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Kristin MacQueen

The Boys of
Mulberry Lane



Book One

Believe

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Kristin MacQueen

Believe – The Boys of Mulberry Lane Book One

First edition. January 1, 2023.

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Can I be him – James Arthur

The good ones - Gabby Barrett

Girls like you – Maroon 5

Sleeping beauty – Dylan Scott

Whatever she's got – David Nail

Say you won't let go – James Arthur

My girl - Dylan Scott

Marry me – Jason Derulo

Chapter 1



Addi



“So... you’re just going to let seven strangers move in with you?” Kendra crosses her arms over her chest and stares at me in disbelief.

“I mean, they’re not *all* strangers.” I nibble on the tip of my thumbnail and turn my attention away from her.

“Oh, I’m sorry! How stupid of me! You know *one* of them.” She rolls her eyes, giving a nod to one of her customers holding up his glass, asking for another drink.

“Do you think this is crazy?”

“Crazy? No. Surprising for you? Yes. I’d be the first to volunteer a home for seven hot guys.”

“We don’t know if they’re hot. I haven’t met them yet.” I grab the plates Tony placed on the counter and load them up on my tray.

“And that’s what I find surprising! How do you invite so many men to live with you, when you haven’t met them yet?”

“I trust Nicky. He’d never let someone he doesn’t trust move into my house.” I shrug, knowing he’ll always protect

me.

“And you’re not dating Nick?” She arches a perfectly shaped brow at me.

“For the last time, no!” Lifting the tray, I maneuver away from the kitchen and over to my tables.

I’m not nervous about my choice. Nick said his friends are really nice and will be respectful. He’s given me a little bit of background on the guys, but not much. Wes, Blake, Hunter, Nate, and Nick are all juniors, while Cole and Lincoln are sophomores. I’m the only freshman in the house.

There’s a reason I don’t want to live on campus, but I also don’t want to be alone. The thought of sharing a room with a complete stranger is nauseating. You could argue that I’m about to share a house with six strangers, but it’s different. Nick won’t let anyone hurt me and I’m positive of that.

He’d kick the guys out if anything goes wrong and I know that. It’s the only reason I was happy to invite them to live in the mansion I bought.

Nick Cohen’s my best friend. We grew up together and our moms were best friends. I’m fairly certain I spent just as much time with the Cohen family as I did with my own.

There aren’t any hidden feelings between us like Kendra seems to believe. We’re more like siblings. We’ve always been there for each other and that isn’t about to change.

After I’ve checked on all of my tables, I make my way behind the bar and start helping Kendra fill drink orders.

I love working at Dive. It's an old sports pub and it's only a few minutes away from my house. I started working here a few weeks ago. I figured having a part time job while going to school would be fun. I'm not taking a heavy course load and I'd rather not tap into my savings for tuition.

"Could you grab that bottle of tequila on the top shelf?"
Kendra motions to the high shelf above the bar.

"Sure." I carefully climb up the step stool and reach as far as I can.

My shirt rides up, showing off a decent amount of my stomach, but there's nothing I can do about that.

One thing I love about working here is the dress code. We don't have to wear uniforms. We can come in whatever we want and Tony doesn't care.

Tony's the head chef, but he also owns the pub. He's the best boss you could ask for and he always has a smile aimed our way.

My cowboy boots slip a little on the old stool and I wobble before regaining my balance. The last thing I need is to fall and faceplant on the bar. I'd be mortified. I'd have to quit and find a new job because most of our customers are regulars and they'd never let me forget about it.

Once I finally have the bottle in hand, I give it to Kendra and hop off the stool. When I spin around to face the bar and ask what she needs, I lay eyes on the man I've been missing.

“Nicky!” I squeal and run from behind the bar to meet him. His face lights up and he holds his arms open right as I jump into them.

“Hey, I missed you.” He holds me closer, burying his face in my shoulder.

“I missed you too. I’m so glad you’re here.”

He keeps me wrapped in his embrace for several long seconds before finally releasing me. My eyes stray to the man standing next to him and I freeze.

Damn, he’s gorgeous.

His dark hair is shaved on the sides and long on the top. He has a thick layer of scruff on his defined jaw, but it’s well kept. He’s wearing a solid black tee and worn jeans, drawing my attention more than he should.

Sapphire eyes are staring back at me, taking in my physical features just as quickly as I’m doing to him. I’ve never seen eyes this color. They suck you in and make you want to get lost in them.

I feel like the entire world is fading around us as I stare at him. This isn’t going to end well.

Chapter 2



Hunter



Holy shit.

It's her! The one woman I've been dreaming about for months. The one who captured my attention last year and I haven't been able to get her out of my head since.

She's grabbing a bottle off a high shelf and my gaze strays to her tiny jean shorts and tight tank top, showing off her curves and slim waist. Her brown hair is longer than it was last summer, making her loose curls hang to her lower back.

"So, where's AJ? I just want to meet this guy and go home." I ask Nick as my gaze stays trained on her. I wonder if I can convince her to talk to me. I want to know what happened last summer.

We need to meet our new roommate, but I couldn't care less about who we're living with when she's here and commanding my attention.

The guys and I don't really know anything about our new roommate. Nick told us he grew up with AJ and they're

practically siblings. They lived across the street from each other when they were younger, but then Nick's family moved.

I've known Nick for over four years and I've never met AJ. Whenever he was in town, Nick would abandon us to hang out with him.

"Who said AJ's a guy?" Nick raises a brow at me and smirks.

The words are barely out of his mouth when my dream girl lets out a squeal and races into Nick's arms. Her legs wrap around his waist as she hugs him close and whispers something in his ear.

As soon as Addi's lowered to the ground, her gaze moves to Wes. I watch as she takes him in and I know there's going to be some sort of competition for her attention in our house.

Why did I agree to go along with this? I could've just stayed in a dorm, like every other normal college student, but Nick convinced us this would be better.

"Let me introduce you to the guys. Everyone this is Addi, Addi this is Cole."

Cole flashes her a smile before Nick moves on to introduce her to the rest of us individually. I watch her while her attention is on the other guys. She nods and shakes each of their hands, giving everyone a polite hello. Her smile is still contagious and I can't bring myself to look away.

I don't think she's noticed me yet and I'm appreciating the extra time I have to soak her in. I'm not sure she's going to be

happy when she sees me.

“This is Wes....” He keeps his narrowed gaze on her the entire time, giving her a small nod.

“Lincoln....”

“Hey, baby. How are you doing?” He wiggles his eyebrows and takes a step closer. “Maybe I’ll have to take you out for dinner this weekend so I can get to know my new roommate.”

“Ignore him.” Nick waves off Lincoln. “This is Nate....”

“It’s nice to meet you, Addi.” Nate grins shyly.

“It’s nice to meet you too.” The smile she aims his way is so sweet. She can tell he’s uncomfortable and she loves it.

“Blake...”

“Hey, sweetness. Which bedroom is yours? Maybe I can sneak in after dark and we can play dare or dare.” He smirks.

“Do you mean truth or dare?” She furrows her brows.

“Nah, dares are more fun than truths. Nate’s your guy if you want to spill all your secrets to someone. I’m the guy you call when you want a good time.”

“Holy shit, I’m already regretting inviting you all to live with us,” Nick mumbles under his breath and rolls his eyes.

“Last but not least...” Nick turns his attention to me.

When Addi finally glances at me, her eyes widen and her smile falls slightly. Yeah... she never expected to see me again.

“Hunter...” she whispers before Nick can say my name. Her eyes squeeze shut like it’s painful to see me and I have to swallow over the lump in my throat.

“Hey Addi, how are you?” My voice is barely audible in the loud pub.

Guys cheer in one corner, all of them staring up at the TVs lining the walls above the tables. Glasses and bottles clink together, but all of it fades away as Addi’s eyes lock on mine.

I wish the guys weren’t around for this little reunion of ours. It’s going to be hard enough to come to terms with this myself, let alone having six extra sets of eyes on us.

“Wait, you guys know each other? How do you know her?” Nick’s voice raises above the bar noise.

Regret fills her features before she’s able to put on a mask of indifference. She plasters a fake smile on, then turns around to face Nick again. I wish I knew what was going through her head.

“Hey, Nicky, I have to get back to work. If y’all are hungry, then stay for dinner. You guys can take a seat over by the pool tables, in my section. I’ll come take your order in a minute. I just need to do something really quick.” Her gaze sweeps around the bar before she spots what she’s looking for.

She darts off just like she did the last time I saw her. It’s like déjà vu watching her run away from me. Pain and rejection fill my chest once again. I’m upsetting her just by being here. I can see it in her eyes. She never could hide things. She’s

always worn her emotions on her sleeve. I still don't know what went wrong with us, but I don't think we'll be able to live together.

We claim a round booth next to a pool table and glance over the menu. My gaze tracks Addi as she runs behind the bar and pulls another waitress to the entrance of a hallway. I can barely see her as she speaks frantically. Her eyes are wide and she keeps dropping her face into her hands. The other waitress peeks over her shoulder several times. She turns back to ask Addi something, then Addi shakes her head *no*. This continues for a few minutes.

The waitress is trying to figure out which guy I am, I just know it. Addi's freaking out about seeing me again and it's painful to watch. I don't know how to handle this. None of this is going to end well for me.

I'll call the school tomorrow and find out if I can get back into a dorm at the last minute. There's no way this will ever work. Hell, I won't even be able to hang out with Nick without things being super weird.

"Hunter! What the hell man? I've called your name like ten times." Nick shoves my shoulder, a frown marring his features.

I scrub a hand down my face before turning to him. I try to keep my voice quiet enough so the other guys won't hear us. None of them have been told about Addi and I prefer to keep it that way. It'll make things less uncomfortable for all of us.

“Sorry. I have a lot on my mind at the moment. Fuck man, how is Addi here?”

“How exactly do you know Addi?” He narrows his gaze on me.

“Remember that girl I met last summer at that camp I worked at...” I trail off, letting him put the pieces together by himself. “And you’ve always acted like AJ was a guy.”

“Oh man! This is going to be interesting!”

“No, it’s not. I can’t live with you guys. Did you see her face when she saw me? I won’t make the next few years uncomfortable for her. I’ll see if I can get back into a dorm tomorrow.”

“Hunter, talk to her before you do anything. She’s not a fragile little girl. She might not be all that upset to see you again. A lot has changed in the past year.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Have you talked to her about me? What did she say?”

“Oh no, I’m not going there. Anything she tells me stays between the two of us. You might be my friend but she’s like my sister and I’m not getting caught in the middle of this. All I’m saying is talk to her, not me, if you want to know where Addi’s head is. It seems like life is giving you a second chance. And she’s worth the fight, Hunt. Especially if you like her as much as you’ve claimed to in the past... Now chill out, here she comes.”

I glance up right as Addi gets to our table. She refuses to look in my direction, but I don't miss how her gaze seems to constantly stray to Wes. She's trying to control her emotions, but I see through it all. I see the girl she tries to hide.

"Alright boys, this dinner is on me, so what can I get for you?" Addi asks with another fake smile.

"Mmmm, I'll take you on my lap, clothes on the side please," Blake replies with a wink.

Addi rolls her eyes and sighs. Blake's a total player and doesn't care who knows it, he hits on every single girl who comes in contact with him.

"Cool it, Everson. Show some respect," I growl. Addi's brows furrow when she realizes I'm the one to warn Blake.

"Fine. I'll have a coke and a cowboy burger with fries," he responds with a pout.

"I'm sorry for my friend, he doesn't know how to behave around such a beautiful woman as yourself. I'm sure he's going to make a fool of himself. It's hard to live with a woman when you're so used to dirty guys," Lincoln says with his signature smile that makes all the girls turn to putty in his hands. Lincoln's a huge flirt who always has girls falling all over him. I've never seen him with a woman, but he surely flirts with all of them. "I'll take the same as Blake."

"Me too," Nate says quickly. He's a quiet guy. It's kind of shocking he's friends with us given we're such a loud group.

He's awesome, but just doesn't do well in public or in large crowds. Or with women.

We go around the table ordering our meals. Wes is an intense guy who doesn't let people close to him and has a way of making people feel naked under his powerful glare. He always has a scowl aimed at people.

Cole makes a joke as he orders. He doesn't take life too seriously. Instead, he goes along with the flow and is always happy. I wish I could be more like him.

Nick's the lovable one who makes anyone and everyone feel comfortable and welcome. And then there's me.

I don't know how people would describe me. I wonder how Addi would sum me up to her friends.

"You guys made this easy for me. Seven cokes and seven cowboy burgers coming up!" She hurries off to give our orders to the cook.

"I'm going to talk to her," I whisper to Nick, as I slide out of my seat.

Seeing Addi again is like going back in time. I feel the same as I did a year ago when I met her for the first time. I'm drawn to her in ways I can't explain and find myself constantly searching for her.

"Addi?" I shove my hands in my pockets as I approach the bar.

She jumps in the air and spins around to face me, a hand covering her heart.

“Oh my gosh, Hunter! You scared the crap out of me! Did I forget something?”

“No. Sorry,” I say chuckling, “what time do you get off of work tonight?”

“Uh, midnight.”

“Did you finally get your license?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Yes... but my car’s in the shop. I’m walking home tonight.” She glances down shyly.

“You can’t walk home at midnight. I’ll come back and pick you up. I wanted to talk to you in private anyway.”

“Hunter...”

“Please, Tink,” I beg with my best sad puppy dog face, because she never could say no to it in the past.

“Tink? Really?” She laughs. “I never thought I’d hear that nickname again... Fine, you can pick me up, but if you’re not here by the time I’m done working, I’m walking home. We both know how great you are at being on time.”

“That hurts, Tink. That hurts real bad.” I grab my chest, acting like I’ve been wounded.

I catch a glimpse of the old Addi coming out and I can’t help a little bit of hope spreading through my chest. Maybe we can go back to how everything used to be.

She stares down at her hands before turning her big doe eyes back up to me and whispers, “I missed you, Hunter.”

“I’ve missed you too, Tink.”

“Help me carry these drinks jackass...I mean Jackson.” She replies with a smirk. Man, I missed this girl.

Chapter 3



Addi



I can't believe he's back. Hunter, the guy I've been thinking about for the past year. Constantly asking myself *what if's* where he's concerned.

What if I hadn't walked away? What if he came after me? What if he didn't make a move? What if I had let him?

No matter what, the answer is always the same. It doesn't matter. What's done is done and I can't change how he acted or how I responded.

I find myself constantly checking the clock, oddly excited about seeing Hunter again. He's even more handsome than he was last summer.

His dark brown hair is longer on the top and hangs down on his forehead. His eyes are captivating, green mixed with brown. Of course he's tan, just like when I met him, but now, he's more muscular. He has to be working out daily.

"Earth to Addi, table five's drinks are ready." Kendra's singsong words float through my brain and pull me from my

thoughts. “Stop thinking about that hot piece of ass that couldn’t take his eyes off of you.”

“I guess that’s one way to describe Hunter,” I say, laughing at how blunt Kendra is.

“Oh Honey, I wasn’t talking about Hunter. I was talking about the broody looking one. I could describe that man in so many different ways, but I don’t think it’d be work appropriate. But really, can he be any hotter? Please tell me he’s an asshole. If he’s a good guy I might throw myself at him the next time he’s here. Actually, that’s not true. Even if he’s an asshole, I’m probably going to throw myself at him.” She shrugs.

I can’t stop laughing at Kendra. She always has the ability to lighten my mood in an effortless way.

“I know nothing about him other than his name is Wes.”

“Based upon that dreamy look on your face, it looks like I’m too late to claim him as my own.” Kendra lets out a dramatic sigh. “I guess I’ll just have to settle on one of the other six insanely hot and sexy men that came here to meet you. Seriously, are you sure it’s legal to have that much hotness in one house? Any one of them could be on the cover of a magazine! How are you so lucky to get all of them?”

“Shut up and give me table five’s drinks.” I roll my eyes with a smirk.

I can’t fall for any of my roommates. Our relationships can never be anything more than friends. I’ll just have to keep

reminding myself of that.

Chapter 4



Hunter



I slip back into the bar around eleven. I need to show Addi I can be there for her. I'm serious about wanting to talk to her and take her home. I want to clear the air between us and see if we can possibly live together.

I sit down in a booth that faces Addi's section, but I'm not really sure if it's in her section.

"Hey there handsome, what can I get for you?" The woman who Addi ran to earlier, asks with a big smile.

She's gorgeous, has curves in all the right places, and she knows how to dress to make herself even more attractive. She's well aware she's sexy and oozes confidence. She's definitely used to getting her way.

"Do you call all of your customers handsome?"

"Only the really handsome ones," She replies with a wink.
"Now, what can I get you?"

"Alright, I'll just take a coke."

Addi walks by and I can't pull my eyes away from her no matter how hard I try. I know I'm being rude to this woman,

but Addi's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen and she doesn't even know it. Something about a girl not knowing they're attractive makes them even more attractive.

“Oh honey, if you sit in my section and drool all over another girl, then you're going to have to order more than a soda. I'll be needing a big tip to know I can look, but can't touch.”

I can't help but laugh, this woman is so blunt. I lean in closer to her. “How about I just get a coke but I'll leave you a thirty-dollar tip to go along with it. I'm Hunter, by the way. I'm one of Addi's new roommates.”

“Oh, I know who you are, Hunter, but I'm pretty sure you're more complicated than just being Addi's roommate, even if neither of you will admit it. For the record, I'm Kendra, Addi's friend. I'll be right back with your drink.”

As Kendra walks away, I turn my full attention back to Addi. She's over near the pool tables at a booth with four guys. All of them are as sleazy as can be. They're trying to get a better look at her and to capture her attention. Addi has a fake smile plastered on her beautiful face the entire time.

One of the guys tries to put his hand on her ass when she reaches across the table to grab an empty glass. Addi quickly grabs his hand, pulls it away from her and puts it back on the table. The guy doesn't take the hint. He keeps trying his hardest to touch her and she pushes him away each and every time.

“Keep your hands to yourself, Brian,” she says sternly.

“Baby, I’d much rather keep my hands on you.”

I stand up and march over to them before I even realize what I’m doing. There’s no way I’m going to let this creep touch her.

“Do we have a problem over here?” I growl in a low, threatening voice that promises things will not end well for this guy if he keeps this shit up. “I’m pretty sure I heard the lady ask you to keep your hands to yourself.”

I stare down at him. Based on his expression, this isn’t going to be enough. He still thinks he has a chance with her. I have to erase the thought from his mind and there’s only one way to do that. I pray Addi won’t hate me for doing this.

I quickly slip my arm around Addi’s waist. She eyes me but doesn’t say anything. I pull her tighter against me, knowing I’ll have some explaining to do later.

“If you’re having trouble keeping your hands off my girl, we could go outside and have a little talk about how to treat women correctly. Especially when they don’t belong to you.”

The guy quickly puts his hands up in surrender, an apologetic look filling his features.

“My bad man, I didn’t know she was your girl. Hands off, I promise.”

“I’m sure that will make the lady happy,” I growl, then I turn to Addi, “Let me help you, sweetheart.”

Grabbing the tray, I head straight to the bar. I place the tray on top and spin around to face Addi, who followed me and is

still shocked over what just happened.

I plop down on the bar stool and grab her hand. With me seated and her standing, we're more eye level than normal. Being well over six feet tall, I tower over Addi when I'm standing.

"I'm sorry, I had to do something and the only thing that's going to stop that guy is if he thinks you're mine. I know you're not, but I'm not going to watch some guy grab you without your permission. I'm sorry, Addi."

Addi places a gentle kiss on my cheek. "Thank you, Hunter." She quickly glances at the clock before staring into my eyes again. "You're a little early, I'm still working for another forty-five minutes."

"I know, I wanted you to know I've changed. I'm never late anymore."

"Addi, why don't you get out of here. Stacy and I can cover the place, we're not very busy tonight. It might help Brian realize you're off limits if you leave with this eye candy." Kendra throws a wink my way.

"Thanks, Kenz, I'll make it up to you!" Addi runs around the bar to hug her, before returning to my side.

"Let's go, Tink," I whisper in her ear, guiding her out of the bar with my hand on her bare lower back.

I glance over at Brian giving him a smirk and a little wave as we walk out. I want him to spot us leaving together. To really hit home the fact that she's not available.

The heat of Addi's skin under my palm shoots a wave of electricity through my body. What is it about this girl?

When we get to my truck, I open the door and help her climb up before I run around to my side to get in. I turn the key and the truck rumbles to life. As I back out of the parking lot, I ask, "Do you want to go home?"

"Are the guys awake?"

"When I left, they were all in their rooms. They'll give us privacy on the first floor."

"Who took the room on the first floor? There was one left next to mine"

"We picked rooms before we came to the bar tonight. Nick made it seem like you were a guy...."

"Please tell me Blake didn't take that room," she groans. I chuckle at how disappointed Blake probably is with his choice now.

"Nah, Blake chose the second floor. I requested the first floor. I tend to stay up late into the night doing school work. The guys are pretty good at retreating to the rooms by eleven, but tend to still be a little noisy in their rooms. I figure the ground floor would probably be the quietest for me to study."

"Ok." That one word is all Addi whispers in response as she stares at her hands for the remainder of the short drive home.



I open the door to the mansion that will house the eight of us for the next few years. It's a gorgeous home on a huge property. I think Nick said it's over twenty acres. It's tucked back on its own street, away from the rest of the world. I'm sure it cost a fortune.

Addi steps in, throwing her bag on the table behind the couch before gently sitting on the end cushion with her back against the armrest. After kicking her boots off, she pulls her knees up to her chest. She's quiet as she fidgets with her bracelet.

I drop down next to her, but am careful to leave some space. I'm not sure if she'd welcome the idea of me being close to her.

We sit in silence for a few minutes, but it feels like hours. Every once in a while, she peeks up at me, before quickly dropping her gaze back to her bracelets.

After I slip off my own shoes, I place my feet up on the coffee table and my arms along the back of the couch, trying to get physically comfortable for this emotionally uncomfortable conversation.

"Addi," I tug on her foot gently, waiting for her to meet my gaze.

She refuses to pull her attention away from her bracelets. Whenever Addi's thinking a lot, she fidgets with her jewelry or nibbles on her bottom lip. It only took me a month at camp to learn her quirks.

“Look at me.... Please, Ad.” I twist so I can stare at her and place my hand on her calf.

She slowly raises her head revealing she is in fact biting her bottom lip. I can't ignore the tightening I feel in my chest. It's killing me that I'm upsetting her. I don't want her to look at me and feel anything except happiness and relief. Yet she's worried and tense right now.

“I'm moving out. I'm going to call the university in the morning and see if I can get a dorm. If not, I'll find an apartment, or I'll move home with my parents,” I blurt out before I can stop myself.

That seems to get her attention. She jumps up and sits on her knees. Her massive blue eyes are as clear as the sky as she searches my features.

“Hunter, don't do that,” she whispers.

“This is your house. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable in your own home.”

“I don't want you to leave.” She drops her head and starts playing with her bracelets again.

“Then I'll see if Nick will switch rooms with me. At least that way you don't have to worry about me living in the one next to you.” After a few moments, she gazes up at me, tears threatening to spill onto her cheeks. This girl's going to kill me. “Sweetheart, what's wrong?”

“I don't want you to move out of the house or change rooms, Hunter. I want you to be next door to me. I've missed

you.”

I pull Addi into my side and wrap my arms around her. She leans her head against my chest and nuzzles closer. I kiss her head and wish having her in my arms was a common occurrence. It’s as if we’re made for each other, she fits perfectly against me.

“I’ve missed you too.”

We stay wrapped in each other for a while, enjoying being close after such a long time apart.

I’m trying to get up the nerve to ask the question that’s been on my mind for the past year. It’s the last thing I think about before I go to bed every night. Finally, I can’t take it anymore, I clear my throat and rest my chin on her head.

“What happened last year? Why did you run away and leave the camp?”

Addi pushes off of me and her eyes widen in panic. She starts shaking her head, her gaze focused on everything except me.

“I can’t tell you.... I don’t want you to look at me differently.”

Staring into her eyes, I search for any hint of what she could possibly be talking about. I gently place my hand on her cheek. She surprises me when she leans into my touch.

“Tink, nothing you say could ever make me look at you differently...you can tell me anything. You know that.”

Addi squeezes her eyes shut, blowing out a deep breath. “I can’t Hunter, it’s too painful.”

“Did I do something to hurt you?” My voice doesn’t sound like my own as I ask. I’m terrified she’s going to say I’m the cause of her agony.

“What? No, of course you didn’t hurt me.” Addi grabs my large hands in her tiny ones, staring into my eyes with an intensity I don’t expect. “Last year had nothing to do with you. You didn’t do anything wrong. It was all me. I screwed up everything between us and I’m sorry.”

“Then what happened?”

“I can’t, I just... can’t. No matter how much you say you won’t look at me differently you will. Everyone claims they won’t, but they always do... I can’t take you looking at me with pity. Not you.”

“Ok, but I’m here for you. If and when you ever want to talk, I’m here for you. Always.”

Chapter 5



Addi



Hunter's breaking my heart. He's an even better guy than I remember. I want to tell him what happened so badly, but I can't. I can't risk the pitied look people always give me after they find out. I just need him to trust it had nothing to do with him.

Being with him again has brought back so many of the memories that surrounded me last summer. The pain and heartache was unbearable. I don't know if I'll survive living with him for the next few years if more and more memories come to the surface.

I want so badly to erase the fateful day I walked away from Hunter. If he'd never made a move, I wouldn't associate him with that day. I wouldn't have these unwanted emotions bubbling up from where I've kept them hidden, pushed down as deep as I can.

"Let's play a game. Ask me a question and I either answer honestly or pass, then I'll ask you a question," I blurt out before I can stop myself. I'm willing to do anything to move this conversation away from the reasons I ran.

“Alright, ladies first.”

“What’s your major?” I pull my knees up to my chest and stare at him.

“Law. What’s yours?”

“I haven’t decided yet. Why did you choose to go to Rosewood University?”

“Eh, it’s a good school and Nick was going there. How could you afford to buy this McMansion?”

“Wow, straight for some personal questions, huh?” I smile, giving him a dramatic wink. “I received a big inheritance. I have enough money to do whatever I want... hmmmm... what kind of law do you want to practice and why?”

“That’s two questions, Addi. I’ll answer, but then I get two. I’m not sure what type of law I want to practice yet. I have some time before I have to make a decision so I’m not going to rush it. Were you upset I kissed you last year?”

I hesitate before answering, really thinking about his question. When I’m ready to answer, I lift my chin and gaze directly into his eyes “No. Do- “

“Hey there, it’s still my turn, remember? Do you have a boyfriend?”

I wince at the question. This is the last thing I want to talk about with Hunter.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

“No.” He hesitates before he continues. “Why do you work at the bar if you have enough money?”

“First, I don’t really like people knowing I come from money. Second, I feel like it’s important to still work. Plus, it’s fun working with Kendra.”

“You like having strangers grab your ass all day long?” He asks with a raised eyebrow, causing a slow smile stretches over my lips.

“No, I could live without that. But I like when cute guys come to my rescue.”

“So, I’m cute huh?”

“Who said you came to my rescue?” I arch a brow.

“Oh, darling, I definitely rescued you tonight. What’s your boyfriend like?”

“He’s nice, caring, and always there for me.” I shrug, not really wanting to talk about Caleb.

“You just described a puppy.” He points a finger at me.

“I did not!”

“You’re right, not a puppy, more like an old dog. A puppy would be fun, playful, loving, and energetic.”

Oh my gosh! I did just describe a freaking dog. I didn’t say Caleb was loving, romantic, exciting, spontaneous, or anything that makes it sound like I want to stay with him. He’s none of those things.

Do I want to stay with him? Caleb's comfortable. He's safe. I don't fear history will repeat itself with him. But I also don't get that amazing electricity coursing through my body at his touch.

His kisses don't make me want more. They don't light me on fire. He might be safe, but I don't feel like he'd be able to keep me safe. But Hunter... Hunter used to make me feel all of those things.

If I'm being honest with myself, I'd admit I'm starting to fall for him all over again. I refuse to acknowledge those facts though. Those good thoughts bubble to the surface, but they bring anxiety, depression, suffocation, and hurt along with them.

Hunter's my roommate. He can't be more.

"I like dogs...young and old," I say in defense.

"I like them too, but I don't want to date one. I want to date someone who challenges me and makes me feel special. If I were you, I definitely wouldn't be dating some guy who's cool with me living with seven other men. There isn't a guy, no matter how confident, that should be ok with that. If I feel like a girl's something special, then I know other guys will see that in her too. I wouldn't trust anyone to resist making a move on what's mine."

Mine.

He loves saying that word. He has no idea what those four letters are doing to me. I want him to say it to me. About me.

But he's not and that's how it needs to be.

You're just his friend, Addi.

Maybe if I keep reminding myself, then I'll stop feeling like there can be something more. I can't quite figure out if I'm hoping for more or hoping we leave the past in the past.

