heads for the front door to unlock it.

Smiling from ear to ear, she puts the truck into Park and turns my way. "Nope. Can you believe it?"

"You've always loved this house," I say, glancing toward the big porch and the freshly painted white swing.

“I have, and now it’s mine.” Releasing her safety belt, she practically vibrates in her seat as she gives me her complete attention and says, “Ready to go see my new home?”

“Let’s do it.”

Chapter Thirteen

Kinsley

“I want to turn this room into my music room.”

I don't know why I'm so nervous to show him this part of the house. Perhaps it's because it's such a large space, the entire back half of the house, and there are a lot of windows. Glass is horrible for acoustics, but I wouldn't be using it for that reason. It's not a professional recording studio, it would be a place I can write and record snippets of audio for my own creative process.

Plus, the view of the timber out back is one of my favorite elements. As soon as I saw the space, I felt the need to sit and write. The previous owners used it as a family room, and I'm certain that would be the intention of any other family who would purchase this house, but that's not how I see it being used. I envision songs being written within these walls and all I want to do is make it happen.

“It's perfect,” Tucker replies, gazing around the vast, empty space, the hint of a smile on his face.

“Perfick,” Grayson mimics proudly, making me grin. He's being given a piggyback ride so he doesn't run in the house. Not that I would mind, but as Grayson said, I don't technically own it yet, so we should be respectful of someone else's property. Grayson eagerly accepted a ride on his dad's back in lieu of walking.

“Yeah?” I ask, and then it's as if my mouth opens and the words just flow. “I want to put a wall of bookshelves over here,” I state, moving toward the back wall. “I have so much music memorabilia I can display. I know I could easily put it in whatever house I get in Nashville too, but I can just envision it all here, since this place will be my refuge. I'll need to change the doorway, because I want to be able to close a door, but Kellen doesn't think that'll take too much work. I'll also need to upgrade the security system and I want to take out the short wall between the living room and the foyer, so it's more welcoming and less choppy. Is that a word used in real estate?”

That's how that space feels. Choppy. Especially with the staircase straight ahead. I want to open it up. Plus, by doing that, I think it'll have more natural light from the windows on the north side, right? And yes, I'll lose a little wall space on the opposite side, but I can come up with other ways to utilize my furniture and whatnot. I don't think I'm losing anything by taking it out."

I'm breathing hard, probably because I just said three minutes' worth of words in about thirty seconds, but Tucker just rolls with it. "I love your ideas, Kins. I think it's going to be perfect when it's done."

I'm smiling and doing a little jig instantly. "It's an amazing place, isn't it? I've always loved this house, and that's when I could only see the outside. Now that I've been inside, I'm so in awe over it, you know?"

"I get it, and I think the improvements you plan to make will definitely benefit you. I say go for it."

I exhale slowly and loudly. "Okay. Yeah, good. I just wish I could start already," I reply with a chuckle. "I'm ready to move in."

"Do you have stuff?"

I think back to the lists I've made at the request of my attorney. There are personal items and some furniture I want from the Nashville house, but not a lot. And most of it would probably go into storage for my new home there, whenever I get a place. That'll be next on my to-do list, but I'm not there yet.

"Not enough to fill a house. I plan to purchase a new bedroom set, living and dining room pieces, and to be honest, I'd really love to shop secondhand and repurpose pieces. I've always loved painting or refinishing older items, and it would be nice to do that again," I tell him. "A whole house filled with my own treasures."

"You've always had an eye for that kind of thing. I remember how you redid your headboard, nightstand, and dresser in that distressed, cracked paint look."

Smiling, I nod. "Those were my favorite pieces. I wish I would have kept them," I reply, making a face as I recall Zander refusing to move them into our new home together.

"What was that about?" he asks, always observant.

"Nothing," I quickly say, but end up telling him what he wants to know. "Zander didn't like the 'used' look. He suggested we buy all new furniture to go in our brand-new house."

His eyes narrow. "What a wanker," he mutters.

"Wanker!" Grayson hollers, clearly having heard his dad's comment.

"Sorry, buddy. We don't say that. It's a bad word. Daddy shouldn't have said it."

"Oh," he replies sadly before grinning widely. "Daddy time-out!"

Tucker chuckles. "Yeah, Daddy needs a time-out."

"He does," I confirm, reaching out both of my hands for him. "Wanna go upstairs with me?"

Grayson starts wiggling, and I wince and reach for the four-year-old so he doesn't fall off his dad's back. But like the true pro Tucker is, he quickly kneels, holding his son to him until his little feet are on the ground and he can let go. I reach for his little hand and smile when he quickly places his inside of it.

"Let's leave your daddy to finish his time-out. He can put his nose in the corner while we're gone," I say, making Grayson giggle the sweetest noise I've ever heard.

"Yeah, Daddy. In duh corner!"

Tucker narrows his eyes at me and shakes his head. "That wasn't very nice. I'll use my time to plan my revenge."

"Oh, so you're going to continue to be naughty?" I ask. The innuendo dropping from my tongue effortlessly.

"Definitely. Naughty's my middle name," he quips with the heat of his words practically reaching out and stroking my clit.

"I remember that about you," I reply, taking a few steps toward the double arched doorway. Pausing, I glance over my shoulder and add, "It was my favorite part."

The fire in his blue eyes is instantaneous and all-consuming as his gaze holds me in place. "I remember," he mutters softly.

My eyes drop down to his groin, and even though he's wearing jeans and a hoodie, the prominent outline of his erection is evident through the material. My mouth goes dry and my tongue slips out to lick my lips.

"Kins," he practically growls.

I look back up, his stormy eyes the color of dark sapphires. The exact shade I recall from when we were younger and led by our hormones. "Yes?" I ask, my eyes, once again, diverting to his hard-on.

"Stop. It."

My body is humming in ways it hasn't in...well, a very long time, and I know it has everything to do with the man before me. He's always had this effect on me, and apparently, it has continued despite a nine-year absence.

"Come on, Kins!" Grayson bellows, lightly pulling at my hand.

"Let's go, Grays. I think your dad needs some alone time down here," I quip, flicking my gaze down to his zipper and adding a wink for good measure. The last thing I hear as I'm leaving the room is his growl from behind.

We walk together up the stairs and into the first of the three bedrooms. The two on this side of the house are the same size and have decent-sized closets. They have tan carpet, which I love. My house in Nashville had all hardwood or tile flooring, and while it looked amazing, the carpet just feels cozier and more comfortable for a bedroom.

Grayson pulls me toward the windows and points out at the truck in the driveway. "Twuck!"

"Yep, that's your truck," I confirm, releasing his hand and letting him explore the room. He touches everything. The walls, the trim, even the closet door. He doesn't go inside, but definitely peeks around the door at the small space. Then, he moves to the middle of the floor and lies down. He's not wearing his coat; we left them down by the front door with our shoes and the realtor, who hung back to make phone calls. Grayson flings his arms and legs out like he's making a snow angel and starts giggling. I find myself laughing just as quickly, watching him.

He's so...amazing. I've never met a little guy like him. I know he struggles with certain things, but you'd never know. His Down syndrome doesn't define him. His spectacular personality does.

Suddenly, he looks up, that big grin on his face, his blue eyes wide with excitement. "Daddy says you pwetty!"

I take a seat in the middle of the room beside him. "He does?"

Grayson nods eagerly before sitting up. He gets on his knees directly in front of me and reaches for my face. His little fingers gently caress my cheeks, nose, and even my eyelids. He touches my face, and even though I know his dad stresses for him to ask before touching someone, I don't say anything. This is his way of learning and communicating, and I'm okay with that.

"Yeah. Pwetty."

“Thank you, Grayson. You’re a very handsome little man yourself,” I tell him, taking the hug he’s suddenly offering. When he pulls back, I ask, “Do you like this room?”

He glances around and nods. “Big tractor room. Tractors go brrrrrrr,” he informs, making the noise and pretending he’s driving.

“Let’s take the tractor across the hall and see the other room,” I state, standing up and reaching for his hand. With his other, he holds it up like he’s driving and makes the tractor sounds once more, steering us in the direction of the next room.

When we step out into the hall, I find Tucker there. He’s leaning against the wall, his eyes cast down at the floor. I pause in front of him, hoping I haven’t somehow done something wrong. I don’t think I overstepped where Grayson is concerned, but I’ve only been around the child a couple of times. Maybe he didn’t like the fact I took off with him by myself without asking.

Then, Tucker’s eyes move up and there’s a look of awe reflecting in them. He grabs my other hand and entwines our fingers, stroking the top of my knuckles with his thumb. The touch sends shivers through my entire body, and it takes all the strength I have not to turn into his embrace and kiss him.

“Come on,” Grayson says, breaking through my thoughts, as he pulls against my hand.

“Yep, sorry, little man.” With my hand still entwined with Tucker’s, we step into the master bedroom of the house. I’m still in love with this room. It’s not fancy, but I love the view of the wooded area behind the house, as well as the en suite bathroom and large closet space. Grayson goes right over to the window and looks out, taking in the backyard. For a moment, a vision flashes through my mind of him playing in the backyard. There would be a big wooden swing set back there, with one of those yellow slides and a sandbox. That would be the perfect place for him to drive his tractors, to push through the sand and build mountains to drive up.

I clear my throat, suddenly overcome with emotions I wasn’t expecting. Perhaps being in my new home, holding hands with the first boy I ever loved, while spending a little time with his son, has kick-started my biological clock. When I was with Zander, I didn’t feel the desire to bring babies and kids into the craziness of my life. At least not at that time. Now,

however, it's almost overwhelming how beautiful that picture looks, and I'm in no position to chase after it.

"Kins!"

I turn to find Grayson lying in the middle of the floor again, swinging his arms and legs on the carpet like a snow angel. Instantly, I drop to my back and do the same. The sweet sounds of his giggles fill the room as he looks over and watches me create my own carpet angel. "Daddy! You!" he hollers, and before I know it, Tucker is down on the ground and doing the same.

"I feel the static," he says with a deep chuckle.

Grayson gets up and stands between Tucker and me, clapping his hands and laughing. "Daddy and Kins funny."

Tucker moves quickly, sitting up and grabbing his son. He pulls him onto his lap and tickles his little sides, making the boy hoot and holler.

"Stop!" he begs between cackles.

Tucker does, smiling down at the boy who is his spitting image. "Are you ready to go?"

Grayson shakes his head.

"Do you have dinner plans?" I ask, a bubble of nervousness creeps into my chest as I await his response.

"No," Tucker says, letting Grayson stand up. We both watch as he walks around the room and touches the walls, trim, and flooring like he did in the other room.

"Do you want to, well, grab something? We can eat at Kellen's place. He's working tonight at the bar, and I think he said Cam is there too."

He looks my way, the faintest smile touching his lips. "Yeah. I'd like that."

I nod, feeling the blush of excitement creep up my neck. "Okay."

We sit there, in the middle of the room, watching Grayson talk and move and stealing glances at each other too. When I catch him staring, he says, "Thank you."

"For what?"

He nods toward his son. "For being his friend."

"He's a great kid, Tuck. You're doing an amazing job."

"Thank you. He's special."

"He is," I agree, glancing at Grayson as he pretends to drive a tractor

around the empty space near the closet. "He, um, he told me you think I'm pretty."

"I think you're the most beautiful woman in the world. Always have."

Again, I can feel the blush burning my neck and cheeks. "I've missed you," I blurt out, the confession flying from my mouth uncontrollably.

He reaches for my hand, linking our fingers together, and bringing it to his mouth. He kisses my palm before flipping it around to touch his lips to my knuckles. "I've missed you more than I ever thought possible. For nine years, I was here, but not really living. Does that make sense?"

I nod, understanding completely what he's saying.

"I know you've only been home a few weeks and you have a lot on your plate. I want that to be your focus, Kins. I want you to get your life back, and if I can somehow be your friend through it, I'd be eternally grateful."

He takes a deep breath and continues, "But I want you to know, just because I'm only talking about friendship now, doesn't mean I don't envision more. And I'm not saying that's where this road is leading. If friendship is it forever, then I'll take it, but Kins, when your sixty-day waiting period is over and you've signed your name on those divorce papers, I want to take you out. On a date. A real one. With dinner and maybe a movie."

I'm grinning as I glance his way. "What about a kiss at the end of the night?"

His eyes darken, and the desire swirling in those blue depths causes wetness to flood my panties. "Kissing is a definite necessity. In fact, it's incredibly hard not to do it now."

"I wanted you to kiss me in the hallway." My breathing seems to be a bit more labored than usual.

"And I wanted to kiss you in the hallway. We'll get there, Kins."

My heart is pounding a happy rhythm full of anticipation and joy. "All right."

He stands up and extends his hand to help me. When I'm beside him, we finish the tour of the upstairs. We look at the rest of the master bedroom before moving to the hallway bathroom, the third bedroom, as well as a smaller space at the very end of the hall that would be perfect for an office or toy room. Once we've seen everything, we make our way back down to the first floor.

“Everything good?” the realtor asks, standing up and slipping his phone in his pocket. I don’t feel bad for keeping him down here for nearly an hour. He’ll make a big commission off the sale of this house, and he did offer for me to take my time. So I did.

“Yes. I’m still completely in love with this house,” I assure him, making him smile.

“Well, if you need access again before we sign, just give me a call. The sellers are more than willing to grant you access, as long as you don’t make any cosmetic changes before signing day.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” I tell him, slipping my boots and coat back on and waiting for Tucker to finish getting Grayson ready to go back outside.

We step out onto the porch, and I take one more look at the swing. If I were here alone, I’d walk over and take a seat, but I don’t want to keep Grayson and Tucker waiting in the cold. “Ready?” Tucker asks.

“Yes.”

Together, we walk toward his truck, Grayson between us, his right hand in mine and his left in Tucker’s. It feels...intimate.

Right.

Once everyone is secured inside, Tucker starts his truck and glances my way. “What are you doing the last Sunday of the month?”

“I’m not sure. Hopefully some remodeling and decorating projects,” I reply with a chuckle.

“How would you like to go with me and Grays to Jameson and Madelyn’s daughter’s first birthday party?”

My eyes widen in surprise. “What? You’re inviting me to a party? Is that allowed?”

He shrugs. “I know Jameson well, and he won’t mind. I can run it by him if you’d like, but I’m certain he’ll be fine with it.”

My mind is spinning with a mixture of excitement to get out of the house and be around people again and the fear they’ll want to talk about the video and my divorce. “Umm...”

“You’ll be perfectly safe and respected there, Kins. No one at the party would bother you. Your brother will probably be there too.”

I think back to all the comments my brother has made about his bosses and coworkers, how amazing they are and how much he loves working there. I’m sure I will feel the same way about the group of Burgers

and Brew owners and employees.

“All right, if he says it’s okay for me to come with you, I’d love to go.”

Tucker grins and throws his truck in reverse. “It’s a date.” Then he glances over and winks before adding, “An unofficial one.”

Now I have something else to look forward to.

An unofficial date with Tucker and Grayson.

Chapter Fourteen

Tucker

It's been two weeks.

Two weeks of random texts and nightly chats. Of anticipating the moment when she calls. Of staying up way too late because neither one of us wants to hang up. I feel like a teenager again, and I know it's because of her. Because of the way she makes me feel. And not just me, but Grayson too. He seems happier when she's around and is always asking about her when she's not.

Today is Rose's first birthday celebration, and it's going to be something. Jameson has been complaining all week about how elaborate this party is going to be, yet he adds his own style and flair every chance he gets. Plus, I've seen him secretly smiling when he thinks no one is looking. He's not stressed or worried. He's just as excited as Madelyn and doesn't care how expensive or outrageous today is.

Grayson is talking a mile a minute in the back seat as I drive toward Kellen's place. He offered to take Kinsley with them, since she's still technically living there, but she said no. As soon as I said we'd pick her up, she made sure to stay put until we arrived.

When I pull into the driveway, she's standing on the porch looking as cute and fucking edible as ever. She's bundled up in a fluffy coat and hat and has tight jeans and little ankle boots on. Her dark hair is down and wavy with those big loose curls that are the rage right now. All I can think about is running my hands through them and tangling my fingers in the soft locks.

"Hey," she chirps as she opens the passenger door and climbs inside.

"Kins!"

"Hello, Grays. I'm so happy to see you this afternoon," she adds, offering my boy a big grin.

"Party," he yells, laughing in excitement.

"You're ready to party? Me too," she replies eagerly as she fastens her seat belt. And then she looks at me and smiles. "Hi."

“Good afternoon, beautiful,” I say quietly, reaching for her hand and giving it a gentle squeeze.

“Booful. Booful. Booful. Kins is pwetty,” my son sings from the back, making us both chuckle.

“How has your day been?” she asks, taking in the scenery as I head for the community center.

“Good. Caught up on laundry, which is always a miracle. I’m not sure how two dudes can have so many dirty clothes, but it’s crazy,” I state lightheartedly.

“I did laundry today too. And made my list for the contractor. Since the house is officially mine, he’s starting Monday morning in my music room. I’m really eager to see how it turns out,” she tells me.

“I’m just glad Jed could start right away,” I reply, knowing the popular carpenter is usually booked out for months.

“I got lucky he had a cancellation and was able to adjust the other big job he was planning to start because the imported tile flooring was still delayed.”

Nodding, I turn off the main road through Stewart Grove and head the three blocks south to Grove Park. There’s a large playground, public swimming pool, pavilions for small gatherings, walking trails, and the town’s community center. It’s a great place to visit in the summer, especially when they host movies in the park and family fun activities.

“How long does he think the job will take?” I ask, even though we had already discussed the details of the job when she hired Jed Streeter.

“He’s still confident he’ll be done by Friday. That means I can paint the fresh drywall and move in next weekend,” she proclaims, practically bouncing in her seat.

Before I can say anything else, I make the turn into the park and head for the community center. “Holy shit,” she whispers, faint enough little ears don’t hear in the back seat.

“Yeah,” I reply, pulling into the first parking spot I find. “Madelyn doesn’t do anything small. Actually, no, that’s not true. Madelyn isn’t the problem. It’s her grandma, Estelle Cartwright. That woman does everything on a grand scale, including help throwing her great-granddaughter a first birthday party.”

“Estelle? I haven’t seen her in a decade. She was a hoot,” Kinsley says,

releasing her buckle and glancing once more at the building.

The entire place looks incredible. With floral balloons tied to everything and the front entrance looking like a scene out of a bohemian garden party, the boring town center has been transformed into a place set for a little princess.

“Still is. Ready to go in?” I ask Grayson, glancing at him in the rearview mirror. His eyes are wide as he takes in the dozens of balloons and the flowers dripping from everywhere.

And this is just the outside.

“Go!” he replies, shaking his hands in enthusiasm.

Climbing out, I help Grayson out of the truck, while Kinsley grabs the wrapped gift on the seat behind her. “I feel bad not bringing anything,” she grumbles, as she has the last two nights we’ve talked.

“I told you I put your name on our gift. It’s from all of us,” I insist, shutting the door and taking Grayson’s hand. I can feel the anticipation rolling off him in waves, but I know with it comes apprehension. He’s not a huge fan of large crowds, and this crüe can be a lot to handle when they’re all together.

Before we go inside, I pause and crouch down in front of my son. “If you get tired and want to leave, tell me, okay?”

He nods, his eyes wide as he pays me no attention and looks over my shoulder at the door. He’s ready to go inside. We’ve been talking about today, about how there’s going to be a bunch of kids and lots of activities, and it might be a little overwhelming for him. If it is, we’ll leave and go home to relax.

But as the door opens behind me and the noise and laughter filters out of the building, there’s a sparkle in his eyes that tells me we won’t be leaving early. He’ll completely exhaust himself over the next few hours and probably not want to go when the party ends, but that’ll be okay too.

“Remember your manners,” I say as I stand up and lead him into the building.

The moment we breach the threshold, chaos ensues. Controlled chaos, but still. I glance around, recognizing all the faces in the building. “Hi, Grayson, welcome,” Madelyn greets, smiling happily as she approaches.

“Thanks for having us,” I reply when my son hides behind my leg.

Madelyn turns to Kinsley and offers her a hug. “I’m so happy you could

join us. When Jameson mentioned Tucker bringing you, I admit I got a little fangirlish. Please don't hold it against me if I get a little starry-eyed when I'm around you," she says, her cheeks blushing a dark red color.

"I appreciate you allowing me to tag along." Kinsley offers her a warm smile.

"It's no problem at all. We have enough food to feed an army, so I hope you're hungry."

Grayson pulls against my hand, pointing at the bounce houses. "Looks like someone wants to go check out the bounce houses," Madelyn says. "No shoes in the bounce houses, and we're doing our best to keep the balls inside the one on the left. So far, it's not working well."

Just as she finishes her sentence, three balls go flying out of the netted opening and land in the middle of the table area.

"Too much excitement," Kinsley says, grinning.

"Make yourselves at home and help yourself to the food," she adds before being pulled away to help Mallory in the kitchen area.

"Come on, little man. Let's find a seat," I say, leading him toward one of the outside tables. We have a great view of the inflatables, as well as being out of the way from the main group of people. I help Grayson take off his coat, hat, and boots, setting them on one of the empty seats at our table, before taking off my own coat and hanging it on the back of the chair.

Kellen spots his sister and comes over to say hello. "Hey, Grayson," he greets, holding up his hand for a fist bump.

My son seems a little shy, so Kinsley says, "Grays, did you know Kellen is my brother?"

Grayson's eyes get huge, and he slowly moves out from behind my leg. Kinsley reaches for his hand, and he goes willingly. With Kinsley at his side, he lifts his hand and raps his knuckles against my oldest friend's. Kellen, in return, makes the exploding sound and hand gesture, causing Grayson to laugh.

"Grays, do you want to go check out the ball pit with me?" Kinsley asks, crouching down next to my son.

He glances over, clearly noticing a few other kids inside, before gazing back up at Kins. He nods eagerly. She looks my way, question in her eyes, as if asking my permission. "Go," I assure her, pulling out a chair to watch as they walk toward the ball pit.

Kellen takes the seat across from me, positioning his chair to face the activity area. We watch as they approach the ball pit. The older boys all jump out, racing over to the big slide inflatable with a double slide down the front. Since the ball pit is empty, Kinsley reaches in and grabs one of the balls, holding it out for Grayson to see. He takes it, looks it over, and smiles up at her. Within seconds, she's toeing off her ankle boots and climbing in. Grayson is hot on her heels, letting her pick him up and take him inside. She sits off to the side, while he jumps hesitantly a few times. Then, as if realizing how much fun the ball pit is, he starts laughing and bouncing higher. She giggles, tossing a few balls up in the air and catching them, all while my son hangs on her every move.

"She's amazing with him," Kellen states softly.

"She is," I confirm, even though my words aren't necessary.

"She's always wanted kids, but I knew it would be a while because of her career. I'm just thankful as fuck she didn't have kids with the jack-off."

I snort a laugh, overwhelmingly grateful myself. Not that I wouldn't be doing the exact same thing she's doing with Grayson with her child, but I'm glad she's not tied to that fucker any more than she already is.

"Things seem to be going well with you two."

I glance his way, waiting to see...what? I don't know. I don't think he'd be upset I was talking to his sister again, but then again, maybe he would. No one knows how badly her leaving town tore me up like Kellen. Perhaps he'd think we're moving too fast. After all, she's not even divorced, which is why we're both taking our time and not crossing any lines. There are boundaries, and as much as my dick would disagree, I'm abiding by them.

"They are. It's nice to have her back here," I say, keeping my eyes on the ball pit.

"I agree," he says, leaning back in his chair and getting comfortable. "And the fact she bought a house is pretty encouraging. She's not just here for a short visit, and then will leave again."

I nod, completely agreeing.

"So, what's going on with you two?" he inquires, finally asking the question he's been dying to since her return.

I feel his eyes on me, so I turn to give him my complete attention. "Nothing more than friendship. She's still going through her divorce, and that's where her focus should be. After it's finalized, then we'll see. But it's

up to her and me.”

The corner of his mouth turns upward a tick. “But you want more.”

Sighing, I glance back to the bounce house to check on my son and Kinsley. “Yeah, I want more. Eventually.”

Kellen sighs dramatically. “Finally,” he says, shaking his head. “I’ve been waiting years for you to admit that.”

My eyes narrow a bit as I look his way. “What?”

“You’ve been pining after her for years, my friend. Every time you’d ask about her, despite trying to act all casual and shit, there was nothing but longing in your eyes.”

I squirm in my seat a little, hating the fact he was able to read me so well, especially after all this time and thinking I hid it from him. “Listen, like I told her, I don’t know where this will lead. Right now, the focus is her divorce. We’re spending some time talking and have had the occasional meal together, but that’s the extent of it right now. If something more happens later, great. I’m open to the idea, but for now, I’m just focusing on being her friend.”

Kellen grins from ear to ear. “And you’re a damn good one, my friend. Though, I think the level of our friendship is very different than hers,” he quips. “At least I hope it is,” he adds, the innuendo clear.