Chapter 6



Hunter



Addi grows quiet after talking about her boyfriend. She's deep in thought and I'm afraid my comments have annoyed her. She doesn't seem angry though, just quiet.

In a way I regret opening my big mouth. I don't want to upset her, but the words just tumbled out. I'll admit the idea that maybe I'm causing her to doubt her feelings about her boyfriend thrills me and gives me hope that maybe something could happen between us.

I shouldn't be happy over her doubts, that makes me a bad friend. Addi deserves all the good in the world, but finding her again has stirred up feelings I thought were gone. No woman has ever gotten to me the way Addison Fields does.

"Do you want to watch TV for a little bit? I wanted to catch up on the latest episode of *Game of Thrones*."

She sits quietly and doesn't answer me, she won't even look at me. Maybe she wants nothing to do with me and I should just cut my losses and leave her alone.

“Unless you’d rather go to bed?” I grip the back of my neck and watch her.

“No, I’ll watch it with you. I haven’t seen the latest episode yet.” Her voice is so quiet I almost don’t hear her.

It’s like she doesn’t know how to act around me. Fuck me and my big mouth for ruining what we’re trying to restore between us. I just had to know about this boyfriend of hers.

“Come here, Tink, you look so uncomfortable sitting over there.” I open my arm for her to move closer.

She stares at me for a few moments, seeming to gauge if this is a good idea. I figure she isn’t going to move any closer to me, so I shrug and place my arm along the back of the couch once again.

I click on the TV and before long I find the episode on a streaming app. I settle back into the couch and put my feet up on the coffee table again to make myself comfortable. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Addi inching closer and closer to me.

About ten minutes into the show, she’s only a few inches away from me. I slowly move my arm from the back of the couch and slowly close the distance between it and Addi’s shoulders. When I finally make contact with her body, I quickly yank her into my side.

She gasps and stares up at me with those massive eyes of hers. Those eyes can’t hide her feelings, not that she’s ever been talented at hiding things. I can see everything in those

eyes. The life I want and the girl I want beside me until the day I die.

“By the way, I’ll be picking you up at the end of each shift at the bar until your car is fixed. You won’t be walking home alone late at night ever again. I won’t allow it, Tink.” I lean down, pressing a gentle kiss to Addi’s forehead and hold her a little tighter. She lets out the sweetest little sigh and nuzzles her head into my chest. She feels so good in my arms.

Once the episode is over, I glance down and realize Addi’s sound asleep. I don’t want to wake her so I carefully pick her up and carry her into her bedroom. As soon as I place her on her bed she rolls onto her side and curls up with a little smile on her face. I grab her a thick blanket and place it over her, tucking her in.

“I’m glad we found each other again,” I whisper, placing a kiss on her forehead.

This girl’s going to ruin me.

I make my way to the door before I do something I’ll regret, like crawling into bed next to her and holding her all night long.

Right before the door shuts, Addi whispers, “Yeah, me too.”

I can’t help the huge smile spreading across my face. I might not be able to have her as more than a friend right now, but at least I can have her in my life. At the end of the day, that’s a thousand times better than trying to live without her at all.

Chapter 7



Addi



Coffee...coffee will be the only thing that will help me get through this day. Last night, all I did was toss and turn thinking about everything Hunter said. Our past played on repeat in my head and I was pulled back in time. It's sweet how he wants to be there for me and be available for me to talk to. I can't do it though. I can't open up those old wounds just to make him feel better.

To him, it was just a kiss that pushed me away. To me, it was so much more. I'm drowning in emotions that have nothing to do with him. It's so hard to handle this alone. That's exactly what's brought me up to Nicky's room at six o'clock in the morning, when there's no reason in the world for any of us to be awake yet.

Since I got home long after the guys retreated to their rooms, I don't really know which room Nicky picked. I decide the best thing to do is gently knock on each door, hoping I don't wake anyone up if they're still asleep. I'll open the door a crack if there isn't an answer to see if Nicky's in the bed. I

feel like I'm invading their privacy to a certain extent, but I need Nicky.

No one else will be able to make me feel better right now. No one else can make me feel safe, or loved unconditionally.

I've knocked on four doors and carefully checked to make sure they aren't Nicky. I quietly peek in the fifth room and find one of the guys laying on his stomach. His blanket is only covering his lower half, making me pause.

I linger in the doorway and take in his beautiful body. His muscles are so defined with ink crawling across his back and down his arms. I've never been attracted to a guy covered in tattoos, but I can't deny how much I want to run my fingers over each tattoo I see. I want to trace them and find out their meanings.

My eyes drift down to the blanket, where the very top of his toned ass is peeking out. His dark hair is sticking up in all directions, making him look more boyish than any of the guys looked last night. He's so sexy laying there and I have no clue which of my roommates he is. All of a sudden, he rolls over and lays on his back with his arm thrown over his eyes.

Wes.

Damn. He looks like Adonis. The right side of his chest is covered in ink too, but oddly his left side is free of anything. His gorgeous six-pack is on display and my eyes keep moving south. His blanket thankfully reaches just under his belly button. I don't feel like I'm invading his privacy too much

since I haven't seen anything more than what a bathing suit would show off. But then he shifts...

The blanket slides down a little lower, displaying that amazing V-shaped muscle that's always driven me nuts. I need to get out of here before the blanket slips any lower.

Wes obviously sleeps naked and I won't be able to explain why I'm in his room if he wakes up or if any of the other guys catch me. It'd be extremely embarrassing to be caught ogling Wes's naked body. My eyes roam over his body one last time before I quickly shut the door and go to the next one.

I don't bother knocking, this is the only room I haven't checked yet. I know Nicky won't care if I invade his privacy without knocking. We share everything with each other. He's the brother I never had. The man who always has my back and drops everything for me.

As I tiptoe into Nicky's room, I glance around at all the things he brought from home. There's a wooden box I made with my dad for his rock collection when we were kids. I gently run my fingers along the top, remembering that summer like it was yesterday.

I spent weeks trying to think of the perfect gift for Nicky's ninth birthday. I finally decided he needed something to hold all of the cool rocks he was collecting. He had a bunch of them and he was so proud of the different colors he'd find. I begged my dad to help me make the box, he said we could go buy one, but I insisted we had to make it.

“But, Daddy, Nicky deserves only the best! You can’t buy anything good enough for Nicky. It needs to be made with love. Please, please, please help me do this,” I cry, begging Daddy.

“Alright, Princess.” His deep chuckle fills the room. “Let’s make this thing. Nicky needs the very best! You need to be careful and follow all my instructions around the workshop though. Nicky won’t think his gift is the best if you cut off a finger making it.” He folds his arms over his broad chest and gives me a pointed look. I giggle thinking of Nicky’s face if I cut off my finger.

We work hard on the box for two weeks before it’s finally done. It’s absolutely perfect. I even stained it with a dark Jacob bean to match Nicky’s bedroom furniture.

The morning of his birthday, I bound up the stairs as soon as his mom opens the door. I quietly tiptoe into his room and I’m careful to not make a sound. After I climb on his bed, I start jumping on him.

“Happy birthday, Nicky! Wake up! It’s your birthday!” I scream as loud as I can. He groans beneath me, covering his head with his pillow.

“Don’t I get to sleep in on my birthday?”

“Nope! You need to open your present!”

He slowly pulls his pillow from over his eyes and stares up at me holding a perfectly wrapped gift. I jump one more time, landing on my butt next to him. He gently takes the present

and starts to ever so slowly open the wrapping paper, as I bounce with excitement next to him.

“Hurry up! I’m gonna be an old lady before you finish opening that thing,” I whine. I know he’s only moving this slowly because he knows how much I hate it.

“Wow...Addi, it’s beautiful.”

“It’s for your rock collection. My daddy helped me make it,” I say, puffing my chest out with pride.

“You made this? That’s amazing. Will you help me put only the best rocks of my collection in here?”

“Of course, silly.”

Nicky runs his fingers along the top of the box before he opens it and sees the black velvet lining the bottom. He throws his arms around me and pulls me into a big hug.

“This is the best gift ever, Ad. You’re the best friend a guy could ask for.”

Tears gather in my eyes as I think back to those memories. I run my fingers over the smooth wood and gently open the box. I assume he didn’t bring his rock collection with him to college and I want to know what’s in here.

A dozen watches fill the box, each carefully laid so they won’t get scratched. I start to close the box when something catches my eye. In the back corner are two rocks. I carefully pick them up like they’re precious newborn babies and stare down at them. Two small rocks that most people would just throw aside and never think about again.

These rocks meant so much more to Nicky and me. One of the rocks was his favorite of his collection and the other was mine. I can't believe he still has these after all these years. I carefully put them back and replace the lid.

As I tiptoe over to Nicky's bed, I find three pictures on his nightstand. All three are filled with photos of us. One from my senior prom, one from when we were kids, covered in mud after playing football. And one of us from the summer before he moved, on the dock at the lake. A smile pulls at my lips, Nicky's been there for me through everything, the good and the bad.

I glance over at Nicky laying on his back with his arm over his head. He looks so much like the little boy who has always protected me, but he's also so much like the strong man he's become since he moved away.

I pull back the blankets and guide his arm down. I quietly climb in bed next to him, laying my head on his chest and tugging his arm around me. He places a sweet kiss on my head as he tightens his hold.

"Go to sleep, Addi. I've got you and I'll always keep you safe," he whispers in my ear before we both fall back asleep.

I wake up an hour or so later, I've never been one to sleep in late. I slowly get out of bed, careful not to wake up Nicky and make my way to the kitchen to create some of my special coffee.

I yawn and stretch my arms above my head, then put some music on to help me wake up more. I dance around while the

coffee slowly pours into the pot. When it finally finishes brewing, I pour myself a mug, add sugar and my special ingredient, dancing the whole time.

I turn and start walking towards the living room while stirring my drink. I gasp when I notice someone standing in the doorway. Wes is leaning his shoulder against the molding, arms folded over his chest with one ankle crossed over the other. His intense gaze trained on me.

Placing my mug on the island counter, I never let my gaze stray from his. I'm not going to let him see how much he's affecting me.

"Sorry, I didn't know anyone was in here," I say shyly. I stare down at my feet, embarrassed he caught me dancing around the kitchen. "How long have you been standing there?" I whisper, peeking up at him.

Wes holds my gaze as he slowly stalks towards me. I feel like a gazelle and Wes is a lion eyeing me as his last meal. With every step he takes towards me, I take one back until the counter presses into my back. I grip the edge with trembling hands and wait to see what he does. I have nowhere to go, but I'm not afraid of Wes, more intrigued.

My chest rises and falls much faster than it should, my mind is running wild with thoughts of Wes's hands all over me. Of mine running over his gorgeous body, tracing his tattoos with my fingertips.

His eyes are stormy as he moves closer, eliminating the space between us. I hold my breath waiting to see what he'll

do next.

Chapter 8



Wes



She's gorgeous. My eyes are trained on her as she gracefully floats around the kitchen dancing along to country music on her phone. Her hips sway in time to the music, drawing my attention even more. I can't rip my mind away from putting my hands on her hips and pulling her against me.

I want to know everything about her. I want to know what makes her tick, her hopes, and dreams. But I don't deserve to think any of this. She's Hunter's girl, not mine, and I need to stay away. If only I could drag my thoughts away from her, or even take my eyes off of her.

I hear a small gasp pass those beautiful full lips of hers when she finally spots me. She freezes and stares at me for a moment before she says anything.

"Sorry, I didn't know anyone was in here."

She's so embarrassed and I can't understand why she'd ever be. What I just witnessed was captivating and beautiful. Seeing her shy is adorable though. Addi has this way about her, she captures the attention of anyone around her. She has no idea how magnetizing she is.

“How long have you been standing there?” She whispers as she peeks up at me through her eyelashes. In that second, I know I won’t be able to stay away from her no matter how hard I try.

I slowly stalk towards her, never breaking eye contact. For every step I take, she takes one backward. When she hits the counter, she lets out a small gasp again.

I close the distance until we are only inches apart. My hands grip the counter on either side of her. I move my fingers enough to just barely touch her warm skin.

Her eyes search my face, looking for a clue as to what’s happening. She won’t find anything, I’m skilled in masking my emotions. She’ll only see what I want her to see.

As I lean in close, her eyes flutter closed and she sucks in a sharp breath. She thinks I’m going to kiss her. I’d give anything in the world to do just that, but I won’t. I’m not that guy, I won’t touch someone who isn’t mine.

I bring my mouth next to her ear and whisper, “Long enough...you’re a beautiful dancer.” Then I lean back, waiting for her eyes to find mine again.

She doesn’t mask her confusion. She doesn’t know what to think at all. My eyes never leave hers as I grab a mug from behind her and pour myself a cup of coffee. I back away, never severing our gaze.

She’s one of the few people who don’t shy away when I stare at them. She’s comfortable when she meets my

questioning gaze with one of her own.

“I hope you enjoyed watching me sleep this morning,” I say in a low gravelly voice.

Her big eyes widen to the point where she almost looks like an anime character. She didn't think I knew she was in my room. I've never been a heavy sleeper though.

Having three sisters, they only ever came into my room when they wanted something. I learned to become really good at pretending I was asleep so I didn't need to help them.

When Addi came in, I caught her in the reflection of a picture frame. I rolled over, figuring she'd leave with my movement. I threw my arm over my eyes to give myself a way to peek at her without blowing my cover. Her eyes scanned every inch of me, her breathing picked up. It turned her on to have my body on display for her to feast her eyes on.

I purposely shifted to make my blanket fall lower on my stomach. I was pushing to see how she'd respond. I was testing her. There's an undeniable attraction I have to her and I'm not sure I like it.

I'm not supposed to want someone. Not after Mercedes. She ruined my faith in love. She made me realize loving someone makes you weak.

I'm not sure what I would've done if Addi hadn't left the room when she did. A part of me wanted to kick the blanket off, leaving me naked, just to see how she'd react.

A soft blush takes over Addi's cheeks, she's finally processed what I just said to her. Her mouth opens and closes several times but she says nothing. I smirk internally. I've gotten to her and I've made her flustered.

With coffee in hand, I stare at her for a few more seconds before I walk right out the door, leaving her questioning everything about this morning.

Chapter 9



Addi



What the hell was that? I thought he was going to kiss me. Instead, he whispers in my ear and tells me he knows I was watching him sleep.

I don't let out the breath I'm holding until Wes is out of eye sight and I'm alone with thoughts rushing through my head. Damn Wes and his stupid sexy voice.



It's down pouring for the third day in a row. Rain is pelting the windows of Dive and it doesn't look like it's going to let up anytime soon. Hunter's late to pick me up, but there's no way I can walk home in this. I glance at the clock and realize it's after midnight and he's fifteen minutes late. I've tried calling him but he hasn't answered.

Nicky's not a night person so I don't want to call and wake him up. I know he'd jump right out of bed and come get me if I asked, but I don't want to bother him.

The only other one who's a night person is Wes. I don't want to call him, but it will be faster than ordering a ride and waiting for it to show up. Plus, I'm not very keen on climbing into a stranger's car this late at night by myself. I sigh, this is the last call I want to make.

I scroll through my contacts until I find his name and press call. Hopefully he won't be mad I'm calling him this late.

As it rings, I start to wonder if I'm making a mistake. Wes and I aren't that friendly. It's weird to call him and ask for him to come to get me, right? I'm about to hang up, when I hear a low groggy voice answer.

"Hello?" He sounds like he just woke up. I freeze, crap, I woke him up. "Addi? Are you there?"

"Yeah... sorry... Did I wake you up?"

"Kinda," he mumbles.

"Shit, I'm sorry."

"What do you need?"

"Um... nothing, I can handle it. Go back to bed, I'll just order a ride."

"Addi, stop. Do you need me to pick you up?"

"Yes," I say softly.

"Give me five minutes and I'll be there."

"I didn't mean to wake you. I can order an Uber. It's really no big deal."

"I'll be there in five."

“Thank you, Wes.”

“Yeah.” And just like that, he hangs up.

I’m antsy as I wait for him. We’ve never really had a conversation. I mean, I talk and Wes stares at me, but he’s never said enough for us to carry on a conversation. He definitely isn’t the warm and cuddly type, he’s more of a dark and broody guy, but damn, can he pull it off.

Less than five minutes after I hang up with Wes, his truck pulls into the parking lot. I peek my head back into the bar to say goodbye to Kendra and when I turn back around, I bump into a solid wall of muscle. I put my arms out to steady myself and strong hands grip my waist to keep me from falling over.

“Sorry... I didn’t expect you to get out of your truck.” Neither of our hands move. Our eyes lock on each other and butterflies explode in my stomach.

I want to stay here forever with his hands on my waist and his eyes on mine. The world around us seems to fade away and nothing else exists except for us.

His chest is pure muscle and all I want to do is let my hands explore his flesh. Wes has this way of making me feel like the rug is being pulled out from under my feet every time he’s around. His powerful stare makes me feel vulnerable, like he can see everything when he gazes into my eyes. I have to fight the urge to spill all the things I’ve kept hidden the past few years.

“I didn’t want you to get all wet.” His voice is low and sexy.

His hair is all over the place and he's wearing a tight black shirt with plaid pajama pants. How can he possibly be this attractive when he just woke up?

"C'mon, let's go before you get cold," he says, placing his hand on my lower back and holding an umbrella over our heads. He guides me to the passenger's door, being careful to make sure I don't get wet.

When I try to climb up into the truck, I realize just how short I really am. It looks like I'll be climbing up a mountain.

"How the hell do you get in this thing?" I ask.

Wes rolls his eyes and shakes his head with amusement. He quickly collapses the umbrella and places his hands on my hips. He lifts me into the truck as if I weigh nothing at all.

As he gets into the driver's seat, a shiver runs through me. He starts digging around in the back seat of the extended cab and pulls out a black hoodie with some sort of a design on it.

"You're cold. Put this on," he says gently.

I don't think my shivering is entirely from being cold, but I do as he says. I slip the soft fabric over my head and am instantly engulfed in the most wonderful scent. It smells like sandalwood and Wes.

"Thank you. And thank you for coming to get me too. I thought you'd still be awake, otherwise, I never would've called. I could've just used Uber. I don't know where Hunter is, he told me he'd be here at midnight," I keep rambling.

Since Wes rarely responds to me, I've gotten used to our one-sided conversations.

"I had a migraine and went to bed early. That asshole should've been here, though. You shouldn't be outside of the pub by yourself."

"I'm sorry for waking you. Do you still have a migraine?"

"I'm fine, Addi. Picking you up isn't a problem."

"I'm also sorry for coming into your room the first morning. I was looking for Nicky's room."

"Of course, you were," he mumbles, glancing away from me.

Well okay then. Wes might not talk much, but he obviously has some strong opinions he isn't willing to share. There's something about him I can't quite figure out.

I swear if it's the last thing I do, I'll discover everything there is to know about this man next to me.

Chapter 10



Wes



My heart skips a beat when I pull up outside of Dive and find Addi standing under the awning. I know she's uncomfortable around me. I'm used to it but for some reason I want her to relax and get to know the real me. This isn't normal for me. Not even close.

Rain starts pounding harder on my windshield. She's going to get soaked before she makes it five steps. I groan, grabbing an umbrella I keep hidden under the bench seat and hop out of the truck. Looks like I get to be the knight in shining... pajama pants?

When she runs into me, I grip her waist to keep her from falling. As soon as I touch her, I instantly never want to let her go. I want to take her home and hold her all night long, let my hands wander over her body. But I can't feel like this about Addi of all people. She's my roommate, completely off-limits.

When I climb in the driver's side, I find her shivering. I know I have a sweatshirt in here somewhere. I dig around in the back of the truck until I find my favorite black hoodie and hand it to her.

My niece made me this sweatshirt when I graduated from high school. I never let other people wear it and I'm going to ignore how easily I hand it over to Addi.

It means nothing, I'm just being nice.

She seems to be smelling my shirt when she puts it on. At first, I'm not sure how I feel about that, it's a little creepy. Then it makes me happy in a weird way, knowing she enjoys my scent so much.

When she apologizes for coming into my room, I can't help but smirk. It's nice to know she's still thinking about me. I definitely haven't been able to get her off my mind. I keep wondering what she would've done if I had kicked my blanket off entirely. Or if I had invited her into my bed to cuddle.

Fuck. I'd love to have someone like Addi keeping me warm at night.

Addi's quiet the rest of the drive home. I keep stealing glances at her every chance I can, memorizing the small details. I swear she's always biting her bottom lip in the sexiest way. She doesn't even know how attractive she is or what she does to me. After a few glances, I noticed she's rubbing her knee.

"What's wrong with your knee?"

She's confused for a few seconds and then notices she's still rubbing it.

"Oh...um...I think I hurt it while I was working out this morning. After being on it all day, it's gotten worse."

“What were you doing?”

“Working out.”

“No shit, what workouts?” I growl.

“Duh, sorry...I’ve always had trouble with this knee. I was doing squats today and I haven’t done them in a while...I think I did too many or maybe my form was off, I don’t know but it’s really sore.” Her voice becomes more and more quiet, almost like she’s embarrassed by what she’s saying.

“I’ll check your form tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry about it, I’m sure I’ll be fine,” she mutters nervously.

“I’ll check your form tomorrow, Addi,” I say adamantly.

There’s no reason for her to continue doing something incorrectly. I’m being a good roommate by helping her out. That’s all this is. A big thank you for letting me live in your amazing house for free.

When we get home, I throw the truck in park and rush around to the other side. I want an excuse to feel her body against mine. I open her door and hand her the umbrella. Slipping an arm under her knees and one behind her back, I cradle her in my arms. She’s forced to lay her head against my chest to stay dry. Her body is as close to me as I can get her without it being weird.

She giggles the whole way to the house. When we walk through the door and into the kitchen, Hunter’s sitting at the

table studying. His brows furrow together as he takes in Addi pressed against my body.

“Next time maybe you should actually pick up your girl from work,” I growl. “I’ll happily take over if she can’t count on you.”

“Shit, I’m sorry, Addi. I completely forgot,” Hunter mutters.

He isn’t a reliable guy; he never has been. He won’t be there for her, but I can be that guy. I can show up when she needs me. I’ll help however I can and I’d never let her down.

“Just forget it, Hunter. Wes came to my rescue.” She stares up at me and I feel myself falling a little harder for her.

I carry her into the living room and carefully place her on the couch. Tugging the blanket laying across the back, I cover her up to keep her warm.

“Stay. I’ll be right back,” I order her before I stomp back into the kitchen to grab a frozen bag of peas. Hunter glances up from his computer.

“I’m sorry, man, I screwed up.”

“Yeah, you did. Some guy was trying to get her into his car.”

“Seriously?” His eyes widen and his mouth falls open. I chuckle to myself, it serves him right.

“No, but it could’ve easily happened. Do you think you’re the only guy in the world that could be attracted to that little

thing out there? She's not safe leaving there at night by herself."

"I'll make sure I'm there tomorrow," he mumbles.

"No, you won't, because I'll be picking her up." I stomp back out of the room without waiting to see what his response will be.

I didn't want to hear it anyway. Hunter and I have never really been friends. We all played baseball together in high school. We became close because of playing and training together, but most of us never got close to Hunter.

He'd tag along with us because he's Nick's best friend, but I don't really think anyone else really liked him. He doesn't really put in any effort to be friends with us. He never went to parties with us and rarely hung out at my house.

When I get back to Addi, she's laying back with her legs up on the cushion. I drop down next to her and pull her legs onto my lap.

"Which one hurts?" I meet her gaze, waiting for her to answer. She stares at me for a moment, her teeth peeking out to nibble on her plump lip.

"The left one."

I waste no time, beginning to poke and prod her knee, asking if any of it hurts. There's only one spot she says hurts.

"I think you just need to build up more strength in the knee, but I'll check your form tomorrow. Keep the peas on it for fifteen minutes then go to bed."

When I stand to leave, she grabs my arm and pulls me back down next to her. Her hands slide down to mine and she squeezes gently, her eyes never leaving mine.

“Thank you for coming to my rescue tonight,” she whispers, pulling me into a tight hug. “Wes, your shirt’s saturated on the back.”

“Yeah, you suck as an umbrella holder,” I growl.

It’s stuck to my skin, making me cold and uncomfortable. I reach behind my neck and tug my shirt off. Her eyes snap to my abs and she bites her bottom lip. She’s definitely feeling the same way about me as I am about her. I’ll wait though, keep her wanting more.

I don’t want a girl who’s hung up on another guy. Hunter will let his true colors show soon enough. She’ll see who he really is. Then, when she’s ready to let him go, I’ll be waiting.

I stand up, catching Addi’s eyes when they go straight to my abdominal V that makes girls go crazy. My pants are hanging dangerously low on my hips, showing off my body perfectly.

“Night, Addi,” I say, smirking on the inside. I love that I’m affecting her like this. It’s nice to know she wants me so badly.

“Huh? Oh... night, Wes. Thanks again,” she whispers as a blush crosses her face.

Chapter 11



Addi



Two miles down, only half a mile to go. I hate running more than anything in my life, but I know how good it is for you and it helps me clear my mind. I try my hardest to do two and a half miles at least three times a week.

Glancing down at my phone, I quickly change the song and crank the volume up. I need some motivation to get through this last half mile.

My eyes drift closed as the music washes over me. I push myself harder for the home stretch. The treadmill starts to slow, indicating my run is coming to an end. When I open my eyes, I gasp and almost lose my footing. I pull my earbuds out and let them hang around my neck.

“Jeez, Wes! You scared the shit out of me,” I pant, trying to catch my breath from my run and being scared half to death. “Why are you just standing there and staring at me?”

“I was waiting for you to finish your run so I could check your form...running probably puts stress on your knee too. It’s not great for your joints. How does your knee feel now?” His eyes hold genuine concern.

“It’s ok, I guess...doesn’t feel great though.”

“Ok, let’s check out your form for squats. Then I’ll look at your knee and see if we can determine what’s causing your pain.”

I nod and get off the treadmill, walking over to a cleared space the guys use to lift weights and get in position to start doing squats. Before I can even do one Wes stops me.

“Your feet are too far apart. They should be shoulder width apart, try moving them in a little and see how it feels.”

“Are you going to be a doctor or physical therapist?”

“No, but I’ve made enough mistakes while working out and hurt myself. I know what not to do now.”

I correct my feet and began to lower myself slowly into a squat. When I come back up, I stare at Wes and raise an eyebrow.

“Keep going, I’ll let you know when to stop.”

Wes crouches down and studies me from all different angles. I’m not entirely sure if he really knows what he’s looking for or if he just enjoys watching my ass move up and down. I’m not going to complain either way. I like having his eyes on my body. I get all the way to twenty-five squats before Wes finally stops me.

“You need to keep your knees back. They should never stick out further than your toes. You’re favoring your right knee when you come up, it’s making you twist your left knee in a

weird way. It's probably causing the pain. You also need to pop that ass out further."

"I am popping my ass out!" I argue.

"No, you're not, darling. Watch me do it." I stare as Wes quickly does ten squats. "Do you see how I pop my ass out?"

"Mmhhmmm." I basically moan in response. I'm definitely watching his ass. He sure has a nice one. It takes me a few seconds to realize Wes has stopped and is staring at me.

"Are you done drooling?" He asks in a knowing tone.

"I was not drooling!"

He raises an eyebrow at me, basically saying, 'you're really gonna deny it?' and shakes his head at me. He quickly grabs my waist and pulls me over to the wall of mirrors. He positions me so I can see my profile and watch myself. He nudges my feet apart with his foot, until they're shoulder-width apart.

"Watch yourself and see if your ass pops out." I do as he says, but he still shakes his head at me. While I'm squatting down, he grabs my hips and pulls them back towards him.

"Like that. You want to pretend you're sitting down on something... If you're not popping it out, then it's not a squat." His hands never leave my hips. I'd be lying to myself if I said I'm not enjoying his touch. His attention.

"I think I can do that," I say, barely above a whisper. I stand up straight and Wes's hands stay firmly planted on my hips. I

peek over my shoulder and stare into those amazing eyes. I could get lost in his gaze forever.

“Am I interrupting something?” Someone says, making me jump. Wes quickly pulls away and grips the back of his neck with both hands. I glance over and find a devilish smile spreading over Blake’s face.

“No... not at all... Wes is just helping me... knee pain... my form is bad... I’m going to go... I need a shower... running makes me sweat.” I choke on each word, making Blake laugh at my attempt to play it cool.

Oh my gosh, why can’t I just close my mouth and walk away? We all know Blake interrupted a moment that could’ve led to something more.

Why did I just say running makes me sweat? That’s so gross. I jog up the stairs and into my room as quickly as I can. I’m hoping we can all pretend none of this ever happened. Wishful thinking, right?

Chapter 12



Wes



“Her form was bad, huh?” Blake laughs. “That’s the best she could come up with?”

“It was, dickhead. Her feet were too far apart, her knees were going over her feet and she wasn’t popping her ass out enough.”

“And what form was this for exactly? I know I could think of a few things that could mess up.” He smirks with a wink. I punch him in the shoulder, not as hard as I can, but hard enough to make a point.

“Her knee is hurting her. She’s doing her squats all wrong. I was just giving her some tips and trying to help her.”

“Mmmm, I could definitely help her with some squats. I’d love to watch that ass pop out.”

“Lay off,” I growl at Blake. He angles his head to the side and stares at me, evaluating me.

“You like her,” he whispers.

I roll my eyes and let out an annoyed sigh.

“Oh my gosh, you really do! You can’t date her!” He whisper yells at me.

“Oh, sorry I didn’t get the memo saying I had to do what you say.” I roll my eyes again. He can be so dramatic.

Blake ignores me as he whips his phone out of his pocket. His fingers fly over his screen and captures his full attention.

“Oh, that’s why. My assistant never sent it out. I’ll have to fire her. Oh, look at that, memo sent.” Blake can be the most obnoxious person in the world. I don’t know why I consider him my best friend.

My phone beeps and I pull it out to check the email he just sent. I don’t want to play along with him, but if I don’t, he’s not going to leave me alone.

To: Wes

From: Blake

Subject: Urgent Memo

Please be advised, you’re not allowed to like the woman who’s letting us live with her. You’re not to kiss her or fuck her. You can look, but no touching. On second thought, don’t look. Don’t even think about looking or touching... or fucking or kissing.

Thank you,

A Concerned Roommate

“Wow, this memo sounds serious,” I say through my laughter and shake my head at Blake. This is why I keep him

around.

“Man, it’s totally serious. We’ve got an awesome thing going here. No dorms and no annoying roommates. Just a gorgeous laid-back chick and all of our friends. Don’t go fucking this up for us. What if you try something and everything falls apart, it goes horribly wrong and she kicks all of us out?”

“But what if it goes horribly perfect and she’s it for me? There’s just something about her eyes. I feel like she can see all of me.” The hopeful tone in my voice surprises me, I definitely don’t expect it.

“Damn, you’re already falling for her,” he groans.

“I am not.” I roll my eyes.

“Dude, you can’t see the little heart emojis floating above your head every time you look at her. But they’re there and I don’t think they’re going to disappear anytime soon.”

“Do you want to get punched?”

“Want to? No. Expecting it? Yes. Will I take it like a man? Also, yes. No matter how many times you punch me, it won’t change how you stare at her with heart eyes.”

“Exactly how many rom-coms have you watched for you to use the term *heart eyes* in your normal conversations?”

“Well, the ladies love it when you watch romances with them. At least with rom-coms, there’s some humor to it. I’d rather laugh than watch some romance about a couple dying in each other’s arms. That’s depressing as hell and I’d rather not

burst into tears in front of whoever I'm trying to sleep with that night."

"Do you know you're a man whore?"

"Eh, sometimes. Other times I think I'm just a normal college guy with a dick. The real question is when was the last time you got laid?"

"I find it odd that you care so much about how much action my dick gets." I roll my eyes and begin stacking weights on the bench press.

"And I find it odd that your dick apparently doesn't get wet. How do you live like that? I mean your hand can only be so good, Wes!"

"Yeah, I'm not talking about my dick or my hands with you. Lincoln's the man you want for that conversation."

"You want me and Linc to talk about your dick and hand?" He frowns at me, looking slightly disgusted.

"Hell no! I want you to forget I even have a dick." I lay on the bench and grip the bar.

"Well, I'm pretty sure you already have forgotten and so has every girl on campus because of how much you scowl. Maybe they think you scowl because you don't have a dick or it's super tiny." He shrugs.

"If I ignore you, will you stop talking?" I growl as I lift the bar off the rack and slowly lower it to my chest.

"Probably not, but you can try."

Chapter 13



Addi



I spoke to Caleb yesterday and asked him to meet me at the coffee shop on Main Street. I need to get this over and done with.

After my conversation with Hunter, I haven't been able to stop thinking about how much I don't want to be with Caleb. There's no way I can stay in a relationship with someone I feel nothing for.

Well, at least nothing a girlfriend should feel for her boyfriend. We're more like friends... actually, even that seems generous. Maybe it's more like we have mutual friends and we've been forced to spend time together. Which makes me sound like a horrible person.

I've stayed with him for so long and he thinks I actually care for him. I just need to rip off the band-aid and hope he feels the same. I don't want to break his heart, but I can't keep living a lie.

My focus is trained on my mug of hot chocolate in front of me. One hand is wrapped around the mug, absorbing the heat into my skin, slowly warming me from the unseasonable chill

in the air. My other hand is using my spoon to play with a large amount of whip cream on top. My cinnamon chip scone sits untouched next to my mug. I should be starving. I haven't eaten all day, but my nerves are keeping me from touching these yummy treats.

My mind keeps wandering to the men I shouldn't be thinking about as I stare more intently at my whip cream melting into the delicious hot chocolate.

Hunter could be everything I've been looking for, but then other times he doesn't seem like he'd be worth my time. I've seen him be sensitive and kind, but he's also irresponsible.

We have chemistry...or at least we did. But now? I'm not sure if we do or if we're both chasing that high we felt the last time we were together.

Wes on the other hand... Wes is an enigma I'm drawn to. I don't want or need anything as complicated as him in my life. I need something simple. Hell, I deserve simplicity. But I want him.

I want to understand him. I want to know what makes him tick. I want to know why he jumps to help me, but then gives me the cold shoulder. I want to know why he's so closed off and yet seems like such a sweetheart.

And why doesn't he smile! Who doesn't smile? Or laugh for that matter. That's going to be my new mission in life, to get Wes to smile.

I jump as a hand falls down on my shoulder. “Addison! I’ve been calling your name. You’ve been so zoned out. You were over here grinning like an idiot to yourself.”

I glance up, finding Caleb standing over me. His hair is perfectly styled, combed to the side, kinda like you’d expect to see a forty-year-old doctor’s hair to be, not a nineteen-year-old college student. He’s wearing a polo shirt and khaki pants with a designer fleece and some super expensive pair of shoes. He’s told me the brand a hundred times and I keep ignoring him. All he cares about is his image. He scans me up and down before a look of disgust curls his lip up.

“Are you feeling ok? You look like crap,” Caleb snaps.

“I feel fine. I didn’t know I had to dress up for coffee,” I snap back.

“Well, you could’ve at least made yourself presentable, Addison.” Disappointment laces his words.

My hair is piled high on my head in a messy bun, my face is free of makeup, just like it is every night for work. I have on yoga pants and a sweatshirt. I look exactly like every other college girl in this coffee shop yet somehow, I’m not presentable enough for him. Internally I roll my eyes. Maybe breaking his stupid heart would feel good.

Caleb situates himself across from me with a huff. He keeps scanning the faces of other customers in the coffee shop like he’s embarrassed to be seen with me.

“Are you looking for someone?” I ask.

“More like hoping I don’t see anyone I know.” He confirms my suspicions.

“Well then, why don’t I just get to the point of why I asked you here.”

“It would be lovely if you don’t waste my time, Addison.” He sighs like I’m an annoyance to him.

“I think we should break up,” I state confidently.

“Are you serious?” Caleb gapes.

“Yes. I am,” I reply, keeping my cool.

“Is this because you now have a house full of men to drool over?”

“This has nothing to do with anyone except you and me, Caleb. We’ve barely seen each other in weeks and honestly, I feel no chemistry. I’m not going to waste either of our time when I know this relationship isn’t going anywhere. You’re a smart, driven person and you’ll have a new girlfriend before the end of the week.”

“Damn straight I’m a smart, driven person. Do you know how many chicks I’ve turned down for you this week alone? Addison, you’re making a huge mistake. You’ll regret this for the rest of your life and I’ll never take you back!” His voice grows louder and louder until he’s practically yelling at me and the whole coffee shop is staring.

“Well, I’m glad you’ll have plenty of women to choose from as my replacement. If I’m making a huge mistake then I’ll live with it. Because guess what, Caleb, it’s my mistake to

make,” I say as calmly as I can. When I finish, I stand up and grab my things. I’m about to walk out, but before I do, I turn back and add, “Maybe don’t tell your next girlfriend she looks like crap or you’re embarrassed to be seen with her because she’s not presentable in yoga pants and a sweatshirt. It makes you look like an asshole.”

I walk away as the coffee shop erupts into laughter and clapping at my parting words. Anger radiates off of Caleb, I can sense it without even looking at him. I head home feeling lighter and happier than I have in weeks.

Chapter 14



Wes



“So how are things with Addi going?” The asshole next to me snickers.

“We both know there’s nothing going on,” I mutter.

“For now. I think that’s going to change.”

“You do know no one actually cares what you think, right? Some people would probably be surprised to find out you think at all.”

Blake lets out a laugh as he pushes me, knocking me off balance. I bump into some Barbie walking the opposite way. All of her books and papers fall to the ground.

“Sorry! I didn’t mean to knock you over.” I squat down to pick up the books and papers. She bends down at the same time. After I’ve gathered everything, I glance up to apologize again and hand her all of her things.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I hiss through gritted teeth.

“Oh my gosh! Wes! I didn’t know you were going here!” Her high pitch voice squeals, causing the birds in the trees

around us to fly away. I understand their fear. I want to run away from that awful noise too.

“Let’s go, Blake.” I grab his arm, walking towards the bookstore to get the textbooks we’ll need for this semester. Then I hear the awful click of heels and her hand grasps onto my arm like it’s her lifeline.

“Wes! Can we get together and catch up sometime this week?”

I stop abruptly. It throws her off balance and she stumbles before she’s able to right herself. I pull her hand off of my arm and place it down at her side.

“Don’t touch me, Mercedes. Don’t ever fucking touch me again!” I growl. Her eyes widen and she takes a step back.

“What’s wrong, honey? Why are you so mad at me?” Her eyes glisten with unshed tears.

“You’re joking, right? Why am I so mad at you? Maybe because you cheated on me the entire time we were dating. You wasted three years of my life and made me a laughing stock. Hell, you made out with Blake in front of me!” My voice raises as I speak, scaring the crap out of her.

I’ve never spoken to Mercedes like this before. I’ve always treated her like the princess she thinks she is. I put her up on a pedestal and made all her wishes come true. When I found out she was cheating on me, I walked away and never spoke to her again. Once Blake and I became friends, he kept her away from me.

“But-but you’re not mad at him?” She sputters.

“No, I’m not mad at him at all.” I throw my arm around Blake’s shoulder. “This guy showed me what a dirty cheating whore you really were. Why would I fault him when you were throwing yourself at anything with a dick?”

Mercedes lets out a dramatic gasp. I ignore her and continue on my way with a smirk on my face. I know this won’t be the last I hear from her though. It’s not her style.

“This is not over, Wes!” She screeches as she stomps her foot like a three-year-old who was denied a cookie before dinner.

“I’ll never understand that chick. How many times do you have to turn her down? Why doesn’t she understand the word no?”

“Because no one’s ever told her no before,” I mutter.

“Maybe you just need a hot girl on your arm to drive her away.” I can hear the smirk in his voice even without looking at him. “I’m sure Addi would be willing to play your girlfriend for a few weeks for such a good cause.”

“Shut up,” I chuckle, shaking my head.



I know Addi’s car is still in the shop. And I know Hunter says he’s going to pick her up... But I don’t care.

There's something about Addi that makes me want to be better. To be the type of guy who deserves to have her by his side. I think she feels it too.

It's like she can sense something inside of me that makes her want to break through my walls. Normally I stay away from those types of people, but with Addi, I feel myself running straight towards her.

I stroll into Dive a little after eleven-thirty, knowing Addi doesn't finish her shift until midnight. I'll wait for her. I don't mind at all.

I glance around the restaurant and bar, spotting Addi taking drinks to a table of guys. Their eyes scan her up and down. They glance at each other, sharing smirks. I know what they're thinking. They think one of them has a chance with her. They think they'll wait until her shift is over and they'll try to convince her to come home with them. She won't.

She's a strong woman and isn't afraid to put people in their place. I've seen her put all seven of us in our place a few times since we moved in together.

Plus, she's coming home with me. Over my dead body will she step foot out of this building with one of them. I stare as Addi quickly delivers their drinks and leaves as soon as possible. She turns around, spotting me right away and a huge smile spreads across her beautiful face.

“Hey, Wes! What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to make sure you had a ride home. Those assholes over there would be all over you if they thought they had a chance.” I point out. Addi’s cheeks get rosy as she peeks over her shoulder.

“They aren’t interested in me. I’m not their type,” she whispers.

“You’re every guy’s type,” I mumble under my breath before I can stop myself. I hope she doesn’t hear me, but of course she does.

She peeks up at me through her lashes, her eyes softening towards me. A slow smile spreads across her plump lips as she lets my words sink in.

“Come on, big man, let me get you something to drink. Do you want some fries or something? It’s on me!”

She grabs my hand and pulls me towards the bar. Her touch sends a surge of energy through my skin and up my arm before spreading through my body. It feels so good to have her hand in mine. My hand is practically twice the size of hers. I instantly want to protect her from all the bad things life can throw at her and I never want to let her go.

When we get to the bar, she pushes down on my shoulders and says, “Sit here, Wes.” She smiles and rounds the bar.

“Now, what would you like?”

“I’m fine, really. I’m just waiting for you to finish your shift.” I scratch the back of my neck as she watches me.

I stare right back at her, waiting for her to back down, but she doesn't. People tend to be uncomfortable under other people's stares, but Addi just tilts her head to the side in the most adorable way. It's like she's trying to figure me out. I've never met anyone quite like her.

"What do we have here? Hey, handsome, what can I get for you?" Some random girl comes up next to Addi.

I know they're friends. Blake and Lincoln are always talking about how hot and sexy she is. Me? I don't want her. There's only one girl that's caught my attention.

"Kendra, this is Wes, he lives with me. Wes, this is my friend Kendra," Addi says with a smile. I nod my head at her and turn my attention back to Addi.

"Well, damn, Addi. Can I move in with you too? It's not fair! You get to be surrounded by this tall, dark, and sexy man when you already have so many other gorgeous men to live with. Share the wealth, girl!"

Kendra's so straight forward and in your face. She has no filter and doesn't care what people think of her. I don't want the attention though, not from her.

I glare at her and watch as her confidence slowly disappears, she twists uncomfortably under my gaze.

"Yeah, I don't need you moving in. You'll be trying to sleep with all the guys before the end of the week." Addi laughs and rolls her eyes.

“What do you care? You’re not dating any of them. Hell, just give me half of them.” She smirks before turning her focus on me. “So, what are you doing here all alone?” Seems like she isn’t backing down as quickly as I thought she would.

“I’m waiting for Addi to get off of work, so I can take her home,” I mumble. Kendra shakes her head as she glances from me to Addi in disbelief.

“What the hell, Addison? How do you have so many men at your beck and call? I think I need to learn a thing or two from you...go home, I’ll cover the rest of your shift. We’re pretty slow.”

“Kenz, you can’t keep covering for me. Eventually, Tony’s going to notice I’m constantly leaving early,” Addi whispers.

“Oh girl, it’s not like you need this job or any job... ever. Why are you so worried about it? You take this sexy man and go home. Just don’t do anything I wouldn’t do with him.” She winks at us and Addi starts giggling.

“Kenz, there’s nothing you wouldn’t do. Especially with someone who looks like Wes.”

Hmm, did she just admit she finds me attractive? Damn, this girl’s going to be the death of me.

“Don’t I know it.” Kendra shakes her head with a grin.

“Addi! Come here, honey, I need your help!” One of the guys who was eyeing her earlier calls as Addi makes her way around the bar and is standing next to me.

“She’s leaving. Find someone else,” I growl at them.

Placing my hand on her lower back, I lead her out of Dive, making sure to throw a glare over my shoulder at the table of guys. I dare them to flirt with her again. I'll start taking up a table during her shifts if I have to. I'll do homework and keep an eye on her so I know she's safe.

We make our way to my truck and I open the passenger's door for her. She peeks up at me, her eyes full of questions.

"Thank you," she whispers. "You really didn't have to come. I would've been ok...I'm going to have to buy a ladder for your truck if you're going to keep coming to get me." She laughs to herself. I quickly grasp her waist and lift her into the truck. She stares at me, still full of questions.

"You don't need a ladder. I can just pick you up, you're light enough... why do you keep looking at me like that?" I mumble.

"I just... I can't figure you out." She speaks slowly. "You want to seem like this big, tough, mean guy. Broody and angry... but you're not. I don't understand why you don't want people to see you're caring and thoughtful."

"Because I'm not," I growl.

"I'm not buying it," she replies in a sing-song sort of way. I get in the driver's seat and turn to Addi before I start the truck. She stares right back at me, waiting to see what I'm going to say. "What's wrong, Wes?"

"What did that chick mean? You don't need any job, ever?"

Addi's focus moves to her hands. She starts fidgeting with her bracelets and biting her bottom lip. I don't think anyone will ever be cuter than she is at this exact moment. She's so worried I'll judge her, but I won't. I'd never judge her. She's perfect and nothing could ever change my opinion of her.

"Addi...look at me," I whisper. She quickly meets my gaze before glancing away immediately. I gently take her chin between my thumb and index finger, lifting her chin until she's forced to look into my eyes. "What is it?"

"I'm rich...like I could never work a day in my life and be ok. My kids could do the same and my grandkids would still be wealthy." Her cheeks stain a dark pinkish color. She's embarrassed, but I don't know why.

"So? Why do you look upset?"

"I don't like people to know... They treat you differently when they think you're worth something...I don't want people to like me for my money, I want them to like me for me."

"I don't give a shit about your money...but why drive that piece of crap that keeps breaking down? Why not buy something new?" I'm completely confused. She could afford any car she could ever want, so why keep repairing the one she has. Addi starts laughing and shakes her head.

"I don't know...I guess I just like it. I should buy something newer, but I hate dealing with the salesmen. They think I'm just a stupid girl and try to take advantage of me."

"I'll go with you."

“Really?” Shock floods her voice, her brows raise, almost meeting her hairline. “You’d really do that, Wes?”

“Why not?”

She throws her arms around my neck and hugs me tight. I can’t help hugging her back just as tightly. She slightly melts into my embrace. I suck in a deep breath of her perfume. It’s vanilla and something else.

She’s so unlike anyone else I’ve known and I know I never want to let her go.

“You’re so much different than I thought,” she whispers. “You’ve come to my rescue nonstop lately... You better be careful or I might start thinking you’re my Prince Charming.” She pulls away and winks at me.

“Pfft, yeah, I’m sure I look just like Prince Charming,” I say, rolling my eyes

“More like Prince Charming’s older, hotter, sexier, dangerous brother,” she mumbles under her breath. I shoot her a look with my eyebrow raised, she didn’t mean for me to hear that. She gasps and turns bright red, focusing her gaze on anything except me.

I have to bite my cheek to keep from laughing at her. No matter how much I know I should keep my distance from her, I feel myself being drawn to her more and more. I’m screwed.

Chapter 15



Hunter



“Hey, Kendra! Where’s Addi?” I ask as I glance around Dive.

“Hunter? What are you doing here? Addi left thirty minutes ago,” Kendra replies, brows furrowed.

“What? She gets off at midnight.” I glance down at my watch. “It’s only ten after.”

“Well, first off, that would mean you’re late. Second, Mr. Tall, Dark, and Sexy came strutting in here thirty minutes ago and took her home. Third, I’d go anywhere with that man. He’s so perfect, broody, and mysterious.”

“What the hell! Why does he keep doing this?” I spit out.

“Oh honey, he’s got his eye on Addi. He even marked his territory with those drunk hotties over there,” she says, tilting her head over to a group of guys. “You’re gonna have to up your game if you expect to compete with Wes.” She gives me a small smile.

“I just don’t get it. What can she possibly see in him?” I mumble more to myself than to her.

I've known Wes for years and he's never been a great guy. Addi deserves someone who will place her on a pedestal and treat her like royalty. She should be with a man who will bring her flowers just because he wants her to know how much she means to him. He should send her a text every morning and evening to let her know he's thinking about her. She deserves to be the center of his whole world.

"Hunter, I'm going to be straight with you... you and Addi have history. I haven't been told anything, but I know it was during a tough time in her life, which I also haven't been told about. You seem like a nice guy. You're handsome, sweet, and funny. But Wes... Wes is HOT and mysterious. He's dangerous yet safe. She sees something in him, he confuses her in a good way." She sighs and looks away. "At the end of the day, Wes is new. You're not really competing with Wes; you're competing with your past. Addi isn't the same girl she was a year ago and you need to stop acting like she is... No matter what, your history might always stand in your way."

"Ugh! All I did last summer was try to kiss her after two months of being really good friends. I don't get how that makes me such a bad guy. She completely walked away and cut all ties with me after that."

"Like I said, something happened and I'm not sure what. She's still not completely over it though. This might have more to do with whatever happened and less with you. Sadly, you might just be a reminder of that time," she replies with a shrug.

“What am I supposed to do?” I grumble.

“I’m not sure there’s anything that you can do. I’m sorry. You need to let her work through this in her own time, be there for her but don’t be overbearing.”

“And what if it isn’t enough?” I peek up at her.

“Then you let her walk away.”

Chapter 16



Addi



My eyes are glued to my kindle and I refuse to get up for anything. I need to know how this story ends. This man just lost the love of his life to cancer and he's trying to figure out how to live without her.

I'm sitting on my favorite couch in the living room, my back to the armrest, curled up reading under a blanket. I'm extremely skilled at tuning out every other sound around me when I read, but Blake and Lincoln's voices keep breaking through my focus.

All of the guys are hanging around the living room, some are playing video games, some are talking, and Wes is reading something on the opposite side of my couch.

"...Nah, man, you obviously need to up your skill. Girls don't like that." Blake speaks with confidence like he actually knows what girls like.

"Nah, I've never had anyone complain. I'm telling you that's how they like it," Lincoln replies with a shrug.

This goes back and forth for over thirty minutes. Them talking about how to please their random fuck buddies in bed and arguing over who's right and who's wrong. Finally, I've had enough. I can't stop what comes out of my mouth.

"It should start like a butterfly landing sweetly on a flower and end like a bulldog eating oatmeal," I mumble, my eyes never leaving my kindle.

Oh my gosh, did I really just say that? I mentally facepalm myself and wish I could go back in time and prevent myself from opening my mouth at all.

There's no response, the room is literally silent. I peek over the top of my kindle and find every eye on me. Conversations have halted, game remotes have fallen to the ground out of shock, and Wes's book slips out of his hands and onto his chest. All eyes are glued on me, wide with disbelief. I can't blame them one bit. I'm shocked those words left my own lips.

"Um...I mean that's what Kendra always says..." I mumble, my cheeks feel like they're on fire. I want the couch to open up and swallow me whole.

"Well Damn! Addi has a kinky side. Let's go up to my room and I'll show you what I can do. We can compare notes then." Blake winks at me, a grin spreading over his face.

"Keep it in your pants," Wes growls.

"Shut it, Blake," Hunter hisses.

"Enough," Nick yells. Blake holds up his hands in defense.

“I’m just offering, no need to bite my head off...I promise, guys don’t like that at all.” He winks at me again.

“I think we need to play a game,” Lincoln blurts out. “We all barely know Addi and she doesn’t know most of us. We each get to ask Addi a question and she gets to ask each of us one. Everyone game?”

Everyone agrees and squeezes onto the two sectional couches. Somehow, I get sandwiched between Wes and Hunter. Can today get any more awkward?

“All right, I’ll start.” Lincoln rubs his hands together. “Addi, how do you have such a huge house? I mean you’re a waitress.”

“Wow, no easy questions to start off with, huh?... I don’t really like people knowing this, but my parents both came from very wealthy families and worked hard their whole lives. When they died, I was left with a trust fund,” I reply with a shrug. “I like nice things and I can afford them, so why not. I’ll probably stay in this house after we graduate... What are you majoring in?”

“Landscape engineering.” Lincoln flashes me his killer smile.

“Why have roommates if you can afford this place by yourself?” Nate asks quietly and I shrug again.

“I guess I didn’t want to be lonely. No matter what, I was going to force Nicky to live with me. I figured why not let him

have some of his friends here too... Are you always quiet?" I swear Nate blushes before he answers me.

"Not always, sometimes I'm super quiet," he says with a wink and I can't help the laugh that escapes from me. He's the adorable, nerdy, boy next door type of person.

"Why not have some female friends move in with you instead of surrounding yourself with strangers?" Cole asks. "I mean we could be ax murderers or rapists."

"I don't have female friends other than Kendra and she already has a place. Also, I'm fairly certain Nicky wouldn't expose me to murderers or rapists... Are you an ax murderer or rapist?"

"Only time will tell!" Cole says mysteriously, wiggling his eyebrows at me.

"If you could have your way with any of us, who would it be?" Blake asks with a smirk.

"Don't answer that, AJ," Nicky growls.

"It's ok, Nicky." I wave him off. "I'd definitely pick you, Blake. I mean how could I be attracted to any of these other guys? You're so manly and strong, so confident in your ability to please a woman. How could anyone not want you?" I answer as innocently as I can while batting my eyelashes.

"Hardy, har, har," Blake shoots back. "Fine, how did you and Nick meet?"

"We grew up next door to each other and our parents were best friends. We spent every minute of the day together until

he moved away. His grandparents still lived down the block from me and he'd come to visit a lot so we could spend time together. He's been my best friend since I was born. He's gone through everything with me. I couldn't ask for a better friend... Do you hit on anything with boobs?"

Blake's brows shoot skyward, stunned and offended. I wonder if I went a little too far, but only for a second.

"Of course not! Some guys have boobs! I hit on anything with boobs *and* a pussy. I have standards, Addi!"

"Who's your favorite man in the whole world?" Nicky asks with a big smile.

"Oh, that's easy. Definitely you, Nicky!" I giggle, shaking my head. "I'd definitely die without you by my side.... Who's your favorite woman in the world?"

"Definitely Kasey." Nicky laughs as my jaw drops to the floor. "Come on Ads, you know it's you. All right, Wes, you're up."

"What's your favorite color?" He asks like it's the most important question in the world. I stare into his eyes, silently questioning him. He stares right back at me, waiting for my answer.

"My favorite color...is definitely the color of your eyes," I mumble, barely above a whisper. We still have our eyes locked on each other and neither of us makes any attempt to break that contact. Hunter clears his throat next to me, prompting me to ask my question. "Oh...um... Have you ever been in love?"

“I thought I had been.”

“And now what do you think?” I whisper.

“No, I don’t think so anymore,” Wes whispers back. I get lost in his eyes, wishing beyond hope that maybe something will develop between us.

Hunter clears his throat again...loudly. I want to smack him and tell him to leave me alone so I can continue talking to Wes. I want to peel back his layers and get to know him better.

“All right, last question, Tink. What happened last summer? If it wasn’t what I did then why’d you disappear?” Hunter asks.

I stare down at my hands and start fidgeting with my bracelets. My eyes begin to water and I can’t stop them. I’m doing everything I can to keep it together.

How dare Hunter ask a question like that in front of everyone! He knows I don’t want to talk about it. I can’t take myself back to that period in my life, it took me so long to crawl out of that hole after it happened. If I go back, I’m not sure I’ll make it out again.

“We’re not doing this, Hunter.” Nicky steps in to save me as usual.

“It’s a simple question. Everyone else asked their questions and she answered honestly. I just want a simple, honest answer,” Hunter spits back.

I peer up at him as tears slowly begin falling down my cheeks. I can’t keep them in. I can’t stay in control of my

emotions no matter how hard I try.

“Nothing about that answer would be simple.” I stand and run to my room, quietly shutting the door before dropping onto my bed.

I need to be alone and try to forget all about my past. Maybe I’ll call Kasey and talk to her. Sometimes just venting to her can help me center myself all over again.

Chapter 17



Wes



“What the fuck, Hunter? Why do you need to keep pushing her? You have no idea what she’s been through and if you did, you’d back off and leave her alone. She doesn’t owe you shit! What you see is just the tip of the iceberg. It’s incredible how much more she keeps buried under the water. She hides her pain well. It’s not for you to see, for anyone to see, unless she wants them to. It’s not my place to share. Why can’t you get that, man!” Nick stands, yelling at Hunter.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen Nick mad in all the years I’ve known him. He’s always been super nice and laid-back, it’s nice to know he really does have Addi’s back. He truly loves and cares about her.

She needs people like him in her corner. I hope I can prove to her that I can be one of those people too.

“I’d have an idea of what happened if someone would just tell me! I deserve to know what happened!” Hunter yells back, rising to his feet.

“You don’t deserve shit! You don’t have the right to know anything about Addi that she doesn’t want to share with you.”

Nick folds his arms over his chest and glares at Hunter.

“You want to know what happened? You just hurt her! How can you be such a selfish asshole? That girl deserves better,” I growl at Hunter.

“I wasn’t trying to hurt her! Why do you care anyway? All you care about is getting her into your bed,” Hunter spits at me.