I don’t deny or confirm his comment. I learned years ago when I was dating his sister, he’s going to tease me about it, but he doesn’t actually want the details, which is good because I’m not one to share them. “You done?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at him.

Mallory and Walker’s oldest, Lizzie, goes over to the ball pit and starts talking to Kinsley and Grayson. After a few minutes, she climbs inside and starts jumping in the balls with my son. He’s all smiles as the older girl plays with him, tossing a few balls back and forth before plopping down in the pit once more.

“I’m not going to pull out the whole big-brother act, but I will say this. If you have a chance, take it, but don’t rush. You’ve both been through too much to lose this opportunity,” he says.

I’m a little overwhelmed, honestly. It’s been only a few weeks since she returned home and even less time since we started talking again. I don’t want to rush anything, but I also can’t help these feelings either. With each passing day, they grow stronger. Putting them back in the bottle would be

difficult, but I've done it before; not that I want to do it again, but I'm trying to keep both eyes open.

"I'm not rushing anything," I reassure him. "I can't. I have Grayson to consider."

"Speaking of, he seems to really like her."

I look over at the ball pit, only to see them climbing inside the other contraption with the big slide. The bigger kids are outside, watching and smiling. Kinsley, Grayson, and Lizzie climb to the top of the double slide and get set. My son sits on Kinsley's lap, and the kids outside start the countdown. "Five, four, three, two, one, GO!" they holler.

Kinsley and Grayson launch off the top of the slide, bouncing down in a mess of legs and arms, while Lizzie bops down at a much more controlled pace. When the racers get to the bottom, the duo is victorious, and everyone cheers for Grayson. The smile on my son's face causes a lump to form in my throat. I've always worried he might be looked at differently, because of his Down syndrome, but when we're surrounded by friends like this, he's just a normal kid.

"Jesus, man, that scene just hit me square in the feels. It makes me want to take Cameron into a closet somewhere and knock her up."

I snort and shake my head. "Make sure you lock the door," I joke, pretty certain he wouldn't cart off his girlfriend to make a baby in the middle of a kid's first birthday party.

But then again, this is Kellen. He did skip math class once in high school and got busy with the head cheerleader under a table in the back of the computer lab. While the class was in session.

He just grins widely and winks.

"Did you see him?" Kinsley asks, all smiles herself as she plops on the chair beside me.

"I did."

"Lizzie came over and introduced herself to him. Now they're practically best friends," she says, pointing to where Lizzie and Grayson are playing in the large bounce house. She's making sure Grayson has a turn at any of the features and the other kids a little bigger and older than him give him some room.

"Walker boasts about her all the time. She's a great big sister. Kind and gentle with her younger siblings," Kellen says.

“When he felt comfortable with her, he told me he was going to play with Lizzie and I could go watch him with you,” Kinsley says with a chuckle.

“Hey!” Cameron says, coming over to say hello to Kinsley. “So, the moms are all over there dying to say hello and meet you. They didn’t want to interrupt while you were playing with Grayson, but any chance you’d come over now?”

“Absolutely,” Kinsley replies, standing up and looking my way. “I’ll be back,” she says softly, squeezing my shoulder with her soft hand before following Cameron over to where a group of women wait.

“She’s different, man. More relaxed than I’ve ever seen her.” When I glance his way, he continues, “Every time she’s been home the last few years, she’s always under some mountain of stress, and she was usually pissed at Zander, who never came with her. To see her truly look happy for the first time in a long-damn time is nice.”

My eyes are drawn to her, taking her in. She’s laughing with Mallory, Lyndee, BJ, Madelyn, Reagan, Kallie, and Cameron, and there’s no mistaking the carefree, cheerful look on her face. She’s a vision, and I’m incredibly glad she’s finally relaxed enough to be herself, because the Kinsley McGregor I remember was nothing short of amazing.

I just need to remember to keep a level head.

Problem is, when I’m around Kinsley, it’s the wrong head that wants to do the talking.

Chapter Fifteen

Kinsley

“He’s still refusing to meet via phone or video conference.”

Sighing, I close my eyes and plop down on my couch.

I knew this was going to happen. At first, he seemed receptive to mediating our divorce over a conference call or video, but as the weeks slowly passed, I started to see what he was doing.

He’s stalling.

Our paperwork was filed six weeks ago. We’re down to two final weeks of opportunity to mediate, and I still can’t even get him to agree to the initial meeting.

“I’ll come there if I have to,” I say, even though returning to Nashville for this is the last thing I want to do.

“You’ll most likely need to in order to get this resolved before the sixty days are up, Kinsley. I’ve seen this tactic before, and all he’s doing is stalling. He’s hoping you’ll cave to whatever demands he has,” my attorney says.

“What demands? If he’d at least lay them on the table, I’d know what I’m dealing with. We have no starting point, and now we’ve wasted six weeks,” I state, really disliking my husband more than I ever have.

“I know. I’ll give his attorney a deadline for mediation, but ultimately, it’s up to his client.”

“I’ll call the fucker,” I say, standing up and pacing my living room. “Is that allowed?”

“Of course it is. You may be able to smooth the waters and get him talking. I know you were hoping to do it all through the attorneys, but it appears he has other plans.”

“What a fucking asshole,” I state bluntly.

Gretchen chuckles. “I happen to agree with you. Keep me posted. I’ll keep pushing his lawyer, but chances are, if he hasn’t agreed to a meeting by this point, he won’t. Unless you find out exactly what he wants.”

“He wants to make this as painful and lengthy as possible,” I concede.

"I believe you're correct. I'll be in touch, and if you do talk to him, keep me abreast."

"Will do, Gretchen. Thank you."

She signs off, and I take a moment to inhale deep, calming breaths. "I can't believe this," I grumble, rubbing the side of my forehead where a headache is forming.

No, wait. I can totally believe it.

Knowing I need to just get this over with, I find his name in my contacts and hit send. It rings several times, and I start to think he's not going to answer, when after five or six rings, he says, "Hello, darling."

"Quit the bullshit, Zander. Why the hell won't you set up a video conference so we can get our divorce details ironed out?" I demand without fanfare.

"I told you I wasn't in favor of divorcing, sweetheart."

"Stop with the cutesy nicknames. This is happening. What are your demands? I know you have a whole list," I counter, trying to cut to the chase.

He sighs through the line, and I can hear what sounds like a glass being set down on a table. If I had to guess, I'd say scotch, but only because it made him feel fancy and important, not because he likes the taste. "I had hoped a little time would give you some perspective."

"Time has given me the exact perspective I needed, Zander," I state pointedly.

"You're being incredibly difficult, Kinsley."

"What? Me? You were served papers six weeks ago. You've been asked to set up a meeting on multiple occasions. You've been asked to make a list of your terms, which I think should be fairly easy. I know mine was. So tell me why we're still at this point, Zander? Why have you done none of the things you've been requested to do, so we can move this along?"

"I was hoping you'd change your mind."

A humorless laugh flies from my lips. "Change my mind? The only thing I've changed my mind on is being married to you."

"You've really turned into a bitch these last few months. Is it your brother's influence?"

"It has absolutely nothing to do with my brother," I practically growl. Any time we have a conflict, he blames my brother, as if Kellen is convincing

me to go against Zander. “What are your terms?”

He sighs loudly. “Fine. I want the house.”

“Standard divorce practice is to split everything fifty-fifty. You would buy me out, even though I’m the one paying for it.”

“You’re the one with the money, darlin’.”

“Doesn’t matter, Zander. Your dick repeatedly fell out of your pants into randoms.”

Ignoring my comment about his infidelity, he says, “I want my SUV and the house. As well as those paintings we acquired when we visited Rome last year. The furniture stays with the house too. Also the sound system and music studio equipment. Plus, you pay off my sports car and the boat, since my income is minimal right now without being on the road. Oh, and half of your financial accounts, including your retirement.”

My mouth drops open. “What the fuck? Hell no!”

“It’s standard divorce practice,” he says, throwing my words back in my face. “Your retirement is well over one hundred K already.”

“Which I put in from my paychecks. It’s not my fault yours is sitting around fourteen K.”

“You make a considerably higher salary, sweetheart. I should be compensated well, since you’re the one requesting this divorce.”

“Because. You. Fucked. Other. Women.”

“Such language. That’s not how a lady talks,” he says.

“It’s none of your concern over how I talk,” I bite out.

My mind is reeling. I figured he’d go for what he could, but I wasn’t quite expecting this. Has it always been about the money? Looking back, I realize sadly, yes. He’s always been concerned about appearances, always needing the best of the best. And who footed the bill? Definitely not him. He had some reason why I needed to cover whatever purchase we were making, and stupidly, I went along with it. I didn’t see exactly who he is.

Luckily, I see it now.

He’s using this as a cash grab, and if I want out of this marriage—which I know without a speck of uncertainty I do—I’m going to have to pay up.

I mentally run through my finances. My savings took a hit when I bought my house, but I don’t regret that. Plus, there’s a big difference in buying a place in Stewart Grove versus Nashville. My beautiful place here

cost me a little over two-hundred thousand dollars. Add in around twenty thousand for the upgrades, remodels, and security. But if I were to buy this exact house in Nashville, I would have paid four or five times more. I would have needed to take out a loan, and possibly not done any of the updates.

My retirement account is growing, thanks to my strict rule of adding money to it from each paycheck I receive. I don't want to give him any of it—let alone half—but I realize I'm going to have to do something to end this madness.

"This is what I'm willing to do," I start, taking a seat on my new couch. "Are you listening, because this is the deal, Zander. No negotiating. Nothing."

"I'm all ears, love," he coos in that Southern drawl I used to find so sexy. Now, it makes me want to barf.

"I'll give you the house and your car. I'll sign them both over to you. You'll take over the utilities and bills associated with the house as soon as our divorce is finalized. The account those bills are withdrawn from will be closed soon, so you'll need to get everything transferred over to you."

"What else?" he asks impatiently.

"You will give me the items on the list my attorney provided your attorney. There isn't anything on there you want, unless you're being that vindictive and immature. You can keep the furniture, sound system, and studio. I want my instruments and you keep yours. Everything in my office is mine."

He's quiet for a few moments before replying, "Fine. What about the other stuff and your retirement account?"

"I won't pay off that stupid-ass boat you never use or the ugly little midlife crisis sports car you spent too much money on, but I will give you a lump sum of cash. What you do with it is up to you."

"And half the retirement?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely not. The lump sum of cash is it. I'll give you one hundred thousand. Not a penny more."

Again, he's quiet for a full minute. "One hundred thousand, huh? Fine. Let's talk alimony."

"Fuck. You."

He chuckles. "If you want, I guess we can give it a go for ol' times' sake, darlin'."

“I wouldn’t let your nasty dick touch me for all the money in the world,” I say, smiling.

He tsks, and I can envision the vein in his forehead popping out in annoyance.

“No alimony. Ever. You cheated. Take the lump sum of cash and be gone.”

“One hundred thousand isn’t enough,” he states. “That will barely cover the car and boat.”

“Not my problem. I’m giving you the house and your other car.”

“One million.”

My mouth falls open. “What? I don’t have a million dollars, Zander.”

“Of course you do. You just finished your tour.”

“It wasn’t a stadium tour, asshole. I’m not Kelly Clarkson,” I argue, feeling the heat of anger coursing through my veins.

“Oh, believe me, I know that. Her records are certified multi-platinum. Yours sell far less,” he replies.

“Whatever, my point is I don’t make that kind of money.”

“You make money on your songs.”

I roll my eyes. “Not anywhere close to warrant a million-dollar settlement, dumbass.”

“Why are you so hostile? You’re the one who wanted to negotiate.”

“This isn’t a negotiation. It’s a hostile takeover. You’re trying to take everything.”

“No, I’m trying to ensure I receive my rightful amount.”

“Well, maybe you should have helped write the songs, because that’s the only rightful way you would be entitled to that money.”

“I’m entitled to *all* your income, Kinsley.”

“And I was entitled to a husband who didn’t cheat with loose, skanky women, yet here we are.”

I’m met with silence once more. “Five-hundred thousand and I walk away. You get your list of piddly bullshit. You give me the house and my car.”

My stomach churns with nausea. That amount would nearly drain my savings, considering I’ve already purchased this house and paid to have the work done. If I want to get a place in Nashville, I’ll have to dip into one of my investment accounts or take out a loan. Not a huge deal, but not what I wanted to do at this stage of my life and career. I’ve been working hard to

save, build my portfolio without excessive spending, and now it looks like I'm going to have to pay up if I want this to be over.

"Four hundred."

"Five. I know you've got it." There's victory in his voice and a smile on his lips.

I close my eyes and shake my head. Yes, I could fight him. We could go before the judge, plead our cases, and let him rule on the settlement. However, that'll take time, and frankly, I just don't have it in me to fight him on this. I've been fortunate enough to make decent money in my short nine years of living in Nashville. Yes, only four of those were with a record label, and an even smaller amount spent on the road, but I've accomplished a lot in a short amount of time. I can do it again.

Plus, I have my songs, which, if I'm being completely honest, is my favorite part. I've written and sold some amazing tunes over the last nine years, and I hope I never stop. I pray the creative juices continue to flow and the songs I write continue to produce hits for other artists. If something were to happen and I were to stop recording and touring today, I'd still have a big piece of my heart in the game. I'd still be able to write music for others to sing, and that's my long-term goal. When the time is right, I want to retire from touring and just write.

That's the ultimate dream.

"Fine. Five hundred thousand dollars."

"I knew you'd cave."

"You're such a douchebag. I never should have married you."

"Yeah, but you did." His greedy little voice grates on my every nerve.

"Fortunately, that's a mistake I'm rectifying now. I'm calling my attorney and relaying our agreed upon terms. I suggest you let yours know it's coming. We will both sign and have it ready for the judge at the end of our sixty-day waiting period. If this gets delayed even one day, the deal is off and you get nothing. I will fight you with everything I have, making damn sure everyone knows how your cheating ended our marriage. It won't look good for the judge."

"Once I sign those papers, there's no coming back, Kins. We're over."

I snort a sound of disgust. "Not happening, but thanks for the warning."

"Goodbye," he says, hanging up without any fanfare or notice.

“Goodbye,” I reply, even though he’s gone. “Forever.”

The next thing I do is dial my attorney. When Gretchen gets on the line, I go through the phone conversation and the settlement terms we both verbally agreed to.

“I’m getting this typed up now to send over to his attorney. I don’t want to delay another second or give him an opportunity to change his mind or think of something else to add,” she states, the sound of her fingers working on the keyboard filtering through the phone.

“I told him if he delays, he gets nothing.”

“I understand why you’re giving in to his demands, but if we were to go to court and fight him, you’d win. You’ll still have to pay a settlement, but it wouldn’t be nearly the amount you’re forking over now.”

“I get that, but I just want it done. I want my life back.”

“And you’ll get it, Kins. Just two more weeks and it goes before the judge,” she states happily on my behalf. We received the notice of our pending court date to finalize the divorce. We got lucky and it’s one day after our waiting period, bright and early on a Monday morning. The only hang up has been Zander and the fact we hadn’t settled anything through mediation. Now, that’s done, and I can close this chapter in my life.

“Thank you for everything,” I say, feeling a little lighter than I did earlier today.

“Don’t thank me yet. The judge signing those papers will be all the thanks I need.”

“Well, still, I appreciate your work and professionalism. I see why you’re highly recommended,” I tell her.

“Let’s get this finished and behind you. I’ll be in touch as soon as Zander and his attorney sign the settlement document.”

“Perfect,” I reply, hanging up after signing off.

I close my eyes and lean my head back against the couch. This room is finished, comfortable and welcoming. Besides my music room in back, it’s one of my favorite places in the house. Hell, who am I kidding? Every room in this house is my favorite.

I’ve been sleeping here officially for two weeks. The living room, kitchen, and my upstairs bedroom are set up, only missing a few pieces of furniture I plan to repurpose or restore from items I found at the secondhand store. Those pieces are currently in my garage until I have the

time to complete them.

I grab my phone, firing off a text message to my PR manager, Erika. I told her I'd let her know when I'll be coming back to Nashville to finalize everything. My plan is to go the weekend prior to my Monday morning court hearing and retrieve the items I want from the Nashville house. She volunteered to help me arrange for a few movers to help so it takes less time than if I were to box everything and haul it myself.

Kellen and Cameron are also going with me. Kellen insisted, refusing to let me go to the house alone, in case my soon-to-be ex-husband tried anything funny. Not that I think he would, but I understand my brother's concern. If the shoe were on the other foot, I'd do the same.

Tucker mentioned the other night, he wishes he could go with me and help. However, I told him no. Not because I don't want or need him, but for the simple fact he has Grayson. We'd be gone a minimum of two nights, and I know he's never been away from his son that long. He trusts his parents to care for his child in his absence, but I can't ask him to do that.

Plus, I don't think I want him there.

I don't want to have my old life with Zander clashing with the potential new one I'm creating with Tucker. Even though nothing has happened romantically thus far, my feelings for him grow deeper and stronger every day, and when I officially walk away from my marriage, I want to head here.

To Tucker.

To see where these feelings go.

So, I asked him to stay behind, to give me something positive and happy to come back to, besides the new life I'm ready to start. He agreed, and I'm certain the only reason he did so readily was because Kellen would be there in Nashville with me.

It's time to close this chapter.

To discover who I really am.

To find out who I want to be in this life.

To see if these feelings for Tucker are real and what we can do about them.

Chapter Sixteen

Tucker

Hell.

That's what it's been like all weekend, knowing she's in Nashville and I'm here. Even talking to her on the phone last night when she returned to her hotel hasn't helped. Until I lay eyes on her in the flesh, I just feel a mixture of impatience and unease.

I don't trust her ex.

Even though he signed all the legal documents necessary for this morning's formal divorce hearing, he has still been a thorn in her side every step of the way. When she arrived at the house they used to share on Saturday afternoon, he was there, hovering. He observed every item she packed, making sure it wasn't anything he was supposed to keep. He stood back and scrutinized as Kellen, Cameron, and Kinsley filled box after box, refusing to lift a finger to help, and then chastised the movers who she hired to load the boxes onto the moving truck because they got too close to his things and could have damaged them. Basically, he was a huge pain in the ass the entire time, just for the sake of being a fucking asshole.

But now she's on her way home.

Back to Stewart Grove.

And she's officially divorced.

They were on the road by noon, after leaving the courthouse and stopping by the bank to take care of details there. According to Kellen, they should be pulling into town within the hour, and I can't fucking wait.

"Earth to Tucker."

I spin around and find Jameson behind me. "Shit, sorry. Didn't hear you."

The corner of his lip curls up just a tick. "I figured. You all right?"

"Yeah, just...thinking."

"Ahh," he says, leaning against the forklift near where I'm working.

"This is about a woman."

My eyes narrow a bit at the big guy. "What?"

"I can tell by the dopey look on your face," he states.

"I never pegged you for the gossip in the group," I tell him, not for the first time either.

He shrugs his wide shoulders and gives me a lopsided grin. "That usually throws everyone off."

"How'd your meeting go?" I ask, knowing he went next door to the bar for their Monday owners' meeting.

"Fine. Walker says Kellen gets back later tonight."

Jesus. Obviously, they know why Kellen took a few days off, which is why Jameson is here, being all weird-like. "Yep," I reply, refusing to give him the dirt he's after.

The man is made of stone and just stares back at me. I start to get a little twitchy, and perhaps a little sweaty in the pits. There's something about his intensity that has me ready to confess to whatever crimes he thinks I've committed or share whatever government secrets I possess. It's unnerving as fuck, honestly.

Finally, he cracks another small smile and says, "I'm just fucking with you. You have a visitor up front."

I stand up straight and level a confused look at my boss. "A visitor?"

He shrugs and turns, walking away.

I stand there for a good ten seconds, trying to figure out who could possibly be here. Of course, the easiest way to get my answer would be to go find out. I know it's not my mom or dad. They would call, and I don't have any message from them. In fact, I don't have a message from anyone.

Bypassing the hallway that leads to the back of the building, I walk toward the very front. Technically, we have a front entrance, but no storefront. You can't come here to buy beer. You get that next door at the bar, but we still have people who come to the front for whatever reason. Right now, we have a part-timer who works four hours a day up there. She answers the phones, helps Jameson with office work, and is the first line of inquiry for deliveries and such. Nicki is working this afternoon, so that's where I head.

"Hey, Nicki. Jameson said I have a visitor?" I ask, rounding the corner and entering the main office area at the front entrance.

The moment my eyes find Kinsley, my heart starts to hammer in my

chest and an instant smile spreads across my mouth.

“Hi. I hope you don’t mind me dropping by,” she says, glancing over at Nicki. “Thank you so much for letting me in.”

Nicki stares back at Kinsley, clearly starstruck. “No problem at all. I can’t believe you’re here actually. And thank you for signing this. I’m going to frame it once I get home,” the young woman declares, gazing down at the slip of office paper. I can’t read what it says, but it appears Kinsley took the time to write Nicki a small note, along with her signature.

“You’re welcome,” Kinsley says politely before returning her gaze to me.

My eyes sweep her from head to toe, taking in her casual appearance. “Would you like a tour?” I offer, extending my hand to the woman I haven’t stopped thinking about, well, pretty much since she returned to Stewart Grove.

She nods her gorgeous head. “I’d love one.”

“Come on,” I tell her, leading her out of the front office and toward the brewing room. “What brings you by?” I ask when we’re alone. “Not that I mind, I just hope nothing’s wrong.”

The softest smile spreads across her kissable mouth. “Nothing’s wrong. Nothing at all. In fact, I feel better than I have in a really long time. Everything is done. The divorce is final.”

I return her grin and squeeze her hand lightly. “Good deal.”

“And I wanted to come by and see you. After court, I just...” She pauses and shakes her head. “You know what? I don’t want to talk about him now. Were you serious about giving me a tour?”

“If you want one.”

“I do. Show me how you make beer,” she replies, her eyes sparkling, but I know it’s not the fluorescent lighting making her look this dazzling. It’s happiness, and I’m here for it.

“The first step for us is the preparation of malt, which happens here,” I tell her as we enter the first section of the brewing facility. She listens intently as I go through the mashing, boiling and cooling process, fermentation, filtration, and eventual bottling and canning of the product.

“Wow, I had no idea how detailed and complicated it was,” she says as we enter the cold storage area.

“Me either, honestly. It was an education when I first started here, but

Jameson was a good teacher. He taught me everything about the business, and it's been a pretty fun job. It has complications, especially in the process of brewing. There are so many different factors, and if one little step is off, it can fuck up the entire batch."

"That's crazy," she replies, walking toward the different groupings of beers and checking them over. "Which one is your favorite?"

"Night Crüe. Though I don't drink often, it's what I keep in my fridge."

She nods and turns to face me. "I think Kellen has that."

"Probably. It's what he usually orders too."

Leaning against a pallet of brew, she gives me her full attention, and I take a moment to appreciate those black leggings and oversized sweatshirt. Her hair is down, long brown strands cascading around her shoulders, and making my fingers itch to touch. My dick definitely takes notice. "So, I was wondering," she starts before clearing her throat. "Would you and Grayson like to come over and have dinner tonight?"

"Sure." My answer is immediate.

Kinsley smiles and elevates my heart rate. "Okay. It'll probably just be pizza. Kellen and Cameron are at my house making sure the movers get everything unloaded properly, and then I'll get to spend the next few days unpacking and organizing."

"I bet it'll feel good to have your stuff, though. And Grayson loves pizza, so that's not a problem. You want me to pick it up when we come over?"

"No, I'll have it delivered," she says, pushing off the pallet she was propped against and heading my way. There seems to be a little extra swing to her hips, and if it's for my benefit, I definitely appreciate it. She walks directly toward me, stopping when she's close enough to touch. "Is six okay?"

"That's perfect."

She goes up on her tiptoes and leans forward. I catch a whiff of her perfume, and it takes all the strength I possess not to grab her and kiss her senseless. "I'll let you get back to work. See you soon, Tuck," she whispers, swiping her lips gently across my scruffy cheek.

Unable to find words, I watch as she walks away, strolling confidently out of the cold storage, her hips tantalizing me with every move she makes.

When I'm alone, I take several deep breaths, hoping the temperature

will help cool my overheated body. There's something different about her. She seems carefree, and that extra dose of self-confidence she possesses is sexy as fuck. Maybe it's the fact she's finally let go of the extra stress she's been carrying around in the form of her now-ex-husband.

Whatever it is, I'm anxious to spend more time with her tonight.

"Remember to not run through her house, all right?" I say to Grayson as we walk up the front steps toward Kinsley's front door.

"Kay!"

"And no yelling either. We use our inside voices in someone's home," I add, bringing my hand up to knock. Before I can rap my knuckles against the hard wood, the door opens and Kinsley is standing before us.

"Kins!" he bellows, releasing my hand and throwing himself at her legs.

"Grayson, I'm so happy to see you," she replies, smiling down at him. "Are you hungry? I ordered us a pizza and breadsticks."

He nods, taking her hand as she leads us inside her home. Once the door is closed and she starts helping my son take off his cowboy boots and coat, I glance around the foyer, which opens into the living room. I still can't believe the contractor was able to get all her updates done in a week's time, but it looks amazing in here. I also don't see any boxes. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but considering a moving truck unloaded her belongings just a few short hours ago, I thought there'd be a few stacks of cardboard boxes here and there.

"Come in," she says, locking the door behind us and setting the alarm. "The pizza should be here within ten minutes or so. Let's get ready in the kitchen."

Grayson goes willingly, allowing her to lead him to the kitchen. First thing I notice when I join them is the booster seat sitting on one of the chairs, just like the one I have at home.

Kinsley must follow my line of sight and smiles, helping Grayson up onto the chair. "I went ahead and ordered a booster for him, so he can have his own seat when you eat here." There's a hint of nervousness in her voice as she tells me, but all I hear is how she was thinking of a way for my son to

eat more conveniently and independently than sitting on my lap.

My feet are moving before I can register the action. Her eyes widen as I approach, but she doesn't say a word. As my fingers slide into her hair and I pull her body flush against my own, her breathing hitches in her throat and her fingers wrap around my upper arms. "Thank you," I whisper before pressing my lips to the tip of her nose.

The softest sigh slips from those lush lips as her eyes instinctively close, and despite the urge to kiss the hell out of her, I hold back. Our first real kiss in more than nine years isn't going to be standing in her kitchen with my son gazing up at us.

A buzzing sound interrupts our little moment. "That's the pizza," she whispers, her warm breath a featherlight touch across my chin.

"I'll get it."

"No, let me. I'm still getting used to this security system. It's similar to the one I had installed at Kellen's house, only a newer program. There're just a few little differences, but it keeps throwing me off."

I nod as she turns to go to the door. Walking to the fridge, I find a half-gallon of chocolate milk on the top shelf and smile. Of course she'd have chocolate milk in her refrigerator if there was a chance Grayson would be visiting. I set the half-gallon on the counter and open the cabinet closest to the sink where I find cups. Shaking my head, I grab the lidded cup from the shelf and hold it up for Grayson to see.

It's a John Deere cup with tractors on it.

"All right, here we go." Kinsley returns to the kitchen and places the boxes on the table.

I grab three paper plates and a couple forks and join them. She places half a breadstick and some cheese dipping sauce onto the first plate and slides it over in front of Grayson.

"Tanks!" he says with a wave before grabbing the breadstick and coating the end with cheese.

"Go slow and take small bites so you don't choke," I tell him, watching as he takes a manageable bite and chews it. "Good job."

I take the seat beside him and wait my turn while she helps herself to half the small side salad. When she slides it my way, I take the other half and coat it with ranch dressing. We're quiet for a few minutes while we all eat, but my mind is on the one thing I was wanting to ask her. When is the right

time? Is there a right time to ask a woman on a date? I'm sure there is, but hell if I know when it is. I mean, my dating knowledge is pretty slim, and the last one I went on was more than a year ago. I'm not exactly in familiar territory here.

As I stab a piece of lettuce and tomato with my fork, I move it through a puddle of dressing and bring it to my mouth. Only, I don't take the bite off my fork. Instead, I set it back down and look over at Kinsley. Her blue eyes are watching me intently as she chews, as if knowing I have something on my mind.

Clearing my throat, I decide to just ask. "Would you go out with me Saturday night?"

Jesus, why is my heart pounding so hard?

Can she hear it?

Her sweet lips curl up into a smile. "I'd love to."

Exhaling, I relax a bit in my seat. "Okay." Deep breath. "All right."

She's grinning from ear to ear as she watches me. "Did you think I'd say no?"

I shrug. "I wasn't sure. I know we had discussed getting to know each other after your divorce was final, but I wasn't sure if you knew how serious I was."

"I was serious myself. If you didn't ask, I would have," she states with a wink.

A bubble of laughter spills from my mouth. "Same ol' Kinsley."

She lifts her shoulders casually. "In some regards, yes, but in others, I'm a different person."

"I like the person you've become, Kins. You're fierce, loyal, and brave. I'm proud of you."

The cutest blush creeps up her neck and stains her cheeks. "Thank you."

After I cut up a piece of pizza into smaller bites for Grayson, I place a large piece on her plate and one on my own. "Everything went well today, right?" I know she didn't want to talk about it earlier, but I feel like I just need to know it ended positively.

"It did," she says, taking a small bite of her pizza. "Actually, he asked me for my ring back after court. I had it in my pocket, ready to give it to him anyway, but I was shocked when he walked right up to me and asked for it

back. Told me he paid too much for that darn diamond and deserved to have it back since I initiated the divorce.”

Shaking my head, I pick up my slice of pizza and prepare to take my own bite. “What a...bad individual. The divorce may have been filed by you, but he was the one who initiated it,” I tell her, wishing I could pop this clown square in the jaw.

“I pretty much told him exactly that and tossed it at him before turning around and walking away for good. Afterward, we had to go to the bank so I could make some changes to the bills being withdrawn and then we were on the road. We left before we had planned, which is why I had time to stop by and say hello to you.”

As soon as I swallow the food in my mouth, I say, “I’m glad you did.”

She grins. “Me too.”

After dinner is consumed and the mess picked up, we make our way to the front entrance. As much as I’d like to stay and hang out, it’s difficult during the week. Grayson’s schedule means it’s nearing the time he needs to take a bath and get ready for bed. Kinsley knows this and doesn’t seem to have an issue with us eating and running with only a small window of visiting in between.

She squats down and helps my son into his boots and coat. While I’m putting my own on, I just watch their interaction. A wave of sadness washes over me. One I usually keep pushed to the back of my mind, because there’s nothing I can do to change our situation. However, I can’t help but think he’s never going to know his mother. She’s missing every single milestone he has for the rest of his life.

“So, about Saturday night,” she starts, breaking through my morose thoughts. “What did you have in mind?”

Chapter Seventeen

Kinsley

He's the most adorable man in the whole world and still makes my heart skip a beat. "Well, I thought about letting you pick. I want you to be comfortable. We can go out of town or stay in and have dinner at my place," he replies.

I nibble on my bottom lip as I stand and face him. "Is Grayson going with us?"

"Would that be all right if he was?" he asks curiously.

"Of course it's okay," I insist, smiling down at the little boy standing beside me. He holds up his hand, waiting patiently for me to take it.

I feel Tucker's eyes on me, watching us. When I look up, he says, "Actually, I plan to ask my parents to keep him for me."

"Oh. Okay." Not that it matters either way. I would be happy to spend the evening with Grayson too, but the thought of a night out with just Tucker has me a little giddy.

"Think about what you want to do," he suggests. "It's not as easy for you to go out in public, so if you want me to cook you dinner, I'd be happy to do so."

"You cook?" I ask, turning to key in the code to the security system.

"Well, not well, but I can make a mean pot of mac and cheese and bake some chicken nuggets," he quips.

I giggle as we step outside onto the front porch. "As delicious as that sounds, I was thinking of something else." Not that mac and cheese and chicken nuggets is bad, but if I have an opportunity to go out on a date, I'd love to try the whole Tucker Dunn experience.

"Like what?" he asks as we make our way down the front steps and to his truck.

"How about Burgers and Brew for dinner and then we can listen to Jameson play music for a while," I suggest, clearly catching him by surprise.

"You want to go there? On a Saturday night?"

I nod. "Kellen is always talking about Jameson's acoustic weekends, and I'd love to hear him play. Plus, their food is amazing, and even though it'll be busy, I'd rather stay in town if I'm going out. The locals at least know I'm from here, so they don't usually make quite the scene as others do when I'm in a place I'm unfamiliar with."

He smiles and makes my heart skip a beat. The whole butterflies in your stomach thing you hear about in romance novels or in those cheesy rom-com movies? Yeah, it totally happens.

"Can I pick you up? Is six too early?" he asks.

Quickly doing the math, I realize we might have to hang at the bar for a bit between dinner and the music starting, but that's okay. "That's perfect, Tuck."

Again, a grin transforms his already gorgeous face into a work of art.

My God, this man's smile is so sexy.

"I can't wait," he whispers, leaning in and grazing his lips across my cheek.

My entire body is on fire, my lips tingling with anticipation. For weeks, all I've wanted was for this man to kiss me again, but because of my pending divorce, those kisses were put on the back burner. Well, the desire and need has been left simmering, and now that my divorce is final, I'm ready to turn up the heat.

Something tells me the result will be explosive.

"I hear the way your breathing changes, Kins, and as much as I want to kiss you right now, I want to do this right. Our first kiss after all this time isn't going to be in your driveway with Grayson staring at us through the window."

I can't help but giggle, lifting my hand and waving at the boy who is watching us from inside the truck. He waves back.

"Don't misunderstand me. I want nothing more than to kiss you right now, but I know one kiss won't be enough. I'm going to need time, Kins. Time to rediscover the little things I learned all those years ago. Time to find out new ways to make you purr like a kitten and cry my name."

A whimper falls from my lips. "Yes, please."

He slides his mouth across my jaw before slowly putting distance between us. "Saturday night, Kins."

I nod, unable to find the right words to tell him how ready I am for

that evening.

He opens the driver's door but doesn't climb inside. "But there are no expectations, all right? We'll take this as slow as you want or need."

I can't stop the snort. "Are you kidding me? You've had my body humming for the last two months. I don't need any more time, Tuck."

A devilish smile spreads across his mouth. "Good to know. Get inside before you catch a cold," he says, moving into the truck cab and starting the truck. The mid-March weather isn't nearly as cold as the previous two months, but it's definitely not spring yet.

"Text me when you get home."

He nods. "Tell Kinsley goodbye."

"Bye-bye!" Grayson hollers from the back seat, waving wildly to catch my attention.

"Good night, Grayson. See you soon, buddy."

Tucker shuts the driver's door and rolls the window down a few inches. "Get inside, Kinsley."

"So bossy," I quip, taking a few slow steps backward. "That's new."

"You have no idea," he mutters.

My thighs clench together. "I'd like to talk more about that at a later date," I say sweetly.

Tucker's eyes darken, and I swear I can read every dirty thought he's having right now. Probably because they're the exact same ones parading through my own mind at the moment. "That can be arranged. Now, go inside before you get sick and miss Saturday."

"I wouldn't miss it for anything," I assure him, taking a few more steps backward before turning and moving up my front steps.

"Good night, Kins."

"Night, Tuck. Night, Grayson," I reply with a wave before walking through my front door and locking myself inside, setting the alarm. I'm afraid if I don't, I'll run back out there, climb in his truck, and insist he take me home with him right now.

But that's not appropriate.

Instead, I'll let the anticipation build for a few more days and let whatever happens Saturday happen. A couple more days won't kill me.

Hopefully.

When the knock sounds on my door Saturday night, I'm all smiles.

I enter the code and open the door, my heart flip-flopping in my chest at my first sight of Tucker since Monday night. He's wearing a pair of dark, well-fitting jeans, a dark Henley, and dark boots. His hair is styled, but his jaw is left unshaved, which warms me from the inside out. There's just something about his scruff that turns me on. Always has. When we were dating, I used to beg him not to shave it off.

"Good evening," he says, holding up a single red rose.

A blush stains my cheeks. "Thank you," I tell him, taking the flower and bringing it to my nose.

"I wanted to get you a sunflower, but it's not the right season," he replies, rocking back on his heels.

Of course he'd remember my favorite flower. Nothing ever got past Tucker, and it doesn't surprise me he'd still recall all the little details from years ago.

"This is perfect," I tell him, taking the bud into the kitchen and placing it in a glass of water.

When I turn around, he's leaning against the kitchen entryway doorjamb. His hands are shoved in his pockets, and he's just watching me. "You look breathtaking," he states, the softest smile on his lips.

I glance down at my pink skinny jeans, black cowboy boots, and fitted black sweater. It drops down in the front, revealing a hint of cleavage without giving away the whole farm. My hair is down in soft waves and my makeup sultry. I'm a woman who used to make sure she was always presentable when she went in public—you never know when a pap would take the opportunity to snap a photo of you looking less than perfect—but I spent way more time than usual criticizing and scrutinizing every little detail of my appearance tonight.

"Thanks," I reply. "You look very handsome."

"Are you ready to go?" he asks, taking slow, measured steps in my direction.

"I am."

When he reaches me, he nods and laces his fingers with mine. "Then we should get going. It'll be pretty busy this time of night, so we may have to

wait for a table.”

I shrug, grabbing my jacket and tossing it over my arm. “I don’t mind waiting. We’ve got all night, right?”

His eyes heat up a few degrees as he gazes down at me. “We do.”

Giving his hand a gentle squeeze, we walk toward my front door. I input my code on the wall, and Tucker makes sure the house is locked and secured behind us. He leads me to the passenger side of his truck, which looks freshly washed and maybe even detailed. It smells fresh and clean as soon as he opens the door.

Before I hop inside, I turn and face him. His warm breath tickles my cheek and sends my blood pumping. His fingers brush against my sides moments before his hands gently grip my hips. We’re close. So close, I can feel the heat from his body and smell his bodywash. “If I kiss you right now, we may not make it to dinner,” he states boldly.

I lift a shoulder. “That wouldn’t be so bad.”

He chuckles, sending pangs of desire racing through my veins. “I should definitely feed you, Kins, because if I get to do even a quarter of the things I hope to do later, you’re going to need the nourishment.”

Going up on my tiptoes, I lean in and brush my mouth against his. “I’m going to hold you to that, Tuck.” I swipe my lips across his chin, reveling in the burn of his facial hair over my sensitive skin. “Are you ready?”

“I’ve been ready for this moment for longer than I care to admit.”

Holding his gaze, I confess, “Me too.”

“Then, let’s get our night started,” he says, helping me into the passenger seat. Once my seat belt is secured, he closes the door and walks around to the opposite side of the truck.

When he’s backing out of my driveway, I ask, “Was Grayson excited to spend the night with his grandparents?”

Tucker grins. “Always. He loves going over there, probably because both of them spoil the hell out of him.”

“I can see why. He’s so dang adorable. I’d do the same,” I confess, realizing I’ve already started. Besides ordering him a booster seat for my table and his own plates, cups, and utensils for the kitchen, I’ve got a bunch of tractors and other toys coming from an online store. They should be here Monday, and I can’t wait to show him what I found.

“He loves hanging out with you,” Tucker says, driving toward the

downtown area where Burgers and Brew is located.

“Well, the feeling is completely mutual, I assure you.”

When we reach the lot, it’s already packed, but we manage to find a spot behind the brewery. “Yeah, we’ll definitely have to wait for a table.”

Releasing my seat belt, I say, “That’s fine, really.”

He catches my eye. “We may not get a lot of visiting in. I imagine you’ll be popular once we get inside, and everyone starts to recognize you.”

Worry settles heavy in my chest. “Is that going to be a problem?”

“Of course not. Why would it be?”

I shrug. “I’m used to it, but I can understand where you may not be a fan of the added attention.”

He reaches for my hand and brings it to his mouth. “I don’t care about that, Kins. I just want to make sure you’re comfortable. If at any point you don’t feel like you are, just say the word and I’ll get you out of there.”

Is this man for real?

“Thank you.”

I wait until he climbs out of the truck and comes around to help me down, even though I really don’t need it. Honestly, I like having his hands on me, and I’m going to take every opportunity I can get for him to do just that.

We walk around the buildings and toward the front entrance. As soon as he pulls open the heavy exterior door, I’m bathed in the sounds and scents of home. As predicted, everyone turns to see who walked in, and a buzz fills the room as soon as realization sets in. I can hear my name whispered loudly, but I pay them no attention.

A woman standing at the hostess stand smiles widely. “Holy crap, you’re Kinsley McGregor.”

Giving her a polite smile, I reply, “I am. We’d like a table for two, please.”

“Of course. Our wait is about fifteen minutes for the dining room,” she says, scanning the layout on the card in front of her. “If you don’t mind a bar table, we could seat you now. They have a few available.”

I look over at Tucker, who shrugs. “Bar side would be fine. My brother’s working over there.”

The woman smiles widely. “Yes, of course. Kellen’s your brother. Cameron’s working that side tonight too.”

“Then that’s perfect,” I tell her and follow behind as she leads us into

the adjoining room.

We stop at a pub table along the back wall, and I instantly recognize a few faces around the room. “This all right?”

“It is,” I confirm.

“Menus are in the holder in the middle of the table, and your server will be with you shortly,” she says before disappearing back to the front of the restaurant.

“You must be someone special,” Tucker says, waiting until I take my seat before he takes his.

“Why do you say that?” I ask, grabbing the menus and placing them in front of each of us.

“They don’t usually seat someone on this side. They just send you over here. Tables are first come, first served on this side, since most customers use the bar entrance.”

I shrug. “I have a way with people,” I confess with a cheeky grin.

“Don’t I know it.” He winks before glancing down at his menu.

“Hey, you two. I’m so excited to see you here.”

I turn to find Cameron standing at our table, placing a coaster down in front of each of us. “Hi.”

“What can I get you to drink?” she asks.

I look over at Tucker. “Night Crüe, please.”

He grins. “Same.”

“Any appetizer you want me to put in now?”

I check out the small list of items available on the menu. “What do you like?” I ask Tucker.

“They’re all good. You pick.”

My eyes scan the list once more, and they settle on the fried mozzarella sticks, I make my decision. “Let’s do the mozzarella sticks with marinara sauce, please.”

“Coming right up,” she says, leaving us alone to retrieve our drinks.

“This place is great,” I state, looking around at the space filled with patrons.

“You’ve never been?”

“I have, but not for a while. The last several years, I longed to just stay burrowed in the little cocoon of Kellen’s house. It was the privacy I craved, and I rarely left it,” I tell him.

“I can understand that.”

“Hey.” Kellen places two draft beers down on the table, eyeballing his oldest friend as he does it. “What are you two doing this evening?”

Smiling at my big brother, I answer his question. “We’re on a date, Kel.”

He doesn’t even look my way, just levels his gaze at Tucker. “That so?”

Tucker rolls his eyes. “Stop it. I told you last night I was taking her out this evening,” he says, bringing his beer to his mouth for a drink.

Kellen just continues to stare at his friend. Tucker doesn’t seem fazed at all, though. He sips his beer and grins back at my brother. Finally, Kellen smiles and laughs. “Yeah, I know. I was just fucking with you.”

Tucker shakes his head. “Had me scared there for a minute,” he mutters, clearly being sarcastic.

Kellen’s mouth continues to curl up. “I figured. I rarely get to play the whole scary big brother routine, so I thought I’d try it out on you tonight.”

“I was definitely scared, my friend,” Tucker quips, his eyes dancing with laughter over the top of his beer.

“Leave them alone,” Cameron announces, placing a platter of mozzarella sticks and dipping sauce in front of us.

“I was delivering their drinks.”

“And pulling out his best big brother intimidation look,” I add, reaching for a hot stick of breaded cheese and smothering it in red sauce.

“Oh Lord,” Cameron replies, rolling her eyes. She places her hands on Kellen’s chest and gives him a gentle push. “Let’s leave these two alone, shall we?”

Kellen narrows his eyes at Tucker once more, using two fingers to point from his eyes to my date, telling him he’s watching him. Tucker laughs outright, which makes me laugh. With a big grin, Kellen and Cameron walk away, leaving us in peace.

“He’s nuts,” I mutter before taking my first bite. “Holy heavenly cheese, these are amazing.”

Tucker nods, taking his own mozzarella stick and dipping it in the sauce. “Jasper makes them homemade.”

“Really?” I ask, taking another bite.

“He makes everything homemade. The man’s a genius in the kitchen.”

Once I finish my first appetizer, I grab my beer. Realizing he’s doing the

same, I hold mine up to toast. When he holds up his beer, I say the first thing that comes to mind. "To second first dates."

The corner of his mouth curls upward as he brings his glass forward and gives mine a tap. "To first loves and second chances in life."

My heart squeezes in my chest as warmth spreads through my veins.

This man.

How did I ever walk away from him the first time?

And a more important question, would I ever be able to do it a second time?

Chapter Eighteen

Tucker

“He’s incredible,” she whispers as Jameson starts playing an old Eagles tune.

“He really is,” I agree, getting comfortable in my chair and slipping my arm across her backrest.

After dinner, I grabbed the second pub chair on the opposite side of the table so I could sit beside her and listen to the music. Of course, I had ulterior motives too. From this seat, I can touch her a lot easier and brush my shoulder against hers as I casually lean her way.

“Kellen said he always draws a crowd Friday and Saturday nights, but I wasn’t expecting this,” she whispers, glancing around the room. Each seat has an ass on it, as well as the ones at the bar. There’re also several small groups standing near the bar, doing their best not to block anyone’s view.

“I haven’t been on a Friday or Saturday night in a while, but this is how it always is. They have a great thing here,” I tell her, sipping my Coke. I stopped drinking beer after my second one and switched to soda so I could drive us home. Plus, I want to make sure my wits are completely intact later. No way am I messing up our first date by drinking too much.

“Are you two all right?” Cameron asks, coming over to check on our table once more.

“I’m good. You?” she asks, turning to face me.

“I’m perfect.” And I’m not talking about my half-full drink. I’m perfectly content sitting here, my arm draped around the back of her chair, breathing in her sweet scent. Her eyes sparkle like diamonds as she gently sways to the music on the small stage.

I forgot how much I love listening to music. When we were together, there was always something playing in the background for her to sing along to. It didn’t matter if we were driving in my old truck or hanging out in her room, there was always music. After she left, I expected to hear her voice, and when I didn’t, it was a painful reminder she had left. So, I turned off the radio. I kept the television on, but always on something mindless.

"I'm pretty sure someone just took our photo," she murmurs as Cameron heads over to another table.

"Your photo. No one cares about me," I tell her, taking another sip of Coke.

"Bullshit. They want to know who the sexy guy is across the room," she insists with a smirk.

"No, they want to know what the hell a woman like you is doing with a guy like me." I'm not insulted, but I know it's true. I've lived in this town my entire life and know how they gossip. Plus, if the shoe were on the other foot and I was sitting across the room, you bet your ass I'd want to know why this gorgeous, famous singer was with some single dad chump who brews beer for a living.

She leans over, invading my personal space, her mouth a whisper away from my ear. "There's no one else I'd rather be with. Tonight or otherwise." Then, she drags her lips across my jaw and sends my blood rushing south of my waist.

I move my arm from the back of her chair to around her shoulders and draw her into my side. If she's uncomfortable with the awkward position, she doesn't say a word. She rests her head against my shoulder and hums along to the song. To be honest, I think I'd rather listen to her hum it than hear Jameson sing it. There's something so hypnotic about her voice, even when she's making noises and not singing words.

After a few more songs, Jameson angles his stool our way and winks, letting me know he's aware we're here. Of course, by now, I've realized everyone else in the room has realized it too, as more cameras are pointed our way. I don't mind, as long as Kins is comfortable with it. No, I've never found myself on this end of a camera like this before, but as long as the woman in the photo with me is Kins, I think I'd be all right with having my face show up on social media.

"Are you all having a good evening tonight?" Jameson asks once he finishes his song.

The crowd claps and hollers their replies, and he nods. "I know you've all recognized one of our patrons in the crowd tonight. Pretty cool and I don't want to put her on the spot, but I can't help but wonder if she wants to come up and sing a song with me."

A bubble of laughter spills from Kinsley's mouth as the entire room

turns and faces us. She turns her head a little, burying her nose in my chest, and the sound vibrates through my entire body. My dick actually starts to respond to the sound of her muffled giggle.

The noise level in the room grows louder as everyone cheers for her, but she doesn't pay them any attention. She looks up at me, eyes bright with excitement. "Are you okay if I go up there?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" I ask, genuinely confused.

She gives me a slight shrug, and I can tell she's thinking about her ex and the ways he'd get angry when she was put on a pedestal without him. That fucker didn't deserve her, that's for sure. "I just wanted to make sure."

"This is who you are and what you do, Kins. Get your cute little ass up there and sing with my friend."

She grins widely and starts to stand up. She catches me by complete surprise as she places her lips against my cheek before turning and walking toward the small stage. Everyone in the room cheers for her, and the moment she's in front of the room, she gives them all a little wave. "Hey, Stewart Grove."

I'm grinning like a lunatic as this wave of familiarity and comfort washes over her. She's so natural, so beautiful on stage, you can't help but be drawn to her light.

Kinsley glances over at Jameson, who has brought a second microphone onto the stage. He scoots his stool over so there's plenty of room for them both and positions his guitar on his lap. "So, Ms. Kinsley McGregor, what would you like to sing tonight?"

"This is your stage, kind sir. You pick."

"Hmm," Jameson says, strumming his guitar a few times as he thinks. Then suddenly, he plays the opening melody to one of Kinsley's biggest songs, and the crowd goes nuts. "You know this one?" he quips, making her laugh.