I stand to my full height and square my shoulders to Hunter. Not only am I taller than him, but I also have about twenty pounds of muscle on him. I glare as I move closer until I’m only a few inches away from his face.

“Don’t you ever talk about what I want. You have no idea who I am or what I want in life. And if I ever hear you talk about Addi like she’s just a random lay, I’ll beat the shit out of you until your own mother won’t recognize you,” I growl in his face before turning my back on them and walking straight to Addi’s door.

I knock softly and wait for a response. I need to make sure she’s ok, then I’ll leave her alone. After a few moments, she still hasn’t answered and I’m starting to get worried.

I quietly open her door and peek in. I find her curled up on her side facing away from the door. Her small body is shaking and a sharp pain spreads through my chest. I step into her room and shut the door behind me.

“Hey,” I whisper. “Are you ok?”

She slowly turns over so she's facing me. She scoots up in bed, leaning her back against the headboard and pulls her knees to her chest. She doesn't say anything, just stares at her feet and swipes at her cheeks. After a few seconds, she shakes her head.

I gently drop onto the bed next to her as I'm warring with myself. I want to wrap her in my embrace and take away all of the pain, but I'm not sure she'd appreciate that right now. We don't exactly have a relationship like that.

"Can I do anything for you?" I whisper, searching her face like the answer to making her happy will appear in front of me.

Instead of talking, Addi takes my hand in hers and lets out a sad sigh and she runs her thumb over the inside of my wrist.

This time I don't hesitate. She initiated the physical contact and I'm going to roll with it. Moving so my back is against her headboard, I wrap my arms around her and tug her into my side. She lays her head on my chest and wraps her arms around my waist.

"It's alright, I'm not letting him near you again. I'll make sure he understands to stay away and to stop trying to pick you up at work," I whisper into her hair.

"I got my car back. I don't need anyone to drive me anymore." She shakes her head.

"I don't want you leaving that place alone at night, sweetheart. I've seen the way those guys look at you. I don't

want them near you, there's no telling what they might try.”

“Why? Why are you being so nice? Why do you care about me?” She questions. She's not angry, just curious. I have a feeling Addi hasn't had a lot of people in her corner throughout her life. She's used to being alone and only counting on a few people.

I shrug, not wanting to confess how I feel when I know she's hung up on a different guy. “Why not?”

“You don't know me. You don't owe me anything.”

“I know your type. You remind me of my sister, Kelsey.”

“And what type is that?”

“You keep these massive painful secrets you don't want anyone to know about. They threaten to pull you into a dark place, but you refuse to let them rule your life. You don't want to let people in or let them know about your secrets because it makes it feel more real. Then, those people will look at you differently and will know what's going on in that pretty little head of yours. So, you act like everything's perfect in your life, even though sometimes you feel like you're drowning. You also have this big soft spot that makes you love with your whole heart, but it also allows you to get hurt badly when you trust someone and they let you down.” When I finish my thought I glance down at her, finding her mouth hanging open. “What?”

“I've never heard you talk so much. I was truly starting to think you didn't know how to say more than ten words at a

time.” She smirks up at me.

“You also try to use your witty and feisty comebacks to keep people at a distance until you trust them. You don’t trust easily because you’re too scared of getting hurt...you’re more like a combination of all of my sisters.”

“Just what I want is for you to view me as one of your sisters,” she mumbles into my chest.

“Sweetheart, there’s no part of me that thinks of you as a sister,” I whisper.

I hold her for a few more minutes before I press a soft, lingering kiss to her head. I know she needs time to work through her emotions and I’m going to give that to her. I exit the room, shutting the door softly behind me. I need to go deal with Hunter anyway.

Chapter 18



Nick



“Hey there, handsome! What are you doing here? You never seem to come unless Addi’s here.” Kendra pouts a little as she speaks.

“I didn’t know I couldn’t eat here if Addi wasn’t here.” I wink at her and she arches her eyebrow at me. “Hunter’s meeting me here,” I confess with a smile.

Kendra’s an interesting woman. I never quite know how to take her. She always has a flirty smile for me, but I feel like she’s constantly hiding something. I want to peel back her layers and find out if I’m correct.

“Oh honey, you can eat here whenever you want. You drastically improve the scenery of Dive. What can I get for you? Or do you want to wait for Hunter?” She asks.

“Can I have a corona? I’ll wait for Hunter to order food though. Thanks, Kendra.”

“Anything for you, sweetness.”

I stare at her retreating form, she’s gorgeous and she knows it. Any guy would be lucky to actually capture that woman’s

attention. She flirts with everyone though, so it's hard to figure out who she truly likes. Maybe she just does it for tips, I don't know. It's not like it matters, I'm not her type at all.

“Here ya go!” She places my beer in front of me then slides into the booth across from me. “How's Hunter doing on the Addi front?” She asks in the sincerest tone I've ever heard come out of her as concern fills her eyes. Maybe this is the real Kendra, maybe there's more to her than we all thought.

“Eh... he's losing her. Pretty quickly too. Wes seems to be riding in on his white horse to save her time and time again. I can't blame Wes or Addi for that. Honestly, they're good for each other but don't tell Hunter I said that. I'm sure it's against the bro code or something to root for the guy who isn't your best friend...I guess technically I've been rooting for my best friend though since Addi's definitely higher on the totem pole than Hunter. I don't know, I feel like I'm constantly stuck between Addi and Hunter, trying to keep peace and calm things down.”

“I didn't think it was that bad. Hunter seems like a good guy.”

“He *is* a good guy...but he's also acting like a year hasn't passed since he last saw Addi. He barely knows anything about her, but he thinks he's in love with her.” I shake my head thinking about all the things he doesn't know. “She's changed a lot in the past year and has been through so much. She deserves to find love. I guess I'm just rooting for Addi to be the happiest she can be.”

Kendra eyes me before plopping her arms on the table across from me. She leans on her elbows, whispering, “Are you in love with Addi?”

I can’t help but laugh. It’s a crazy idea, but this isn’t the first time I’ve been asked. I’m sure it won’t be the last either.

No one seems to believe a guy and girl can be friends with each other after they’ve hit puberty without having a crush. It’s ridiculous, but a question I’ve grown used to answering.

“No, Kendra. Addi and I grew up like siblings. We spent our entire childhood together. We had sleepovers every weekend, even in high school. We shared a bed and my parents never batted an eye at it. That’s how non-existent our romantic feelings are for each other. I’ll always love her, but I’m one hundred percent not *in* love with her.”

“Thank goodness, you seem like the first guy in your house that isn’t. Y’all make me feel invisible over here.” She pouts.

“Sweetheart, you couldn’t be invisible if you tried. You’re gorgeous and you know it. And for the record, only Hunter and Wes are in love with Addi. The rest of us definitely see you.” I smirk.

“Thanks, Nick, you sure know how to make a girl feel better. Wes seems like a good guy, but I don’t think he wants people to know how sweet he is.” She laughs, shaking her head. “Plus, that boy’s sexy as hell!”

“Wow, Kendra, way to make me feel invisible,” I say with my own pout. She throws back her head and starts laughing.

She's beautiful and I can't take my eyes off of her.

“Nick, you're a one in a million guy, any girl would be stupid not to throw themselves at your feet and beg you to fall in love with them. You're every bit as sexy as Wes, just in a different way. Wes is dangerously sexy, covered in tattoos, and broody all the time. You're sweet and caring. The boy next door type of sexy. Neither one is better than the other, they're just different. You know I'm right and I'm sure you're constantly beating the girls away.”

I sarcastically look around at the floor and shrug. “I don't see anyone throwing themselves at my feet, darling.”

“Oh, they will be as soon as they realize what they're missing. I gotta go back to work before Tony realizes I'm taking a break. I'll be back when Hunter shows up.” She comes around to my side of the booth and gently kisses me on the cheek. “See ya, handsome”.

Then she's gone. My eyes are glued to her as she walks away swaying her hips a little more than usual. Damn, she's perfect.

Chapter 19



Addi



Classes are in full swing and everything seems a little bit crazier in our house on Mulberry Lane.

When I bought this house, I saw it as a forever home. It sits on twenty beautiful acres and has a private street. It's away from the hustle and bustle of the world, providing you with your own personal oasis.

I always dreamed of being surrounded by friends and family. Each of us having our own home next to each other and a space to get together and have fun.

I'm getting used to living with the boys. It hasn't been easy though. Most of them seem to forget they live with a girl. They all walk around the house in boxers and nothing else. They never even bat an eyelash when I walk into the room. Of course, all of them are in amazing shape, covered in muscles, and tan skin. Absolutely drool worthy.

I walked in the gym one day to use the treadmill and found them all lifting weights. My eyes couldn't help but linger over their bodies, taking in how each of them is different.

Nate, Nick, and Hunter are lean, but they have a lot of muscle. You wouldn't know it if you didn't see them working out or shirtless though. Cole and Lincoln are a little more obvious with their strength. Their biceps are big even when they're not flexing, but it's Wes and Blake that make you really stop and stare. They're the types of guys you see on social media and don't believe are real. The ones you swear must spend their entire lives in the gym. Though you wouldn't want to get in a fight with any of them, Wes is definitely the most intimidating one of the bunch. He's the most muscular, his chest and arms are covered in tattoos, and he's got that permanent scowl thing going for him. When you mix that with his constant broody attitude and fierce sapphire blue eyes, he's a scary guy when he wants to be.

I still haven't seen him smile or laugh and it's driving me crazy.

His intense gaze makes me feel like he can see into the depths of my soul, finding all the secrets no one else knows about. It makes me uncomfortable, yet I can't pull myself away from him even when I try.

No man has ever made me feel like this before. It's like I'm constantly having the carpet pulled out from under me. Every time I think I know where I stand with Wes, he does something to make me question it. It confuses, yet intrigues me. He makes me crave being around him more and more.

I woke up early this morning. I wanted to make the boys a special breakfast. It's Saturday and we just finished our second

week of classes. We seem to all be getting along well and this breakfast is like a little thank you for not letting me live in a large house all alone.

I look forward to these guys becoming more and more like family to me. At this point, the only family I have left is my sister, Kasey, and her daughter, Charlie. I want more. I want a big family to spend time with and lean on when I need it.

The feast I'm making is almost done when I hear the boys shuffling around upstairs. I made pancakes, eggs, bacon, sausage, scrapple, toast, hash browns, and coffee. Typically, everyone eats cereal or protein shakes for breakfast so I figure this will be something special.

Nicky's the first one to venture into the kitchen and the rest stagger in soon after. I instruct them all to sit at the table and wait for the rest of the guys to arrive before we can start eating.

"Where the hell is Hunter? This food smells amazing and I'm starving!" Cole whines.

"Calm down, boys. I'll go get him. Don't touch anything until I come back." I glare at each of them, letting them know I'm serious. Wes quirks a brow at me and stares right back, making my heart beat a little faster.

I hurry to Hunter's room and knock, but there's no answer. I open the door while calling his name. His bathroom door is shut. A squeaky knob turns and the water shuts off.

“Hey, Hunter? I have a breakfast feast made for everyone. We’re waiting for you so we can start eating. Hurry up!”

The door opens and a cloud of steam billows out as Hunter emerges from the bathroom. His chest is bare and he has a towel wrapped around his waist. His skin’s wet and he looks like he belongs on the cover of a magazine. Water drips from his hair as he runs his hand through it. His other hand holds his towel in place.

My jaw drops, I need to look away, but my eyes don’t seem to understand. I can’t tear them away from this amazing muscular form standing in front of me. Hunter clears his throat and watches me, doing his best to hide his smile. A deep red blush moves up my neck to my cheeks, making my skin feel like it’s on fire. I finally make eye contact, gulping at how his eyes have darkened and his full attention is locked on me.

“I’ll be out in a minute,” he says in a deep sexy voice.

What the hell is wrong with me? Hunter’s my roommate, nothing can happen. Absolutely nothing. My mouth opens and closes a few times as I try to find words, but I can’t seem to form any.

“Umm, Addi...if you don’t mind, I’d like to get dressed so we can eat. I’m sure the guys aren’t happy waiting.”

“Right,” I squeak, but my legs can’t function no matter how much my brain wills them to move. All I can do is continue to stare.

“Addi, I’m dropping this towel in ten seconds. If you’re still here, that’s not my fault.” He smirks, daring me to stay.

And I want to. I’d love to stay in here and watch that fluffy fabric pool at his feet. Though I’m sure my cheeks would heat to an unbearable level if I saw Hunter naked.

“Oh,” I whisper as Hunter starts counting down. When he gets to four seconds left my body finally seems to snap out of it and I blurt, “Sorry,” right before I run out of the room.

I close the door and stand with my back against it as I take a few deep breaths. Get a grip! I can’t act weird in front of the other guys. They’ll think something’s going on between Hunter and me. There definitely isn’t. Nothing can happen. We’re roommates and friends, nothing more.

“Yay! Can we eat now?” Nicky asks as I enter the kitchen.

“You can start serving yourselves, but you can’t take a bite until Hunter gets here,” I instruct them.

“I’m here,” Hunter mumbles from behind me. I jump, clutching my chest with both hands. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.” He smirks as he brushes past me to take his seat next to Nick.

I settle into the chair at the head of the table and glance around at the boys. They’re all so vastly different, yet they get along so well together.

“This looks great, Tink,” Hunter says.

“Where’d the name Tink come from?” Nate asks, his attention on Hunter. He laughs before responding.

“Addi’s obviously a small petite girl and when I met her, she was a force to be reckoned with. She was so spunky and had a fiery tongue when it came to some of the younger guys making comments at camp. The boys loved getting her riled up so she’d get all mad and make tight little fists at her sides like Tinkerbell always does. The boys in my cabin used to discuss ways they could make her mad the next day. I was the counselor and had to remind them it wasn’t nice to piss off Tinkerbell and the name just stuck. Soon everyone called her Tinkerbell.”

“Hmmm, I love feisty little women. They’re the best in bed.” Blake sinks his teeth into his bottom lip and stares at me.

“Hmm, too bad they don’t like you. Us little women like to be impressed in bed, just because we’re little doesn’t mean we want little things.” I grin, arching a brow at him.

“Damn, Ad, straight for his jugular, huh?” Wes chuckles in his low deep voice, a grin spreading across his face. His laugh is the most captivating thing I’ve ever heard.

“Damn, is that a smile?” I gasp.

“Guess your feisty side brings a smile to my face.” He shrugs, lifting a bite to his mouth.

“You should smile more. It makes you even more attractive. Your intense eyes are sexy, but that smile will make women melt at your feet.” I keep my gaze on him, ignoring the responses I know are coming from the other guys.

He nods his head; his grin widening even more. “Duly noted.”

“Aww fuck, now Wes is getting the girl. Sorry Blake, you better retreat to your room to lick your wounds in private before they go at it on this table.” Cole laughs.

When I glance over at Blake, he seems a little wounded. His pride is definitely taking a hit today. I feel bad. Blake’s a really nice guy, he just flirts a lot.

Hunter’s pissed and won’t make eye contact with me. I don’t really understand what his problem is. We’re not together. We never were. And honestly, I’m not sure anything will ever happen with us. No matter how attracted we are to each other, he reminds me of my past and it’s not something I want to think about. I’ve spent every day of my life trying to pretend it never happened.

But when I’m able to forget about the past for a few moments and focus only on the here and now, I’m drawn to Hunter right away.

“This food is great, AJ, when did you learn to cook? The last time you made me grilled cheese, I think we almost burnt down your house. I’ll never forget your dad yelling and your mom ripping the smoking pan out of your hands and throwing it in the sink.” Nicky tries to change the conversation to something less sexual. He’s always thought of me as a sister and I’m sure this all makes him more than a little uncomfortable.

“I had to learn to cook for Charlie when Kasey was working. She worked in the evenings so I could stay home with Charlie and we didn’t have to worry about babysitters. It seemed like the best option. Now she’s working from home so she can always be with her.”

“I miss Kasey, she was always so awesome. The big sister I never had. And of course, who wouldn’t miss little Charlie.” Nick smiles down at his plate. He’s always been a part of my family, the son or brother we all never had.

“Kasey always had a soft spot for you. She says you’ll make some woman extremely happy one day and she’ll be the luckiest woman in the world. I couldn’t agree with her more. Charlie, on the other hand, wants to know where her Uncle Nicky’s been lately. She’s getting jealous and thinks you might have a new girl in your life.”

“I’d never! Charlie will always own my heart. Maybe I’ll video chat with her later today and see when I can take her out for some ice cream.”

“I think she’d love that,” I murmur, loving how much he cares about my family.

“Where did AJ come from?” Nate asks.

“My name’s Addison Jane. When I was younger, I always acted like more of a tomboy and so everyone started calling me AJ. I ran around with all the boys and chased the girls with worms. I wasn’t afraid to play in the mud or join their team to play sports. Most of the guys stopped seeing me as a girl. At least until my boobs showed up, then they weren’t sure how to

act because I was one of them, but now I had curves and a body they liked. The girls hated me because the guys wanted to spend time with me. And the boys wanted to hang out, but didn't exactly want to date me. They wanted me as a friend with benefits and I wasn't having that."

"What's your thoughts on friends with benefits now?" Blake blurts out. Before I'm able to respond with some smartass comment, Cole responds for me.

"Everson, hasn't your pride been hurt enough today. This beautiful woman invited us into her wonderful home and cooked us an amazing breakfast. Can't you just keep it in your pants? At least while you're in this house. Feel free to unleash all your sexual aggression on all the poor unsuspecting women who inhabit the halls of the college."

Everyone laughs and gives Blake some sort of comment about his flirting skills. It's fun to watch them interact and be themselves. I'm honored to have such amazing and fun men live with me.

The rest of breakfast goes by smoothly and we all tease each other and we're having fun. Blake stops being so blunt and crude. Everyone else is just letting loose after a stressful start to school.

I stand and start clearing the table as everyone continues talking. I enjoy seeing them all so happy and at home here. I'm really glad I made this decision. I figured any friend of Nicky's would be someone I'd get along with. That's why I

invited him and anyone of his choosing to move in with me. I knew I wouldn't regret it.

I clear my throat as I stand at the head of the long farm style table and feel seven sets of eyes instantly snap in my direction.

"I wanted to thank all of you for moving in here and taking a chance living with a girl. I know it was probably weird moving into a stranger's house, but I hope you all feel like this is your house too. Anything you guys need, please don't hesitate to ask me about it. I know I'm more of an outsider to you, but you've made me feel welcome in your circle. I hope we'll become like family over the next few years. Thank you for making me feel a little less lonely."

As soon as I finish my speech, Nicky wraps his arms around me, hugging me for a long time. When he pulls himself back, he searches my eyes.

"You're my family, Addison. Don't you ever doubt that. You mean the world to me and they'll all feel the same once they get to know you better."

When Nicky leaves the kitchen, Nate approaches me. He's hesitant, but I can tell he really wants to open up to me.

"Addison, I've never had a sister, but I always wanted one. You seem really cool and I hope we can become close too." He quickly gives me an awkward hug and hurries out of the room.

"Come here, knucklehead." Cole grabs me, pulling me into a tight hug. "You're one of us now. No denying that."

He presses a big, sloppy kiss to my cheek before disappearing into the living room.

I'm overwhelmed when I notice the boys are standing in line to give me some kind words with loving hugs. I'm the luckiest girl in the world to be surrounded by such loving men.

"You're a beautiful woman, inside and out, Addi, don't ever change," Lincoln whispers as he releases me from his arms.

"I'm sorry. Sometimes I forget I'm not trying to get into every woman's pants. I promise to try harder to keep the pervy comments to myself... and I apologize in advance for when they slip out. You seem pretty cool and I don't want you to hate me." Blake shifts uncomfortably before he pulls me into a hug.

"I don't hate you. I was only teasing you before. You're not a bad guy. Like I said, I know how to be one of the boys but sometimes my teasing is taken more harshly because it's coming out of a girl's mouth. I'll try to be nicer too." I stand on my tippy toes to reach Blake's cheek, placing a soft kiss. "Thanks," he whispers, blushing a little before rushing out of the room.

"You're an amazing woman, Snow," Wes whispers in my ear as he holds me tightly in his arms. I pull back a little and gaze up into his eyes.

"Snow?" I questioned.

"Like Snow White. You're living with seven men who don't really know how to treat a lady. We all need your help in one

way or another. Even us broody guys,” he responds as a large smile spreads across his face.

“Damn, that smile. You’re going to be melting girls’ panties left and right.” I shake my head and smile up at him. “Don’t show everyone that smile. You should save it for someone special. But I liked broody Wes too.”

“Snow, you’re more special than you know. I’ll only let other girls see the broody me.” He winks and kisses my head before leaving me alone with Hunter in the kitchen.

I was having such a good time, but now I realize Hunter’s been quiet the entire meal. Shit. Things have been getting progressively more awkward between Hunter and I. He seems to think I owe him some sort of explanation. Small things he’s said or done are adding up and annoying me. He’s definitely not the guy I remember. It won’t take much for me to lose all hope in him.

Chapter 20



Hunter



“You should smile more... It makes you even more attractive... Your intense eyes are sexy but that smile will make women melt at your feet.... don't show everyone that smile. You should save it for someone special... But I like broody Wes too.”

Those words keep repeating over and over in my head. Does Addi really like Wes? How can she like someone who's so pissy all the time? I don't get it. I've been here for her, we have history. I can't lose her again.

I realize she's staring at me and I have no idea for how long. Did she say something to me and I missed it? Crap, what's wrong with me? She's just my roommate. She can't be anything more, yet I can't walk away.

“Thanks for breakfast, Tink. It was delicious.” I pull her into a hug. “You've always held a special place in my heart, Addi.” I lean down and place a kiss on her cheek. She gazes up at me without any words for a few moments.

“Thank you, Hunter,” she says softly. She grabs something off of the table and walks out of the kitchen without another word.

She didn't say anything about me being special to her. No kind words indicating she feels anything more towards me. Maybe she doesn't feel the same about me as I feel about her. Maybe I'm reading too much into her response. How can I be so stupid? She probably feels nothing for me at all.

As I move to exit the kitchen, I realize Nick and Addi are talking in the living room. I stay out of sight so I can eavesdrop. I know it's not the best thing to do and I'll feel guilty for it, but I want to figure out what they're hiding. Maybe some secrets she doesn't want me to know. I want to see if she'll mention me at all.

"You like him, don't you?" Nick asks gently.

"Ughhhh." Addi moans into a pillow. "Is it that obvious?"

Shit. Is she talking about Wes? Or is she talking about me? Could she be talking about someone else entirely?

"Well... I mean... maybe if you're blind... and deaf then no. Not at all." He laughs as Addi throws a pillow at him.

"What am I doing, Nicky? I can't fall for a roommate. What if things go horribly wrong?"

"What if they go horribly right?"

Yes! I knew Nick was my best friend for a reason. Maybe he can convince her this can work out between us... unless she's talking about one of the other guys... then I hope she stands her ground and doesn't listen to him.

"Why do you have to do that? Why are you always playing devil's advocate? Can't you ever just agree with me and say

‘Yeah, you’re right, you should just walk away from this before you get hurt.’ Would that really be too much?”

“I’m your best friend, it’s my job to play devil’s advocate when you’re wrong. And for the record, I don’t think you’d be the one to get hurt in this scenario. He’s different with you, I’ve never seen him look at someone like he looks at you. He’s already fallen for you... hard.”

“Really? You think so?” Her voice holds so much hope in it. The question is... is she talking about Wes or me? None of the other guys seem any different with her.

“Addi, I’m close with all of the guys, some more than others, but I know all of them really well. That being said, you’re the number one person in my life. There’s no one else I care about more and no one else I’d share my deepest and darkest secrets with. I’d never steer you in the wrong direction.”

He twirls a lock of her hair around his finger and watches her. An outsider looking in would swear they’re in love with each other. They have this easy-going relationship that anyone would be envious of. He understands her in a way I’m not sure anyone else ever can.

“You’re something special to him. I’ve seen it and so have the other guys. I’ve heard Blake razz him enough about it. I’ve also never seen that man try to help anyone before... but he’s come and picked you up from work how many times? He checked on you after the blow up with Hunter’s stupid question during our game. And I’m pretty sure I heard a rumor

he was ‘checking your form’ after you hurt your knee working out.” He chuckles with a knowing smirk.

No. No, no, no. She doesn’t want me. She wants him. What can he possibly have that I don’t have?

“I just thought he was being nice,” Addi whispers.

“That’s the thing, he isn’t nice, Addi. He makes a point of making people know that right away. He prides himself on being an asshole. He tries to keep people at a distance. The fact that you think he’s nice to you shows how much you mean to him. And was that his hoodie you were wearing last night?”

“...Yeah. He gave it to me the first night he picked me up from Dive. It was cold and raining. He told me to put it on. I tried to give it back the next day. I thanked him and said it was a really soft and comfy hoodie. I was sure he wanted it back. He brushed me off and said to keep it, that I looked better in it anyway.”

“Oh, Addi.” Nick shakes his head, a smile spreading ear to ear.

“What!”

“That’s his favorite hoodie. Blake tried to borrow it one night after some girl dumped a drink on him for being a perv and Wes told him to fuck off. He told him to walk around without a shirt on, no way in hell was he giving Blake his favorite hoodie. Blake’s his best friend and he wouldn’t let him wear it for a few hours. And now he’s telling you to keep it.”

“Nicky, it’s not that big of a deal... is it?”

“For Wes it is. Guys like to see women in their clothes. It makes us feel like you’re ours. It’s kinda like we’ve claimed our territory. When I see a girl wearing men’s clothing, I automatically assume she’s taken and back off.” Nick stands up and watches her. “Be careful, figure out what you want... who you want. It’s not fair to lead them on. You need to decide who you want before you destroy one or both of them. I’m here for you if you need someone to talk to.”

Nick bends down and kisses Addi’s head before disappearing up the stairs.

I walk back to the table and sit down. I plant my elbows on the wooden top and drop my face into my hands. Addi likes Wes, Wes definitely likes Addi. The question is, does Addi like me? Which one of us does she like more? Who will she choose? Knowing Addi, she’ll pull a DJ Tanner and tell us both to get lost so she doesn’t have to pick.

I give myself a few minutes to collect my thoughts, then I finally pull myself together and am about to travel into the living room, when Wes comes running back down the stairs. Addi’s curled up on the couch in a blanket, reading a book on her kindle. She’s gorgeous as usual.

I peek into the living room and watch as Wes plops himself down on the couch right next to her. He leaves no room between them and doesn’t even seem to notice.

“Hey, some of us are going to the movies, then for burgers tonight, do you want to come with us?” He asks casually.

When he realizes Addi isn't paying attention to him, he reaches over and grabs her Kindle out of her hand.

"Hey!" She protests. "Why'd you take that?"

Wes holds the kindle over his head, there's no way for her to reach it. He towers over her. He makes her look tinier than she already does.

Neither one of them can see me from where I'm standing and that's fine with me. As much as it hurts to watch them together, I need to see if there's something going on between them.

"I was asking you a question and you were ignoring me. What are you reading anyway?" He questions.

"I'm sorry, I get a little distracted when I'm reading and don't really pay attention to anything going on around me. I'm reading a romance novel."

"Huh, I don't know much about romance novels. Maybe I should read it to get some tips on how to woo a girl." Addi starts giggling nonstop at Wes, confusion sweeps over his face. "How's that funny? You don't think I can woo someone?"

"I have no doubt you can woo a woman. I have a hard time believing you need help with it."

"Oh, Snow, not everyone loves my broody side. Many see me as too intense to approach." He searches her eyes.

He likes her. I can spot it from a mile away. He wants more than friends, he wants her to be his. Addi smiles up at him,

completely clueless. Or maybe she knows exactly what's going on and she wants the same thing.

“Don't worry about what people think. The right girl will love all of you and won't be afraid to approach you. Don't waste time on the girls who don't try to reach deeper, they won't matter anyway.” She stares at him for a few seconds, letting her words sink in. “What did you ask me?”

“Some of us are going to the movies then out for burgers tonight, I wanted to invite you to come with us?”

“I don't know. I kinda wanted to finish the book you're currently holding hostage.”

“Please, Snow. I won't have fun if I know you're sitting at home by yourself.” Wes starts pouting.

Wes freaking Robinson is pouting. He doesn't act like this. He's an ass to everyone. He's rude and scares the shit out of men and women, children and the elderly. He doesn't care who you are, he'll have a scowl aimed your way.

Yet with Addi, he's different. He even carried her through the rain the other night when I forgot to pick her up. He's gone out of his way to make her feel like she matters and he's tried to protect her more times than I can count.

I've had enough of watching them. The thought of them ending up together makes me nauseous.

I spin on my heels and rush through the back door. I hop in my car and speed off. I need to get away from them. To clear my head and figure out what I'm going to do.

I don't start to calm down until I can no longer catch a glimpse of the house in my rear-view mirror. Screw them.

Chapter 21



Addi



“If I agree to come, will you give me my kindle back?” I ask Wes.

“Hmmm, that’ll be a tough one.”

“Why? Just give it back.”

“But if I give it back, then you’ll go back to ignoring me while you read. I don’t want to be ignored,” he says shyly.

I didn’t think Wes knew how to be shy. Ever since I made the comment about his eyes and smile at breakfast, he seems to be letting his guard down even more around me. I’m enjoying seeing this side of him.

I knew there was a big teddy bear of a man locked inside of him, but I couldn’t figure out how to expose that part.

“But I need to finish my book!” I whine like a little kid, placing my own pout on my face.

Wes starts laughing, his laugh is even sexier than his smile. He’s so carefree when he’s not trying to hide behind some façade. It’s adorable. I’m falling more and more for this man

who'd seem like such a hard-ass and complete trouble if you passed him on the street.

“That pout always gets you whatever you want, doesn't it?”

“Mmhhmm.” I smirk up at him. “Every time.”

“I'm sure you use your smile to your advantage too. Pretty girls always get what they want... Please come with me, Addi,” he begs. His eyes are so sincere and hopeful, I can't say no to him.

“Alright, I'll go with you guys. Can I have my kindle back now?”

Wes leans in close to me and whispers, “You can try to take it from me. I dare you.”

“Oh, you poor boy, you should know I don't back down from a dare!”

“Duly noted.”

I quickly jump up to kneel on the couch and try to reach my device. Wes is faster though. He changes hands and holds it further away from me. Every time I try to grab it, it's just out of my reach. I know I have to get closer to get the kindle.

Finally, I jump on top of him, straddling his hips. As I reach for it, he throws it on the other couch across the room. I gaze down at him with my mouth hanging open.

“Really, Wes? What are you five?”

His eyes are more intense than I've ever seen them before. There's so much heat and desire in them. He glances from my

eyes to my mouth. I lick my bottom lip and his gaze follows the movement. I know he wants to kiss me, but that can't happen. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

My hair falls down into my eyes as I continue to stare at him, waiting anxiously to see what his next move will be. He carefully pushes my hair out of my face and tucks it behind my ear. His movements are so gentle they send a shiver through my body. He brushes his knuckles along my cheek, a shot of desire and electricity course through my body. I've never reacted to a man like this. His hand trails down my neck and arms until it settles on my hips and he leans in to whisper.

“You're so beautiful. In the short time I've known you, you've shown me what a wonderful person you are. Don't let anyone take you for granted. Men should be lining up to be with you, but not for friends with benefits. You're the type of girl that deserves the whole world. Wait for the guy who gives you everything.” He stares into my eyes the entire time he speaks.

Just when I think he's going to eliminate the space between us and kiss me, he doesn't. He picks me up like I weigh nothing and gently places me back on the couch. He grabs my kindle, placing it in my hands and covers me up with my blanket. He gently kisses my head and whispers, “I'll see you later, Snow.”

As he walks away, I'm still speechless. Who the hell is this guy?

Gone is the dark, broody guy and in his place is this amazing man who's laugh and smile makes my heart swell. I'll do whatever I have to do to keep that smile on his face. I'm looking forward to the next time I get to spend time with him... alone.

As much as I don't want him to kiss me, I do. I want to know what it would be like to have a man like Wes Robinson. He's intense and overwhelming on a normal day. But if he turned that intensity and overwhelming personality into love, I can only imagine how amazing it would be to have it all directed at you.

He has a sensitive side he likes to keep hidden. I don't know what happened to him that he wants to hide this side of himself, but I'm happy to see the man no one else gets. All I know is I won't be able to sit here and read any more of my romance novels. I have to go find an outfit to wear to the movies and create my own romantic night with this mysterious man.



I decide to go with a simple white fitted tee, skinny jeans, and sneakers. I braid my long hair over my shoulder and it hangs to almost my belly button. Charlie always tells me I look like Elsa when I do it this way.

I apply light makeup, just eyeliner and mascara. I don't feel the need to cake on makeup and contour my face. At some

point a boyfriend or husband will see you without makeup on and I'd rather them not be horrified.

As I'm heading out of my bedroom, I spot Wes's sweatshirt on my chair and decide to grab it too. Movie theaters tend to be cold, right? It's not like I'm wearing this because I haven't washed it and it still smells like Wes. Not at all.

Wes, Blake, and Nate are all sitting in the living room right outside of my room waiting for me. Wes's eyes light up the second he spots me.

"Hey, Addi, is it ok if we go see a horror movie? I've really been wanting to see the one that just came out. If you don't like horror movies, we definitely don't have to see it though." Nate's so sweet to ask and make sure it's ok with me. I can't wait to get to know him better.

"We can see a horror movie under two conditions. First off, if I get scared you have to hold my hand. Second, if I jump onto one of your laps because I'm terrified, you can't make fun of me. Three strong men surrounding me should make me feel safe though, right?" I laugh at myself, knowing I'll probably end up with my face buried in one of their shoulders, trying to hide from the movie.

"We'll always protect you, Addi," Nate whispers as he moves his arm around my shoulders and places a gentle kiss on my head. "You can hold my hand anytime you're scared, I told you I've always wanted a sister to protect. Lincoln's the closest thing I ever got."

“What? Lincoln’s your brother?” I stare up at him with wide eyes.

No way! Lincoln and Nate are nothing like each other. There’s no way they’re brothers.

“Not only are they brothers... they’re twins.” Blake chuckles when my jaw falls to the ground with this new information.

“You’re kidding me! You’re nothing alike... I mean if you told me Blake and Lincoln were twins, I’d totally believe that. They’re exactly alike... you’re so sweet and quiet, but Lincoln’s a major flirt and not quiet at all.”

“You do realize we don’t have to have the same personalities to be twins right? It just means we were born at the same time.” Nate smirks.

“But you don’t even look alike.”

“Yo, Linc! Get down here!” Blake yells up the stairs.

A few minutes later, Lincoln jogs down, eyeing us with curiosity.

“What’s up? I told you, I’m not going to the movies.” He folds his arms over his chest and tilts his head to the side like a puppy.

“Addi doesn’t believe you and Nate are brothers, let alone twins,” Blake explains.

“Ha! You wouldn’t be the first, sweetheart. We’re twins, but we aren’t identical twins,” Linc tells me with amusement

filling his eyes.

“Wait, wait, wait. Stand next to each other,” I request and they both comply. I plant my hands on my hips, looking them both up and down for what seems like forever. I walk in circles around them, examining every little detail. “I just don’t see it,” I whisper.

Where Lincoln has dirty blonde hair and dark chocolate eyes, Nate has light brown hair and pale gray eyes. Lincoln’s athletic and has muscle on top of muscle. You’d expect to find him on some sort of field all year round. Nate’s fit with lean muscle, but you’d look for him in a library or studying.

“I promise I wouldn’t make up being related to Linc,” Nate mutters, rolling his eyes.

“Take off your glasses...” I turn my attention to Nate. “See you’re like a sexy version of Captain America with the button-up shirts rolled up to your elbows, fitted pants and nice shoes.” I move my attention to Lincoln as Nate’s face turns pink with embarrassment and continue. “You, on the other hand, are like Chris Hemsworth with longer hair, constant stubble, always sporting a fitted tee and jeans. You don’t even have the same color hair or eyes. I honestly never would’ve guessed you two are related.”

“Well, sweetheart, though I love to be told how sexy I am, I have a date I need to go and not shave for.” Lincoln winks.

“Who’s the poor girl?” Blake flashes him a devilish smirk.

“I’m not telling you.”

“Because you know if I even blink in her direction she’ll be putty in my hands.”

“No! She’s been drooling over me for weeks. I have no doubt she’ll be begging for a kiss by the end of the night and I don’t mean on the mouth.”

“I don’t want to hear this shit,” Wes groans. “Can’t the two of you talk about this shit alone?”

“On that disturbing note, Captain, let’s go watch a horror movie!” I grab Nate’s hand, dragging him toward the door. Blake, Lincoln, and Wes laugh at how uncomfortable Nate is. He definitely doesn’t know how to act around women, but it’s endearing.

Chapter 22



Wes



Addi's next to me in the front seat, dancing along to the music and laughing at something Blake said. She's so happy and carefree. I've never seen anything so beautiful in my entire life.

Before I met her, I felt like life was perfect. I had a big group of friends, college and baseball, and a great family. Now, I'm wanting more. I keep thinking about what it would be like to have a woman like her at my side. To come home after a long day of practice and have her curled up on the couch waiting for me.

I could tug her into my arms and hold her while we watched a movie. Take her out on dates and spoil her like crazy. I'd be happy with someone like Addi.

"Are you going to sit next to me in the movies?" Blake asks as he leans forward from the back seat of my truck.

"No," Addi replies.

"What do you mean no?" Blake asks, his voice full of shock.

“It’s the opposite of yes. Come on, Blake, I’m sure you’ve heard the phrase *no means no* from plenty of girls.”

“You wound me, woman.” Blake holds his chest like she’s ripped out his heart. “Don’t hate me because I’m a lover!”

I glance at Addi as she tosses her head back and laughs. She has a great laugh; one I’m quickly becoming addicted to. One I’d enjoy listening to for the rest of my life.

As soon as we pull into the theater parking lot, I jump out of my truck and run around to Addi’s side to open the door for her. I gently grasp her waist and lift her down from the cab, brushing a loose strand of hair away from her face.

She stares up at me with big blue eyes and smiles. And that smile hits me straight in the chest. Damn, I’m falling for her and I don’t even know how to stop it. Not that I want to stop it.

I rest an arm around her shoulders and lead her to the door. As we step up to the ticket counter, I ask for two tickets and quickly pay for hers before she can protest. She glances up at me with her big doe eyes again.

“You didn’t need to pay for me,” she whispers.

“I asked you to come, of course I’m going to pay for you. Plus, we both know you really don’t want to see a horror movie and you’re only doing it for Nate.” I wink as Nate and Blake join us.

“Why are you paying for her but not me? That’s not exactly fair, Wesley!”

“Don’t call me Wesley. You know I hate that.” I roll my eyes at him.

“Let’s get some snacks.” Nate pushes past Blake and we follow.

“I’m just as pretty as she is!” Blake pouts.

“Not to me,” I call over my shoulder without stopping, Addi’s giggling at my side the whole time.

I buy us some popcorn and a soda to share then we make our way into the theater with Nate leading the way. He’s always fun to come to the movies with. He really gets into the story and it’s entertaining to watch his facial expressions.

He leads us to what he deems *the perfect seats* and holds out his hand for Addi to go first.

“Hell no, Captain. You go first. I’m fairly certain I’m going to need two strong men next to me to make it through this.”

Nate blushes at the nickname and quickly complies. They instantly fall into a quiet conversation between the two of them until the previews start. I’d love to talk to Addi, but Nate needs this. It amazes me how comfortable Addi makes him.

Nate’s been one of my best friends since we were in preschool. I’ve never seen him comfortable around a girl before. Except for maybe Olivia, but she was awkward and uncomfortable around everyone, so I feel like they just gravitated towards each other.

It brings a smile to my face knowing Addi’s able to pull Nate out of his shell, but can also play along with Blake’s

constant flirting and put him in his place. She's perfect.

The movie starts and within thirty minutes, Addi's jumping in her seat and covering her eyes. Her hand is clasped in Nate's and she's squeezing so hard her knuckles are turning white. I chuckle to myself, leaning in to whisper in her ear.

"Why don't you give Nate's hand a rest before you break Captain America." She glances down at her grip on Nate's hand and apologizes to him.

"I *hate* horror movies," she whispers to me and jumps again as another person pops out, scaring her. She buries her head in my shoulder and wraps her hands around my arm as I laugh at her. "Stop laughing at me. I hate being scared," she whines.

"Come here, babe," I whisper as I raise the armrest between us, putting my arm around her, and pulling her into my side.

Every time something scares her, she fists my shirt and buries her head in my chest. I tighten my arm around her and hold her head against my chest with the other hand, making sure I cover her eyes so she won't see anything. Her heart is racing and my own is beating faster than normal. I'm not sure if it's from watching the suspenseful movie, or having her in my arms clinging to me. All I know is I never want her to let go and that scares the shit out of me.

Chapter 23



Addi



“You’re the biggest scaredy cat I’ve ever met.” Blake teases me as we wait for our food to arrive.

“Shut up! I don’t like horror movies.” I pout.

“I wouldn’t have asked you to go if I knew you didn’t like them,” Nate says quietly. “We could’ve seen an action movie or a comedy. I didn’t want you being scared.”

He feels bad and I hate that. He’s such a great friend and he has a massive heart. I don’t want him feeling responsible for any of it.

“No, Nate, it’s ok. Don’t worry about it.” I wave a hand at him, dismissing his concerns. “I told you I was happy to go to it... I just didn’t realize how much of a baby I am.”

When I drop my hand back down next to me on the booth seat, I put it right on top of Wes’s.

“Sorry,” I whisper, trying to remove my hand, but Wes takes it and intertwines our fingers.

I hold in a gasp as goosebumps spread up my arm. I glance from our joined hands up to Wes’s face. He’s hesitant and

vulnerable. Something I've never seen in him before and I'm not expecting it.

He stares at me, silently asking if this is ok. I give a slight nod and squeeze his hand in reassurance. I refuse to admit how much I'm enjoying this because I don't know if it's going to amount to anything and I don't want to have my heart broken.

Our food comes and we eat while there's comfortable conversation about classes and living together.

"You did what?" I glance from Blake to Nate then Wes before returning my gaze to Blake.

"What? It's a tradition to pull a senior prank." Blake shrugs and takes another big bite of his burger. "And it was harmless," he mumbles around his food.

"Did you get in trouble?"

"Nope." Nate chuckles. "The principal couldn't pin it on anyone specifically. And since there was no harm to school property or a person, he didn't try very hard to figure it out."

"Yeah, but how many rolls of plastic wrap did it take to wrap *every* staff member's desk?"

"I think we told each person to bring three rolls." Wes strokes his beard. He's been letting it grow longer. Normally I hate beards, but Wes can definitely pull it off nicely.

"Ok, but how many pads of post-it notes did you need to cover all of their cars?"

“That was a lot more than three per student.” Blake points a finger at me, trying to keep his face serious. “We didn’t cover the whole car, just all of the windows. I think there were fifty staff members and maybe five pads per car? It was a lot.”

“Luckily for us an office supply store was shutting down and when we asked if we could buy every pack of post-it notes they had, they gave them to us a lot cheaper than it normally would’ve been. Hell, I think I still have a few dozen in my closet at my parents.” Wes smiles to himself.

“Didn’t you do anything for your senior prank?” Nate asks.

“Nah, our school didn’t really do that sort of thing.”

The waitress cleared our plates and asked if we want anything else. We decided to order milkshakes and are waiting for them to come.

“Hey, can I have your keys? I want to get my sweatshirt, I’m a little cold.”

“I’ll go get it for you, sweetheart,” Wes says and quickly disappears. I turn back to find Blake wearing a knowing smirk on his cocky face.

“What?” I ask, trying to sound as innocent as possible.

“You like him,” he says in a sing-song way, twirling his finger in my face. I swat his hand away, a blush creeping over my cheeks.

“I do not,” I say, lacking the conviction I’m going for.

“You’re an even worse liar than he is.” Blake chuckles.

“I am not!” I hiss as Wes reappears with his sweatshirt in hand.

“What’d I miss?”

“Nothing,” I say a little too quickly. Wes’s eyebrows draw together slightly before he shrugs and places the sweatshirt over my head.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Blake basically yells, causing a few other customers to glance in our direction before they determine we’re just a few rowdy college students.

“What’s wrong with you, Everson?” Wes responds rolling his eyes.

“Is that your sweatshirt?”

“I think you already know the answer to that.” Wes sounds bored with this conversation, but I’m hanging on to every word, waiting to see what this will reveal.

“Answer my question.”

“Yes, it’s my sweatshirt. I don’t see why that matters.”

“She asked for her sweatshirt.”

“Yes, I gave her the sweatshirt.”

“Are you shitting me?” Blake’s face is full of shock and disbelief as he glances back and forth between Wes and me.

“So, Addi... what are you majoring in?” Nate asks louder than normal for him.

He winks at me like he thinks he’s saving me by interrupting Blake and Wes’s conversation. In reality, I want to

know what Wes's response is going to be.

“Oh... um... I haven't really declared a major yet. I really have no idea what I want to do. I figure I'll get my general credits done and then worry about it.”

“No one cares what everyone else is majoring in, Nate. Now stop interrupting Wes and I. We're discussing important things,” Blake says, his eyes never leaving Wes as he waves off Nate.

“It's really not important,” Nate mutters. Blake glares at him before turning a scowl on Wes.

“It's very important. You see, some chick spilled a beer on my shirt last semester and I asked Wes if I could borrow his sweatshirt. Do you know what he said to me?”

“No,” Wes says in his gravely deep voice. Blake points to him and nods.

“That's exactly what he said. No! No, like I'm not his best friend and I wasn't in need of a clean shirt.”

“I'm pretty sure I was his best friend first.” Nate flashes me a small smirk. He's just trying to annoy Blake and I love it. Blake shoots Nate another glare and I chuckle at them.

“So, you're not new to the word *no*.” I wink. Blake pauses and stares at me for a few seconds, then proceeds to ignore me just like he did to Nate.

“Do you know what he said when I asked why?” When no one answers him, he continues his rant. “He said he doesn't

lend out clothes. That it's his favorite sweatshirt and there's no way in hell anyone else is wearing it."

"Is there a point to this conversation, other than you being melodramatic?" Wes asks, rolling his eyes.

"Yes!" Blake almost yells again. All eyes turn to our table for a few seconds before people return to their own meals.

"What's so special about her? What's she got that I don't?"

"Well, we already established I find her prettier than you," Wes says and Blake gasps while clutching his chest. "And she's got boobs." I instantly choke on my own saliva, my eyes going wide. He says it so nonchalantly like he's talking about the weather. Blake starts howling with laughter and Nate's cheeks flush with embarrassment for me.

"Are you ok?" Wes whispers in my ear.

I turn my wide eyes on him and nod. I have no words. No idea how to respond to him at all.

Apparently, me having boobs is enough of a reason for Blake, because we continue the evening with safe topics and the drive home is quiet. When we walk in the front door, Blake tells us goodnight and quickly makes his way upstairs.

"Thanks for going to see the horror movie... even though you really didn't want to," Nate says quietly. He pulls me into a hug and whispers in my ear. "I really had fun tonight. I hope we can hang out again soon."

I step back after Nate releases me from his hug. "I had fun too, we should make this a weekly thing. The four of us going

out together, I mean. Maybe we can even convince some of the others to join us, too. And thanks for holding my hand, Captain.” I place a quick kiss on his cheek before I turn and head for the kitchen. “Night boys. I’m getting some water then finishing my book before bed,” I call over my shoulder.

Footsteps move up the stairs and I assume I’m alone. I grab a water bottle out of the fridge and spin on my heels to head to my room. I slam into a solid wall of muscles. I gasp and stumble a few steps backwards.

“Whoa, are you ok?” Hunter asks.

“Yeah... I just thought I was alone,” I mumble, stepping around Hunter. I don’t really want to deal with him right now. Things aren’t bad between us, but they’ve been strained.

I make my way through the living room with him following behind me. He clears his throat, watching me expectantly.

“So... what’d you do tonight?”

“I went to the movies and dinner with some of the guys. We saw that new horror movie.”

“You hate horror movies.”

“I know.” I wrinkle my nose. “I didn’t pick the movie. Nate wanted to see it and I didn’t have the heart to say no to him.”

“Do you like Nate?”

“Of course I like Nate. How could you not like Nate?” I stare at him like he’s crazy. I’m positive no one could ever hate Nate.

Hunter's face falls. Oh, he's asking if I *like him* like him. That's different.

"Wait, what? No, I don't like him. I mean I like him, but only as a friend. He told me he's always wanted a sister and wants to be good friends. Nothing more. Neither of us wants anything more," I ramble.

"Oh ok... where'd you get that sweatshirt?" He asks, eyeing it up.

"Oh my gosh! What's with everyone's questions over my sweatshirt?" I basically snap at Hunter.

"I... I've just never seen you in it before. It looks like a guy's sweatshirt. Is it Caleb's?"

"No, it's not Caleb's... it's Wes's. He gave it to me the night he picked me up from work and it was raining. I was cold and he said I could keep it. Why does everyone keep acting like this is a big deal?"

"Because you're wearing a guy's sweatshirt that isn't your boyfriend's," Hunter growls, pushing past me.

I'm left stunned, standing in the middle of the living room. What the hell is wrong with everyone? Yes, I'm wearing Wes's sweatshirt. No, he's not my boyfriend. What none of them realize is I don't have a boyfriend anymore. And I can wear whatever I want, boyfriend or not.

Wes and I are friends, I can wear his sweatshirt. And if I like him more than friends, so what. But what if he likes me more than friends too? He did hold my hand tonight at the

diner... and held me close to him at the movies. He's been really flirty with me lately... oh my gosh, Wes likes me too. Something Blake said shoots to the front of my thoughts.

You like him... You're an even worse liar than he is.

Chapter 24



Wes



“I thought you were going to read?”

She jumps in the air and lets out a little shriek as her hand goes to her chest. She spins around and spots me sitting back on the couch, laughing at her.

“What’s with all of you sneaking up on me? I’m going to get bells to hang around your necks.” Her fingers move to the ends of her hair, undoing the tie. She begins gently unbraiding the strands and finger combing the knots out as she goes.

I stare at her intently. She’s so beautiful and captivating. I’m falling more and more for this woman every time I see her. I don’t think I’ve ever felt like this before.

Mercedes is the only other girl I’ve ever fallen for in my entire life. I thought I was in love with her until I found out she was cheating on me with half of our high school.

Since then, I’ve kept everyone at a distance. I never wanted to feel the way I did after she destroyed me. I decided I’d never give someone that sort of power over my life again. I

built walls around me to protect my heart and keep everyone far away.

Something about Addi makes me want to drop those walls. One brick after another is tumbling to the ground and shattering into millions of pieces.

She's different. She's been through her own hell, but she isn't letting her past affect her. She's happy keeping it hidden from the world. She doesn't want anyone to know her weakness or to show her pity and I can respect that.

I just wish I could figure out what her demons are. I want to share her pain and be a shoulder she can cry on when things get tough.

But right now, I can't pull my eyes away from the angel in front of me, I want to thread my hands through her hair. Feel the softness slip between my fingers and hold her in my arms as I kiss her. I want her melting against me and finding comfort in my embrace.

I slowly lift myself off the couch and move behind her before I can stop myself.

"Let me help you," I whisper in her ear, sending visible chills through her body.

I lightly grasp her hands, remove them from her hair and guide them to her sides. I unbraid a small portion of hair and gently run my fingers through her soft strands, making sure to remove any knots. I keep going, unbraiding small sections at a time and removing any tangles until I've completely removed

her braid. Her silky hair falls in loose waves down her back. I slowly spin Addi around to face me.

“You look stunning like this. It’s taking everything in me not to kiss you.”

She sucks in a shaky breath and holds it. Her eyes search mine before dropping to my mouth. Damn, she wants me too.

“I’m not going to kiss you, Addi,” I whisper.

“You’re not?” She asks with a hint of sadness in her voice. She lifts her gazes up to mine with those big blue eyes.

“I won’t kiss you until I know I’m the only man on your mind. I want you to want this as much as I do, if not more.” I step away from her, needing to create some sort of distance before I make a move. She’s the type of woman I could become so immersed with that I would forget my own name. “All of us are going to a party on Friday night, will you come with us?”

“I... um... I don’t... I don’t know if I should,” she stutters. She’s struggling to keep her emotions in check around me. The sexual tension between us has been building and building over the past few weeks. I think last night when we went to the movies was our tipping point. I know she wants me to kiss her, but I’ll wait until it’s killing her.

“Please, Addi? I want you to come.”

She let out another shaky breath and nods slightly.

“Is that a yes?”

She nods again. “Yes, I’ll come.”

Chapter 25



Hunter



“Morning, Hunter.” Addi smiles over her cup of tea at me. She’s adorable with her hair in high pigtails, wearing an off the shoulder shirt and pajama pants. I swear she’s going to be the death of me.

“Morning, Tink. How’d you sleep?” I pour myself a cup of coffee, keeping my eyes on her the entire time. She lets out a long sigh, staring into her mug.

“Horribly. I kept waking up from dreams about that stupid movie. I think I checked my closet and under my bed at least fifty times. I ended up sleeping with my lights on,” she mumbles and I can’t help but laugh at her.

“Why didn’t you come to get me? I would’ve checked for monsters. I would’ve slept in a chair for you or held you while you slept.” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them and I instantly feel like an idiot. She has a boyfriend. I repeat those words to myself over and over again.

But she also has feelings for Wes. I find it weird that she hasn’t broken up with her boyfriend yet, but maybe she likes the old dog.

“Thanks, Hunt, I’ll keep you in mind next time.” She glances up at me with a shy smile.

Wait... does that mean she doesn’t think the idea of me holding her is insane? Maybe she’s starting to feel more for me. Do I take a chance and ask her out or do I remain a coward and keep my mouth shut?

“Are you doing anything today?” I ask before I can change my mind.

“Nope. What’s up?”

“I’m going on a hike. Would you want to come with me? We could have a picnic lunch.”

“That sounds awesome. When do you want to go?”

“Is an hour too soon?”

“Nope. Sounds perfect.” She gets up to put her mug in the sink and flashes me a smile. “I’ll see you in an hour.”

Chapter 26



Addi



“Oh my gosh, Hunter, how much further?” I whine through my panting breaths. I don’t know the last time I worked out this hard.

He said this would be a nice leisurely hike. It’s not. It feels like we’re climbing straight up the side of a mountain. I’m not sure how much more my muscles can take.

Nate tried to warn me about how hard hikes with Hunter can be and I waved him off, insisting it couldn’t be that bad.

Sweat is pouring down my back. My clothes are soaked through and I’m really happy I opted for a black shirt instead of a white one. I really don’t need to have see-through fabric clinging to my body.

Ahead of me, Hunter glances back, his smile lighting up his face. It reminds me of the summer we spent together.

He’s so carefree today. He’s happy and smiling, talkative and sweet. A complete contrast to how he’s been at home.

“Maybe another quarter of a mile. I promise it’s worth it.” His breathing is calm and I swear he hasn’t even broken a

sweat yet.

“I don’t know if I can make it,” I mutter.

I rest my hand against the closest tree trunk for support and bend down, trying to catch my breath. Hunter turns back and squats down in front of me with his back to me.

“What are you doing?” I laugh.

“Jump on. We can piggyback it for the rest of the way. It’s flatter terrain from here on.”

“Such a gentleman, offering to carry me when it’s easier. You made me do all the hard climbing myself,” I tease him.

“If it makes you feel better, you can carry me back down.” He winks and I laugh even harder.

Everything seems lighter with us today. I feel like we’re friends for the first time since he showed up in the pub. This is the only time he hasn’t brought up or hinted at what happened that fateful day I ran away from him. It’s refreshing to just hang out with him.

I’m not sure I trust him. He could drop me so easily. I slowly walk over to him and arch my eyebrow.

“You promise you won’t drop me?”

“Promise. I’d never hurt you, Tink.” I quickly climb on his back and wrap my arms around his neck, my legs around his waist. He holds on to my thighs and stands up straight. “Scouts honor! I won’t drop you.” He holds up his hand, making me scream in fear of being dropped.

My body doesn't respond to being wrapped around him. He doesn't send tingles through me like Wes does. My skin warms to his touch and my heart races, but I don't feel that zing.

"You weren't a scout," I squeal as he takes off in a run towards the trail, both of us laughing. We get to our destination quickly and Hunter slowly lowers me to the ground.

"See over there," he says, pointing to a beautiful waterfall about fifteen feet away.

I must've been laughing so loud I didn't hear the water raining down into the pool below us. It's absolutely breathtaking.

"This is my favorite place to come." He steps close to the edge. I'm hesitant to follow him, but he takes my hand tightly. "Trust me, Tink, I won't let anything bad happen to you." I silently nod and step to the edge with him. It's so pretty. I've never seen anything like it. I can't rip my gaze away.

"It's beautiful," I whisper almost like if I talk too loudly, I'll ruin this scene before me. The sound of water crashing onto the rocks below is almost soothing. The birds chirping in the trees makes this feel magical. I close my eyes and just listen.

"It really is," Hunter whispers almost to himself. I open my eyes to catch him staring at me. "Let's eat, I'm starving after carrying you here."

“Oh, whatever. It was like five minutes.” I roll my eyes at his sexy smirk.

Hunter spreads a blanket on the grass and pulls out a container of grapes, some sandwiches, and bottles of water from the basket. We munch on our lunches, quietly appreciating the scene before us.

“I could lay down and take a nap right now. It’s so peaceful out here,” I mumble more to myself than to Hunter.

“Lay your head on my lap.” He pats his thighs.

“No, it’s fine,” I wave him off, but he pulls me between his legs.