"It sounds familiar," she replies, smiling over at him. "I have to admit, I'm a little surprised *you* know it."

He shrugs his wide shoulders. "My wife's a huge fan. She's gonna be pissed when she finds out she missed this."

"Well, maybe we'll do this again sometime just for her," Kinsley states, as if there isn't anyone else in the room but the two of them on stage.

"She'd love that." He plays a few more chords. "So, we gonna sing this

song or what?"

"Oh, we're definitely going to sing it," she replies, adjusting the microphone for her height.

I glance around and nearly every single person in the bar has their cell phone out and pointing to the stage. I find myself holding my breath in anticipation of what's to come. I haven't heard her sing live since she was eighteen years old and sang at her high school graduation, and I didn't realize how much I crave the sound of her voice until this very moment.

Jameson starts to play the music for her very first single, "There's Always a Reason." It has a slower beat and the words poignant and resounding. Kinsley starts to sing, and goosebumps pepper my flesh. She's singing about life, about the ups and downs it throws you and riding out the storm. No matter what happens, there's always a reason to find hope. To find happiness.

I don't know what I was expecting, it's not the first time I'm hearing this song, but it strikes me differently this time. It makes me recall the ups and downs in my own life and how every single one has led me to tonight.

Back to her.

Jameson joins in and sings backup for the chorus, and holy shit, their voices blend beautifully. His is gravelly, a little grittier and rougher, while hers is angelic, soft and sweet. They're quite the pair, and I can't help but want to hear more.

When the song ends, the entire room stands up and applauds, myself included. Kinsley's smile is genuine and happy, as if she's never been more comfortable than right now, up on a stage.

"One more?" Jameson asks, continuing to strum a few cords.

"What'd you have in mind, cowboy?" she teases, as if understanding Jameson isn't exactly the country music type of guy.

"This one's a little more my taste. I'll even pick a ballad for you, but the band is nonnegotiable," he says into the mic.

"Let's hear it," she replies, watching him as he plays.

Recognition fills her face as she listens. Hell, recognition hits all of us at the same time. Of course he'd pick a Crüe song, and this one is considered one of their biggest power ballads.

"I know this one," she confirms with a smile, tapping her foot in time with the beat and drawing the mic to her mouth.

“I figured,” he replies, diving right into the song.

The opening line of “Without You” reaches right into my chest and squeezes. I’ve heard Jameson sing this song, but it never hit me the way it does hearing her voice. As she sings, her eyes land on me, and it feels like we’re the only two in the room. Like she’s singing every word for me and me alone, just like she used to back when she was mine. With each word spilling from her lips, she draws me in, refusing to let go, and I realize how much she still means to me. These last few months have done nothing but strengthen the feelings that were lying dormant, waiting to be unleashed. Now, there’s no reeling them back in.

Kinsley McGregor owns my heart.

Always has, always will.

I start to get antsy, needing out of this place soon. All I can think about is getting her alone, showing her how much she means to me, despite the time and the distance, there’s only ever been her. She consumes me completely.

Fuck me.

“She’s amazing.”

I don’t need to look to confirm her brother’s standing beside me. My eyes remain firmly locked on the one woman I’ve always loved. “She is.”

“You gonna give her a reason to stay?” he asks softly.

My heart starts to hammer in my chest. “I’d never ask her to stay, but if she chooses to on her own, I’d give her everything she wants.”

His hand lands on my shoulder and gives a gentle squeeze. “Sometimes they just need a reminder, man. My sister’s always loved you. Even when she was with the dickless douche, I know she longed for you. Make her happy, Tuck.”

All I can do is nod. The words just don’t seem to come as I watch her finish the song. At some point, he walks away to return behind the bar, but I’m not sure when. All I see is her.

Finally, after what feels like the longest song in the history of music, they finish. Kinsley walks over to the big guy and gives him a hug, despite his stiff, awkward demeanor. Then, she waves at the crowd and steps off the stage, slowly making her way back toward me.

Before she can sit back down in her chair, I’m standing. “You ready to go?”

Her blue eyes darken, and she nods. "Can I run over and say good night to Kel and Cameron?"

"Of course," I tell her, placing my hand on her lower back, grabbing any personal items on the table, and guiding her to the bar.

"You sounded great, brat," Kellen says, the pride written all over his face.

"Thank you," she replies, stepping into his embrace and giving him a hug. "We're going to head out," she adds, glancing over her shoulder to where I stand.

Kellen looks up, a hint of a smile on his lips. "All right. Be careful."

"We will," she confirms, turning to find Cameron heading our way. Once Kellen's girlfriend is within hugging range, she throws her arms around her and squeezes tightly. "I'll see you soon, all right?"

"Of course," Cameron says with a grin. "You sounded amazing up there, by the way. You and Tank could form your own little band."

Kinsley chuckles. "He's a talented musician."

"I'll call you tomorrow," Cameron says. But as she looks over at me, she grins like the Cheshire cat and adds, "But not too early."

"Yes, not too early," Kinsley confirms with a wink.

"Stop." Kellen suddenly looks uncomfortable standing there and reaches for his girlfriend. He kisses her cheek and whispers something in her ear. The way she blushes, I'm pretty sure I can figure out the direction of his words.

Kinsley turns to face me. "I'm ready."

With a nod, I take her hand, wave at my oldest friend, and head straight for the exit. A few patrons try to stop us or point a phone in our direction, but Kinsley just politely acknowledges them and keeps walking.

Once we're outside, she pauses on the sidewalk and turns to face me. "I don't want there to be any question about tonight, Tuck. I don't care if we go to your place or mine, but I'm not ready for our night to end. I have every intention of spending the night with you."

I clear away the sudden bout of dryness in my throat. "If you were to tell me you're ready to go home—alone—I'd happily take you there. Tonight has been one of the best I've had in I don't even know how long, but I'm not ready for it to end either." Taking a step closer, I release her hand and slide both of mine along her cheeks, threading my fingers into her hair. "I want to

take you home and to my bed more than I want my next breath.”

“I want that too.”

Leaning forward, I lightly swipe my lips across hers. “Then let’s go. All I’ve been able to think about since you started singing was getting you naked.”

She giggles. “Funny, that’s all I’ve thought about since I opened my door and found you standing on my doorstep.”

My cock jerks in my pants, anxious to get to the next phase of our evening.

Without saying a word, I take her hand once more and lead her around the buildings and toward my truck. *Why’d I have to park so damn far away?*

When we finally reach it, I manage to get the passenger door open, but before she can climb inside, I spin her around and press her back to the metal. “If I move too fast at any point, please tell me.”

She gazes up at me, her eyes full of desire and an intensity I wasn’t prepared for. “If you don’t hurry up and take me home, I might die.”

Snickering, I shake my head at her blatant comment. “Can’t have that, now, can we?”

“No. In fact, if we don’t get going, I’m liable to start without you.”

My eyes widen as the images parade through my mind. “You’d strip in my truck?”

Kinsley nods. “I’d probably have to touch myself too.”

A groan comes from my gut, and I have to close my eyes for a moment to collect myself. Unfortunately, by doing that, all I see is her, sitting in my truck, legs spread wide as she glides her fingers through her wet pussy. “We’ll never make it home then,” I tell her.

“Then we should hurry, huh?” Her words are just as breathless as my own.

I practically lift her and toss her into my truck—gently, of course. My heart gallops as I race around to the driver’s side and hop in. The truck is running and backing from the parking spot before I even realize I haven’t fastened my seat belt. Once I do so, I glance her way. She’s sitting in her seat, belt secured, and is watching me. There’s the faintest hint of a smile on her lips.

Fuck, I could just sit here and watch her all night long.

“Tuck?” she asks, holding my eyes. “Hurry.”

I practically stomp on the gas pedal, sending us surging forward and toward the exit. I keep my focus straight ahead, because I know if I take my eyes off the road, even for one second, she’ll be all I see. And we will never make it home.

The drive to my place is short, thanks to very limited traffic on the streets of Stewart Grove at this time of night, and as soon as I pull into my driveway, I hear her seat belt release. I park in front of the garage, not even wanting to take the thirty extra seconds to put it away, and shut off the ignition. We’re both hopping out moments later.

We meet at the back bumper. Taking her hand, I lead her swiftly toward my back door, fumble with my keys to unlock it, and then we’re stumbling inside. The keys hit the floor. My hands reach for her, pulling her against my chest. Our mouths collide in a fusion of heat and urgency.

Everything else just fades away.

It’s just her and me and the desire that consumes us.

“Here,” she demands, reaching for my Henley and tugging it up to expose my abs.

“In the kitchen?” I ask, the corner of my mouth ticking upward in a smile.

“Hell yes.” She levels me with a fiery gaze that makes my balls ache. “Right here, Tuck. Right now.”

Spinning her around, I lift her onto my kitchen table and step between her legs. “Your wish is my command.”

Chapter Nineteen

Kinsley

I don't know what comes over me. One minute, we're practically racing toward his house with the intention of making it to his bed before the clothes start to fly, and the next, I'm begging him to take me on his kitchen table.

Tucker's hands dive into my hair, holding me firmly in place. His mouth slowly lowers, drawing closer to my lips with each passing second. "Once I kiss you, Kins, I won't be able to stop."

I fist his shirt at his sides. "I don't want to stop, Tuck. I've been imagining this moment for far too long."

"I'm not saying I won't stop if you tell me to," he quickly insists, his mouth suddenly moving away from mine.

"Tuck?" I whisper, holding firmly on to his clothes and locking my ankles together behind his ass. "I realize you're trying to be the good guy and all chivalrous, but that's not what I want."

"No?" he asks, cupping my jaw in his hands. "What do you want?"

"I want the bad boy."

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, his mouth presses to mine. Every nerve ending I have comes to life as fire starts to pump through my veins. His tongue glides along the seam of my lips, coaxing them apart and begging for entrance. Our tongues collide in a frenzy of desire, our hands moving just as hurried.

"My God, Kins. Your mouth is pure sin," he whispers, nipping at the corner of my mouth before trailing his lips across my chin.

"Take off your shirt," I demand, pushing up on the material until I've exposed the smooth skin beneath.

My fingers grip at his flesh, my nails digging into the warmth, my body craving more. He reaches behind his neck and pulls his Henley up and over, tossing it onto the floor beside him. "Better?"

All I can do is stare. His chest is...wow. Tucker Dunn always had

definition, thanks to manual labor and sports, but this version, this man, is better. He's still hard and toned, but he's softer too. His skin has aged, and the light matting of hair has filled in a bit more. There're also a few tattoos that weren't there nine years ago, and to see the dark ink in contrast to his lighter skin is mesmerizing.

"What does this mean?" I ask running my fingers across the three arrows pointing up marking his left pec.

He glances down and grins. "It's what they call 'The Lucky Few' tattoo and it sort of became the symbol of Down syndrome. The three arrows refer to the three twenty-first chromosomes that result in Down. They're pointed upward as a symbol of rising up and moving forward, and the blue and yellow behind it is the color representing the syndrome."

My eyes fill with tears as I take in the color splattered behind the three simple arrows. "It's beautiful," I tell him, tracing each of the three points with my fingertip. I glance down to his arm and find the word "never" written. It's such an odd piece, so I know it must have a special meaning like the one on his pec. "And this?" Again, my finger traces the black lettering.

When he doesn't reply, I look up. His dark eyes are stormy and full of emotion. "Do you remember our last night together. The one down by the creek before you left for Nashville?"

A loud hammering fills the room masquerading as my heartbeat. "Yes," I whisper, a golf ball-sized lump suddenly forming in my throat.

"You asked me not to forget you."

I have to blink to keep the tears from falling as I'm transported right back to that night. To our final time together. We were in his old truck, parked by the creek bank. We had just made love for the last time, and I was crying. He held me in his arms, rocking me back and forth. I wasn't the only one who cried. He did too, even though he tried to fight it.

I had told him not to forget me.

"I remember," I reply, my eyes slamming back down on the tattoo.

Suddenly, I know exactly what it means.

"What did I say to you?" he whispers softly, his words full of pain.

Clearing my throat, I murmur, "You replied never. You said you'd never forget me."

He smiles softly and cups my jaw in his hands. "And I never did."

I don't know who moves first, him or me, but the next thing I know, we're kissing once more. My hands glide up his sides, wrap around his shoulders, and dive into his hair. He slowly lifts my sweater, his warm palm caressing my stomach. My nipples are pebbled hard against my bra, begging for some attention. As if knowing exactly what I need, he peels his lips from mine, but only long enough to remove my sweater completely and toss it onto the floor with his Henley.

He trails open-mouthed kisses across my jaw and down my neck. I pray his mouth is headed exactly where I need it. He glides his lips across the mounds of my breasts, his tongue delving into the valley between them as I feel his fingers fumble for the clasp. With one swift flick, my bra loosens and falls away, and his mouth is there.

He swirls his tongue across one nipple before sucking it deep into his warm, wet mouth. I groan as pleasure races through me, my back arching to press my chest closer to him.

"You are the most beautiful woman in the world," he whispers between flicks of his tongue.

"I don't know about that," I pant, rocking my hips in search of delicious friction.

When I come up short, he chuckles and places the palm of his hand over my pussy. "I can feel how hot and wet you are, Kins."

A whimper spills from my lips, as I close my eyes. "I'm ready."

"Are you?" he asks, pulling his mouth away from my breasts and standing to his full height. "Are you ready for me?" He applies just a little more pressure with his hand, sending shock waves of bliss through my blood.

My legs fall open even more, and I roll my hips. "So fucking ready, Tuck."

He leans forward and kisses that magical place just below my ear. "I should take you to my bed. I've wanted you there since the moment I saw you standing on the sidewalk."

"Later," I mutter, throwing my arms around his shoulders and drawing him closer. "You can take me to bed later. Right now, I really want you to fuck me on the kitchen table."

His mouth curls up in a smirk. "My Kins appears to be a little naughtier than I remember."

“No, not really. I’m just tired of waiting,” I insist, grabbing for the fly of his jeans. “I feel like I’ve been waiting for years.”

“Hmm,” he murmurs against my skin. “Can’t have that, now can we?”

Then, he’s moving. Tucker helps me stand, but only long enough to remove my boots, jeans, and panties. I’m not even embarrassed he’s seeing my body for the first time in almost a decade. I’m not worried about my own changes. How could I when there’s only appreciation and longing reflecting back at me.

Before I can try to get his own pants off, he’s lifting me back onto the table and stepping between my legs. “You’re wearing too many clothes for this to properly work,” I quip, dying to get his pants off.

Grinning, he places his palms on my thighs and gently spreads them apart even more. “We’ll get to that. First,” he says, dropping to his knees between my legs, “I’m going to eat.”

I open my mouth to argue, but any words I was going to say just fade away as his tongue swipes down my pussy. My fingers move to his hair for leverage as he gets to work. He swirls his tongue over my clit before sucking it into his mouth.

If I was wet before, I’m well on my way to soaked now.

Slowly, he presses a single finger inside my body, and it’s pure heaven. “Oh God,” I whimper.

He licks my clit, gently moving his index finger in and out in long strokes. After about a minute of bliss, he adds a second finger. The stretch feels magnificent, the slight burn welcomed. Tucker slowly picks up speed, angling his fingers upward and stroking my G-spot. A gasp flies from my lips as he continues to manipulate my clit.

“Fuck,” I groan, rocking my hips to take his fingers even deeper. “I’m going to come.”

“That’s what I want, Kins. I need you to come on my mouth. It’s been too long since I’ve tasted your release,” he mutters without missing a stroke.

I want to lie back on the table, but the desire to watch him eat me is stronger. My eyes are glued to his every movement. Placing my palms on the table behind me, I hitch my ankles onto his shoulder and let my thighs fall open as far as they’ll go. He picks up the pace, finger fucking me at the same time as he feasts on my clit. My orgasm is just within reach now, the buildup growing stronger and stronger. All it’s going to take is one little push

over the edge, and I'll fly.

"Tuck?" I ask, needing more.

"Yes?" The vibrations of that single word tickle in all the right places.

My body is a live wire, on the edge, but craving more. "Please," I beg, praying he knows what I need.

"Please what?" he asks, lazily stroking my clit with his tongue.

"Please do the thing," I whisper, refusing to be embarrassed by my request.

He pauses, looking up at me from between my thighs. His fingers are still buried in my pussy and his mouth glistens from my wetness. His eyes are burning hotter than a thousand suns as he asks, "You sure?"

"Fuck, yes. Please," I groan, clenching my internal muscles around his fingers.

Without saying another word, I feel his mouth curl up in a smile and his pinky strokes me...there. It grazes my ass, circling across the puckered hole and applying just enough pressure to send me flying. My orgasm consumes me as wave after wave of white light fills my vision. My entire body tenses as I come hard, rolling my hips to steal every touch of his mouth I can get.

When my release finally subsides, I fall back onto the table in a blissful heap of boneless limbs. "Jesus," I mutter, trying to get my breathing under control.

Tucker chuckles, slowly pulling his fingers from my pussy and standing in front of me. Holding my gaze, he draws those two digits into his mouth and sucks them clean. He's always done little things like that, savoring the taste of my release.

Placing his hands on the table beside my head, he bends down and kisses my lips. "I forgot about the thing," he whispers, the scent of me hanging in the air.

I hadn't.

I was eighteen when I discovered I liked having my ass played with a little during sex. What started off as an accident quickly turned into something I craved. Tucker was more than willing to explore that side with me, taking it slow and never pushing me to do anything I wasn't ready for. The result was intense orgasms and secrets shared only between the two of us.

After I married my ex, I hinted one night about trying some ass play, but he quickly shut it down, claiming it was gross. I never brought it up again.

I go up onto my elbows and lift my legs over his hips. His hard cock presses firmly against the apex of my legs, and all I can think about now is getting him naked and inside me. It's quickly becoming one of my life goals, and I'm afraid I may die if it doesn't happen soon.

"Ready to move to my bedroom?" he whispers, sliding his stubbled cheek against my neck.

"I don't believe I've been properly fucked on your table yet, Tuck."

He looks up, gauging my seriousness. "It's more comfortable in my bed."

"I'm aware," I tell him, sitting up and reaching for the fly of his jeans. "We'll take it there for the next round."

A slow smile transforms his entire face as he gives me complete access to his jeans. I flip open the button and gently glide the zipper down. My hands move to his sides as I push the denim off his hips and down his legs. He helps me take them the rest of the way off, stepping out of the pants and toeing them out of the way. He's standing before me in a pair of black boxer briefs, the outline of his cock prominent.

Instinctively, I lick my lips. "I'm going to suck your cock, Tuck."

His breath hitches as his eyes flare with desire. "Hell yes, you are, but not right now. When I come for the first time tonight, it's going to be inside your pussy."

I nod in total agreement, slip my fingers inside the band of his boxers, and give them a tug. His cock bounces free, hard and ready, the tip seeping with moisture. I almost offer to clean the drop off with my tongue, but that thought dies on my lips as he grabs his cock by the base and gives it a gentle squeeze.

A fresh wave of wetness coats my inner thighs. "Tuck, I'm going to need you to get a condom. Now."

He snickers, releasing his cock and reaching for his pants. He retrieves his wallet, pulling a single condom from within, and dropping it on the table beside me. "You wanna do the honors?" he asks.

"Always," I insist, grabbing the protection and ripping it open. I wrap my hand around his cock and give it a gentle stroke.

“Fuck,” he groans, shaking his head and closing his eyes. “Never mind. Bad idea. I’ll do it,” he adds, when I continue to move my hand up and down his dick.

“No takebacks,” I tell him, refusing to hand over the condom. Instead, I release my hold on his cock and position the rubber at the head. I pinch the tip and slowly roll it down his impressive length, watching as it fits into place.

“I’m gonna blow just by having your hand on me,” he says, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows hard.

“No you’re not. You’ve never had a problem before,” I tell him. Even as a teenager, Tucker always seemed to last long enough to get the job done.

The corner of his mouth turns upward as he positions his cock at my entrance. “I jacked off an hour before I picked you up.”

His confession makes me laugh, but not at him. “I used my vibrator twice last night before I could fall asleep,” I confess, without an ounce of embarrassment.

“And yet, after twice last night and once already tonight, you still want more,” he says, sliding the head of his cock between my folds.

“Hell yes, I do.”

With his eyes locked on mine, he presses forward, slowly filling me with his cock. Pleasure dances through my veins as he pushes all the way in, balls deep in one, long stroke. “Jesus, Kins. I forgot how fucking amazing this is,” he whispers, holding still as he gives me time to adjust to the invasion.

Reaching up, I wrap my hand around his neck and draw his mouth to mine. “Only with you, Tuck. It’s us.” The confession slips from my mouth effortlessly.

He nods before drawing out of my body, leaving just the tip inside. “Ready?”

“Yes.”

He surges forward, and I cry out as his hips slam into my thighs. He leans forward, thrusting with determined, sure movements, and claiming my mouth with his in a bruising kiss. The way he rolls his hips strokes my G-spot once more. I can already feel my next release building.

“Lie back,” he tells me.

I do as instructed, and he holds me up by my ass and drives forward. I

hitch my ankles on his upper arms and hold on tight.

“Touch yourself. Rub your clit, Kins. I want to watch.”

My hand moves between my legs, and even though I’m already plenty wet, I run my fingers around his cock as he moves in and out. Then, I place my fingers against my clit and apply the right amount of pressure. I glance at him as he watches me, enjoying the look of euphoria on his face as much as the pleasure sweeping through my body.

Between the clit stimulation and the cock stroking that pleasure spot inside me like a fucking pro, my orgasm is there, ready to explode with the intensity of a firework. “I’m going to come, Tuck,” I whisper.

“Let go, love,” he demands, and it’s the passion in his words that has me detonating like a bomb.

I cry out his name, trying to keep my eyes open and watch as he does the same. With a grunt, he thrusts hard and pauses, his entire body tense as his own orgasm takes hold. I can feel his cock flexing as he comes and makes smaller thrusts to draw out both releases.

He places me back on the table and lowers my legs, coming down on top of me the best he can, considering he’s still buried inside me and standing between my legs. Tucker brushes his mouth across mine and whispers, “Give me a couple of minutes, and I’ll be ready to do that again.”

I giggle at the same time as I yawn, my hands wrapping around his shoulders and holding his sweaty chest to my own. “I might need a short nap, and maybe a shower.”

Desire fills his eyes once more. “Is this a two-person shower or a solo performance?”

“Oh, we’ll both be there.”

“Deal.” He rests his cheek against my forehead. “I’m never going to look at this table the same,” he quips.

A bark of laughter flies from my mouth. “Me either,” I tell him. “How about you take me to bed now. My ass is numb.”

Heat dances in his eyes once more as he states, “I’ll rub it for you.”

Giggling, I’m lifted in the air, my front plastered to his as my legs wrap around his waist, and he carries me off to his bedroom. Hopefully, he’ll make good on that whole ass rubbing comment. My entire body fires to life once more as I envision what’s to come.

Something tells me there won’t be much sleeping tonight.

Chapter Twenty

Tucker

I startle awake and blink up at the ceiling fan as it steadily spins around. Without even thinking, I reach for Kinsley, only to find the opposite side of the bed empty and cold. Sitting up, a wave of panic rushes through me. Did she leave? She couldn't have, right? She doesn't have her vehicle.

Then I hear a noise, a soft whisper that sounds like...humming.

I climb from the bed, naked, and go in search of Kinsley. It's almost four in the morning; way too early to be up and moving, especially after the marathon sex. First, in the kitchen, followed by hard and fast in the shower, and then finally, slow and gentle in bed before we both passed out. That was only a couple of hours ago, so why she's awake is beyond me.

But I'm going to find out.

I creep out of my bedroom, glancing toward Grayson's room out of habit. It only takes a second to remember he's gone for the night, and I move away from his doorway in search of Kinsley.

When I enter the living room, I stop in my tracks, a small smile playing on my lips. She's sitting in the middle of my couch, legs crisscrossed, and not wearing a stitch of clothing on her body. She has a pad of paper on her lap, blocking the view of her pussy, but I can see everything else. She's holding an ink pen in her hand, tapping it gently on top of the notepad, and humming a tune only she can hear. Her eyes are closed, and I'm certain she's unaware of my presence.

I remember every moment, from the first touch to the last,

I thought our time was over, I left you in the past.

Now here we are again, and to my heart I must stay true,

My heart knows what it wants, and it was always you.

Her eyes pop open, but they're cast down as she writes on the paper. I lean against the wall and just watch her. It's clear she's writing a song, and I find it fascinating to witness. She hums a few more chords, and gently sings the lyrics she's working on. When she stops and starts over again, she smiles

as she finds the right words to go with the melody, and quickly jots those down on the paper.

Just as she removes the tip of her pen from the paper, she looks up and startles. "Crap, I didn't realize you were there."

"Only been standing here a minute," I tell her, my eyes dropping to her naked breasts.

She glances down and smiles sheepishly. "Is this okay?"

"Okay, as in finding you sitting naked in my living room in the middle of the night? Yes, Kinsley, that's more than okay." Miraculously, considering the amount of sex we've had in the last six hours, my cock gets hard, enjoying the hell out of the view. But I've always had that instantaneous reaction to her. No one can stir an erection to life faster than this woman.

Licking her lips, Kinsley's gaze zeroes in on my cock. "You seem very okay with it."

Smiling, I stop in front of her. "He knows what he wants."

Before she can reach for me, I take a seat beside her on the couch and slip my fingers into hers. "What's that?" I ask, nodding down to the notepad. I recognize it as the one from my kitchen counter.

"A song," she replies softly, a faint blush creeping down her neck.

"Can I hear it?"

She shakes her head. "Not yet. It's in pieces."

"But you'll sing it for me one day?"

She holds my gaze for a brief moment before nodding. "If you want."

"What's it about?" I find myself asking, trailing a finger across her leg just to feel her soft skin.

"Us."

I look up, finding her eyes full of truth. "Yeah?"

She nods, that hint of embarrassment back once again.

"Then, I definitely want to hear it. When you're ready."

"Okay."

"What brought you out here in the middle of the night? I would have thought after the number of orgasms you've had, you'd be in a sex-induced coma," I quip, making her laugh.

"I couldn't sleep," she confesses, setting the notepad down on the coffee table and turning a bit to face me. "I lay awake, watching you sleep, and the words just started speaking to me. I knew I had to get up and write

them down or risk losing them forever.”

“I see. Have you slept at all?”

“Yes,” she replies. “For about an hour. I think I got too warm, because I woke up all hot and sweaty, and then I couldn’t fall back asleep.”

“If you were too hot, you should have woken me,” I insist, setting our entwined fingers on my upper thigh.

“I didn’t want to wake you. I was too busy watching you sleep like a stalker.”

I snort a chuckle. “I’ve never had a stalker.”

“They’re not as fun as you’d think,” she chimes in, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. “No, I’ve never had one,” she quickly adds. “One of the female artists with my record label did last summer, and it was a nightmare. Really scary for her and those she worked closely with.”

“I bet.” After watching her for a few long seconds, I ask, “Tell me about Nashville. What happened after you left here?”

She sighs and shifts her legs, leaning into my side and getting comfortable. “It was so nerve-racking, really. I had no idea how to make my dream come true, and it was incredibly hard, especially in the beginning. I got a job working for a music studio during the day and a diner at night. I sang at any club or bar that would let me, especially during those open mic nights. Mom went with me to all of them, since I wasn’t twenty-one and sat with me at a table until it was my turn to perform.

“Eventually, the owner of a bar on Broadway called Shannon’s Place heard me sing and offered me a gig, opening on Saturday nights for their house band that was pretty popular. I jumped at the opportunity, and for a year, I played and sang a few times a month. The experience was amazing, and the lead singer of the band, Rachel Cooper, sort of took me under her wing.

“Then, one night, there was this big murmur backstage. Joseph Miller was supposedly in the crowd, and he owns Miller Records. The assumption was he was there to hear Rachel’s band, Desert Flower, play, but at the end of the night, it wasn’t Rachel he gave his card to. It was me. I was twenty-two.”

I find myself smiling as she shares the details of her life after leaving Stewart Grove. “That’s amazing, Kins.”

“It’s been one hell of a ride, that’s for sure,” she says with an awkward

chuckle. “My mom was there every step of the way and helped me hire a manager. Of course, I fired him when the affair news broke, since he knew about it.”

“He did?” I ask, unsure how I feel about that. You’re supposed to be able to trust the members of your team, and if that trust is broken, it’s hard to rebuild.

“Yep. Him and the stage manager. Everyone else seemed shocked by the video. I don’t know, maybe they’re just good actors, but I’m pretty sure the other members of the band and the few on my team I trust explicitly had no clue.”

“What happens now?” I ask, lightly drawing circles on her outer thigh with my thumb.

“Well, the tour is over, and I don’t see another in the works unless I have a new album to back it up. The label recommended a new manager, and even though I’ve not met him face-to-face yet, he seems like a good guy. He has a decent client list, so I know he’s legit.”

“You hired him without meeting him?” I ask before I can think better of it. I’m not trying to judge her business decisions, but that seems a little iffy.

“We did actually meet a few times when I opened for Simon Rhoades last year. He represented him and made several appearances on the tour. When I saw his name at the top of the list from the label, I gave him a call. We did a few video chats before I signed. I also reached out to Simon and talked with him about it, and he recommended him. So, I may not have met with him in-person to sign my contract, but I felt like I was making a solid decision.”

“Okay. Sorry, not trying to question you or anything,” I start, but she stops me.

“I know. Besides, my dad does that enough for the both of us.” Her chuckle comes out uneasy, and I don’t like it. I’ve always liked her parents, even if they made her childhood difficult with their bickering and fighting, but her dad was far worse. I hate to think about the guy causing her more stress as an adult.

“Hate that.”

“Me too. I think it all boils down to the fact he’s bitter I didn’t hire him to be my manager. He used to tell me all about famous parent and child

duos who worked in the business together. I heard enough of the fighting when I was younger to know I didn't want my father managing any aspect of my business. The man couldn't hang on to money to save his life."

"Smart move," I tell her, grateful she was smart enough to keep him far away from that part of her life.

"Kellen would have killed me if I let that happen," she adds with a snicker. "So, since we're sharing all the stuff that happened while we were apart, will you tell me more about that time, while I was gone?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Well, I know you dated Evie, Grayson's mom. Was there anyone else?"

I shake my head. "I tried to date a little after you left, but it took me a while. I was so fucking proud of you and happy you went, but it was hard too. I missed you so damn much. So many nights, I wanted to pick up the phone and call you. We went from talking every opportunity we had to nothing, and it was an adjustment."

Her eyes look a little misty. "Me too. I hated leaving you. I cried the whole way to Nashville. I'm pretty sure, at one point, I begged my mom to turn around."

I squeeze the hand I'm holding and rest my head against hers. "I'm glad you didn't. Our lives took us in different directions, but those roads were necessary."

She sighs and kisses my collarbone. "I know. And eventually, they led me home."

Now I'm all smiles.

Home.

Kinsley swings her leg and climbs onto my lap. My cock starts to get hard once more, anxious and ready. My arms wrap around her waist, drawing her closer. The movement causes her pussy to glide along my cock and her perky tits to brush against my chest. Leaning forward, I claim her mouth with mine in a slow, tantalizing kiss.

"Tuck?"

"Hmm?" I murmur, stroking her outer thighs with my palms.

"I'm on birth control," she whispers, rocking her hips and gliding her wetness along my dick. "And I was tested when I came to town."

My hands freeze as I meet her gaze. "I...I would never risk you, Kins. I

can go get a condom.”

She shakes her head, brown waves of hair spilling over her shoulders, begging for my hands. “You’ve always protected me.”

My grip tightens. “Always.”

She lifts her hips, reaches between us and takes my cock in her palm. She gives me a gentle stroke before lining herself up over me. With her eyes locked on mine, she lowers herself onto me, taking my cock all the way to the root in one stroke.

“My God,” she murmurs with a whimper. “So fucking good.”

My head falls against the back of the couch as the sensations take hold. I keep my hands on her outer thighs, helping guide her as she moves. Kinsley takes complete control, and I willingly let her. She lifts up and sinks back down over and over, slowly picking up her pace. Our bodies start to take over, the pleasure grabbing hold and refusing to let go.

Kinsley shifts from her knees at my sides to placing her feet flat on the couch. I reach through her legs and grab her ass to help support her weight. Then, she drops. Hard. My cock is buried inside her wet pussy, my balls already aching and drawing up to my body. She sets a fast, precise pace, lifting up and slamming back down on me. I close my eyes and just feel.

“Tucker, I’m going to come,” she states without breaking her stride.

“Let me feel it, love.”

She gasps, rocking her hips as I’m buried inside her. She lifts and drops several times, her movements hurried. I know the moment her orgasm starts. Her internal muscles squeeze, pulsing around my cock as she hollers my name. Her release and the squeezing of my cock triggers my own release. She milks every ounce of cum I possess, drawing the most intense release I’ve ever had from my body.

“Fuck,” I mutter, my eyes closed as the euphoria spreads through my body.

“Mmm,” she murmurs, dropping down on top of me one last time.

My arms wrap around her back, a mixture of her breathing and mine filling the room. My balls are heavy and wet, but I don’t care.

Best. Orgasm. Ever.

“I think I’m going to sleep for two days now,” she whispers, her warm breath tickling my shoulder.

“As long as you’re in my bed, I don’t see a problem with that,” I tell

her, sweeping her hair off her back and grazing my fingertips down her skin.

“Yeah, but you’ll have to get Grayson at some point tomorrow. Or today. Whatever,” she mutters through a yawn.

“I told him I’d pick him up after lunch.”

“Mmkay.” She sighs against my skin, and I’m not sure I’ve ever felt this content and happy before.

“Would you like to go with me? To pick up Grayson?”

She shifts so she can see my face. “At your parents’ house?”

“Yes.”

She considers my question for a few seconds before saying, “I’d love to. I haven’t seen your mom in ages.”

“She’ll be so excited to see you too,” I assure her, placing my lips to her forehead. “We should get cleaned up and go back to bed.”

She pulls the cutest face as she starts to move, realizing it’s only making things messier. “We’re probably getting it all over the couch.”

I shrug, shifting her off my lap carefully and laying her down beside me. “It’ll wash.” Then, I hop up and move to the hall bathroom to retrieve a washcloth. As soon as I have myself cleaned up, I grab a fresh cloth and soak it with warm water, before taking it back into the living room where Kinsley waits.

She holds out her hand, but I shake my head. “Let me.”

She doesn’t say a word, just spreads her legs and allows me to wipe away my cum. There’s something oddly possessive about seeing it dripping from her body, and as much as I’d like to fuck her all over again, I know we’re both exhausted and needing sleep.

Once I have the majority of the mess cleaned up, I bend down and take her in my arms. She squeals with laughter as I lift her to my chest, turn, and carry her back to my bed. I lay her down on my second pillow, loving the way her dark hair fans out on top of the gray material. Bending down, I place my lips to hers, savoring the feel and taste of her.

Without saying a word, I walk around to the opposite side of the bed and climb beneath the comforter. She curls onto her side, pressing her sweet ass against my groin. I toss my arm over her hip and position myself as close to her as possible.

“Good night, Kins.”

“Night, Tuck.” She glances over her shoulder and adds, “This was the

best date I've ever had. And I'm not just referring to the sex, which was pretty great. I mean the entire night, from the very start to now. I've never felt more comfortable and cherished than I do when I'm with you."

"Good," I tell her, kissing her cheek in a chaste kiss. "I've had the best night too."

She sighs and relaxes even more. "It might be too soon, but I'm already excited for our next date."

"Me too, love. Me too," I assure her as her breathing starts to even out.

As Kinsley dozes off, I just hold her in my arms, breathing her in and committing every part of her to memory. I don't know what the future holds, but I pray we're finally on track to spending it together.

I won't settle for anything less.

After just one date, I'm all in.

I want Kinsley.

Now.

And forever.

Chapter Twenty-One

Kinsley

“Kins!”

I’m grinning from ear to ear the moment Grayson spots me enter his grandparents’ house. His little legs carry him as fast as they can toward me, and I drop and hold out my arms. He runs into me with the force of a little linebacker, giggling the entire time as he wraps his arms around me and squeezes.

“Hi, Grayson. How are you?”

“Dood!” he yells, leaning forward and kissing my cheek.

My heart melts even more for this little boy.

I stand up and face Tucker’s mom and dad for the first time since I left Stewart Grove at eighteen. I’ve always secretly hoped I’d run into them while I was visiting my brother, but it never happened. Well, it’s not like I ever went anywhere. When I was back here, I was usually relaxing and unwinding at my brother’s without anyone knowing I was there.

“Kinsley,” Marge Dunn says with a huge smile and maybe a tear in her eye.

“Hello, Mrs. Dunn,” I reply stepping forward to greet Tucker’s mom.

“Oh, stop. It’s Marge, dear,” she states right before wrapping me in her arms in a fierce hug. “I’m so glad we’re finally seeing you. How have you been?”

“Very well, thank you,” I tell her, unable to hide the blush snaking up my neck as I recall just how *well* I’m doing this morning.

Marge smiles knowingly over my shoulder, her eyes trained on her son.

“Kinsley.”

I glance over at the older version of Tucker. Ray Dunn extends his arms and I instantly walk straight into them, basking in the familiarity and comfort they provide. Years ago, when things got hard at home and I’d seek out Tucker, his parents were part of that. They fed me meals, let me watch their

TV after working on homework, and welcomed me into their lives like I had always been a part of it. Ray Dunn taught me how a real husband was supposed to act, showing me nothing but love every step of the way.

Funny how I ended up marrying a man more like my own father than Tucker's.

"Hi, Mr. Dunn."

He tsks as he hugs. "You know better than that," he whispers. "It's so good to see you, sweet girl. We've been following your career."

I don't know why, but I'm a bit surprised by that admission. "You have?"

"Of course we have. It's not every day our little Kinsley McGregor makes it big in Nashville. We went to one of your shows, you know."

My jaw drops. "What? You did?"

He nods, glancing over at Marge. "In Cleveland a couple years back."

My eyes fill with tears, and I don't really know why. Maybe it's because they cared about my career enough to support it, despite my breaking up with their son to do it. "I had no idea," I say, glancing between the couple. "Why didn't you reach out to me and let me know? I would have loved to have seen you."

Marge just shrugs. "You were busy, dear, and we didn't want to disrupt that."

I look at Tucker, and when I don't see shock or hurt on his face, I realize he knew they went to the show, and for some reason, that support means more to me than I ever could have expected. Clearing my throat, I ask, "What did you think of the show?"

Ray grins proudly. "You were better than the guy you opened up for. You should have been the headliner."

I laugh easily. "That headliner has won back-to-back awards for album of the year," I tell them.

Ray just shrugs. "He was okay. We liked your show better."

"Come on, let's go into the kitchen and catch up. You can stay for a bit, right?" Marge asks, a hopeful look in her light-colored eyes.

I glance at Tucker, who seems just as content and relaxed as ever. "Yeah, we can stay for a bit. I can't wait to catch up with you both."

“Hello?” I say, answering my cell on a Tuesday afternoon.

“How’s my favorite divorcée?” Erika asks by way of greeting.

“She’s fabulous,” I reply, smiling as I think about the time I’ve spent with Tucker and Grayson. It’s been just over three weeks since my divorce was finalized, and I finally feel like I’m getting back on my feet. My house is coming along, I’m writing songs left and right thanks to this sudden overwhelming bout of creativity.

“I’m happy to hear that.”

I shift on the couch, moving my guitar out of the way. “I’m willing to bet you didn’t just call to check up on me.”

“That was part of the reason,” she insists before diving right in. “The other part was because I’ve been asked if you have a comment about photos being published with you and a man.”

I sigh, knowing this call was going to happen sooner or later. Honestly, I’m surprised it’s taken this long. “He’s a friend.”

“Come on, Kins. You know I need to give them more than that. The photos look, well, more than friendly, and there are several. You’re three weeks post-divorce, and everyone is chomping at the bit for details. You know if we don’t give them something, they’ll go digging or make assumptions.”

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I don’t want to invade his privacy.”

“Of course you don’t, but he had to know what he was getting into.”

I’m sure he did. We’ve talked about the fact our photo may come out at some point, but that doesn’t mean I want it to happen. “He really is an old friend. We dated before I moved to Nashville and reconnected when I came back after Christmas. Nothing happened until after it was final, I swear.” I take another calming breath. “What should I say?”

“How about this. After my divorce was final, I reconnected with a few old friends. My focus is on my career and writing music for my next album.”

Is that where my focus is?

Yes, I’m writing music, but not specifically for my next album. I’m writing because the words, the melodies are flowing, and honestly, it feels good. It’s part of the healing process, and there’s nothing like putting pen to paper and leaving my heart and soul in every line I write. The hurt I’ve experienced seems to feel lighter, the betrayal slowing fading into a

memory.

Of course, Tucker Dunn could be aiding in that regard too, but he's not the only reason. He's helping me find who I am, gently giving me the nudges to take the next steps forward.

"I guess that's okay."

"It won't stop the questions about who the man is, but at least it's something. If I get follow-up requests, I'll just continue to insist he's a friend. You may want to ask him not to look at you like he's ready to eat you alive, though. His eyes look a lot less than *friendly*."

"Send me the pics," I request, blushing as I think about what kind of look she's referring to.

"They're already in your inbox. I can't stop them. They're already out there as of about thirty minutes ago, but at least a few of the media outlets are kind enough to ask for a comment before taking them national."

I shake my head. "I can't believe anyone cares who I'm friends with."

"Your divorce and the reason behind it were very public and high profile. The media is invested in your story. They're foaming at the mouth for any kind of follow-up, Kinsley."

"I know," I reply with a deep sigh.

"You probably want to warn him of what's to come too. Could be nothing, but you're a household name now, Kins."

"I was really hoping to fly under the radar, Erika."

She chuckles. "Good luck with that. Anyway, I'll put together the statement and get it sent out. I'll also post it on our socials."

"Thank you," I tell her.

"You bet. I'll be in touch if I need you."

"Bye," I reply before tapping my screen and setting my phone down on the side table.

I grab my guitar, trying to put my mind back into the song I was writing when Erika called, but it won't stop spinning. After playing the same little chord wrong a few times, I replace my guitar in the stand and walk around my music room. The view is my favorite part. The trees and the serene feeling I get when I gaze into my backyard.

To be honest, it's gonna be damn hard to go back to Nashville, even just part time.

I forgot how much I loved my hometown. The people, the familiar

places, the slower pace. It's all part of the charm of Stewart Grove. Of course, Tucker's here too, which lately, is probably the biggest part of the appeal. Things have been...good. Too good, and I want to stay firmly planted in my Tucker-infused bubble, where only he and I exist. Well, and Grayson too. I know they're a package deal, and with Tucker comes Grayson.

That's okay. I've fallen hopelessly in love with that little boy. Even stealing just a few hours every couple of nights was enough for him to wrap his hands around my heart and own it. Just like his dad, really. That man has owned my heart since I was a teenager, and while we may have spent nine years apart, I've come to realize it's still very much his.

I just don't know how to tell him.

Speaking of telling him, I fire off a quick text.

Me: Hey, you. I have something to run by you. Call me when Grayson's down for the night.

His reply comes almost instantly.

Tucker: No problem. Everything okay?

Me: Yes. Just wanted to make you aware of a paparazzi situation.

Tucker: Okay. I'll call you. Or I can make you dinner.

Me: How about I make you dinner?

Tucker: We can do it together. At my place? Grayson wants to watch *Cars* on the DVR tonight.

Smiling, I picture myself snuggled up to Tucker and Grayson, watching whatever movie the little guy wants before settling down for bed.

Me: Perfect. What can I bring?

Tucker: Just you. I've got chicken in the fridge and can whip up a salad and some asparagus with it.

Me: I'll be there.

Tucker: Can't wait to kiss you. Maybe do some other stuff too.

My cheeks blush a dark shade of pink as warmth spreads through my veins, striking me square in the clit like a bolt of lightning.

Me: It's a date.

Tucker: See you soon, beautiful.

I set my phone back down on the table and move over to where my keyboard is set up. I'm not the best, but I've learned a lot about playing over the years. I got my first guitar when I was nine years old, and within a couple years after that, I had Kellen playing the drums. I had big dreams about us forming a band together, but that fell apart the moment he discovered girls. We still jam together, but not like we did when we were younger. He still plays from time to time and has even taught Cameron a few things.

I start playing a few of my favorite melodies on the keys, particularly an old Reba song I used to play and sing when I was little. I run through the song, singing every word, before sliding into one of my own hits. I think about all the times I've sang this song, on small stages and big ones. I'm proud of what I've accomplished in my Nashville years and really hope to write more number one hits. Not all for me either. Yes, I'd love to continue performing, but if it was taken from me today, I know I'd be okay as long as I could write music.

Smiling, I play two more of my favorite songs, singing quietly with each one. Just as I lift my hand from the keyboard, my phone rings. I stand and walk over to where I left it and pause when I see the name on the screen. My gut tells me I should let it go to voice mail, but for some reason, I worry it could be something important. He is a member of my band, even if only for a short time until I can meet with the record label and have him replaced.

"Hello?"

"Kinsley."

Acid in my stomach churns. "Zander."

"Didn't take you long, did it?"

"What are you talking about?" I ask, even though something tells me I already know.

“The guy you’re already fucking.”

I let out a disgusted sound. “That’s rich coming from you. Weren’t you the one screwing women while we were married? What I do now that we’re divorced is none of your business.”

“It’s my business when I’m getting phone calls, wanting a statement.”

“Your statement should be no comment. I’m none of your concern. The papers you signed prove my point.”

“Yes, darlin’, but you see, this is a small industry with even smaller circles. Someone moves on so quickly, and people want to know why. Was she fucking this guy while she was married too? Chances are she isn’t the goody-two-shoes she portrayed herself to be. Everyone has skeletons in the closet, Kinsley. Including you.”

“Fuck off, Zander.”

He exhales loudly. “So hostile.”

“Yep. That happens every time I speak to you.”

“You’re something else,” he bites out. I can almost picture him shaking his head in disgust. That gives me reason to smile.

“Anyway, is there a reason you called? Other than to ask about my love life?”

“You’re playing with fire here, cupcake.”

“And it’s still none of your concern. Is there anything else?”

Again, he sighs dramatically. “I suppose not. Just don’t come crying to me when your good name is raked over the coals because of your extramarital affairs.”

“Goodbye, Zander,” I state, immediately hanging up the phone. “What a prick,” I add out loud.

Pacing the room, I know I need to get my mind off the photos, my ex, and what people could possibly be saying about me. Music has always had the ability to calm even the most tumultuous waves in my mind, so I grab my pen and sit back down to write. This time, a new idea pops into my head. One full of green tractors and muddy dirt. Farm animals and cowboy boots. An amazing little four-year-old boy with big almond-shaped blue eyes and a heart of gold.

I sit and write a song for Grayson.

By the time the clock strikes six, I’m pulling into Tucker’s driveway. His truck is here, and there are several lights on in the house. I park my vehicle

behind his and head for the rear entrance of the house. I knock on the door and immediately try to turn the knob, finding it unlocked.

“Hello?”

“In the kitchen. Come on in,” Tucker hollers.

Kicking off my shoes, I go in search of the man who has promised me one hell of a kiss. “Hey,” I say when I find him standing at the counter, cutting the asparagus.

He smiles, glancing over his shoulder. When I approach, he leans over, his lips poised for a kiss. “Hello,” he says the moment he releases my mouth. “You smell amazing.”

I lift my arm and sniff my skin. “New lotion. That adorable little place by the bank has the cutest home décor, and I found they also supply locally produced bath and body products. I had to get some.”

“Smells like summer.”

“That’s the lime and coconut. It reminds me of a piña colada,” I reply with a chuckle.

“Kins!”

I turn just as Grayson comes barreling into the kitchen, throwing himself at my legs. “Hey, little man. Did you have a good day at school?” I ask, dropping to my knees to receive my hug.

“Yep!”

“I’m glad. I heard you’re going to watch *Cars* later.”

His eyes widen. “Do you like it? The tractors go brrrrrrr,” he informs, making the perfect tractor noise as he moves around the kitchen.

“No driving your tractor in the kitchen,” Tucker teases. “Why don’t you go play in the other room? Dinner will be ready soon, and after we eat, Kins and I will watch the movie with you.”

His eyes fill with anticipation and delight. “Really?”

I nod. “I’d love to watch it with you.”

“Yay!” he hollers, taking off for the living room to play.

“Sorry ’bout that,” Tucker says, placing the vegetable on a foil-covered pan and adding seasoning.

“Don’t apologize. Talking to him is one of my favorite parts of my day,” I assure him honestly.

“Yeah? What’s your most favorite part?” he asks, turning to face me as he slips the asparagus into the oven.

“This.” I step forward, press my chest to his, throw my arms around his neck, and kiss him. He reciprocates immediately, sliding his tongue into my mouth and deepening the kiss.

Unfortunately, the shared moment doesn’t last nearly long enough, and he’s pulling back. “Well, that happens to be my favorite part of the day too.”

Grinning, I grab the tomatoes on the counter and start slicing them for the salad. “I had an interesting day,” I start, placing the tomato chunks on top of the fresh greens.

“Me too.”

“Yeah? What happened?” I ask, reaching for the cucumber and doing the same.

“I saw my picture all over the internet.”

I pause and set the knife down. When I turn to face Tucker, he’s wearing a normal, natural look on his face, as if the fact he’s all over the internet doesn’t faze him. “I’m sorry.”

“Why? Did you take them?”

“Well, no.”

“Did you sell them?”