His back is leaning against a tree trunk with a leg on either side of me. I rest against his chest and peer up at him. Our eyes lock and he smiles that beautiful smile I fell in love with. His eyes drift to my lips as I lick a spot of mustard off my thumb.

I can tell he wants to kiss me and I can’t let that happen again. I’m not sure how I’ll react and I’d be mortified if history were to repeat itself. I wouldn’t even be able to find my way back to the car. I’d die in the woods. Plus, I don’t like Hunter like that. I need to draw a line between us and not cross it.

“Want a grape?” I ask, my voice squeaking. I hold up a grape towards him

“Sure.” Hunter opens his mouth. I throw the grape up in the air and he catches it in his mouth.

“Score!” I yell, sending a bunch of birds flying out of nearby trees. I need to keep him in the friendzone and make sure he knows to stay there.

Chapter 27



Wes



Addison. Fuck.

Addi's going to be the death of me. I don't know what it is about her that makes me lower my guard, but there's something. She's so honest and vulnerable, real and transparent. It makes me want to be the same way.

I want to be myself around her, not the man I've built to keep people away. But Addi saw through it. She's the only one who's ever seen through the façade. It terrifies me to show her the true me and risk how she might react. At the same time, she makes me want to take that risk.

There's something so lonely about her. I want to make her happy. I want to keep that alluring smile on her face forever.

It's Friday night. All of the boys are gathering in the kitchen, ready to go. We're just waiting on Addi.

"What the hell's taking her so long?" Blake whines like a toddler.

"Chill man, I'll go check on her," I respond quickly before Hunter can volunteer to get her.

I know he has a thing for her, but I'm not willing to back down. He had his shot with her before, but something happened and she walked away. I have no idea what transpired and I don't really care. I just know she left him after he tried to kiss her and never contacted him again.

I knock on Addi's door and wait.

"Who is it?" She calls.

"It's Wes."

The door opens a few inches and Addi peeks out, glancing around to see if anyone else is with me.

"It's just me.... what's wrong?" I ask, laughing at her strange behavior.

"I can't get my zipper up." She pouts.

"If you let me come in, I'll help. But I can't help through the door, sweetheart."

A blush creeps up her neck and spreads across her cheeks, she quickly ushers me into her room and shuts the door.

"The zipper's stuck..." she mumbles, still trying to zip it up herself.

"Turn around and let me do it," I say gently.

She slowly turns until she's facing away from me. Her back is bare, her skin soft and sexy. I can't help but notice the absence of a bra and her black lace thong is just barely visible where the zipper is stuck. Ever so softly, I run my fingers down the center of her back to where the zipper is. She shivers

under my touch. I'm affecting her just as much as she affects me.

"I think the zipper's stuck on your thong," I whisper in her ear. I don't need one of the guys overhearing and razzing us all night.

"Ohmygosh," she moans out in one quick word. She covers her face in her hands.

I spin her around, grasping both of her wrists and gently pull them away from her face. I want to make sure she really hears me.

"I'm so embarrassed! I never should've let you come into my room!"

"Stop, there's no reason to be embarrassed. I can fix it, but there could be some accidental ass touching." I wink.

"Ugh...just do it. Try not to rip the lace though, that's my favorite pair." She turns back around to let me get to work.

"They might be my favorite too," I mumble.

"Wes!" She gasps and I chuckle.

"Sorry, you weren't meant to hear that." I quickly work at getting the zipper unstuck and truly do my best at not touching her ass. I'm not going to take advantage of the situation.

I send up a silent prayer and thank God for letting me be the lucky man to check on Addi. If Hunter had volunteered first, he'd be the one with his hands on my girl and I truly believe he'd take advantage of this opportunity.

“All done, let’s see this beauty,” I spin her around to face me.

My jaw drops. She’s breathtaking. She’s wearing a tight black off the shoulders dress, that hugs her figure beautifully. Her long hair is down in loose curls hanging low on her back. Her makeup is done to perfection with a classic smokey eyed look with a little bit of lip gloss.

My sisters taught me all about makeup. Not that I asked, but with three older sisters, I’m well versed in everything girl. I can tell Addi doesn’t have any foundation on at all, her perfect skin doesn’t need it. Her tan legs end in black wedge sandals, bringing her closer to my height.

“How do I look?” She asks so quietly I almost don’t hear her. She’s incredibly shy, biting her bottom lip looking sexier than ever. I grab her hand, spinning her in a circle.

“You’re stunning, darling, absolutely exquisite.” I tug her to a stop, pulling her into my arms and whispering in her ear, “Every girl will be jealous and every guy will want you. Eyes will be on you all night.”

She pulls back, gazing up at me with those crystal blue eyes I haven’t been able to get off my mind. “I only want one set of eyes on me.” With that, she grabs my hand and pulls me along to the kitchen.

As we enter the room, six jaws drop and six sets of eyes widen. A few of the guys open and close their mouths but nothing comes out.

“Damn, Addi, no one will mistake you for being one of the boys looking like that,” Blake murmurs, his gaze traveling up and down her body. I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to commit bodily harm to my best friend as much as I do right now.

“Thanks,” she murmurs. After a few moments of awkward silence and everyone staring at her, she speaks up. “Alright, can we all stop staring? I get it, I have boobs, now you all know. Can we go now?”

That snaps them out of it and they all start grumbling in response and walk out the backdoor.

“Is your boyfriend coming?” Hunter asks as we climb into Nick’s SUV.

Fuck! Addi has a boyfriend? How did I not know? Thinking back, I don’t think she’s mentioned any guy since we moved in here. She definitely never brought the guy to the house and I don’t remember her ever going out.

As far as I can remember she was always either working or at home curled up on the couch, reading or studying. Why wouldn’t he drive her home from work when her car was in the shop? Why wouldn’t he show himself at our house to make it clear she is taken?

Hunter’s sitting on one side of Addi and I’m on the other. Nick’s driving and Blake’s up front. Cole, Lincoln, and Nate went in Nate’s SUV.

I feel like Hunter’s trying to put me in my place, to tell me to back off and he has dibs on her first. Screw that. Addi’s a

grown woman and can make her own decisions on who she wants to be with. And if that isn't me then yeah, it will sting, but I'll survive as long as I can keep her as my friend. I don't think I could let her go entirely, even after only having her in my life for such a short period of time. Addi tenses next to me once Hunter asks about her boyfriend.

"You have a boyfriend?" I try to keep the surprise out of my voice as I ask, but fail miserably.

"We're not together anymore," she whispers, barely audible.

"What'd you say?" Hunter asks.

"We're not together anymore," she says more loudly than she needs to.

"Why? What happened?" Hunter probes some more.

"Because, Hunter, I realized I didn't want to be dating an old dog. That I wanted something more. Something new and exciting. Something that makes me feel a spark instead of just being comfortable. I want someone who's going to be there for me and be reliable. Someone I can count on no matter what. Someone who makes me feel special. Is that ok with you?" She's on the verge of tears, her voice strained.

"Yeah. Jeez, I'm sorry, Tink. Is there anything I can do?" Hunter responds.

"Just drop it, Hunt, you're upsetting her," I tell him as Addi curls into my side, putting her head on my bicep.

I move my arm, pulling her in closer so she can rest her head on my chest. I've never wanted to protect someone the

way I want to protect Addi.

I glance over at Hunter and catch him glaring at me like I just stole his favorite toy. What a shithead. I turn my attention back to the woman in my arms and can't help but smile when she wraps her arms around my waist.

When we arrive at the party I quickly get out of the car and turn around to help Addi. She takes my hand, but before she can get out, I stop her.

“Are you ok? We can go home. You don't have to do this. We can watch a movie of your choice and eat popcorn while curled up on the couch together,” I whisper.

“I'm ok, Wes. Thank you for everything. I want to go in. You asked me to come to the party with you and I want to. Now put on that 'I'm an unapproachable badass' face so the girls don't crawl all over you,” she replies with a smirk and I help her down from the car.

“Wes! Come here for a minute, I have a question,” Nick shouts from the other side of the car.

“I'll be right back, stay here,” I tell Addi before I run around the car to see what Nick needs. “What's up?” I ask as I get closer to him.

“Take care of her, man.” He levels me with a stern look.

“Of course, I'll take care of her.” I run a hand through my hair. I don't really understand what he's getting at. I shake my head and turn to walk away, but Nick grabs my arm.

“I know you, Wes. You don’t fall easily, but you’ve fallen for her. She’s like a sister to me and I’ll do everything to protect her... She doesn’t trust people, yet you have her complete trust. Don’t blow it. She won’t give you a second chance, no matter how much she wants to. She won’t allow any guy to have a second chance. Once she’s made a choice, she sticks to it even if she knows she’s made a mistake. She doesn’t dwell on her mistakes. She just moves on. Look at Hunter, his screw up wasn’t even really his fault, but she won’t give him a second chance. Now we’ll have to deal with a miserable Hunter until he finds a new girl...” He shakes his head. “Just protect her and don’t hurt her. She’s one of a kind.”

I rub the back of my neck, meeting his gaze. “I know, man. I see it too. I don’t know what the future holds, but I know I want her in it. I won’t blow this. I swear I’d never do anything to hurt her. You have my word.”

“Good, because if you hurt her, I’ll have to kick your ass and I’m not exactly sure how I’d accomplish that.”

I chuckle as I head back over to Addi and put my hand on the small of her back, leading her into the party.

Chapter 28



Addi



Wes is captivating tonight. He's wearing dark jeans that hug his toned butt with white sneakers. He has on a black button up shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His chiseled jaw has a well-maintained beard growing on it, making him even sexier. His dark brown hair hangs across his forehead. It's all messy, like he's been running his hands through it all day.

His sapphire blue eyes are intensely locked on me and every time my gaze falls on him a flirty smile spreads across his face. His hand never leaves the small of my back no matter who he's talking to. It's like he's claiming me as his own. Shockingly, it makes me happy to think of myself as his.

When a few of the guys from the baseball team stop to talk with him, I expect him to ignore me, but he doesn't.

"This is my girl, Addi. Addi, this is Mattson and Foxy. They're on the baseball team with Blake, Lincoln, and me."

"It's nice to meet you." I smile, moving closer to Wes's side. I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep my smile from splitting my face in two.

Wes wraps an arm around my waist and presses a soft kiss to my temple. The warmth of his hand seeps through my thin dress and heats my skin. His large hand on me makes me feel safe and protected.

We talk to his teammates for a few more minutes before I get overheated from the number of bodies in the house.

“I’m going to grab a drink; do you want something?” I yell over the music to Wes.

“Sure, get me whatever you’re getting,” he responds. When I try to walk away, he grabs my hand and pulls me back to him. He leans down and whispers in my ear, “Thank you. You really are stunning. Hurry back before one of these idiots thinks you’re here alone and tries to hit on you.” He smirks and winks at me before letting me go.

I head straight to the kitchen and find an assortment of beer, whiskey, tequila, and some flavored mixes. I grab the sour mix and whiskey, starting to make my own whiskey sours. My favorite drink.

My sister used to make them for me after everything happened. She said I might be underage, but I’ve gone through more than most adults do in their entire life so I deserve a drink every now and then.

She’s my rock and helped me get through some of the toughest years of my life. Her, Charlie, and Nicky are my family. They refused to let me fall into the depths of depression like many have. They made sure I made it through my low points as well as I could’ve.

I grab the two solo cups and head back out to the living room to find Wes. Standing ten feet away from him, I spot Caleb talking to some trashy blonde. I'm shocked to see him here, but I'm not upset or hurt to find him with someone else. I don't care, she can have him. I want Wes and only Wes.

There isn't anything specifically wrong with Caleb, other than him being a snob. Any girl who met him instantly told me how lucky I was to have him. I just didn't feel lucky. He's attractive, fit, comes from a good family, and is nice, at least until I tried to break up with him. Plus, to top it off, he's rich.

Girls threw themselves at him and here I dumped him because I felt nothing for him. He's pissed I broke up with him but I couldn't keep living a lie. I refuse to live a life I don't want after everything I've been through.

I keep my eyes on Wes as I head straight to him. His face lights up when he spots me and he steps away from whatever conversation he was having. He meets me halfway and I hand him his drink, before leading him out to the front yard. I want him to myself for a little bit.

“What's this?” Wes asks after we're outside.

“Whiskey sour. It's my favorite. My sister used to make them for me when I was going through some tough things.” I stare down into the plastic cup, thinking of all the times Kasey took care of me and put my needs above her own. She's the greatest sister anyone could ask for.

Wes slides his arm around my waist and pulls me close to him. He gently kisses my head, letting his lips linger longer

than necessary.

“I’m sorry anyone hurt you, Snow. Thinking of you as anything other than happy kills me.” He kisses my temple again.

We’re quiet for a while, just enjoying being wrapped up in each other. This might be my new favorite place in the world.

“Who’s that asshole staring at you?” His brows furrow, he’s both annoyed and concerned.

I spot Caleb walking towards us out of the corner of my eye. I don’t want to deal with him right now and there’s only one thing that might make him back off. Hopefully, Wes won’t hate me for doing this. I put our drinks down on a retaining wall and snake my arms around his neck. He grins down at me and puts his hands on my hips.

“Please, play along,” I whisper so only he can hear.

He simply nods. “Anything for you.”

I stare into Wes’s eyes before I pull him down to me, pressing my lips against his. Wes responds immediately, kissing me back and wrapping his arms around my waist. He’s an amazing kisser. His lips move with skill and make my knees weak. Butterflies erupt in my stomach and go crazy. Then the entire world around us seems to melt into the background and all I can focus on is Wes.

Wes deepens the kiss, his tongue grazes my bottom lip, asking for permission. I gently part my lips, allowing his tongue in. He makes me feel desired and wanted. Like we’re

the only two people in the world even when we're surrounded by dozens of other people.

Our tongues dance together as my heart races. I feel Wes's beating out of control against my body. He holds me tighter against him as I pull back from our kiss. He rests his forehead on mine and we stay that way until our breathing evens out.

"Damn," he half-whispers, half moans.

"Damn," I whisper back.

"What are you doing here, Addison?" Caleb hisses from behind me. "You're my girlfriend. Why are you kissing this piece of shit?"

I spin around quickly, throwing my hands on my hips and I glare at Caleb. Wes moves behind me, gently placing his hand on my lower back. The small gesture means the world to me. I know he'll have my back no matter what's about to happen.

"Who the hell do you think you are, Caleb?" I narrow my gaze on him and keep my voice firm.

"I'm your boyfriend. What are you doing with this asshole?"

"I broke up with you! I'm not your girlfriend anymore!"

"Oh, come on, baby, that was a misunderstanding. Just a little fight." Caleb tries to take a step towards me, but I take a step back, straight into Wes's chest. He places one hand on either hip and holds me in a strong, yet gentle grip.

“There was no misunderstanding, Caleb. We. Are. Done. I’m pretty sure your parting words were ‘You’ll regret this for the rest of your life and I’ll never take you back’. Well, guess what? I’m not regretting it, and I’m not trying to get you back,” I say with strength and pity in my voice.

Why can’t he understand this? He barely wanted to do anything together, yet now he’s losing it because I’ve moved on? He doesn’t want me, but he also doesn’t want anyone else to have me.

“You little slut!” He roars. “I gave you everything and you’re breaking up with me so you can sleep around with this ogre! How dare you! You’re mine, not his!” Caleb makes a move and grabs both of my wrists, I pull back and struggle to free myself from his grip.

In the blink of an eye, Wes yanks me behind him and gets right in Caleb’s face. He towers over Caleb by at least four inches. His solid muscular build makes Caleb look like a stick figure in comparison. All I can do is stare. Wes is intense and isn’t backing down. The muscles in his arms tighten as he makes a fist at his sides.

“You *will not* speak to Addi like that. And you’ll *never* touch her again. Ever! Apologize to her now,” he growls into Caleb’s face.

Caleb has to look up to make eye contact with Wes. He hates dealing with people bigger or stronger than him. He likes to feel like he’s in control and with Wes he’s not.

“You can have the whore. I can find someone better than her in a second.” Caleb narrows his eyes as he speaks.

Wes glances over his shoulder at me, his gaze softening as it lands on me. His sapphire eyes sweep over my body, examining me, trying to see if I’m ok. I nod my head, wordlessly telling him I’m fine.

I don’t realize I’m rubbing my wrists until Wes’s gaze locks on the movement. I glance down, noticing how red they are. He must’ve grabbed me a lot harder than I realized. Wes briefly makes eye contact with me before he whips around with another intense glare focused on Caleb.

“You hurt her.”

“Like I care,” he spits back and tries to push Wes. Wes is a lot stronger than Caleb and barely moves at all, making Wes chuckle.

Before I can even process anything, he punches Caleb square in the jaw. The sound of flesh on flesh is nauseating. Caleb stumbles back a few steps before he lunges for Wes again. Somehow in his flailing attempts, he ends up punching Wes in the eye.

I stare in horror as they keep going after each other. Caleb stops to spit out blood repeatedly and Wes has a cut above his eyebrow that’s trickling blood down his face.

I hate that they’re fighting, but I don’t know how to stop it. They’re attacking each other so angrily and relentlessly; trading blows one after another.

I'm scared Wes is going to get hurt, but I'm also scared he's going to really injure Caleb. Caleb's a misogynist jerk, but I don't want him to end up in the hospital.

A chuckle fills the air, drawing my attention from the fighting. I glance up to find Hunter casually leaning against the post on the porch, laughing at the scene before him.

"Hunter, help!" I scream at him as rage begins to boil inside of me. He's just standing there, laughing at what's unfolding in front of him.

"I'm enjoying the show," he slurs his words, swaying slightly to the side. I don't have time for him. I turn back around to face Wes and Caleb. Whipping out my phone, I send Nicky a text.

Addi: HELP! Front yard!

"Stop it! Please stop!" I scream over and over again, but neither one of them are listening to me. I really don't think they even hear me. "Hunter, please help!" I scream, desperate to have someone break up the fight. I know there's no way I can break them up. Even if I tried, I'd probably get hurt.

Nicky flies off the porch with Cole, Blake, Lincoln, and Nate following. Blake grabs me and pulls me into his arms as I watch Cole and Nate grab Caleb and throw him onto the grass. Nicky and Lincoln grab Wes and pull him to the other side of the yard.

The guys gather around Wes, asking what happened and checking to make sure he's ok. They're all standing in a way

so their eyes are on Caleb in case he decides to be stupid and make another move to attack.

Blake's rubbing my back in small circles and whispering as he holds me tightly in his arms with my head on his chest and his chin resting on top.

"It's ok, Addi. I've got you... the guys got them separated... everything's okay, sweetie... shhhhhh it's ok... don't cry, baby girl... it's all gonna be ok."

After a few minutes he pulls back so he can get a look at my face. He gently wipes the tears off my cheeks. I didn't even realize I was crying until he made a comment about it.

"Don't cry, baby girl."

I'm not really crying, I'm full out sobbing. Shaking like a leaf, gasping between sobs while Blake holds me tightly.

Blake Everson, the player.

He holds me with so much love. Almost like if he lets go, I might fall apart and won't be able to be put back together again.

He holds me as a big brother would and my heart softens towards him. He tries to put on this tough guy, player attitude, but in reality, he's a big teddy bear. I think he only feels confident when he hides behind his douchebag personality.

What's up with these guys? They all hide behind these fake personalities, fearing someone might see the real them. Their real personalities are amazing, so why hide it?

As my sobs slow, Blake leads me to Nicky's car and opens the back door. He helps me into the seat and holds my hands, gazing into my eyes.

“He just watched and laughed even when I asked him to help. He wouldn't move. He saw Caleb hurt me and he wouldn't move. Said he was enjoying the show.” I choke out, as fresh tears begin rushing into my eyes again.

“Who, Addi? Who'd you ask to help?”

“Hunter,” I whisper so quietly I'm not sure if Blake hears me.

“Is it ok if I go check on the guys? Will you be ok here alone?” He whispers.

I can't answer, so I just nod my head. He leans forward and kisses my forehead.

“I'll be right back, sweetheart.”

Chapter 29



Hunter



These two are beating the shit out of each other and it's hilarious. When the boys burst out of the house and grab Wes and Caleb, throwing them away from each other, I howl even harder.

The only part that makes me feel bad is watching Addi sob into Blake's arms. She should be in my arms. She should be my girl. I should go punch Wes and Caleb for thinking they can have her.

We had a great time on our hike and things were finally looking up for us. We were comfortable. We were laughing and having a great time. She's not either of theirs, she's mine.

I'm not going to get involved in this fight though, those guys just sealed their fates with Addi. She doesn't like violence and she's not going to want anything to do with either of them after tonight. Maybe I'll get her by default.

I stare as Blake holds her and leads her to the car with such love and care. I've never seen him act like this before. Shit, is he going to go after Addi now too?

He gently shuts the car door with Addi inside and shoots a glare in my direction. What the fuck did I do? I don't even have time to contemplate what I've done wrong because in the blink of an eye Blake's in my face yelling and screaming.

“You fucking asshole! She needed you and you stood here and laughed! Caleb hurt her! Wes is your friend and you didn't step in to help! What the fuck's wrong with you?” He spits in my face.

I've never seen Blake so angry before. I don't really understand why he cares; Addi isn't his. Within seconds Nick's at his side, scowling at me just as hard as Blake is.

“What's going on now?” He questions Blake.

“Addi told me she asked Hunter for help when the fight broke out. Hunter refused to help and was laughing. Said he was enjoying the show. The girl he acts like he's in love with, asks for help after being physically hurt, and he laughs in her face. He won't even help his friend in a fight. What a shithead.”

Nick tosses Blake his keys, “Can you take Addi home? Take Lincoln with you and tell Cole and Nate to get Wes into Nate's car. I'll be there in a minute.” Nick's voice is soft, Blake nods and walks away. When he's out of earshot, Nick levels me with a scowl and his voice develops a sharp edge. “What's going on, Hunter? This isn't like you.”

“Why should I come to her rescue? She doesn't want me.”

“You’ve never been a guy to ignore a damsel in distress. Never mind that, you’ve definitely never been someone who’d laugh at his friend when he’s in a fist fight with someone else. Especially when someone physically hurt the girl you supposedly have a thing for. Why didn’t you have his back? Why didn’t you have hers?”

“He wants her. She’s falling for him. I wasn’t going to help him.”

“Look, I’m going to be straight with you, you fucked up. In so many ways, dude. You’ve just destroyed any trust Addi still had in you. If Wes finds out what went down, you’re screwed. We all know how he gets when he’s pissed. You’re changing rooms.” He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “I want you to take my room tonight and tomorrow we’ll handle moving your stuff. You can’t be in the room next to Addi. She’s been through enough in the past five years. She needs someone she trusts next to her and that isn’t you. I’ll talk to her in the morning and hope I can smooth things over with her. You’ll be lucky if she still wants you living there. Trust is a big deal to her, man, and you fucked that up.”

I don’t respond. I have nothing to say to Nick. They can all go fuck off. I’m done with all of them.

“We’re leaving, if you’re coming, get into Nate’s car. Otherwise, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I tilt my beer back, gulping it down until the cup is empty. Then I throw it in the bushes and march back inside. Fuck them all, I don’t owe them anything.

Chapter 30



Addi



Our ride back to the house is silent. Blake's driving and Lincoln's sitting beside me with his arm around my shoulders.

It's surprising how comfortable I am with all of the boys. We've lived together for such a short period, yet I trust all of them... except Hunter. I know the rest of them will always take care of me and do what they can to help. It makes me feel like I have my own little family for the first time in a long time.

When we pull into the driveway, Blake throws the car into park and hops out. He opens my door and takes one of my hands in his, leading me inside. Lincoln holds on to my other one tightly, both of them trying to be the strength I need right now. They lead me to one of the L shaped couches and force me to sit, never letting go of my hands.

"What's going through that pretty little head of yours?" Lincoln asks, rubbing my skin softly with his thumb.

"Is Wes ok?" I whisper, almost afraid of the answer.

“He’s a little beaten up, but looks better than that Caleb dude does. He’s gonna hurt tomorrow though,” Lincoln murmurs.

“Why didn’t Hunter help?” I stare straight ahead, not really seeing anything.

“Fuck if we know,” Blake blurts out. Lincoln flashes him a dirty glare.

“He made a bad decision. I’m sure he regrets it,” Lincoln responds gently. I know he’s trying to keep peace, but I don’t want that right now. I want him to be just as mad at Hunter as Blake and I are.

“I think he’s mad at me. He still has a crush on me. We went for a hike this week and it was great. Just the two of us... But when other people are around, things are all weird between us. I don’t think he’s taking it well that I’m spending time with Wes. I think that’s why he didn’t do anything. He wants to get back at Wes and me.”

“Addi, that’s bull shit!” Blake growls.

“Everson, chill,” Lincoln scolds him.

“No, Linc, nothing excuses what he did. Caleb hurt Addi. Addi asked for help, he should’ve helped. Simple as that. Wes was in a fist fight, he should’ve helped. Simple as that. He can be pissy, but that doesn’t mean he leaves them alone when they need help. I don’t care if he’s mad that Wes likes Addi. It doesn’t excuse his behavior.”

I can feel the tension rolling off of Blake. Him and Wes are really close. I'm sure it kills him to see someone who's practically a brother get hurt and their friend not help. I know Blake would do anything to help Wes.

We're quiet for a few minutes before the backdoor opens and Nicky, Nate, and Cole enter the living room a moment later. I leap off the couch as soon as I see them.

"Where's Wes?" I ask, concern flooding my voice.

"He's coming, give him a second. He's hurting," Cole says softly.

When my gaze lands on Wes, I gasp, putting my hand over my mouth. He looks terrible. The cut above his eyebrow is still bleeding and his cheek is covered in dried blood. His jaw is swollen and so is one eye. His knuckles are cut up and bloody, and he's limping slightly as he walks.

"Wes!" I cry, running into his arms. He immediately pulls my head against his chest and holds me tight. I'm finally able to breathe a little easier knowing he's ok. I can deal with banged up as long as he's not seriously hurt.

"I'm alright, Snow. Are you ok?"

"I'm fine. But, you're a mess. Let me get you patched up."

"It's ok. You should relax. I can do it myself."

"No! This fight happened because you were defending me and I'm going to bandage you up. No arguing," I order, grabbing his hand and pulling him into my room. I guide him

to the bed and gently push him down on the foot of it. “I’ll be right back, don’t move a muscle. I need to get some things.”

I ransack my bathroom cabinets until I find the first aid supplies I need to treat all of his wounds. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror as I gather everything in my arms and stop dead in my tracks. I look terrible.

Makeup is smeared all over my face. I look like a raccoon and a panda had a baby and it’s ugly. I quickly remove all of my makeup, the red splotchy face that’s left behind won’t be sexy, but it’s better than the black smudges running down my cheeks.

“Why didn’t you tell me I looked like shit?” I scowl at Wes playfully.

“Because you didn’t. You always look beautiful.”

“Wes, I had makeup smeared all over my face.”

“Because you’re not afraid to show your emotion. You don’t hide behind some mask. I love that about you.” He reaches for me as soon as I’m close enough.

“Hmm, what else do you love about me?” I tease him, trying to lighten the mood.

Wes has this way of making me feel like I’m the only woman he can see. He’s sweet and observant. He knows exactly what I need and when I need it.

Everything seems to be moving so quickly with him, but I can’t help myself. There’s a spark between us I’ve never felt before and I want more.

My mom and sister always said falling in love is like black ice. Sometimes you see it coming and can avoid falling and other times it takes you by surprise. One second you're going about your day and the next you're flat on your ass and have no idea what just happened. It comes out of nowhere and can turn your whole world upside down. All you can do is hope when you fall on your ass, you have a good guy waiting to help you back up. I'm not saying I'm falling in love with Wes, but there's definitely something going on here that didn't exist before the rainy night I called him to pick me up.

I stare down at him and take his chin in my hand. I tilt his head back so I can see his cut better and my eyes lock on his. I get lost in his sapphire eyes and am distracted for a few seconds before I clear my throat and focus on cleaning him up.

"This might sting a little," I whisper as I dab his cut with some alcohol to get all the dirt out.

"Fuck, Addi! You're not supposed to use alcohol!"

"Oh, stop being a baby! I do it all the time...now tell me, what else do you love about me?" I ask again as I gently brush the wet washcloth across his skin, trying to remove the dried blood.

I still can't believe he fought Caleb for me. He had my back. No other guy has ever done that. Well, other than Nicky, but he's basically my brother so he doesn't count.

"I love the way you smile and laugh. You brighten the room just by being there. I love how when you read, you're so focused on the story that you forget everything around you. I

love how you don't realize how beautiful you are. I love that you got embarrassed when your sexy lace thong got stuck in your zipper. I love how you trusted me to not take advantage of your zipper situation. I love how you scrunch your nose when you're studying and you're confused. I love how you bite your bottom lip when you're nervous or focusing hard. I love how you light up when you talk about your sister and Charlie. I love how you're not afraid to be yourself no matter what. I love that you don't back down even when you're scared. I hate that someone hurt you badly, even though I don't know who or how, but I love how you still hold your head high and don't let it consume you." Wes speaks with so much tenderness and his incredible eyes never break contact with mine.