“Of course not.”

He shrugs. “Then there’s nothing for you to be sorry about.”

“It’s because of my career. They think because I sing in public the rest of my life should be that way.”

He props his hip against the counter. “I’m not bothered by them.”

“It could happen again, Tuck. They’re relentless.”

He lifts his broad shoulders and steals a slice of cucumber off the cutting board. “I’m not worried.”

“You say that now—” I start, but am cut off.

He presses a kiss to my lips, the scent of cucumber hanging on his breath. “I’ll say that always, because you’re worth it. Come on, beautiful. Let’s eat.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Tucker

There's nothing better than this. Sitting with Kinsley in my arms, my son curled up on the other side of her. The movie is coming to an end, and Grayson's been out for at least fifteen minutes. I know I should pick him up and carry him to bed, but I'm enjoying this comfortable scene too much to move right now.

Finally, when the credits roll, I glance Kinsley's way. Her head is leaning on my shoulder, brown hair fanned out across my black T-shirt. She turns her head and looks up at me. She looks so fucking beautiful, so content, and so damn perfect here in my space.

"Would you mind if I put him to bed?" she whispers, looking down at the boy who has his head on her lap.

"No, I don't mind," I say. I'm not going to tell her no. I can always slip into his room after and tell him good night myself.

She carefully gets up, jostling Grayson a bit as she moves. His eyes open and he gazes up at her with happiness in his eyes.

Yeah, I know the feeling, buddy.

"Ready for bed, Grays?"

With a nod, he sits up and extends his arms for her. She picks him up easily, nestling him to her chest. His little arms wrap around her shoulders, his legs around her waist. She stands there, holding in him and rocking back and forth. I don't know what possesses me to grab my phone from my pocket, but I'm able to quickly snap a couple of photos of them before she heads to his bedroom.

My heart is lodged in my throat.

Fuck, I love her so damn much.

I hang back in the living room, picking up the remnants of the popcorn we snacked on and Grayson's juice cup. Once the cup is rinsed and placed in the dishwasher and the popcorn disposed of, I flip off the lights and make sure the back door is locked. I haven't talked to Kins about spending the

night with me, but I'm really hoping she agrees. I want her in my bed.

Tonight.

Forever.

I head for my son's bedroom, ready to tell him goodnight and stop in my tracks just outside his door. Kinsley is singing. I'm so transfixed on the sweet sound of her voice that the words she's singing don't register right away.

She's singing about...tractors.

Leaning against the wall just outside his door, I lose my heart to the only woman I've ever truly loved. She wrote my son a song, and she's singing it for him at bedtime. His excited giggles filter into the hallway where I stand, and I find myself smiling so big when she gets to a part about his favorite big machines and requests him to make the sound. He waits anxiously for the next opportunity, giggling when he knows it's coming, and proudly grumbles like a tractor engine for her song.

When it's over, he whispers, "I wove you."

Fuck.

"I love you too, Grayson. Next time I'm here, we'll sing the tractor song together again, okay?"

"Kay," he says through a yawn.

"It's time for bed now. Sweet dreams, sweet boy," she murmurs, and I can't stand outside the room any longer.

I push off the wall and slip inside, just as she bends over him and kisses his forehead. She pulls his tractor blanket up and tucks it beneath his arms. He holds up his arms for another hug, which she readily gives. Only then does she stand up and take a step back, preparing to exit his bedroom.

"Daddy," my son whispers, giggling when he sees me standing near the door.

"Looks like Kinsley got you all ready for bed," I say, approaching his toddler bed and crouching down on the floor beside him.

"Kins sang about tractors."

"I heard that," I tell him, unable to look at the woman in the room. If I do, I'm liable to drop to my knees, confess my love, and beg her to stay with me forever. There are so many conversations that need to be had before I broach that particular topic, so it's best I just keep my focus on my son right now.

“Tractors go brrrrr,” he says, his little lips vibrating as he makes the noise.

“Yes, they do, but now it’s time for bed, all right?”

“Kay.” He turns on his side and closes his eyes.

“Night, Grays. Love you, buddy.”

“Nigh-night, Daddy,” he whispers.

Once he’s settled and sleep takes hold, I stand up and turn toward the door. Kinsley is there, but I still can’t look at her. I need to get her alone, need to get her in my arms and my mouth on hers, and standing in my son’s bedroom isn’t the place to do that.

I walk across the hall, and I know she’s behind me. Call it a sixth sense, but I just *know* she’s right there. I move into the heart of my bedroom, my bed beckoning me as if to say *bring her here*. I turn to face her, the restraint I’ve held on to the last few seconds slips completely away.

“Tuck, I’m sorry if I did something wrong,” she says softly, the uncertainty in her voice my undoing.

“What?” I ask, spinning around to face her.

“You seem, I don’t know, upset maybe? Did I do something wrong? I just wanted to sing the song I wrote for him earlier today, but—”

I pull her toward me, my mouth silencing her with a fierce kiss. My tongue delves inside, leaving no place unexplored. She tastes like butter popcorn and pure heaven, all rolled into one delicious package.

Needing to say my piece before stripping her naked, I pull back, keeping my hands framing the sides of her face. “I’m not mad. Not at all. I was overcome with emotion, and I didn’t want to kiss you in the middle of my son’s bedroom.” I take a deep breath and swallow over the lump in my throat. “What you just did tonight, that song you wrote for Grayson,” I start, unable to find the right words to finish. “No one has ever done anything like that before for him. Or me.”

She smiles up at me. “He’s incredible, Tuck. And...” She too swallows hard, her eyes filling with tears. “I’ve fallen completely in love with him. He’s absolutely perfect, just how he is.”

God, I love this woman.

“He loves you too,” I assure her, and even though I want to tell her how I feel myself; I keep those words locked inside.

Her smile is...everything. The sun, the moon, the stars, and the fucking

world all wrapped in one. *She's* everything.

"Tuck?"

"Yes?" I whisper, my thumbs gently trailing down her soft cheeks.

"Take me to bed."

"My pleasure," I murmur, lifting her into my arms and moving for my king-sized mattress.

Gently, as if she were made of fine china, I lay her in the middle of the bed, covering her body with my own. My mouth is on hers, my hands moving to caress her sides and slipping beneath her shirt in search of her magnificent tits. Her legs hitch over my ass, her thighs spreading apart in invitation for my body.

"We should have gotten naked before getting on the bed," she says, raking her nails over my lower back.

"Mmm," I murmur against her neck. "The anticipation of stripping you naked is one of my favorite parts."

"My favorite part is when you make me come," she states boldly. "Make me come, Tuck. I need you so badly." She groans, rocking her hips upward and grinding herself against my erection.

"I'm right here."

I'm always right here, never planning to leave.

"Less clothes," she insists, grappling for my shirt and trying to push it over my head.

Taking pity on her, I sit up and toss my shirt over my head while she does the same. I want to stop her, to insist I help remove her clothes, but the urgency in her movements is so strong, I let it go. When she reaches for the waistband of her leggings, I finally say something. "Let me."

She lies back down and lifts her hips in the air, granting me better access. I slowly shimmy them over her hips and down her thighs, moving to the side while I finish taking them down her legs. First thing I notice is her lack of panties. Well, that and the fact she's freshly shaven, her pussy completely bare.

"Fuck, Kins," I mutter, my mouth going completely dry at the sight, yet my tongue getting wet in anticipation of tasting her.

"Mmm, yes. That."

"Well, now you have to wait," I tell her, climbing off the bed and closing my bedroom door the rest of the way. I flip the lock, only so Grayson

doesn't walk in on something he shouldn't see. As soon as we're done, I'll open the door and check on my son, but for now, while he's fast asleep, I need a little privacy.

"Wait for what?" she asks, but I can tell by the glint in her eyes, she knows what's next.

"Wait to be fucked, Kins. First, I eat."

Taking my position between her spread legs, I lower my mouth and lick her pussy. A groan fills the room, and her scent wraps around me, grabbing hold and refusing to let go. "Hold up," she grumbles, pushing on my head and stopping me. "I want you to lie down."

"Huh?" I ask.

"Take off your pants and lie down, Tucker Dunn. Don't make me tell you again."

Stunned by her directness, especially since, I know for a fact, she really fucking enjoys when I eat her out. Doing as instructed, even though I'd rather take control and finish my task, I stand up and remove my jeans and boxer briefs, discarding them to the floor. Then, I climb onto the bed and get into position for whatever she has planned. I assume she's going to ride me, but when she straddles my face and takes my cock in her hands, I'm pleasantly surprised by this development.

Kinsley doesn't say a word, just tries to swallow my cock in one gulp. "Fuck," I mumble, my eyes rolling back in my head as pleasure hits me with the force of a thousand hurricanes.

"So much better," she says sweetly, licking around the head of my cock before taking it down her throat once more.

Realizing I have a golden opportunity here, I place my hands on her ass and pull her pussy down to meet my mouth. My tongue sweeps across her clit before delving inside her body. Her hips rock forward, her pussy grinding against my face. I try to ignore what she's doing to my cock, but it's hard. Figuratively. No way do I want to blow down her throat right now. When I come, it'll be while I'm buried inside her sweet pussy, being milked for every drop I possess.

When I start to get dangerously close to being unable to control my release, I lift her off my cock with a pop and set her to the side. "Hey, I wasn't finished."

"Yeah, but I almost was," I quip, crawling over the top of her and

taking my position between her legs. "Ready for me?"

"Hell yes," she murmurs, wrapping her arms around my shoulders and drawing me down on top of her. My cock seems to know exactly where to go. He's poised at her entrance and I'm able to push forward, filling her with slow, controlled movements.

I reach for her hands and lace my fingers with hers, placing them above her head. I hold myself up with my elbows as best I can, but for the most part, my body weight is on her. She doesn't seem to mind, though. She arches her back, pressing her breasts into me and hitches her ankles over my lower back.

I keep my pace unhurried, my thrusts measured. She mewls little noises as she rocks in time with my own movements. Our bodies are completely in tune with one another, the music we create in perfect rhythm.

This is what making love feels like.

Being with her.

"Tucker," she murmurs, turning her head to the side and exposing the long column of her neck. My lips drag down her flesh, tasting her skin and committing the feel of it to memory. No way do I ever want to forget any piece of this moment.

I feel her internal muscles start to squeeze, and I know she's there. My spine starts to tingle in response, and I know there's no stopping it now. I revel in the feel and let it consume me, the undertow dragging me under. She cries out a muffled sound, and I swallow it with a kiss. Her pussy chokes my dick, rippling around me in a wave, pushing me over the edge. I come hard, my movements no more hurried than they were prior, as I bask in the feel of our joint releases.

When I'm left with shudders sweeping through me, I place gentle kisses along her jaw and down her neck. "You're everything to me, Kins. Every. Fucking. Thing."

She sighs contently, her legs falling open onto the bed and her arms tightening around my neck. As much as I don't want to move, I need to grab a washcloth for her and check on Grayson. I never lock my door like this, and I don't want to risk him needing me and not being accessible.

"Hang tight, love," I whisper, kissing her forehead before extracting myself from the cocoon of her body.

Her fingers tighten around me, but slowly loosen as I pull away. I don't

want to move, believe me, but it's necessary.

I slip into my bathroom and clean myself up quickly. Then, grabbing a cloth from the cabinet, I wet it with warm water and return to where I left the woman I love in my bed. She's curled on her side, snuggled into my pillow, and is the most breathtaking sight I've ever witnessed. I could just stand here, staring at her like a total creeper, and never bore. She's that beautiful, that magnificent, and the fact she has come back into my life a second time blows my mind. She could literally have anyone she wants, and she chose me.

Twice.

"Are you staring at me? I can feel your eyes on me," she mumbles without opening her eyes.

"I am," I confirm, crawling onto the bed with the cloth. "When the most gorgeous woman is lying in your bed, naked, you have to take a few minutes to appreciate the view," I tell her, shifting her top leg and placing the washcloth between her legs.

"I can do that," she says softly, rolling onto her back.

"I know, but I like it. I rather enjoy seeing our releases mixed together on your thighs."

She giggles, pushing her hair off her forehead and meeting my gaze. "You're naughty."

"You have no idea," I retort, tossing the wet cloth across the room to the hamper. "Unfortunately, we need to get dressed. You never know when we may have a young visitor appear by the bed."

Glancing down, her eyes land on her naked body, especially her chest. "I don't suppose you have something I could wear, do you? I didn't bring any other clothes, and by the sound of it, I'm spending the night."

Smiling, I get up and move to my dresser. "I do admit, that is my hope. If you don't mind," I reply, pulling one of my nicer brewery T-shirts from my drawer and returning to the bed.

"I don't mind. I tend to sleep better when I'm in your arms," she confesses, even though it's only happened one other time—our first date when Grayson was gone. "I wasn't sure if you wanted to go there, you know, with Grayson here and all."

"I want to." The confession is swift and truthful.

"Me too."

She slips on my T-shirt, while I throw on a pair of sleep shorts. “Do you want shorts? They’ll probably be pretty big, but you can roll them down and try to tighten the drawstring.”

“No, I’m okay. Unless you want me to have on shorts,” she states, waggling her eyebrows.

My eyes zero in on all that creamy, soft flesh of her legs. “Nope. I’m good,” I reply with a chuckle. “I’m gonna check on Grays and will be right back.” Slipping across the hall, I check on my boy, who is sleeping peacefully in bed.

Finally, I return to my bedroom and slide into my bed. Kinsley turns in my arms and snuggles into my chest, her body warming my skin. “Night, Tuck.”

“Good night, Kins.”

The last thing I remember is how content I am just lying here, holding the woman I love, and I can’t help but wonder how long I’ll be able to hold on to this dream.

Because she and I together, raising my son?

That’s it.

That’s what I want for the rest of my life.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Kinsley

“The label wants to talk. Soon.”

“Really? About what?” I ask my new manager, Donovan Hoover, when he calls me late Saturday morning.

“They didn’t say, but we both need to be there at nine a.m. sharp.”

“Nine in the morning...Monday? At the label?” My heart kicks up a few extra beats as realization hits me.

“Yes. I’ll meet you at eight forty-five in the lobby. We’ll go up together,” he informs pointedly.

“Umm, okay. Yeah, I can do that,” I say, my mind suddenly spinning with what I need to do to be in Nashville Monday morning. “Do you know what it’s about?”

“They didn’t officially say, but I’ve heard talk about another album and tour.”

“Oh.”

I should be happier than I feel, right? This is the dream I’ve always wanted, and I might have another chance at going out on the road. I should be thrilled, shouting it from the rooftops. Yet, there’s a heaviness in my chest I can’t seem to get away from.

What is wrong with me?

Of course, they could be letting me down in person too. My last official headlining tour ended with a bang. Literally. At least one for my ex-husband. Our names were on the tips of everyone’s tongues and not in a good way. It cast dark, negative light on the tour, and the label could take offense to that. They may see me as more hassle than I’m worth and decide to cut me loose.

I definitely wouldn’t blame them.

“I’m sure it’s not negative,” Donovan states, as if hearing my thoughts or sensing my worry.

“Well, I did ruin my last tour thanks to a viral video of my husband

screwing women backstage before the show,” I quip, finding it’s easier to poke fun at the situation now.

“You didn’t ruin it. Your ex-husband cast a negative shadow on himself, but not you. If anything, it boosted your image. The label knows that,” he assures me. “You can be there, right? Are you in Ohio?”

I swallow over the sudden lump in my throat. “I am, yes, but I can be there. I’ll drive down tomorrow afternoon and get a hotel. I haven’t had an opportunity to look for a place there yet.”

“When you’re ready, let me know. I can have my assistant, Justine, pull some properties for you.”

“Thank you,” I reply.

“How is the songwriting coming?”

“Good. I have several songs I’d like to consider for myself and even more I can sell.”

“We’ll bring that up at the meeting. I’m sure they have artists chomping at the bit for more pieces you’ve written.”

Even though I haven’t been with Donovan long, he did his research on me prior to signing. He knew which songs I had written and sold to fellow artists and is a firm believer in supporting fellow songwriters and artists. So far, this partnership has worked well, and I hope it continues to strengthen.

“Do you have a hotel in mind? We’ll arrange it for you.”

“No, not particularly. It doesn’t have to be too fancy.”

“We’ll put you somewhere safe and comfortable near the studio,” he insists. “Justine will email you the information.”

It’s not lost on me either they’re both working on a Saturday morning because I need them.

“Thank you,” I reply.

“I’ll be in touch to confirm everything is set also. Talk to you soon.”

I set my phone down and glance around my living room. The television is on, an episode of some law drama on the screen I’m not even paying attention to. My throw blanket and cute little pillow that says *Home* on it is still bunched on the couch, and I have fresh flowers in a vase on the end table, thanks to Tucker. Family photos are on the wall, as well as a few landscape paintings I’ve purchased from a local business. This place feels like home to me, and not just the house.

Stewart Grove.

It's where I belong.

Tears well in my eyes. This isn't what I had planned. Yes, I was going to buy a house so I had a place to come back to when I needed a break, especially since my brother needs his own space now he's with Cameron. I planned to return to Nashville, to settle into a new home there, where I was right back in the middle of my dream. However, the waters are suddenly murky, and what I thought I wanted seems...off.

My phone chimes and when I spot Tucker's name on the screen, I smile.

Tucker: The weather is beautiful. Grays and I are going to the park. Wanna go?

For April, the temperature outside is warmer than normal, the sun shining high in the sky.

Me: I'd love to.

Tucker: Grab a jacket. We'll be there in five.

Slipping my phone into my back pocket, I head for the small closet by the front door and grab a light jacket. I stuff my feet into a pair of athletic shoes and step outside to await my ride. A couple of minutes later, I spot Tucker's familiar truck heading my way. After making sure the alarm is set and the front door locked, I move his way, smiling when he still gets out to assist me.

"Good morning," he says with a grin before placing a warm kiss on my lips.

"Morning."

"Ready for a little swing and slide action?"

"Of course," I reply, jumping into the passenger seat.

"Kins!"

"Hi, Grays. Are you excited to go to the park?"

"Yep!"

Tucker slowly backs out of my driveway and heads for the larger town park. Conversation centers around Grayson, as he tells me how excited he is for this party. He'll turn five in a few months, and he has already determined

he wants a big tractor party.

“I’ll just have something small at my house. My parents, some of his friends from school, and you, if you’re available.”

“I’ll be there,” I reply automatically. Then a boulder the size of a watermelon settles in my stomach when I realize I have no idea where I’ll be in the next few weeks. If the label wants me back in the studio to work on an album, I’ll be at their mercy. The schedule isn’t negotiable when you’re paying for the space and employees to record and produce the songs.

We get to the park, and I’m surprised to find it fairly busy. There are kids all over the playground, families taking up space on picnic tables in the pavilion, and people coming and going from the walking trails through the woods. Everyone is out, enjoying the unseasonably warm spring day, and all I can think about is how much I love being in the middle of it with them. Most of the people I don’t even know, yet it feels more like home than Nashville ever has.

“Swing!”

“All right, hold your horses,” Tucker replies with a chuckle, releasing his seat belt and climbing from the truck. He helps Grayson out of his own seat and reaches for his hand. “You have to hold my hand until we get over by the swings, okay?”

The eager boy nods, holding his other hand out for me.

A lump forms in my throat as I take it. He grins up at me, and my heart cracks. Can I leave him for months at a time? Would it even be fair of me to come in and out of their lives like that?

I already know the answer, and it’s not what I want it to be.

We walk toward the swings first, and Grayson seems exceptionally pleased there’s one open. Tucker helps him get inside and the safety belt around his waist. “Ready?”

Grayson nods and squeals in delight as his dad pushes him slowly on the swing, keeping him low to the ground. There’s a grin on my face as I watch father and son play, a warmth spreading through my veins that has nothing to do with the sun high in the sky.

“What’s the matter?”

I look over at Tucker. Even as he pushes his son on the swing, his eyes are on me. Deciding this conversation needs to happen sooner, rather than later, I clear my throat and say, “I received a call from Donovan Hoover. The

label wants to meet with me Monday morning.”

Even behind sunglasses, I see his eyebrows pull together in confusion.

“This Monday?”

“Yes.”

“What for?” he asks, continuing to slowly push Grayson.

Shrugging, I reply, “Not sure. It could be anything, but Donovan says he’s heard talk about another album.”

Tucker grins widely in excitement. “That’s amazing, Kins.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re not excited?” He seems genuinely confused by my lack of reaction.

“No, I am.” I decide to lay it all on him. “There might be a tour attached to it too.”

“Wow, that’s awesome. Another tour is huge news,” he proclaims.

“It is. I can’t believe it,” I tell him.

“Why?”

I lift my shoulders. “Probably because the last one ended in major disaster. To be honest, I wouldn’t be surprised if they kick my butt to the curb,” I state with an uncomfortable chuckle.

“They’d be foolish to do that. Your next album and the supporting tour will kill it. I know.”

His confidence in me and my talent means more than he’ll ever know.

Turning my attention back to Grayson, I add, “I’m going to go down tomorrow afternoon and check into a hotel. I’m meeting Donovan Monday morning before the meeting.”

“Makes sense,” he says.

After a few more minutes, Grayson wants down to go play on the slide. He takes off for the shorter plastic slide, and we follow close behind. When it appears he’s doing okay, we take a seat on the nearby bench, only ten feet from where he’s playing. Together, we watch him climb up the steps and slide down, giggling the entire time.

“Is he always this happy?”

“Unfortunately, no. He gets really emotional sometimes, especially when you change his routine or schedule. But those times aren’t as frequent as the ones where he’s happy. He definitely likes to smile and laugh.”

A little boy runs over to Grayson and joins him on the slide. They take

turns going down it a few times before the other little boy runs around Grayson, beating him to the stairs. When that happens, Grayson slips in the sand and falls down. Instantly, tears are flowing.

Tucker jumps up and is there moments later. "You're okay, buddy. It was an accident."

Grayson is shaking his head no, pushing at his dad.

The mother of the other child is right there. "I'm so sorry. Dallas didn't mean to cause him to fall," she says, crouching down beside Grayson.

"I know. It was an accident. They were both just having fun, playing."

But Grayson is not having it. He's still pushing at his dad's hands, big crocodile tears streaming down his cheeks. I'm standing back, yet watching very closely. Like Tucker, I've taken stock of his limbs and see no visible injuries. Not even a scrape.

Finally, Tucker stands up with Grayson and walks toward the bench we just vacated. I follow closely, my heart breaking for the little boy who fell. Just as Tuck goes to sit down, Grayson turns around. His eyes are wild and wet, and the moment they connect with mine, he holds out his arms and wiggles.

Without giving it a second thought, I'm reaching for him. He comes quickly, Tucker, helping to transfer his son into my arms. I take a seat on the bench and hold him to my chest. His little arms are wrapped around my neck, holding on tight as he cries.

"Shhhh, it's okay, Grayson. You're okay," I murmur softly, rocking him back and forth until he slowly starts to settle down.

My eyes lock with Tucker's and there's a mix of emotions pouring from the depths of those dark orbs. He offers me a soft smile and rubs his son's back gently.

After sitting there for several minutes, Grayson finally stops crying and pulls back. I wipe the remnants of tears off his cheeks and give him a smile. "You okay?"

"Sand scratched me," he mumbles, trying to look down at his hands.

There's just the faintest hint of pink scratches on his palms, but I still bring them up to my lips and kiss both spots. "Better?"

He throws his head back and giggles before nodding. "Yep!"

"Oh, good."

"Hey, Grays, how about we go get some lunch? What are you thinking

we should get?”

“Pizza! Nuggies! No, ice cream!”

Tucker and I both chuckle at his enthusiasm, and I’m grateful he seems to have forgotten all about falling in the sand.

“Well, how about we go to Burgers and Brew for some French fries?” Tucker asks.

“Yes!”

I slowly stand, setting Grayson down and taking his hand. The three of us head for the truck, and I catch Tucker’s smirk, his eyes on me. “What?”

“Kinsley kisses always make me feel better too,” he replies softly, winking.

I roll my eyes and glance ahead. As soon as I do, I notice two people off to the right by one of the SUVs in the parking lot, and they have cameras pointed my way. My first thought is Grayson. Tucker understands there’s a chance he could be photographed, but I really don’t want the little boy involved.

Tucker must spot them as well and takes an extra step to the side to block Grayson and me. I keep talking to Grayson, but do everything I can to help shield the photographers from being able to snatch his photo. Of course, I have no idea how long they’ve been here, taking pictures. I just pray they’re not about to plaster pictures of the child all over the internet.

I help Tucker get Grayson into the truck, doing everything I can to provide privacy. As soon as the door is closed, he walks me around to the passenger side, making sure I also get inside and belted securely. Only then does he climb into the driver’s seat and start the truck.

“I’m so sorry,” I blurt out, on the verge of tears. I never wanted his or Grayson’s privacy invaded.

Tucker just gives me a smile and reaches for my hand. “Don’t do that. It’s not your fault.”