It's like he can see into the deepest parts of my soul and loves it all. I freeze in place with my hand on his cheek, long before he finishes talking.

"Am I all fixed Doc?" Wes asks when I still don't move.

"Not yet, I got the blood off, but now you need a bandage above your eye... Nicky? Can you bring me two ice packs?" I call into the living room.

I'm checking to make sure I got all the dried blood and dirt off when Nicky appears with the ice packs.

"Addi, I spoke to Hunter. Tonight, he'll stay in my room and tomorrow he'll be changing rooms. I don't want him next to you anymore. You can choose who will move there or I'll switch rooms, it's up to you. I need to trust the person sleeping

next to you and I think Hunter ruined everyone's trust tonight. If you want him gone, everyone will understand that too. I think a few of the guys would be huge supporters of that decision after tonight's events. Think it all over and let me know what you want in the morning, I'll handle everything for you, darling."

"What did I miss?" Wes asks, his brows furrowing together.

I ignore him. I don't want to talk about this all over again. I just want this night to be over and to focus on tomorrow.

"I'm not kicking him out, Nicky. As far as him changing rooms, I'm good with that. I don't trust him. I know you get it. I know that's why you've already taken control of the situation. You always protect me. As far as I'm concerned, Blake, Nate, Wes, or you can move next door. I'm cool with Lincoln and Cole, but I haven't gotten to know them as well."

"Can someone fill me in on what happened?" Wes asks again, but Nick doesn't bother answering him.

"You know I'll never stop protecting you. I'll talk it over with the guys and see if anyone wants to volunteer to switch with Hunter. I love you, AJ." He pulls me into a hug and kisses my head like only a brother can do. We might not be blood, but we're siblings in every other way.

"I'll switch! I want to. I don't know what the hell happened with Hunter, but I'll gladly switch rooms." Wes speaks up.

"Are you sure?" Nicky asks.

“Of course, I’m sure. Obviously, I’ll protect Addi, didn’t I prove that tonight?” Wes responds quickly and Nicky laughs.

“Thanks, Wes.” He says before turning his attention back to me. “I meant what I said, Addi, I’ll never stop protecting you. Love you.”

“I love you too, Nicky. Go get some rest, you look exhausted.” I push him out the door.

“Well, playing daddy to all these punks is exhausting,” he calls over his shoulder.

Chapter 31



Wes



“Addi, come here,” I say softly, holding out a hand to her. When she moves close enough to me, I grip her waist and tug her onto my lap.

I peer down at her wrist and notice the start of a bruise. Caleb grabbed her a lot harder than I thought he did. She’s going to be sore for a few days. She gazes up at me with beautiful eyes full of wonder and questions.

“How do your wrists feel?” I ask, gently rubbing them with my thumb.

“They’ll be fine,” she whispers. I lift each hand and gently kiss her wrist a few times.

“What happened between you and Hunter?”

She lets out a sad sigh and starts fidgeting with her jewelry. She’s so easy for me to read and that somehow relaxes me more.

“And I love how you fidget with your jewelry when you’re nervous or uncomfortable,” I whisper into her neck, making a shiver sweep through her body.

“When you and Caleb started fighting...” She begins telling me the events of the night and anger washes over her once again. I can’t believe Hunter and what an asshole he is. “I can’t forgive that, Wes.” Her eyes fill with tears and I know it won’t be long before they fall down her cheeks. “I’ve been hurt by enough people I trusted in the past.”

“Hey, baby, look at me.” I grasp her chin between my thumb and index finger, tilting her chin until she’s forced to meet my gaze. “I’m ok. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Why’d you punch him, Wes? Why’d you punch Caleb?” She drops her gaze to my chest and refuses to look at me. My chest aches with the thought that she could be mad at me. That somehow I hurt her when all I was trying to do was protect her and stand up for her.

“Because I couldn’t stand to watch him hurt you and talk so badly about you. I’ve known you for a very short period of time, but in those weeks, you’ve shown you’re nothing but an amazing woman who deserves only the best. Not only did he physically hurt you, which is never ok, but he was speaking about you like you were a dirty tramp and I won’t put up with that. I’ve never met anyone quite as unbelievable as you. I feel like I’m going to wake up and realize this is all a dream and you aren’t real... Plus, I’m not about to allow some punk to think he can push me.”

She laughs as she places her hand on my cheek and stares into my eyes like she can see all the things I keep hidden from other people. Hell, she just might be able to. I feel naked under

her stare, but I refuse to look away. She makes me want to share everything with her, the good, the bad, and the ugly. I know she'll accept it all and not judge me any differently.

“I love when you're being all broody. I love how you've noticed little things about me that no one else seems to notice. I love how your smile makes my heart swell and your laugh brightens my day. I love that you've let me see this side of you that you keep hidden from other people. I love how everything has changed between us. I love how you had my back without me asking you to. I love that I can trust you. I love that you beat up my ex because he was rude and put his hands on me. And I love how you kissed me back with such passion.” She speaks slowly and has my complete attention.

She wraps her arms around my neck and toys with the hair at the nape. She stares at me before leaning in and pressing her lips against mine. This kiss is full of desire and passion. She's showing me exactly what I mean to her and it's driving me crazy. I don't want to let go of this girl.

Our kiss turns rougher and needier as our breaths come out in pants. Addi brushes her tongue against my lips, sending a shot of excitement straight to my dick. I open my mouth and moan when our tongues meet. I can still taste the whiskey she only took a few sips of.

She gently pushes me back so I'm lying on the bed. She straddles me and I know it's going to be hard for me to stay in control and not let my body take over. She's so sexy and I fight to keep my hands from wandering all over her body.

I pull back and kiss her jaw, then her neck and she trembles under my touch. Damn, this girl's going to be the death of me.

Her hands wander over my chest and sneak under the hem of my shirt. She traces my abs while I grab her ass and hold her tighter. Her fingers move higher and I groan in pain. Addi freezes.

"Did I hurt you?" She whispers, her doe eyes staring down at me are full of worry.

"Nah, baby, I'm sure it's fine," I say, kissing her neck again, but she pulls away quickly and climbs off of me. "Come back here," I beg.

She stands only a few feet away with her hands on her hips looking feistier than ever.

"I'm not kissing you again until you take off your shirt."

"Yes, ma'am!" I don't have a problem with that. I'm more than happy to comply.

I try to quickly undo the buttons on my shirt, but it's taking too long and I need her back in my arms. I get annoyed and attempt to pull the fabric over my head. I groan in pain again. I can't even take my shirt off.

Addi's eyes are wide as she kneels in front of me. Her small fingers start working one button at a time. She's careful and intently focused. I've fallen so hard for this beautiful woman. How she's taking care of me right now is making me fall even harder.

Addi gently pushes my shirt over my shoulders and it falls to the bed as I pull my arms out of the sleeves, more than ready to get back to what we were doing.

Addi sucks in a sharp breath, drawing my attention to where she's looking. I peer down at my abdomen, finding my entire right side is starting to bruise. Caleb kicked me there, but I didn't think he did much damage.

"Shit," I whisper.

"Lay down, now," Addi commands and I obey. I'm not going to fight her when she's trying to take care of me. "What happened, Wes? I thought you didn't have any serious damage."

"It's fine, honey, Caleb got a good kick in. I didn't think it was that bad. I guess I was wrong, it's worse than I thought."

"Oh, babe! Caleb's practiced mixed martial arts his entire life. I know you're stronger, but he knows the moves and has been trained to be quick on his toes. I've seen him go against other people at events and he knows what he's doing. He doesn't need the strength you have to inflict damage."

When she calls me babe, I swear my heart is going to leap out of my chest. I love hearing that word come out of her mouth. Her voice is sexy, full of love and compassion.

She bends down next to me, kissing my bruised flesh. My body shudders under her touch and a knowing smirk spreads across her lips as she continues to kiss my torso. My eyes slide

shut. I want to memorize what it feels like to have her lips all over me.

“Say it again,” I whisper, as she gently traces the outline of my bruise with her fingertips. I open my eyes and watch her.

“Say what again?” She tilts her head to the side in the most adorable way.

“Call me babe again.”

A sexy smirk crosses those beautiful full lips as she straddles me again. “Babe...” She breathes the words against my neck, making goosebumps spread over my body. “Babe, you’re so amazing.”

She leans down and claims my lips again. I get lost in her. In the feel of her body pressing against mine. In the way she smells like vanilla and tastes like heaven.

“We need to stop, Addi,” I beg between kisses

“I don’t want to.” She pouts.

“Baby, I don’t want to stop either, but you *need* to stop or I won’t be able to.”

“What if I don’t want you to?” She challenges me back.

“We’re not crossing that line tonight, sweetheart. I’m not rushing into this with you. I’m not a one-night stand type of guy, I’m a long-term guy.”

She scrunches her nose at me. “I’m pretty sure that makes you a girl.” She giggles when I gasp.

“Does this body look like a girl’s body?”

“No, but damn does this body look good. Almost like a Greek god. You always make it very difficult for me to use the gym when you’re there. And these freaking tattoos. Seriously, Wes, are you trying to ruin other men for me.”

“Oh, I definitely want to ruin every other man’s chance of being attractive in your eyes.” I kiss her head gently and hold her close.

“Stay with me tonight, I don’t want to be alone. We don’t need to do anything. I just want to sleep in your arms,” she mumbles.

“Anything for you, darling.”

Chapter 32



Addi



I wake up wrapped in Wes's arms. We're both still dressed in our clothes from last night. Well, Wes is only wearing jeans, but I'm not complaining.

I try to gently get out of bed without waking him up, but as I sit up, he mumbles "Where are you going, babe?"

"Mmm, I love when you call me babe," I whisper. "I promised Kendra I'd go shopping with her today. She has a date and thinks she needs a new wardrobe for it." I roll my eyes.

"Ugh, fine. Do I get to spend the evening with you at least?"

"I wouldn't have it any other way. Now can you please unzip me, with my luck I'll get it stuck again."

"I'll gladly help you undress," he mumbles against my ear, making me tremble.

I pull my hair over my shoulder to keep it out of the way. Wes peppers my exposed skin with kisses, making me giggle.

He slowly drags my zipper down my back, making me go crazy with anticipation. I peek over my shoulder, finding a

smirk on his face. He knows he's driving me crazy. When he finally gets the zipper all the way down, he lets his fingertips graze up and down the center of my back.

I can't take any more teasing, I try to step away from him, but he grabs my waist inside of my dress, so his hands on my bare skin. My legs go weak with his touch. He knows exactly how to make me putty in his hands. But two can play this game.

I lean back into his chest, kissing his neck slowly, before pulling away. This time he lets me go. I move to my dresser with my dress completely unzipped. I pull out my daisy duke shorts, a black lace bra, and a tight white tank top.

I glance over my shoulder at Wes as I drop my dress to the floor. His jaw hangs open as his eyes rake up and down my body. All I'm wearing is my black lace thong and my long hair is cascading down my back. I make sure to keep my front side out of view. I'm going to tease this boy, make him see how it feels.

"Fuck, Addi, you don't know what you do to me," he rasps out.

I smirk and pull my shorts on making sure I shake my hips as I pull them over my ass. I quickly put on and hook my bra, sliding my tank over it. My tank top doesn't reach my shorts, it doesn't even cover my belly button and you can see my black lace bra through it. To tease Wes, even more, I ask him to help me put on my necklace.

I pile my hair up on top of my head so he'll have better access to my neck. He immediately starts kissing and nipping the back of my neck causing me to tremble once again. He clasps the necklace and runs his hands under my tank top along my ribs. The feeling of his hands all over my bare skin makes me want to climb back in bed with him and tell Kendra to pick out her own clothes.

“Wes, I need to go before I throw you on the bed and attack you. I'll see you later, babe.” I give him a quick kiss on the cheek before heading to my bedroom door.

“Addi, wait.” He disappears into my walk-in closet and comes out holding a loose-fitting black tank. “Please, put this on. I don't think I can handle another fight so soon, but if you leave wearing that, I promise I'll end up fighting someone for staring a little too long. Chances are I'll be fighting five people before you even leave this house... feel free to lose it tonight when we're alone though.” He winks at me.

“Fine, but only because you're healing.” I laugh.

I try to give him a quick peck on the lips, but he pulls my body flush against his and turns my peck into a deep kiss. He doesn't pull back until he has me moaning in his arms.

“What was that for?” I ask.

“That's so you don't forget what's waiting for you at home.” He smacks my ass and disappears out of my room.



“So, what happened last night at the party?” Kendra leads me through another store. She doesn’t stop to look at the clothing racks, she’s skilled at drive by shopping. She keeps moving and only pauses if she sees something she likes. It’s interesting to watch her and we’ll be done faster than I thought.

“Well, it took a turn for the worst when Caleb showed up.”

“Shut up! Caleb showed up? What happened?”

I give her all the details she’s practically foaming at the mouth for and tell her what happened when we got home. I end my story with this morning and how I teased Wes.

“So how long until you wake up naked in bed with Wes?” She wiggles her eyebrows.

“Shush. We’re not even technically dating yet.”

“Huh, here I thought you could screw someone you weren’t dating. I must’ve gotten my info wrong from my last booty call.” She rolls her eyes and snags a cute shirt off the rack.

“I don’t want to be a booty call for Wes. Plus, he said he doesn’t do one-night stands.”

“Damn. I guess I don’t have a chance with him then... ow! What the hell, Addison!” She rubs her arm where I just pinched her.

“Don’t talk about him like that! He’s mine and you aren’t allowed to touch him!” I fold my arms over my chest and glare at her.

“Fine! Does that mean I can touch the other six of your roommates?”

“As long as you stay away from Wes, I don’t care what you do.”

Chapter 33



Hunter



I rub my eyes, slowly opening them to look around. Where the hell am I? I sit up and a sharp pain radiates through my head. I glance next to me, finding a girl laying on her stomach with her long brown hair draped down the bare skin of her back. I have no idea who she is. I have no idea what happened last night. What's the last thing I remember?

I remember going to a party. Addi looked sexy as hell in that short tight black dress. I remember her being stuck to Wes's side all night and she was ignoring me. I remember her saying she broke up with her boyfriend. And her hanging all over Wes at the party. I went outside to get some fresh air, I felt like I was suffocating watching them.

How can she find him attractive? He walks around hating the world and glaring at everyone. He isn't what she wants, she wants a guy like me.

Slowly the events from last night filter through my head. Caleb started fighting with Wes. Addi was screaming and I... I was laughing? Shit.

Addi must hate me. She begged me for help and I said no. How could I be so stupid? Blake was yelling at me and Nick wasn't happy. The last thing I remember is going back into the party after all my roommates left.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed, resting my elbows on my knees and drop my face in my hands. I couldn't have messed up things more if I'd tried. I need to go home and fix things with all of them and hope they can accept my apologies.

I quickly get up and slip my shirt back on. I don't know what happened here last night. The girl's naked but I still have my jeans on. I'm hoping I passed out before we did anything together. I have enough things to regret from last night. I really don't want to add fucking some random chick to the list.

As I exit the girl's apartment, I call Nick and pray he'll pick up. On the third ring, he finally answers.

"Where have you been?"

"It's not important. I really fucked up last night, didn't I?"

"That's the understatement of the year, Hunter."

"Does Addi want me to move out?"

"No... but you're changing rooms... with Wes."

"Of course I am," I spit out.

"You have no one to blame but yourself, Hunt. If you knew everything that's happened to her, you'd understand."

"I *would* understand if you'd just let me know what happened to her," I growl back.

Nick lets out a sad sigh. “It’s not my story to tell, you know that. She trusts me with her secrets and I’m not going to betray her. Now, get your ass home so we can switch your room. I’m tired of playing Daddy to all you pain in the asses.”

“Can you pick me up?” I mumble.

“Yeah, Hunt, just tell me where you are.” He sighs again then mutters under his breath. “I’m starting to think I really am the dad of this house.”

I text Nick the address and a few minutes later he pulls up and I climb in his SUV. We don’t speak to each other the entire way home.

When I walk into the living room all the guys are there, but Addi’s gone. Cole, Nate, and Lincoln say hi but they’re uncomfortable. They claim they need to study and quickly retreat upstairs. Blake’s shooting daggers at me and Wes is pissed.

“I’m sorry, man. I screwed up last night. I should’ve stepped in and helped you out.” I grip the back of my neck. Wes aims a glare my way that makes me feel like I’m five inches tall.

“I don’t give a fuck about that. You hurt Addi. She trusted you and thought you were her friend. Hell, I thought you were my friend.” Wes looks irritated that he even has to talk to me.

“He’s not a friend to anyone here. He only cares about himself and getting in Addi’s pants,” Blake growls.

“That’s not true,” I say, trying to sound more confident than I actually feel.

“Really? Because you weren’t holding Addi as she sobbed over the turn the night had taken. You laughed at her when she needed you. You fucking laughed! You didn’t have to stare into those big eyes of hers as she replayed what you did over and over again. She kept asking me why you wouldn’t help? How could you just stand by and laugh?”

Blake stands to his full height and glares at me. He begins pacing the length of the living room and I know he’s barely holding it together.

“You didn’t watch her heart break over the fact someone she trusted wasn’t there for her when she needed it. She watched a guy she likes, taking and dealing out punches, because her ex spoke badly about her and grabbed her. A guy she met less than two months ago protected her. Yet you, the guy she has a past with and claims he’s in love with her, laughed in her face and instead of helping, stood by and watched her weep. As far as I’m concerned all you care about is what’s in your pants... you need to fix this because she deserves better.”

“I’m sorry guys, I’ll talk to her and repair everything. I don’t know how, but I will.” I feel worse than I did when I woke up this morning. How did I mess things up so much?

Chapter 34



Addi



Shopping with Kendra is exhausting. I thought it was going to be an easy trip. She looks perfect in *everything* yet is never satisfied with anything she tries on. She'd be stunning in a garbage bag and I would've suggested that if I didn't think she'd yell at me. After four hours of searching the mall for the *perfect dress* for her date, I'm ready for a nap.

I don't want to see the guys. I can't handle any more drama right now. Luckily my room has its own private entrance, I slip in my door without anyone seeing me, drop my stuff on the floor, and fall onto my bed.

I'm just starting to feel my body relax when I hear music playing. Ugh, why did I want roommates? I could've had this whole place to myself. Or just invited Nick to live here with me. There was no reason to invite the other six men... but then I never would've met Wes.

Wait... that isn't the radio playing or anything, someone's actually singing in my house and they're amazing.

I hurry off my bed and tiptoe to the door. Slowly and quietly, I open my door and peek outside. I'm not prepared for

what I find.

Wes is sitting on the couch facing my door, he has a guitar in hand with his eyes closed, singing a country song I know. He's amazing. I never would've guessed he could sing or that he could even play the guitar. He's incredible at both. He sings with such passion that I can't look away. I feel like I'm witnessing something he doesn't share with others, possibly ever.

He sings about how all he wants is my time. He doesn't need me to be his or to call me baby. He doesn't need my heart or to make me love him. He doesn't need to take my freedom or talk to me constantly. He just wants to spend time with me.

When Wes sings, he keeps his eyes closed and lets out all this raw emotion. I quietly creep out of my room and make my way into the living room, silently plopping down on the couch.

"You're amazing," I whisper. Wes jumps at my voice, his eyes flying open.

"Jeez, Addi, are you taking ninja classes?"

"Something like that." I chuckle at him.

"How long have you been sitting here? I didn't even hear you come in."

"I have a private entrance to my room. I saw enough to know you have an unbelievable talent, Wes. But I have an issue with you."

"What is it?" Concern washes over his features. He almost sounds scared. I keep my eyes locked on his as I stand and

move to sit next to him. He never breaks eye contact with me.

“I don’t think we’re on the same page as each other.” I let out a sad sigh.

“What? Addi, what are you talking about?”

“I don’t think I feel the same way about you, as you feel about me,” I reply, staring down at my hands.

“Shit! I knew this was too good to be true. You’re the perfect girl, you would never want a guy like me.” He’s so crushed. His gaze drops to the ground and he refuses to look at me.

“No, Wes, that’s not what I mean... I want you to take more than my time. I want you to call me baby and I want you to call me yours. And I definitely want you to go home with me.”

Before I even know what’s happening Wes throws his guitar on the couch, picks me up and has me in his arms. His kisses are hard and rough, exactly what I need.

I thread my fingers through his hair as he grips the back of my neck. I get lost in him and forget that a world around me exists.

At any second one of the guys could walk through the door and catch us. I’m not sure what we are, but I’d rather figure that out before the guys start asking questions.

Wes pulls back and rests his forehead against mine as we catch our breath. A slow smile spreads across his face and I can’t help but do the same.

“I want you to be mine, I want everything.” He breathes into my neck.

Chapter 35



Wes



Addi's such an unbelievable woman. No one's ever made me feel the way she does. Most people see the walls I've built around my heart and say screw it, they're not up for breaking them down. They want the path of least resistance.

Addi, on the other hand, is like '*here, hold my beer*' and went to work the second we met to chip away at each brick until the wall crumbled to the ground.

She always had a smile or kind words to say to me even when all I did was respond with intense stares and one-word responses. She saw through it all. She made me feel important, needed, wanted. She makes me want to be a better man, one who deserves a woman like her.

When you spend so much time keeping up walls and keeping people at a distance, it's easy to forget who you really are. It's easy to forget how much you want someone to see you for you and nothing else. Addi has a way of doing that, seeing the man I keep hidden from everyone else. We've been dating for about two months now and I've never been happier. My mind drifts back to our early encounters.

Cole and I are sitting at a large table waiting for the other guys to show up for dinner. Dive has become our favorite hangout spot since we get to see Addi and keep an eye on her. Cole and I are talking about the old times in high school.

“Remember when Lincoln dared Blake to kiss Mercedes? And Mercedes’s boyfriend chased him and beat the crap out of him. Blake was terrified to go to school for days.”

“You do know I was the boyfriend, right? That’s how I found out she was cheating on me. It’s also how Blake and I became such good friends.”

I can’t help but remember that bittersweet time. Finding out my girlfriend was cheating on me with multiple people. It destroyed me, but becoming best friends with Blake was more than worth it.

“Shit, I forgot about that. How the hell did Everson pull off becoming your friend after kissing your girl?” Cole laughs at the memory.

“Eh, he seemed like he needed someone to protect him from himself. If he didn’t have someone like me by his side through high school, he would’ve gotten in so much more trouble. Everyone knew exactly how to get him to do stupid things. I talked him out of stealing the principal’s car, running down Main Street naked and fighting with Brad for making a move on his girlfriend.”

“But I thought someone did fight Brad over that chick.”

“Someone did... but it wasn’t Blake.”

“Holy shit, you beat up Brad, didn’t you?”

“Maybe... I needed to have my friend’s back.”

Addi comes over to our table, reaching across to pick up Cole’s empty glass. I lean back enough to check out her ass in those little daisy duke shorts she seems to live in. I raise my eyebrow and look at Cole just being a typical cocky guy.

Without turning towards me, Addi says, “I see you checking out my ass, Wes.”

“Am not,” I mumble.

“Like hell you’re not. I hope you like what you see.” Addi smirks and arches a brow at me while Cole howls with laughter.

“Well, it’s a nice ass. You must have good form when you do squats.”

“I have an ok guy helping me out with that.”

She walks away, shaking her hips a little more than normal. She even glances over her shoulder to make sure I’m watching her walk away. She’s pleased to find my eyes glued to her.

They’re always glued to you, sweetheart.

Another night Blake and I were hanging out in the living room talking and watching the game.

“You like her.” He smirks.

“I don’t like her, Blake. I can’t like her,” I mumble.

“Just admit it, you like her. We both know it.”

“I don’t even know her. How can I like her?” I snap back.

“Oh, but you want to!” He sings the words as he makes a heart with his fingers in my face.

“Wes likes someone? Who would’ve known there’s a soft heart under all that muscle! Who is it, Blake?” Addi asks as she emerges from her room.

My face goes blank and I struggle to find words. Luckily, we never used a name so there’s no way for her to know we’re talking about her.

“If you don’t want me to know, maybe don’t talk so loudly right outside my room when my door is open,” she whispers as she takes the seat across from me. “So, who’s the lucky lady?”

“No one,” I blurt out before Blake can cut in.

“Come on, Wes! What’s she like?”

“She’s a girl.” I mentally facepalm myself the second the words leave my mouth.

“Well, alrighty then. I’m so glad we have these in-depth talks.” She starts to walk away but turns back to me. “Keep your chin up buttercup, any girl would be lucky to catch your eye.” She bounces out of the room and I sit there speechless for a while. Does she really think a girl would consider herself lucky to be with me?

Another night I was in the kitchen and overheard her on the phone.

The guys are all at the library and I don't think she realizes I'm home. I peek around the corner, finding her video chatting with someone. Before long I realize it's her sister. She's so happy and her face lights up instantly when her niece starts talking.

"Charlie! I miss you!"

"I miss you too, Auntie Addi! When can I come to see you? I want a sleepover. I wanna play princess." A little girl's voice fills the room.

"Oh, sweetie, I want to see you too! I don't know when we'll be able to have a sleepover. I have seven smelly boys living with me and they have cooties. I don't want you to get cooties." Addi scrunches up her nose like we disgust her.

"But won't you get cooties, Auntie Addi? I don't want you to get cooties!" Charlie cries.

"It's all right, honey, see I have this special cootie medicine I take every night and it keeps the boys away. As long as I take it, I won't get cooties. It's science." She speaks with such confidence I have to try to keep myself from laughing.

"Will I get cooties from boys?... What about Uncle Nicky! I don't want him to get cooties!" She cries again.

"Uncle Nicky takes my special medicine too. Are you stinky?"

"I don't think so."

"Are you over fifteen?"

“No, silly! You know I’m four.”

“That’s right! Well, guess what! You can’t get cooties until you’re fifteen! After that, you need to make sure you don’t get stinky or you’ll get cooties. Make sure you take lots of baths and wash behind your ears.”

“Oh good! I don’t wanna have cooties. I love you, Auntie Addi.”

“I love you too, my beautiful princess! Now go to bed before your mommy falls asleep! Night night!”

She’s such a natural with kids. She lights up when she speaks with her family, especially her niece. A glow radiates from her that I’ve never seen on anyone else.

I lay in bed with Addi in my arms, thinking about her and all the unique things that make her special. She isn’t like anyone else.

She sighs softly in her sleep and nuzzles even closer to me. I swear this is what heaven must be like.

Both arms are around her, holding her tightly to my side. Her head is on my chest, one arm draped across my stomach and our legs are tangled together. Part of me wants to give in and fall asleep with her in my arms, but another part of me wants to stay awake and watch her sleep. I let my fingers travel over her lips, down her neck and arms to her fingertips and back up to her hair.

Some people don’t realize what they have until they feel the cold empty spot in their bed that used to be occupied. I don’t

need an empty spot to realize I never want to let Addi go. I realized that before Addi asked me to help with her zipper.

I'm not going to forget how lucky I am. I've seen enough people ruin their chance at love and I'm not going to let myself be one of them.



Addi pushes the coffee table to the side and lines up shots for all of us. We haven't been able to spend much time together as a group and she wants to change that.

“So... what are we doing exactly? That's a lot of shots.” Lincoln eyes the table with concern.

“We're playing never have I ever. I think it's a fun way to get to know each other.” Addi smirks over her shoulder and goes back to pouring tequila into the shot glasses.

“This sounds like fun.” Blake drops onto the floor next to Addi and wraps his arms around her waist. He pulls her onto his lap and hugs her close to him. “Can you sit on my lap while we play?”

“Only if you want a black eye and a few missing teeth,” I growl, narrowing my eyes on one of my best friends. I'm not against punching him if I have to. No one's coming between me and my girl.

“Damn, he's not joking either.” Blake eyes me cautiously before he picks Addi up and deposits her on the ground next to

him.

The guys gather around and take a seat on the floor. We form a circle and wait for Addi to start.

“Normal rules. Each person states something they’ve never done before and if you’ve done it, you take a shot. Who wants to go first?” She glances around the circle.

“Never have I ever drunk dialed my ex,” Nate smirks at Lincoln.

He glares at his brother and snatches a shot off the table. He downs it without wincing.

“You’d have to have an ex to drunk dial them, Nate,” Lincoln mumbles under his breath.

“Oh, someone’s already getting touchy.” Blake eyes him with amusement. “Never have I ever gone skinny dipping.”

“Really? That’s surprising.” Hunter chuckles.

“Hey, I don’t show my goods to just anyone.” Blake shakes a finger in the air.

I’m surprised when only Lincoln and Cole take a shot. At this rate Lincoln’s going to be plastered before the end of the night.

“Never have I ever kissed more than one person in twenty-four hours.” I glance around the circle, wondering how many of them this one is going to take down.

“Are you all just targeting me?” Lincoln grumbles, grabbing another shot. This time Blake takes one with him.