“But it is,” I start.

“I don’t see it that way. And as soon as you realized someone was taking our photograph, you did the exact same thing I did. You protected him. You protected him as if he were your own, Kinsley.”

My throat closes. It’s hard to breathe. Little white spots dance in my vision as a gasp of fear slips from my throat disguised as a cry. “I love him so much,” I confess.

He brings our joined hands to his mouth and places a kiss on my knuckles. “I know you do. I see it in how you interact with him. He’s so damn lucky to have you in his life. We both are.”

I nod, because that’s all I can do. Words won’t come. There’s no use in fighting it or forcing them. I just squeeze his hand, hoping he can feel everything I want to say but am unable.

We eat on the bar side at Burgers and Brew, surprisingly undisturbed, but it’s definitely quieter on a Saturday at noon than it is in the evening. My brother’s not working, but I get to talk to some of the owners and other employees. Kallie is behind the bar, and it’s nice to finally put a face with the woman my brother has talked about and worked beside since he started.

When it’s time to leave, we head back to Tucker’s house. Grayson’s ready for a nap, and I really want to spend as much time as I can in Tucker’s arms before I have to leave tomorrow. Partly because of how it feels—how *I* feel—there, but also because I don’t know what the future holds.

If I have to pick between Tucker and my career again, I’m not sure what I’ll do.

I’m not sure I’ll be able to make the same choice as nine years ago.

It’s different now.

We’re different.

And the thought of losing him a second time is indescribable.

So, I just need to figure out how to not let that happen this time.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Tucker

I'm going to lose her again.

I can feel it.

There's no way the label is stupid enough to let her go. She has so much life left in her, so many hit songs and albums yet to write and sing. Unfortunately, I know that means she'll be needed in Nashville a lot more than she'll be here. My time with her will be limited, maybe even nonexistent for big chunks of time, and I'm not sure I'm equipped to deal with that.

I'm also in a different place in my life.

If there was a possibility of following her the first time she left, that possibility is long gone. Now, I have Grayson, and there's no way I could uproot his life, even for short periods of time. Maybe if he were older, but not now. He needs the structure of his preschool and the development assistance it offers. Plus, I could never take him away from his grandparents. He craves that relationship, thriving in the stability and comfort they help provide.

There's no way I could take him away from his life here.

That leaves only one option.

She'll be going without me.

Then what? Do we try to maintain a long-distance relationship? We chose not to do it the first time around. The last thing I had wanted was for her to worry about me, about us. She needed to focus on her career, on doing what she loved so she could live her dream. As much as I wanted to maintain contact and try to make it work, I knew in my heart it wouldn't, and I'd never wanted her to be forced to make a decision: Nashville or me.

Now here I am, nine years later, potentially facing the exact same dilemma. Only this time, I did this to myself. I knew she would be going back to Nashville at some point. Yet, I still jumped in with both feet, dragging my son along with me for the ride. He's going to be crushed when she's gone for

long periods of time, not understanding why he can't see her when he wants.

"Hey," Kinsley says, joining me in the kitchen after helping Grayson take a bath. He insisted she help him and never complained about it once. Considering bathing is his least favorite thing to do on the planet, I definitely call that a win.

I give her a smile and hold out my arms. She comes willingly, wrapping hers around my waist as I draw her into my chest. "He playing in his room?"

She nods. "I promised him I'd come back in a few minutes, after I checked on you."

"You didn't need to check on me," I assure her, taking a few extra seconds to memorize the feel of her body against mine and the scent of her skin surrounding me.

"I did. You've been kinda quiet this evening," she says, concern filling her breathtaking blue eyes.

"Some days are harder than others to get a word in edgewise when Grayson's around," I quip, hoping to lighten the mood and push the dark storm clouds threatening to consume me.

She grins and shakes her head. "He's perfect." Her face sobers as she adds, "I really wish you could go with me."

No need to state where. I know what she's talking about. "Me too, but it would be too hard with Grayson."

"I know. The last thing I want is to disrupt his schedule," she says, nibbling on her bottom lip.

The action causes my cock to stir in my pants, and needing to redirect my brain, I reach up and slip her plump lip from the confines of her teeth with my thumb. "I'll be here when you get back. I can't wait to hear all about it. I'm sure you're going to hear amazing news," I insist, finally sweeping my mouth across hers. She tastes like berries and feels like heaven.

"Kins!"

We both chuckle, pulling apart and taking a deep breath. "Come on. Let's go play with my boy before he goes to bed."

She smiles affectionately, taking my hand and leading me toward his bedroom.

I try to ignore the way I almost said *our* boy. I'd never want to put that kind of pressure on her, especially with the possibility of her leaving for an

extended period of time looking just off in the distance, but the truth is I've never felt this undeniable desire to co-parent again until now. She's not perfect, but she's perfect for us.

We sit on the floor in his bedroom for thirty minutes before I inform him it's time for bed. He picks up his tractors and puts them in the large basket overflowing with red, green, blue, and yellow ones, and climbs into his bed. "Book!"

My eyes scan the bookshelf and settle on one we haven't read in a while. "How about this one?"

He nods, grinning as he gets ready for the story. Even though it's familiar, the anticipation and excitement roll off him in waves. Kinsley sits on the floor beside me near Grayson's head and leans against the wall, hand softly stroking the hair on the top of his head.

"*The Very Hungry Caterpillar*," I say aloud before flipping open the book to the first page and starting to read.

I work my way through the whole book, earning a few giggles along the way from Grayson lying in his bed, and when I'm finished, his eyes brim with fatigue, as well as happiness.

He turns on his side and looks at Kinsley. "Song?"

She leans in, lightly stroking his cheek with her finger. "Which song do you want? The tractor one?"

He nods vigorously.

"All right," she replies gently before opening her mouth and singing. The words pour from her lips in the most beautiful combination of humor and quirkiness, as she sings about a tractor going to visit his tractor friends. When she gets to the chorus, she pauses and points to Grayson, who makes a resounding tractor noise and laughs.

"Good night, Grays," she whispers, leaning forward and kissing his forehead once the song is completed.

"Nigh-night, Kins." He glances my way and holds out his arms.

"Good night, buddy. I love you," I tell him, giving him a hug and kiss.

"Wove you," he mutters, rolling onto his side and closing his eyes. "Wove you, Kins."

"Love you too, Grays," she whispers before we carefully get up and slip out of his bedroom.

The moment we're in the hall, I take her hand and guide her to my

room. "I'm going to make sure the house is locked up. Get comfy and I'll meet you in bed."

She nods, and when she steps inside the bedroom, I make quick work of checking to make sure both the front and the back doors are secured. Only then do I return to my bedroom, searching for the woman I love, but am too chickenshit to say it.

Not that it would do me any good. If anything, it'll make the situation we're dealing with that much harder. If she knows how I feel, it could sway her decision, and I want her to make it based on her own dreams and desires, not mine. So unfortunately, I'll stay quiet. At least until I know what the future holds.

When I slip quietly into my bedroom, I find Kinsley naked, her body on full display on top of my bed. My cock immediately responds, thickening at lightning speed, eager to slide inside that tight, wet pussy. "You told me to get comfy," she says casually, her long, sexy legs gliding across the comforter.

"I did," I confirm, releasing the button on my jeans and lowering the zipper. I push them down my hips and step out of the denim, grateful to be rid of the tightness in my groin. "I'm glad you took my suggestion."

She shrugs, shimmying her body against the material, as if she likes the feel of it against her skin. "I was hoping you wouldn't mind."

Approaching the bed, I pull my T-shirt over my head and throw it on the floor. I pull off my socks before removing my boxer briefs and leaving them where they fall. "Mind finding a sexy naked woman in my bed? Never."

She holds out her arms, and I crawl between them. My mouth claims hers in a bruising kiss as I cover her body with my own. Her skin is so soft, so warm, like heaven on earth. There's nothing better than this.

Her legs slide up my outer thighs before hitching over my hip. The position opens herself up in invitation, and I know it would only take one small thrust to be pressing inside her pussy. Needing my hands on her, I wrap my fingers around her hip before slowly dragging them upward. Goosebumps pepper her skin as the pads of my fingers dance along her flesh. She gasps when they brush across the bottom of her tit, dancing their way up to touch her nipple.

"Tuck," she murmurs softly, her eyes closed as the sensations take

hold.

“I’m right here, love,” I whisper, the sentiment dropping from my lips easily.

She opens her eyes and meets my gaze. There’s so much emotion, in both her eyes and pouring from my soul, it threatens to choke the life out of me. Instead of speaking the words I long to say, I shift my hips and gently push inside her body. It’s pure bliss. She was made for me, body, mind, and soul, and the thought of losing that again is almost too much to bear.

Her arms wrap tightly around my shoulders, pulling me snugly to her body as I gently move. A burning desire to thrust and take what we’re both after looms nearby, but I’m able to keep it at bay. At least for a bit. Right now, I need to make love to the woman who owns my soul.

Our speed remains leisurely, our hands gentle and caressing, our mouths tender and exploring. When we were younger, we were usually a bit more energetic in bed, but this is pretty fucking amazing too.

“Tuck?” she whispers, rolling her hips as I fill her completely.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t ever want to lose this.”

“What?” I ask, my heart pounding so loudly, I’m certain the neighbors can hear it.

“This feeling I have when I’m with you,” she confesses, her eyes pooling with unshed tears.

I have to force the words from my lips, because even though I want to believe them, I can’t. We just don’t know what the future holds, and her career comes first and foremost, just like my son comes first in my life. “You won’t, love. Ever.”

She sighs in relief, but then I feel tension course through her body. Her legs tighten around me as her hands move into my hair. Our mouths have a bit more urgency in the kiss, and my hips start to move on their own. I wish I could hit the pause button. I’m not ready for this to end. Not yet. But my body is taking over, pushing logical thought to the side as it chases after the looming release.

Her nails bite my scalp, the mixture of pleasure and pain consuming. I feel every flutter of her internal muscles and know she’s getting close. I want to switch positions, to have a bit more leverage to thrust, but she won’t let me. She’s holding me so tightly against her, I’m not sure where she ends and

I begin.

A gasp fills my bedroom as her sweet pussy clenches my cock. "Tuck," she mutters as her orgasm begins, grabbing hold of me and dragging me down into the abyss right along with her. My spine tingles and my balls draw up. I claim her mouth with my own, swallowing the sounds of her coming, mixing them with my own.

"Kins," I murmur softly when I start to float down from the clouds. My nose runs along the column of her neck, inhaling her scent and committing it to memory. Her hands slip from my hair and glide lazily down my sweaty back. Her soft touch is like fire, burning and consuming me, the sweetest contradiction. I know I'll never get enough of her.

Ever.

When the aftershocks have subsided, I move to my side, taking her with me. I'm still buried to the hilt, trying to draw as much pleasure from her body as possible. Kinsley's leg swings over my hip, cementing our connection, her arm resting comfortably on my side.

"I should probably get a washcloth so we can clean up, but I have no desire to move," I confess, placing a kiss on her forehead.

"Me either. Just stay here, like this, for a little longer, okay?"

I don't reply with words, but with action. I do exactly as instructed, holding her against my body and savoring the way we fit together like puzzle pieces. My release is seeping from her body, the fluids run down our legs, but neither seem to mind. If anything, in my sick and perverse way, I like the way it marks her.

"Tuck?"

"Hmm?"

"Will you take a shower with me?"

Smiling, I lean forward again and press my lips to her skin. "I'd love to."

I slowly extract my soft cock from her body and go to stand. "We're probably going to need to change the sheets after."

Her grin is knowing, laced with a hint of naughty. "Definitely."

"Come on, dirty girl. Let's get you cleaned up."

I walk around the bed and scoop her up in my arms. Her giggles carry me to the bathroom, and the moment I set her down on the vanity, she wraps her legs around my waist once more. The kiss has a bit more urgency

to it, and as much as I'd like to take my cock and slide it back into her body, I can always do that later.

After we're cleaned up.

I extract myself from her arms and turn on the water, making sure it's the right temperature. When steam starts to fill the room, I return to the vanity where I left her, scoop her up once more, and step into the tub, pulling the curtain closed as I go. We take our time, slowly washing each other's bodies, leaving no part untouched. Our gazes are constantly locked, the connection so powerful you can feel it like another living, breathing being in the room.

Finally, when we're both clean and on the verge of turning into prunes, I turn off the water and reach for a towel. She stands there, watching my every move as I glide the soft material over her skin, drying her off. When I'm finished, I wrap it around her body and grab a second to dry myself.

"Come on, love. Let's go to bed," I say, reaching for her hand and guiding her out of the tub. We exit the room side by side, flipping off the lights as we go, and make our way to my bed. Towels are discarded on the floor to be picked up in the morning, and we fall together once more in the middle of the bed.

This time, when we make love, it's hurried. It's full of unbridled passion as we both chase the release the other promises. I can't stop touching her, my hands seeming to be...everywhere all at once.

She pushes on my shoulders and climbs onto my lap the moment I flip over. Kinsley grabs my cock, giving it a few hard squeezes, before lowering herself onto it. Her pussy is fucking magic. There's nothing in the world like this.

Like us together.

She rocks her hips, grinding herself down on me. My hands hold her hips, guiding her movements, as she starts to pick up the pace. She slams down on me, and her pussy is like a vise. "Oh God," she whispers as she comes around me once more, pushing me over the edge and letting me soar.

I come just as hard this time as I did the first time tonight, flexing my hips upward and pausing as I fill her once again. When the spasms subside, she covers my body with her smaller one, her erratic heartbeat pounding

against my chest.

“Damn, we’re going to need to shower again,” I whisper into her hair.

She yawns and sighs, her soft breath tickling my neck. “Tomorrow, Tuck. We can deal with the mess tomorrow.”

I nod, holding her tightly as she drifts off to sleep. Something tells me, she was referring to more than just the cum mess. Our happy little bubble is about to burst, leaving messy little pieces for us to pick up and deal with.

Oh well.

I don’t have to do that tonight.

Tonight, I get to hold her in my arms and pretend the sand in the hourglass isn’t about to run out.

Tonight, I’m with the woman I love, and that’s all I need to lull me into a deep sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Kinsley

“Kinsley, it’s so nice to see you again. Are you ready for this?” Donovan asks with a pleasant smile on his handsome face.

“Wonderful to finally meet you too. I’m ready,” I confirm, shaking his outstretched hand.

“I’ve already checked in at the security desk. Here’s your visitor’s pass,” he says, offering me the lanyard. “The elevators are this way,” he adds, pointing to where the bank of elevators is positioned.

We step inside the car and silently make our way up to the fifteenth floor. When the door opens, I step out first and smile at the receptionist. I’ve met Grace before and always find her pleasant and friendly.

“Hello, Ms. McGregor, Mr. Hoover. If you’ll follow me, Mr. Miller will see you now,” she says, walking around the front of her desk and waving toward the long hallway. I know this is where the conference room is situated, as well as some of the smaller offices. Mr. Miller’s is down another hall and was kind enough to let me see it when he gave me a tour the day I signed my contract.

Grace steps inside the conference room and says, “Have a seat at the table. Mr. Miller will be with you in just a moment.”

“Thank you,” I tell her before she makes her escape and leaves us alone in the room.

Donovan holds out a chair for me, so I have a seat, trying not to fidget nervously with my hands. He takes the vacant seat beside me and pulls a legal pad of paper and an ink pen from his briefcase. Moments later, there’s a knock on the open door as Mr. Miller, the label owner, enters.

“Good morning, Kinsley, Donovan. I’m so happy you were able to meet with me this morning,” he says, coming over to shake our hands as we stand up. “Please, have a seat and we’ll get this meeting underway. I’ve asked Felicia Douglas to join us.”

“Good morning,” Felicia says, a bright white smile on her face. She’s

the label's attorney and was in on the last big meeting I had here.

Once pleasantries are out of the way, Mr. Miller places his elbows on the table and leans in. "Let's get down to business, shall we? The numbers from your eastern tour were better than projected, and by the end of the tour, downloads increased by twenty-four percent on digital platforms and another seventeen percent on physical album copies. Not to mention, your merchandising was well over twenty-two thousand in sales every night of the tour, plus online orders. We're incredibly proud of the work you put into this last album and the tour."

"Thank you, Mr. Miller," I reply when he pauses in his speech and offers me a warm smile. "I have a great team supporting me."

He nods, his face sobering briefly. "I understand there were circumstances surrounding your bass player. Mr. Hoover informs me he's no longer with your band, nor are you legally married. Is this correct?"

"It is."

"Probably for the best, considering the less than desirable publicity you've received in recent months."

"Agreed," Donovan chimes in, taking the contract being passed over from Felicia.

"Standard contract with dates to be determined based on album release date," she says.

"You'll notice a sizable profit increase," Mr. Miller states, drawing my eye to the section containing the royalties breakdown.

My jaw hinges open.

Are those numbers real?

"I'll take it by the stunned look on your face, you weren't expecting those numbers," Mr. Miller states, almost smugly.

"No, sir. That is...generous."

"Well, we expect a lot out of you, Kinsley. Your recording schedule will be very time-consuming. We'll want to get you in the studio ASAP, which means finding you a new bass player. Grace is pulling portfolios and demos for you to review, and we'll do auditions immediately. We need to fill that position and get them with the rest of the band for rehearsals."

I blow out a deep breath, feeling slightly overwhelmed. Okay, more like completely overwhelmed. I remember feeling exactly this way when I signed my first contract to produce my debut album. Those same butterflies

are in my stomach and my head is spinning like the Tilt-A-Whirl. I may not feel like throwing up this time around, but the heaviness of the moment is quite surreal.

"I'd like you to meet with Rigo Stanos, who will produce your sophomore album. He's one of the best in the industry. Once we get the first few tracks nailed down, we'll finalize the remainder of the singles. Do you have songs you'd like to consider?"

I nod numbly.

"Perfect."

"We'll need some time to review the contract," Donovan states.

Felicia nods. "Of course. I'm sure your agency attorney will find everything up to par and straightforward."

"I'm sure you're right," he replies with a smile, glancing my way. "Do you have any questions?"

It's hard to get my mind to stop the spinning long enough to gather a single thought. "You said something about a tour?"

Mr. Miller smiles proudly. "Yes, ma'am. We have fourteen cities with a verbal agreement, based on availability, and another thirty-two listed as interested. We're talking arenas, stadiums, and outdoor venues. Anything from eight thousand to twenty-five thousand seat capacity."

"Twenty-five thousand?" I ask, my mouth gaping open.

He chuckles with his nod. "The United Center in Chicago is on the list with a verbal agreement. They've sent in a list of available dates for this fall."

I give my head a little shake. "I don't know what to say."

"Say yes," Mr. Miller answers with a laugh. "I understand you'll want to review everything I've presented this morning." He looks over to Donovan before asking, "Would you like to schedule a follow-up meeting? Does tomorrow work for you?"

Donovan glances my way, but doesn't draw me into the conversation further. "That should be fine. Maybe tomorrow afternoon so the attorney has plenty of time to review it, and then I can meet with Kinsley to go over everything. Would three o'clock work for you?"

"Three would be fine. I'll have Grace put it on my calendar. If either of you have any questions or concerns beforehand, please call me or Felicia."

"We will do that, Mr. Miller," Donovan replies as the owner of the

label stands up.

“Thank you both for coming in this morning. I look forward to continuing a wonderful relationship, Kinsley. You’re a tremendous asset to our label, and you have a long, successful career in your future. We want to nurture it and help you grow. We’re proud to have you as part of the Miller Records family, Kinsley.”

I blink a few times, trying to keep the tears at bay. The emotions, the magnitude of this meeting, of this moment, is almost too much.

Clearing my throat, I extend my hand. “Thank you, Mr. Miller. I’m honored to be part of this label.”

He smiles warmly and places both hands on my upper arms. “We’re a family here, Kinsley, and you’re part of that.”

I nod jerkily, shake Felicia’s hand, and follow my manager out of the conference room. It isn’t until we’ve returned to the ground floor that he finally looks over, a huge grin on his face. “This is huge, Kinsley. That contract is nothing to balk at. This is big news, a big income jump, just from the album royalties alone. Add in the tour income, and you’ll be set for quite a while.”

“I can’t believe it,” I whisper, still trying to get my bearings. “I’m honored.”

He nods. “You should be. Today is a major milestone in your career. You’re going places. Everyone who comes to Nashville dreams of this moment, and it’s yours for the taking. I’m going back to the office to have our attorney look over this contract. Want to meet for dinner to go over it?”

“Sure,” I reply.

“I’ll have Justine call you with arrangements. Dinner at seven?”

All I can do is nod.

“Great. We’ll be in touch,” he replies before heading toward the car parked along the curb.

I watch as it pulls away before walking toward the parking garage at the end of the street. Now what? I suppose I’ll go back to my hotel room and wait until I receive the call for my dinner meeting with Donovan.

What I really want to do is call Tucker. To tell him about the offer. I know he’ll help me weigh the pros and cons. Not that there are many cons to list. This is an incredible opportunity. It’s what I’ve dreamed about since I was a little girl. It’s within grasp and ready to take my career to new heights.

So why am I not as excited as I should be?

Why does this moment feel like I'm giving up one dream to have another?

Because I am.

I'm waiting at a table at the restaurant for my meeting with Donovan, my heart pounding in my chest from the worry and pressure that's been present since this morning's meeting. Even after I went back to my hotel room and tried to relax, I felt anxious. I went to lunch with my mom, and while that helped, it didn't alleviate the discomfort in my chest, especially when she doted on me, expressing her excitement at the new contract presented.

As elated as I should be, it just feels like I'm suffocating.

That's not how this moment should feel.

There's also the fact I need to reach out to Tucker and haven't yet. When I left for Nashville Sunday afternoon, I wasn't sure how long I'd have to stay. I knew there was a possibility it would be a few days, and while Tucker said he understood, I still need to let him know I'm not coming back today and probably not tomorrow either. Our contract meeting is at three, which means the potential for me leaving the city late in the day is improbable. Not that I don't want to get back to Stewart Grove, I just don't know what will happen after I sign. I could have to meet with the producer immediately, which would delay my departure.

There're just too many questionable variables right now.

But that doesn't mean I want to leave him hanging.

While I wait, I pull up the messaging app on my phone and tap on his name.

Me: Definitely not coming back tonight. I'm not sure about tomorrow, but there's a good chance I'll have to stay tomorrow night too.

The bubbles appear almost instantly.

Tucker: Sounds good. Hope it's going well. We miss you here.

Me: Going well.

I don't elaborate. This feels like a conversation to be had face-to-face. When I tell him I'm likely returning to Nashville for the foreseeable future, it shouldn't be through text message.

Tucker: I'm glad. Can't wait to hear all about it when you get home.

Home.

That one word brings tears to my eyes. Stewart Grove will always feel like home to me, will always hold a big piece of my heart. Even when I'm in Nashville.

I glance up and see Donovan, as well as Virginia Clinert, their agency attorney, heading my way.

Me: I need to go. My dinner party just arrived at the restaurant for our meeting.

Tucker: Knock 'em dead, Kins. I'm so fucking proud of you.

Me: *insert red heart emoji*

"Kinsley, good evening," Donovan says when he reaches the table. "You remember Virginia, right?"

Setting my phone face down on the table, I stand up and extend my hand toward the older, petite lady. "Yes, of course."

"Lovely to see you again, Ms. McGregor," she greets with a pleasant smile before we all take a seat. "I've had the opportunity to review your contract," she adds, getting right down to business.

"Good evening, and welcome to Alfonso's. Can I start you off with a drink?" our server says when he approaches our table.

Since this is a working dinner, I opt for water, while Donovan orders an iced tea and Virginia requests a Diet Pepsi. "Let's order food, and then we can get down to business," Donovan suggests when the waiter leaves to retrieve our drinks.

Scanning the menu, nothing really sounds good, nor am I as hungry as I should be. When the server returns with our drinks, I ended up settling on

the first pasta dish I find on the menu and hand it over when the ordering is complete.

Finally, when the server walks away, I turn my attention to Virginia. “This is a solid contract, Kinsley. There was one clause I felt could be a little tighter,” she starts, pulling a small stack of papers from her satchel bag and placing them on the table. “This one here that referred to transportation,” she continues, going into her reasoning behind changing that particular clause in the contract.

I nod along, even though I’m having a hard time concentrating on the words coming out of her mouth. I feel completely out of sorts, and it’s starting to piss me off. This is the opportunity of a lifetime, and I should be basking in the glow of signing this deal, not feeling anything other than excitement.

Shaking my head, I focus on what they’re saying, agreeing completely.

“Solid,” Donovan adds when Virginia finishes explaining. “Are you good with the amendment?”

“Yes, of course. I trust you both to have my best interests at heart,” I state, taking a sip of my water.

“We do. I wouldn’t let you sign anything I wouldn’t let my own child agree to,” Virginia adds, making me feel more at ease.

“I appreciate that.”

“Felicia had already sent the contract addendum to my office just a short time ago, so this one will be ready to sign tomorrow afternoon when we arrive. If you’re good with it, that is,” Virginia says, placing the second contract in front of me. “You can take that copy and look it over tonight. Unless you have any changes or additions, it will be the one you sign.”

My throat is suddenly parched, and I take another long drink of water. “Thank you,” I finally reply, taking the new version, folding it in half, and placing it inside my purse.

“My pleasure. If you have any questions or concerns along the way, I’m here for you. That’s why the management group employs their own attorney. It’s important to have both sides review all documentation before anything is signed. I’m at your service as long as you’re under contract with Horizon Management.”

“And we hope you’re with us a long time,” Donovan adds, holding up his glass. “Let’s toast to another successful contract, album, and tour. You’re

a bright star in this industry, Kinsley McGregor, and I can't wait to see where your career takes you. Cheers."

We tap glasses and take a drink. I'm thrilled this is working out the way it is. I'm living my dream. The one I've had since I was a child, teaching myself how to play musical instruments and singing every chance I got. Yet, I can't seem to escape the heavy feeling of dread weighing on my chest.

Digging deep, I push away any tepidness for good, refusing to let this big moment be dimmed any longer.

This is my big moment.

It's time to grab ahold and take it.

Stepping into the same conference room as yesterday, I'm all smiles as I greet everyone in attendance. Not only is Mr. Miller already here, but Felicia is at the table, as well as the producer expected to work on my next album. I can't believe I'm meeting Rigo Stanos. He's produced some of my all-time favorite albums from artists who are continually at the top of the charts and winning awards.

"Kinsley," he says, stepping forward and placing air kisses on my cheeks.

"It's wonderful to meet you," I reply.

"I can't wait to get started on your next project," he adds, a bright white smile stretched across his lips.

"I look forward to it as well," I tell him before being directed to the table.

Everyone takes a seat around the table. Grace brings in small bottles of cold water and a coffee carafe, cups, and little packets of sugar and creamer. I opt for the water, even though I'm not really thirsty. I don't want to seem ungrateful for the offer, so I take the bottle and sip as soon as it's open.

I tap my foot on the carpeted floor beneath the table, hoping everyone in the room can't tell. The group goes over the contract once more, detailing the changes Virginia stated and Mr. Miller agreed on. Everyone seems happy and eager as Mr. Miller looks my way.

"Kinsley, this is the contract drawn up by the label and reviewed by

your team. Are you satisfied with the terms as stated?" he asks.

"Yes."

Felicia brings the official document toward me and places it on the table. "You'll sign here and here," she informs me, pointing to the two lines waiting for my signature.

I grab the ink pen already on the table and take a deep breath.

This is it.

This is my dream.

With the pen in hand, I close my eyes and sign my name.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Tucker

Kinsley: I'm home. Can I come over?

I glance at the clock, noting it's after ten o'clock. Despite the later time, there's no way I'd tell her no. Not when all I want to do is hold her in my arms and breathe in her sweet scent.

Me: Of course. Back door's unlocked.

Kinsley: Be there in a minute.

I glance around the living room, quickly picking up a few of Grayson's toys I haven't gotten to yet this evening. He was extra grumpy tonight, asking where Kinsley was and wanting to know why she couldn't sing him the tractor song. As many times as I told him she was working, it didn't help to calm him down any. He was flat-out annoyed and didn't understand the severity of the reasons why he couldn't see her.

Just as I head for the kitchen to put my empty beer bottle in the trash can, I hear the sound of a vehicle in the driveway and see headlights flash on the garage. My heart skips a beat with excitement as I watch her climb from her vehicle and head for the back door. Deciding to meet her there, I'm all smiles when I push open the screened door and step out onto the small back porch.

The moment she looks up and sees me standing there, a soft smile filled with relief and eagerness spreads across her kissable lips.

"How was your drive?" I ask as she proceeds up the stairs toward me.

"Exhausting," she admits. When she hits the porch, I hold out my arms. She almost runs straight into me, her smaller arms wrapping effortlessly around my waist as she presses her chest to mine.

"Fuck, I've missed you." The confession falls so easily out of my mouth.

"Missed you too," she whispers, sighing as she rests her cheek over the top of my heart.

“Let’s go inside. You can tell me all about it,” I reply, doing everything I can to sound positive and encouraging, even when my heart is beating like a jackhammer.

The moment she pulls back, I miss her body against mine. I pull open the screened door and step to the side for her to enter first. As soon as she does, I close the storm door and lock it. No, I don’t know if she’s spending the night, but it seems more logical to secure it now than to do it later. Plus, I’m really hoping to have her in my bed tonight, so we’ll call this wishful thinking.

“I hope I didn’t wake Grayson,” she says quietly the moment we’re in the kitchen.

“You didn’t. He’s been out since about eight thirty.”

She smiles softly, her eyes tender and filled with love. “How has he been? I’ve missed him like crazy too, and it’s only been two and a half days,” she says with a chuckle.

I definitely agree with her. It feels like she left before Sunday late-morning and has been gone a lifetime already. “He asked about you,” I decide to confess. “He’s anxious to hear the tractor song.” I opt to leave out the part where he cried at bedtime.

“Aw,” she replies, a look of sadness on her face. “I’ll sing it for him twice when I see him next.”

I notice she doesn’t say when exactly that’ll be. Clearing my throat, I grab her hand and guide her toward the couch. I’d prefer to take her to my bed, but something tells me we should be clothed to have the conversation we’re about to have.

“So, tell me all about it,” I encourage the moment we’re both seated.

She turns to face me, positioning her knee on the small space of cushion between us. Still holding my hand, she gives me a blinding smile that lights up my entire world. “They offered me a new album and follow-up tour. Nationwide.”

“Holy shit, Kins, that’s amazing! Congratulations,” I exclaim, pulling her into my arms and squeezing her tightly. “That’s so fucking cool.”

She smiles. “It is. They want me in the studio two weeks from yesterday.”

My heart practically seizes in my chest, and it’s hard to draw oxygen into my lungs. Worse, I have to hide my pain and paint excitement on my

face. I can't let her know how badly it hurts to know she's leaving. Even knowing this day was coming doesn't help. If anything, it makes it worse because it feels too soon, despite the fact she's technically been in town since the beginning of the year.

"Wow, two weeks, huh? Do you have enough songs ready to go?" I ask, drumming up as much excitement as I possibly can.

I need her to know I support her, even if it kills me on the inside.

She shrugs. "I have seven definites and would need to submit the remaining three choices."

"That's because you're a fucking rock star, Kins," I tell her, unable to mask the pride in my voice.

"Well, not a rock star. I prefer country music," she quips, lightening the heaviness in the room with her easygoing nature and effortless smile.

"Me too," I confess, knowing she'll forever be the voice I long to hear.

She gapes at me. "Oh my gosh, don't tell my brother or the rest of the guys. They'll fire you for not proclaiming your allegiance to the Crüe."

I can't help but snort in humor. Lacing my fingers with hers, I declare, "My allegiance will always be to you, to making sure you're happy."

She visibly swallows, as if there's a lump in her throat. "And if that means I'm spending months on end either in Nashville recording an album or on the road touring?"

The pain in my chest is almost too much to bear, but I somehow manage to push past it. "As long as you're happy."

Tears fill her eyes as she stares at me. This is the moment when our time together slowly comes to an end. It might not be right now, but somewhere over the next two weeks, we'll reach the fork in the road. The one where she goes one way, and I go the other. It's going to hurt like a motherfucker, but I've managed to somehow get through it before. I can do it again.

The hard part is going to be Grayson. He won't understand why she's no longer around, and no amount of me explaining will help him to grasp why she's no longer here. We'll grieve the loss of Kinsley in our everyday lives forever, I'm certain.

Bringing her hand to my lips, I place a gentle kiss on her knuckles. "I'm so damn proud of you, Kins. I need you to know that. No matter where your dream takes you, you'll always have me here, believing in you and wishing

you nothing but success every step of the way.”

The tears brimming in her eyes moments ago start to fall, and all I can think about is making love to her.

Before she can say anything, I stand up. I’m not sure what her plans are. It’s late, and she probably wants to go home and unwind in her own house, but all I want is her with me.

Kinsley stands up, and as if she knows where we’re going, follows me toward my bedroom. Before we make it to the hallway though, she stops. I glance over my shoulder to see what’s wrong, and find her silently crying, the pain sliding down her face so real, it’s as if every single tear is reaching into my soul and stabbing it.

“You didn’t ask me to stay.”

My throat is tight, my chest cracking open and bleeding all over my damn carpet. “Because that’s not my job. My job is to love you, no matter where your dream takes you. If that’s back to Nashville, then as badly as it hurts, I’ll let you go in a heartbeat. Not because I don’t love you, Kins, but because I do. So fucking much it hurts to breathe, but at the end of the day, you deserve to chase your dream. You deserve the world, baby.”

Those intoxicating sapphire blue orbs bore straight into my soul as she whispers, “What if my dream has changed?”

The heart in my chest is beating erratically, and I almost can’t get my simple question out of my mouth. Hope is suddenly barreling its way to the front of the emotion race coursing through me. “Has it?”

Even though the tears remain, the sweetest little smile curls her lips heavenward. “Yes.”

I take a stuttered breath, glancing toward the semi-closed bedroom door of my son. Without saying a word, I continue into my bedroom and quietly shut the door so we can talk. “I don’t understand, Kins,” I say when I turn around to face her.

She releases my hand, and I miss her touch instantly. However, it’s replaced in another spot. She places her palms on my cheeks and goes up on her tiptoes. “I didn’t sign the contract.”

Blood swooshes in my ears as realization hits. “What? No!” I proclaim, confused and scared. The last thing I want is for her to throw away the opportunity of a lifetime.

“Yes, Tuck. I followed my heart. You told me to go after my dreams.

Well, my dream is you.” Her words are barely audible over the heavy thump in my chest.

“You can’t do this,” I whisper, terrified she’s going to pick me—pick *us*—and then regret it. “You belong on that stage.”

She’s already shaking her head. “No. I belong with you. I’ve always belonged here, Tucker Dunn. Everything I have is nothing without you. You and Grayson.”

Tears fill my eyes, and I don’t even care. The last time I remember feeling this emotional was after Evie died and left me alone to raise our son. I was overwhelmed with grief for Grayson, for the situation we were facing, and I recall letting a few of those tears fall. The only other time I remember crying was the day Kinsley left for Nashville nine years ago, taking my heart with her.

And now, she’s staying? In Stewart Grove? Giving up the album and tour?

“Kins, I can’t let you walk away. You’ve worked so hard for this.”

“What I need from you is to trust me, Tuck. I struggled for about thirty hours with finding the joy in what was presented to me. As hard as I dug, I couldn’t locate it. Everything was laid in front of me and I had a pen in my hand, but when it came time to sign my name, I couldn’t do it. I didn’t want it anymore. Like I said, my dream changed.”

“Tell me what you want,” I practically beg, trying to understand.

“I want you, Tucker. You and Grayson. I want to live in Stewart Grove, maybe, someday with you and your son. I want to write songs and sell them to artists. I want to take day trips to the park and stay up way too late watching Disney movies. I want to learn how to cook more than just mac and cheese and grilled cheese with tomato sandwiches, help Grayson take his bath at night, and sing to him before he falls asleep. I want to be held in your arms and lie next to you in bed every night.”

“Done,” I state quickly, cutting her off.

She smiles up at me. “I don’t need Nashville or the album or a nationwide tour. I just need you.”

Wrapping my arms around her waist, I draw her close. “You have me. You’ve always owned every single piece of me.”

“Likewise,” she says, resting her cheek against the place my heart pounds in my chest.

“I don’t want you to resent this decision, Kins. I don’t want you to resent me.”

She looks up, meeting my gaze. “I won’t. Do you know why?” When I don’t reply, she continues, “Because I love you. I’ve always loved you. My heart feels incomplete without you, and I’m tired of living this life only half alive.”

My mouth finds hers in a searing kiss, one I hope conveys exactly how much I love her too. “You mean everything to me. You and Grayson. I would be honored to be part of his life. As much or as little as you want, but you need to know, I’ve fallen so completely in love with him.”

“He’s the best parts of me,” I find myself saying with a small grin.

“He is. From those big eyes to his obsession with tractors to his little giggle that makes my heart sing. I don’t want to just insert myself into his life, but I need you to know I’m all in.”

I can’t stop from pulling her even closer yet. “He loves you so much. These last two nights have been hard on him because you weren’t here.”

A look of pain crosses her face. “I’m sorry.”

Shaking my head, I reply, “Don’t be. There’s nothing to be sorry about. He’s so young and doesn’t fully understand that adults sometimes have responsibilities.”

Her hands slide up my arms as she looks up at me. “I’m not saying I want to replace his mom, but I need you to know the love I feel for him is very maternal.”

Unable to stop myself, I blurt, “I’m going to marry you.”

A beautiful smile curls her lips. “Is that a proposal?”

“No. But someday, you’ll be my wife. I knew it at nineteen. I knew you would be my forever. I don’t want to do this life without you, Kinsley McGregor.”

“Good, because I’m not going anywhere,” she says, going up on her tiptoes once more and pressing her mouth to mine. “I love you, Tuck.”

“I love you more than words can say, Kins.”

Then, I kiss her with every ounce of love and adoration I have, showing her, first with my mouth, then with my body, how much she means to me. When we’re lying in a tangled mess of limbs and damp sheets, I press my lips to her forehead and say, “We’ll have to figure out the living arrangement, because I sleep like shit when you’re not beside me.”

“I know Grayson loves his room and has his schedule and routine set, but maybe we can spend a few nights over at my place. You know, try it out.”

My lips find her skin once more. “I think he’d love that. We’ll talk to him about it in the morning.”

“I didn’t mean right away,” she counters.

“If we’re doing this, I’m all in. I’ve spent my entire adult life in limbo, Kins. Now that I have you back in my life, I refuse to let even a second go by without you.”

She looks up and grins. “Okay.” Then, she burrows deeper into my body, her head fitting perfectly beneath my chin.

“I love you,” I tell her, realizing I’ll never get tired of saying those words.

“I love you too,” she replies before a deep yawn takes over.

Holding her close, she sighs contently and slowly drifts off to sleep.

I lie awake for another hour, listening to her breathing, reveling in the feel of her naked skin against mine. Am I worried about what the future has in store for us? Hell no. We’ve already been through hell and have finally come out stronger on the other end. I’m certain it won’t always be easy, but with her as my partner, walking through this life by my side, I’m positive we can overcome anything put in our path.

She’s my best friend.

The love of my life.

The woman I want to marry, have more babies with, and grow old together.

Without her, it just doesn’t work.

That’s why I’ll spend every day of my life showing her how much she means to me.

For better or worse, we’re soulmates.

Until my last breath.

Epilogue

Kinsley

7 months later

“Hurry up, Kins. The commercial break is almost over,” Tucker hollers from the living room.

I grab the bowl of popcorn and hurry back to where my boys are sitting on the couch, waiting. We’ve allowed Grayson to stay up and watch the first part of the award show, even though he may not fully understand the magnitude of the moment.

My song.

Sung during the biggest award show in country music.

By Tim and Faith.

I plop down on the couch and shovel popcorn into my mouth in an attempt to mask my nervousness. I’ve sold several songs in the past, many of which have gone on to be sung by some amazing artists. But this one hits differently. It’s not every day a power couple like Tim and Faith calls you up and wants one of your songs. And not just any song.

Our song.

The song I wrote for Tucker. The one describing the perfect love, how time and distance only strengthens the bond, cementing that person into your heart forever. About second chances. Originally, it was one I had planned to record myself. However, when I decided to give up the contract, I toyed with the idea of selling it. I knew the song was special, and if it was going to another artist, it had to be the right one.

That’s when Tim McGraw called me up.

When I heard his voice, I knew who it was instantly. Then, he told me he heard the song and wanted it, but he requested to make some adjustments. At first, I didn’t want to even consider it, but when he explained he wanted to turn it into a duet, I was all in. The edits took me less than an hour to make, and the next thing I knew, the contract was signed,

and Tim McGraw was recording my song.

The show returns and I find myself holding my breath.

“Please welcome Tim McGraw and Faith Hill debuting their new song, ‘It Was Always You.’”

“Breathe, Kins,” Tucker whispers, linking his fingers with my own.

I sit on the couch and listen to them sing the most meaningful song I’ve ever written. The words flow beautifully, their voices perfectly harmonize as they belt it out. I have goosebumps on my skin, knowing I absolutely made the right decision in selling them the single. “It was made for them,” I murmur, tears streaming down my face as I’m overcome with emotion and pride.

“No, it was made for you. They’re just the gateway for your song now,” he states, squeezing my hand in silent support.

I feel another hand, a much smaller one slip into my right hand too. “No cry.”

I grin down at Grayson, wiping away the wetness on my cheek. “These are happy tears, buddy. I promise.”

He stands up and wraps his little arms around my neck. When he pulls back, he asks so pointedly, so beautifully, “I call you Mommy?”

Tim and Faith fade away.

All that’s left are Tucker, Grayson, and me.

“What?” I mutter, the word sticking to my lips like taffy.

“Daddy says I can.” His vibrant blue eyes are so full of hope and anticipation, it makes my heart soar to new heights.

“Daddy said you could ask. He said he was okay with it, as long as Kinsley was,” Tucker says gently beside me.

It takes me a few moments to find my composure because the emotions are too much. Happiness at this precious moment and the unimaginable love I feel for him. In under a year, I have come to love him as if he had my blood in his veins and will spend the rest of my life protecting, defending, and raising him as my own.

“You can call me Mommy,” I whisper, wanting to scream those words from the rooftop.

He smiles and reaches forward, rubbing his fingers against my face as he always has. “Kay.”

“Do you want to give her your gift?” Tucker asks, clearing the emotion

from his own throat too.

“Yep!” Grayson hollers, making me chuckle at his eagerness.

Tucker hands Grayson a small box. The blood swooshes in my ears, my heart trying to beat right out of my chest. “My mommy,” he says almost shyly as he practically shoves the box into my chest.

With shaking hands, I lift the lid and peer down at the beautiful necklace. The pendant is a delicate platinum heart with a vibrant ruby at the point where the two sides come together. I don’t even have to ask what the ruby represents. I already know.

July is Grayson’s birth month.

“You like?” he asks, moving his head close to mine to get a good look at my face.

“I love it, Grays. More than you’ll ever know,” I reply, wiping at tears.

“Let me,” Tucker says, taking the box and removing the contents. I turn to my side and hold my breath as he carefully places the jewelry around my neck and fastens it into place.

Glancing over my shoulder, I murmur, “This means more to me than anything in the world.” My fingers are touching the ruby and heart resting perfectly against my skin.

He smiles, his blue eyes brilliant and alluring. “There’s more.”

“What?” I ask with an awkward chuckle. I’m not sure how much more my poor heart can take tonight.

“Ready, buddy?” Tucker asks his son as he stands up and pulls a second box from his pocket. Before I even realize what’s happening, Tucker drops to one knee, quickly followed by his son. “Kinsley McGregor. I’ve loved you since I was a teenager, and I knew then you were destined for great things. Letting you go was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, but it was what had to happen for you to live your dream. Now, you’re here, and because of that, I get to live mine. So, Grays and I have a question for you.”

“Marry my daddy,” Grayson instructs, making me giggle.

“It was supposed to be more of a question, but I like the way you think, buddy. Let’s not give her an opportunity to say no,” Tucker says to his son, ruffling his hair.

“I would never say no. Not to him and not to you. Yes, I’ll marry you. Both of you,” I reply moments before the most stunning diamond is slipped onto my finger.

Then, he moves, pulling me into his arms and pressing his lips to mine.
“I love you so much.”

“And I love you,” I say, wrapping my arms around his neck and holding on as tight as I can.

“Me too!” Grayson proclaims before wiggling his small body between ours.

“Yes, you too,” I tell him, kissing his forehead and holding him close.

“Mommy.” That one simple word floods my soul with happiness.

I hope I never get tired of hearing him call me that.

I am his mother. No one will love and protect him like I will.

We’re a family.

The strongest bond in the world, and nothing will ever change that.

Tucker

Four months later

“Ready, little man?” I ask my son as I stand at the altar and wait for the woman I love.

“Ready!” he proclaims loudly, making our wedding guests chuckle.

Finally, the music starts, and the anticipation I’ve felt all day is on the verge of exploding. We watch as Cameron slowly walks toward us, and an audible groan bellows softly from my best man. All I can do is smile, knowing how Kellen feels, watching the woman he loves approach in a beautiful dress.

Then, the music changes to the “Wedding March” and the guests all stand. When we started to plan, we both knew we wanted a small, intimate wedding. Our closest family and friends. Less than sixty guests in attendance to watch me profess my undying love to the only woman to have my heart. Kinsley wanted the old church at the edge of town. Nestled in one of the local cemeteries, it’s not in regular use anymore. Only serving as a spot for small weddings and funerals for locals. Its primitive appearance is the reason most nuptials happen in one of the larger, comfortable, and climate-

controlled churches, but for us, this was the perfect location.

Movement catches my eye at the back of the church, where I see Kinsley's father escorting his daughter my way. I'm happy he agreed to do this for her. I know they haven't always had the best relationship, but it was important to her that her father walk her down the aisle. My chest burns as I take in the sight of the most beautiful woman on planet earth walking toward me, a smile on her full lips.

"Mommy!" Grayson exclaims before releasing my hand and taking off down the aisle toward her. I don't try to stop him, because she insisted on having him be part of every aspect of today. He even gets to say I do with us.

"Hi, Grays," she replies, stopping in the middle of the aisle to kiss his cheek. "You look very handsome."

He reaches forward and touches her satin and lace dress. "Pretty."

"Thank you," she says, moving her bouquet to the arm she has linked with her dad's and holds out a hand. "Wanna walk with me?"

He nods and takes her hand. It's the most breathtaking moment, watching them walk toward me with love and determination in their eyes.

When they finally reach where I stand, Mr. McGregor reaches for my hand and gives it a shake. Then, he gently removes his daughter's hand from the crook of his arm and places it on mine. The meaning behind that one small gesture is like a lightning bolt to my heart.

She's mine to love and protect for the rest of my life.

Kinsley passes her bouquet to Cameron before we all join hands. The three of us, all standing together, forming a small, yet mighty circle. "You're stunning," I whisper as everyone takes their seat behind us.

"You're not so bad yourself, handsome," she replies.

"I handsome too," Grayson chimes in, making us laugh.

"You most certainly are," Kinsley replies with a wink.

I take a deep breath, ready to marry the love of my life. The woman who has always been mine, even before either of us knew what that meant. The one who stands beside me, raising my son as if she were the one to give birth. And hopefully, someday, will give us more children to love and adore.

Without her, it just doesn't work.

She's our forever.

My life.

"Dearly beloved..."

The End

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Music Notes, a sexy contemporary romance standalone
A Place To Call Home, a Memorial Day novella
Exes and Ho Ho Ho's, a sexy contemporary romance standalone novella
Pants on Fire, a sexy contemporary romance standalone
Double Dog Dare You, a new standalone
Grip, A Driven World Novel
Bachelor Swap, A Bachelor Tower Series Novel
Perfect Kiss, Mason Creek Series book 9
Waiting For Love, The Love Vixen Series book 11
Quarterback Keeper, a surprise baby novella

Burgers and Brew Crüe Series

Kickstart My Heart
Don't Go Away Mad
Same Ol' Situation
Wild Side
What's It Gonna Take
Home Sweet Home
Too Young to Fall in Love
Without You

Pine Village Series

Pretty Remarkable, a free prequel short story
Pretty Incredible, book 1
Pretty Dependable, book 2 – coming soon!

Co-Written with NYT Bestselling Author, Kaylee Ryan

It's Not Over, Fair Lakes book 1
Just Getting Started, Fair Lakes book 2
Can't Get Enough, Fair Lakes book 3
Fair Lakes Box Set
Boy Trouble
Home To You, a second chance novella
Beneath the Fallen Stars
Tell Me A Story

Royal – Writing as Rebel Shaw
Crying Shame – Writing as Rebel Shaw

Acknowledgments

I wish I could properly convey how much this series means to me! When I started it, I had four books planned, yet here we are, releasing book eight. You, the readers, told me the series wasn't complete at the end of book four, and I listened because in my heart, it didn't feel finished to me either. And it still doesn't feel that way! While I'm switching gears for a book or two to work on my Pine Village series, I promise I'll be back to Stewart Grove. This Crüe holds my heart!!

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About the Author

USA Today Bestselling Author Lacey Black is a Midwestern girl with a passion for reading, writing, and shopping. She carries her e-reader with her everywhere she goes so she never misses an opportunity to read a few pages. Always looking for a happily ever after, Lacey is passionate about contemporary romance novels and enjoys it further when you mix in a little suspense. She resides in a small town in Illinois with her husband, two children, adorable black lab puppy, crazy cat, and three rowdy chickens.

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