“Never have I ever stalked someone on social media,” Addi says, watching me carefully.

I lean back on my hands and smile. I don’t really use any of my social media accounts. No one needs to know about my life.

“I hate all of you,” Lincoln hisses, grabbing another shot. This time all of the guys grab one except for me.

“Never have I ever climbed in someone’s window in the middle of the night.” Hunter’s eyes widen when Addi reaches for a shot and downs it quickly. Lincoln, Nick, and Blake take one with her.

“Whose window were you crawling through?” I arch a brow at my girlfriend.

“Nicky’s.” She smirks, leaning her body into mine. I place my arm around her shoulders and drop a kiss on her head.

“Never have I ever sexted someone.” Nick smirks. Lincoln, Blake, and Cole take a shot.

“Never have I ever taken the walk of shame,” Cole says.

Hunter groans and reaches for a shot. Lincoln, Blake, and I grab one as well. Addi eyes me with amusement and raises a brow.

“It’s not what you think,” I mumble in her ear. “I’ll explain later.” I didn’t sleep with anyone, but I’ve had to stay at Mercedes when her parents were out of town and she got too drunk. I was afraid she was going to get sick and not wake up.

The last thing I wanted was for my girlfriend to die because no one was there to save her.

“Never have I ever gotten the girl I wanted,” Lincoln slurs, looking beyond miserable.

I reach for a shot and down it, keeping my eyes on Addi the entire time.

Blake grabs a bottle of water out of the kitchen and quietly fills up Lincoln’s empty glasses with water. He lines them back up on the coffee table so if Lincoln has to take another shot, he’s drinking water.

“Never have I ever had a one-night stand.” Nate glances around the room. Blake and Hunter down a shot.

“I mean seriously! Do you all just follow me around and jot down all the things I do?” Lincoln throws his hands up in the air in frustration. He downs one of the shots of water and scowls. I don’t think he realizes it’s not tequila.

“Never have I ever owned a fake ID.” Hunter smiles. He knows most of us did in high school. Everyone except Hunter takes a shot. He smiles triumphantly.

“Never have I ever been black out drunk.” Nick smiles over the rim of his water.

Hunter glares and snags a shot. Everyone except Addi grabs one too. I’m shocked Nate’s been black out drunk, I don’t remember that.

“Nate? Really?” Blake’s brows raise.

“Yeah. When Lincoln was going through that shit in high school, we used to steal alcohol and drink together. I don’t really remember some of those nights.” He shrugs like it isn’t a big deal.

No matter how many times I tried to figure out what happened their senior year, I’m still in the dark. I think everyone is.

“At this point, I’m going to be black out drunk tonight.” Blake’s words begin to slur. I uncap a bottle of water and hand it to him. He’s had more than enough shots. He can drink water from now on.

“Never have I ever gone to a strip club.” Cole smirks at us.

Addi’s eyes widen when I reach for a shot.

“Don’t look at me like that, baby. We all went for Lincoln’s nineteenth birthday.”

“Then why isn’t Cole drinking?” She arches a brow at me.

“Because he was out with Sammie instead.” Blake wiggles his eyebrows at Cole, making him roll his eyes.

“Oh, who’s Sammie?” Addi turns her attention to Cole.

“She’s my best friend. Nothing more. Some of us can be friends with members of the opposite sex without it being more.” He folds his arms over his chest and glares at all of us.

“You keep telling yourself that. Maybe one day we’ll believe you.”

“Never have I ever been ghosted.” Blake looks so proud of himself.

Hunter and Lincoln take drinks. Hunter’s gaze is locked on Addi the entire time, pissing me off more than it should.

“Never have I ever slept with two people in one night.” I throw out something I don’t think Lincoln’s done, trying to make him think I’m helping him. He doesn’t know he’s drinking water and he thinks we’re all doing this on purpose.

Lincoln sighs and grabs another drink. He’s given up at this point and I wish I knew what he was fighting. He completely changed his last year of high school. It was like he became a shell of a person and no one knows why.

“Never have I ever lost my V-card.” Addi ducks her head in embarrassment. Everyone except Nate and I drink.

I stare at my girl in surprise. I’m really happy to hear no one has touched her like that, but I didn’t expect it.

“Never have I ever liked my friends,” Lincoln grumbles.

We all burst out laughing and take a final shot.

Chapter 36



Addi



Addi: Hey, would we be able to go car shopping this week?

Wes: Sure. Does today work for you? My classes are over at noon.

Addi: Perfect. I'll meet you in the courtyard!

I throw on a pair of ripped black skinny jeans, a black tank top and a plaid black and pink button-up shirt on top. My hair is braided again, I'm not wearing any makeup, and I slip on a pair of pink Converse to match my shirt.

I make a few sandwiches and pack a picnic for us to eat in the courtyard before we go car shopping. It will be a cute surprise for Wes.

When I get to the courtyard, I spread out my blanket under a big oak tree. I place my basket on the ground then hop up to wait for Wes. I'm leaning against the tree when I spot him in the distance. It's like he can sense me. His gaze snaps to mine and an adorable smile appears on his face. I don't think he could be any sexier even if he tried.

Our eyes stay locked as he makes his way towards me. When he's a few steps away some blonde girl runs up to him and throws herself into him. His face drops and he plucks the girl off of him like she's an annoying gnat. He glances up at me, worry in his eyes. I take a deep breath as my chest tightens. Who the hell is this chick all over my man?

"Hey, baby. I missed you," Wes says as he closes the gap between us and wraps me up in his arms. I smile against his chest. She obviously means nothing to him.

"I missed you too, babe." I stand on my tippy toes to give him a kiss on the lips.

I was planning on a quick kiss, but Wes pulls me tighter against him and deepens our kiss. We both get lost in each other's arms until someone clears their throat in the background.

We turn in the direction of the offending person. Blondie is standing there with her arms crossed over her chest, forcing her fake boobs together, making them look bigger. She's tapping her foot and has a resting bitch face on.

"Can I help you?" I ask as sweetly as I can.

"Get your hands off Wes. He's mine."

"Oh, honey, you must be mistaken. Wes is mine and only mine. I think all that bleach you put on your frizzy hair is affecting your brain."

"Like he'd ever want someone like you," she scoffs.

"Get lost, Mercedes," Wes growls.

“Mercedes? Like the slut that cheated on you with Blake and anyone else with a dick?” I ask in shock.

“The one and only,” Wes mutters.

“You’re even more delusional than I thought. Why would you ever give up this amazing man?”

“I didn’t give him up! We had a misunderstanding!” She shrieks.

“The only misunderstanding we had was I thought we were dating and you thought you could blow anything in a twenty-five-mile radius,” Wes growls. “Leave us alone and stop trying to talk to me.”

“Yes, run along now and let the grown-ups talk,” I speak to her like she’s a toddler and wave my hand, telling her to go away. A scowl takes over Mercedes’ face.

I don’t normally talk to anyone like this, but I’ve heard more than enough stories about Mercedes over the past few months. I’m well aware of what a terrible person she is and I’m going to make it clear I don’t want her around.

“You’re going to regret this,” she hisses before turning on her heels and stomping away.



“You’re so sexy when you’re possessive,” Wes whispers as he kisses the soft skin below my ear. I let out a little moan and he chuckles.

“That’s not fair, babe,” I grumble. “Let’s eat and go buy me a car.” I lead him to the blanket and he’s shocked to find the picnic I packed for us.

“You packed us a picnic?”

“Yup! I figured we could have a mini date before we go.”

“You’re adorable, sweetheart,” he says, leaning over to kiss me again. I swear the longer we’re dating, the harder time he has at keeping his hands and lips to himself.

I take out plates and forks, a salad, sandwiches, fruit, and some chips. I also pull out a container of my homemade lemonade and smirk. I know he loves it.

“How did I get so lucky with you?”

“It was your squats.”

“I’m sure,” he chuckles.

After we finish our little picnic, we head to the car dealership. I pick out a mid-size SUV I’m in love with and Wes is able to get me a good deal on it. I’m thrilled with my new car and Wes is happy knowing I’ll be safe and won’t be breaking down on the side of the road.

Chapter 37



Addi



There's a knock on the bathroom door. "Yes?" I yell.

"Are you dressed yet? I need to brush my teeth," Wes yells back. I smile to myself and open the door in just a towel.

"Can't you walk next door to your room and brush your teeth in your own bathroom?" I tease.

"Yes... but then I wouldn't be able to drool over you in a towel... plus my toothbrush is in your bathroom. For some reason, I don't really use my own room. I mean my clothes are even in your closet."

"Mmmmm, but that's how I like it."

"Oh, I'm not complaining, babe, merely stating facts. I don't want to change a thing... except maybe you losing that towel," he replies with a wink.

"I'll gladly lose the towel if you lose the rule of keeping things PG."

Wes shakes his head. "Nope. I don't need you getting pregnant, my family would kill me. I want to do this the right way.

“And what’s the right way?”

Wes comes behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist. He kisses my neck, whispering in my ear, “First we date, then we get engaged, then we get married and then we get some sexy time together.”

“Mmmm, how long is all of this going to take?”

“As long or as short as you want it to take, sweetheart... Are you free tonight?”

“I’m yours all day, babe. What do you want to do?” I ask.

“I want to take you out for dinner. Somewhere nice.”

“Aww, we’re going on a real date?” I gasp.

“Oh shush.” He tickles me. “It’s not my fault you’d rather stay home and kiss or cuddle on the couch than go out with me.” He continues to tickle me as I try to free myself while keeping my towel in place.

“Wes!... If you don’t stop... I’m not responsible if this towel falls!” I gasp between laughing.

Wes lets out a groan and releases me. “We can’t have that or I’ll lose my will power to keep this PG.”

I wait until he’s in the middle of brushing his teeth before a wicked grin spreads over my face. I stand in the middle of my bedroom with my hand clenching the ends of my towel.

“Hey, Wes? I have a question for you?” I have to fight to keep the smile out of my voice or he’ll know something’s up.

“What do you need, baby?” He mumbles around his toothbrush. He steps into the doorway and waits for me to answer him.

I drop the towel to the ground and watch Wes’s jaw drop with it. Toothpaste dribbles out of his mouth and all over his bare chest.

“I think you’ve got a little something.” I motion to my own chest instead of his and his eyes follow the movement.

He disappears into the bathroom and the faucet turns on for a few seconds. I wait patiently, wondering what he’s going to do. Exactly twenty seconds later, Wes stalks out of the bathroom and sweeps me into his arms.

His mouth crashes down on mine in a searing kiss and he plunges his tongue into my mouth. My breasts are pressed against his chest and I can feel how hard his heart is beating.

“You’ve been driving me crazy for weeks, baby,” he murmurs against my skin as he trails his mouth over my jaw and down my neck. “How am I supposed to keep my hands off of you when you tease me like this?”

“You’re not,” I moan as he grips my waist, tugging me so my entire body is flush against his.

I can feel his hard length pressing against my stomach and need pulses between my legs. I’ve never wanted to get physical with anyone. Not with my past. But with Wes... I want all of him.

His hands slide down my back and cup my ass. He grinds against me and lets out a low groan.

“Do you feel what you do to me?” He whispers, dropping his forehead to my shoulder. “I was trying to keep my hands and eyes off of you until after we got married... but then you do this.”

“I don’t want you to keep your hands or eyes off of me. I want to feel both of them on me and I want to do the same to you.” I slip my hand down his abdomen and over the bulge in his pants.

Wes is still wearing a pair of tight boxer briefs and nothing else. It leaves little to the imagination and I’ve been wanting to strip them off of him for weeks.

“You’re playing with fire, Snow.” Wes grips my hips and walks me backwards until my knees hit the edge of my bed.

“Maybe I like the flames,” I whisper as he lowers me to the mattress and I move my body up the bed.

He crawls up my body and straddles my waist. Staring down at me, he doesn’t look at me like I’m a quick fuck or someone to pass the time with. He looks at me like I’m his entire world and the only woman he’ll ever love.

Wes places his palms flat on my stomach and watches me carefully. Anticipation spreads through my body, making me hyper aware of each move he makes.

He slowly lets his fingers travel up my torso. He peeks up at me to make sure I’m ok with where he’s leading us and I

quickly nod my head.

“Someone seems a little eager.” His deep chuckle wraps around me and turns me on even more.

There’s a dark side to Wes, but I know he’d never hurt me. He cares about me too much to do anything except protect me and care for me.

“Every night I sleep in bed next to you is pure torture. I’ve been dreaming about what your hands would feel like on my body.”

I let out a soft whimper when he swirls a finger over my breasts and around each nipple. Arching my back off of the mattress, I thrust my chest further in the air and Wes smirks.

“I’m not going to give you what you want until you’re legally mine. Do you understand that?” He leans down and sucks my bottom lip into his mouth.

I moan and move my hands up his torso as I anticipate what he might do next. I’m begging for him to touch me, but I know Wes isn’t going to do anything he doesn’t want to, it doesn’t matter how much I beg.

“I said, do you understand, Snow?” He moves his mouth to my stomach and slowly licks a trail down to my hip, this time he bites down gently on my skin.

“Y-yes. I understand,” I stutter, barely able to form words.

“Do you want me to make you feel good?” Wes’s hot mouth moves to my collarbone. He licks a trail up to right below my ear and sucks on my sensitive skin.

“Yes, please,” I whimper, rubbing my thighs together to try to release some of the tension building inside of me.

“Slide a little higher on the bed, baby.”

He climbs off of me and settles onto the mattress next to me. I scoot higher and watch him with a hooded gaze.

Wes moves to my feet and watches me. I think he’s worried I’m not ready for this, but I am. It’s killing me to not have his hands on me.

“If there’s ever a time you want me to stop, all you have to do is tell me and I’ll stop instantly... have you ever been touched by a man, Addison?” The way he’s practically growling my name sends a shot of lust between my legs and I have to take a deep breath to control myself.

“N-no, you’ll be my first.”

“Fuck, baby. That makes me happier than you’ll ever know.”



Wes rolls onto the mattress next to me. He sucks in greedy breaths and tries his hardest to calm his racing heart.

“Get your naughty ass over here, Snow.” He holds out an arm and I gladly cuddle into his chest, resting my hand on his chest.

“Do we have to wait to get married to do that again?” I peek up at him and giggle when he opens one eye to stare at me.

“Fuck no. I’m thinking we need a repeat performance tonight after our date.” He tilts my chin up and claims my mouth in another searing kiss. “And, I think we should sleep naked from now on. There’s no reason for you to cover up this gorgeous body anymore.” He runs his hand up and down my side.

“I think I could be on board with sleeping naked with you, but only if you don’t keep your hands to yourself anymore.”

“Baby, I couldn’t if I tried. Can we take a nap? You just took all of the energy out of me.”

“That sounds like heaven,” I whisper as my eyes fall shut and I throw my leg over his waist. He tugs me closer until the apex of my thighs is against his hip.

“This right here is all I’ve ever wanted.”

Chapter 38



Wes



I made reservations at a little Italian restaurant in the city for the two of us. I want to take Addi out for a nice dinner since we never seem to get much time alone. With so many people in the house, it is rare not to be surrounded by others.

I want this night to be special, especially after what happened this morning. I even bought a new shirt that matches my eyes since Addi says that's her favorite color.

I'm waiting in the living room for Addi to finish getting ready. She never lets me stay in the room because she likes to make a big reveal when she's done. I don't mind, I think it's cute how she wants to doll herself up for me. She doesn't need any help. She's always beautiful, but I love how she likes to put in a little more effort for me.

"Where are you going all dressed up?" Hunter asks me.

"I'm taking Addi out for dinner," I reply, trying to keep our conversation short.

Hunter's been nothing but rude and disrespectful to Addi and I. He apologized for the night of the fight, but he's still

pissed that I'm dating her and he doesn't hide it. Addi acts like it doesn't bother her and she asked me to stay out of it, but I know it annoys her.

She told me Hunter's a constant reminder of the past and she'd never be able to have anything more than a friendship with him. At this point, I think even friendship is a stretch, there's too much tension between everyone.

I hate seeing Addi upset. She's such a loving and caring person. I truly don't understand how Hunter can continue to treat her so horribly. Nick says he still has a thing for her, but if that's true he should be going out of his way to be nice to her.

Us dating doesn't give him the right to treat her badly. He's no better than Caleb in my viewpoint. He may not call her rude names or physically hurt her, but I think his behavior is hurting her more than Caleb ever did.

"Who knew you actually knew how to date a woman," he hisses at me.

"Shut your mouth, asshole. It's not my fault Addi doesn't want you," I growl. I don't need to pretend to like him, especially when Addi isn't around.

Hunter and I were never close. We've always been nice to each other because we ran in the same circle, but we aren't friends. Not really.

"And one day she'll realize she doesn't want you either. She deserves much better than you. She'll figure out what a piece

of shit you are sooner or later,” Hunter replies with a cocky attitude.

“Maybe she will, but she still won’t run to you for comfort.”

The words are barely out of my mouth when a door creaks open. I glance over my shoulder and watch my beautiful girl strut over to me. She wraps her arms around my neck and stands on her tippy toes to give me a quick peck on the lips.

“Hey, baby,” I say softly, pulling her body flush against me.

“Wes, you look amazing, you should wear a suit more often. And I love that color shirt on you, it matches your eyes.” She stares up at me with adoring eyes.

“You’re breathtaking, babe. Absolutely stunning. I bought this shirt just for you. It’s your favorite color.”

“You remembered!”

“Of course, I did. I remember everything you tell me.”

“Wes... I love you.” Addi stares up at me.

We’ve never said those three little words before. We both feel it, but neither of us has been brave enough to voice them. A huge smile stretches across my face, as I stare into those loving eyes of hers.

I thought I knew what love was before I met Addi. Nothing I’ve ever felt before can compare to how I feel about her. She’s a whole different level of love than I’ve experienced before.

“I love you, Addison, I can’t believe you’re all mine,” I whisper. Happiness shines in her eyes as she snuggles even

closer to me.

“I can’t believe it either,” Hunter grumbles behind me. He stomps passed us and up the stairs to his room.

Guilt and hurt flash in Addi’s eyes, I’m not going to put up with this. That asshole needs to learn his place in this house or we’re going to have an issue.

“Miss Addison Fields, I heard some moaning and groaning coming from your bedroom this morning. Do you care to explain?” Blake drops onto the couch with a shit-eating grin.

“Umm, no, I don’t think I’d like to. I think pleading the fifth might be the best option for me.” Addi’s cheeks turn a rosy red and it makes my chest swell with pride. She’s all mine.

“Let’s go, babe. If we don’t, Blake’s going to ask even more questions that you won’t want to answer.” I say, gently holding her hand in mine and leading her out to my car.

Chapter 39



Addi



I sit in Wes's truck and stare at my feet. I can't believe Hunter. He's been so rude, I heard what he said to Wes before I came out of my room and I'm done with it. He can't talk to me and my boyfriend like that, especially when it's my house. I refuse to have someone around who's constantly bashing my relationship. After everything I've been through, I deserve to be happy.

"I want him out of my house," I whisper.

"Who, baby?"

"Hunter... I want him out... I heard what he said to you... about how one day I'll realize I don't want you... I won't put up with someone treating us like this in my house! I won't feel guilty about being with someone I love just because Hunter doesn't like it."

"I know. It's your decision on what you want to do with him and I'll support your choice no matter what. You have no reason to feel guilty, I know I don't... smile and let's have a nice dinner and forget Hunter until tomorrow. Please, I love you and I want to see you happy."

“Anything for you, babe. I love you too. You really do look sexy as hell in that suit. Every girl in the restaurant is going to be staring at you.”

“Then we’re even because every guy will be staring at you in that little red dress.”

When we get to the restaurant we’re led to a booth in the back. After we order drinks and our food, Wes holds my hands in his and gazes into my eyes.

“I don’t want to wake up,” he whispers more to himself than to me.

I start laughing, “What are you talking about? You are awake.”

He simply shakes his head. “There’s no way I’m awake, I could only have a woman like you in my dreams.”

His eyes are so honest and pure, he truly believes what he’s saying. I gently pull his hands to me until he’s leaning over the table. I meet him halfway and kiss him. Our kiss is passionate and says everything words can’t.

This man means the world to me. He’s become the center of my life so quickly and I can’t imagine not having him next to me for the rest of my life.

When we finally pull back, I search his eyes, finding doubt and uncertainty. Wes was hurt worse than he’ll ever admit by Mercedes’ actions. I wish I could take away all of his worry, but I don’t know how to.

“I’m not going anywhere, babe. You’re everything I’ve been looking for and more. I feel more than a spark with you. I feel like I have electricity coursing through me whenever you’re around. You’re there for me whenever I need you, even when I don’t ask you to be. I can count on you for everything and anything. You make me feel so special, like I’m the only girl that exists in your world. I can’t take my eyes off of you and you’re always on my mind. I never again want to fall asleep without your arms wrapped around me. I want to wake up every morning to your sexy smile. I never want to feel another set of lips on mine. I never want another man’s hands on my body. I want you and only you, Wes.”

“Damn, you’ve made me the luckiest man in the world, Addison.”

“And you’ve made me the luckiest woman in the world. Come sit next to me, you’re too far away on that side of the table.”

Wes shoots me his sexiest smile then quickly comes to my side of the booth. He drapes his arm around my shoulders and pulls me close. I lay my head on his chest and hug his waist.

“You never told me, what are you majoring in?” I ask.

“Construction engineering with a minor in business. I want to have my own construction business. I already know how to do the construction side. I grew up helping my dad and uncle with their business, but I want something of my own. A business degree will help with that. What are you majoring in?”

“I really don’t know... have any ideas for me?” I jokingly ask.

“Something with kids. You light up when you talk to Charlie. You handle her well, plus you handle Blake really well.” He laughs.

I relax into his arms and contemplate his words. Working with kids would be amazing. I love being around them. Maybe something that would help kids like me, ones who have been through something traumatic.

As the wheels turn in my head, I finally discover what I want to do with my life. I stare up into Wes’s captivating eyes and give him a deep passionate kiss.

“What’d I do to deserve that? I mean I’m not complaining but damn, I want to make sure I do it again.” He winks. I can’t help but laugh at him.

Wes has changed so much since I met him. He’s so loving, caring and happy now. Sometimes I wonder if the change had something to do with me. Am I the reason he’s dropped those walls around his heart and let me in?

“It was to thank you. Up until now, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life but you just helped me figure it out. I’m going to become a child psychologist. I want to help kids who’ve experienced some type of traumatic event. I want them to see they’re not alone and have someone to lean on. I want to help them avoid the depression and guilt they may feel. To help them come out stronger than they were before they experienced any trauma,” I whisper shyly.

“I think you’ll be great at that. I don’t know what you’ve been through, but I’m always here to listen and for you to lean on. As long as I’m alive, I never want you to feel alone, babe. Never. I’ll be by your side and I’ll be your biggest cheerleader.” Wes speaks so tenderly.

He puts his finger under my chin and lifts it so he can kiss me. He always knows exactly what to say to make me feel like the luckiest woman in the world. I nuzzle closer to his chest just as our food arrives.

“That looks really good.” Wes glances at my gnocchi with cream sauce.

“It is. Have a bite.” I stab a piece of gnocchi and lift it to his mouth. He wraps his lips around my fork and lets out a low groan.

“Holy crap that’s good! Do you want to try my chicken parm?” He peeks up at me as he raises his fork to my mouth. As my lips close around the metal, Wes stares at my lips and doesn’t look away. “Damn, baby. You’re killing me.”



Saturday morning breakfast as a family has become a sort of tradition since I did it the first time. Everyone’s seated around the table chatting and having a good time. I get up to refill my cup of coffee and pause. Leaning back against the counter, I watch the guys tease each other and laugh nonstop. Life seems

so perfect right now. I find myself feeling light as a feather with all of them.

We haven't had a chance to talk to Hunter yet. He's keeping his mouth shut today so I'm putting off kicking him out. I know I'm being a chicken, but it will kill Nicky. He'll understand but it will be hard on him.

I'm not sure I want to start any drama. I'd rather wait until he says or does something else and then call him out on it right then and there. I wish I had done that last night. It would've saved me from this anxiety of waiting for the right moment to do it.

My cell phone vibrates on the counter beside me, it's an unknown number. I only answer it since it's a local number.

"Hello?"

"Hello, I'm looking for Miss Addison Fields."

"This is her. How can I help you?" I ask.

The boys quiet down and turn their curious gazes to me. I tend to only get calls from Kasey and Kendra.

"Miss Fields, I'm a doctor at Rosewood University Hospital. There's been an accident with your sister and her daughter..."

The man on the phone continues to talk, but I barely hear a word. I tuned him out after he said Kasey and Charlie were in an accident. I can't get myself to focus on him no matter how hard I try. I need to pull myself together.

My coffee feels heavier than it should in my hand. My body feels like a weight has been placed on my chest, it's hard to breathe and even harder to stay standing. The mug starts slipping from my fingers, but I make no move to grasp it tighter. I stare as it slides out of my hand and falls to the ground. It's like everything's in slow motion and I'm observing from outside my body.

The mug crashes onto the tile floor. It shatters into millions of tiny pieces of ceramic, flying in every direction. The coffee explodes up in the air and covers my pajama pants before falling back all over the floor. I begin crumbling to the ground, my legs finally giving out from this extra weight on my chest, but I never make contact. Someone grabs me, holding me against their strong chest. Someone else pulls the phone out of my hand.

Oh my gosh, Kasey! Charlie! What happened to them? Are they ok? I can't lose them! They're all I have in this world.

Chapter 40



Nick



I stare as Addi scrunches up her nose at the caller ID on her phone. She only ever talks to two people and if either one of them were calling she would've jumped to answer it.

“Hello...this is her. How can I help you?”

I watch her intently; her tone seems off and her body is stiff. All of a sudden, Addi drops her mug on the ground and just stares. Tears are streaming down her face, but she makes no noise. Wes reacts immediately, gathering her into his arms and holding her against his chest before she can fall to the ground. I quickly grab the phone.

“Hello?” I ask.

“Umm, Hello. Are you a relative of Kasey Fields's?”

“Yes, I'm her brother, Nick.” I only half lie. I might not be blood-related, but we're as close as siblings and always have been.

“Nick, my name is Dr. Matherson. I work at Rosewood University Hospital. I have Kasey here. She and her daughter were in a car accident. They were T-boned by a drunk driver.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. This can't be happening. Addi's been through enough already. I don't know how she's going to get through this, but I'll make sure I'm there for her every step of the way.

"How are they? Are they ok?" I whisper.

"Nick..."

"Please, just be honest. I'll be there right away, but I need to know what I'm walking into," I beg.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but Kasey didn't make it. She was dead when the police arrived. Charlie's ok physically. We're running tests to make sure we haven't missed anything though. She was lucky."

"We're on our way," I choke out as the tears begin falling down my own face.

As soon as I hang up the phone, I turn my attention to Addi and the boys. Wes has Addi cradled on his lap and I kneel in front of them, taking her hands in mine.

"Kasey didn't make it," I whisper, feeling my heart break. Kasey was always like a sister to me. She let us follow her around all the time and she never yelled or told us to leave her alone. "They think Charlie is ok, but they're doing some tests."

Tears fall faster, but she doesn't say anything. I think she's in shock and I'm worried how she's going to react when the shock wears off.

I'm leading Addi out to the car and the boys are all following without a single word. We load into two cars and make our way to the hospital. Addi sits between Wes and me, she's shaking uncontrollably from her sobbing.

"Ad, I know this is hard, I can't imagine how you're feeling," I whisper to her.

"She's gone." She gasps between her sobs. My heart is breaking as I watch her. "She was your sister too, Nicky. She loves you."

"I know, sweetie. I love her too. I love both of you more than anything in the world. I'm here for you. I'm always here." I tug her a little closer, holding her as tight as I can.

Wes is quiet, I'm sure this is hard for him to watch his girlfriend fall apart and know there's nothing he can do to help. By him being here and holding her is more than enough for right now, she needs him to lean on.

I know Addi better than I know myself and Wes is exactly who she needs by her side during this. Between Wes and I, she'll make it past this. I've been there through every tragedy and she's stronger than she thinks she is. She's lived through more than anyone should ever have to.

"Oh my gosh, Nicky, Charlie lost her mother! Who's going to take care of her?" She's so defeated as this loss begins to hit her. "It's like history is repeating itself," she whispers. "Nicky, I barely made it through that. What if she can't handle it?"

“Addi, look at me.” When she gazes up at me, I continue, I need her full attention to make sure she’s really hearing me. “You made it because Kasey was strong for you and took care of you. Now you need to be the strong one and take care of Charlie. I’ll be there every step of the way. I’ll never leave your side. We can do this together, she needs us. We’ll take care of her and raise her to become the woman Kasey would’ve wanted her to be.”

“Addi, I’m here for you too. Anything you need, baby, just ask,” Wes whispers. I peek over Addi’s head to make eye contact with him and mouth, *Thank you*. He nods and turns his attention back to his girlfriend. There’s no one better for Addi to have by her side through all of this.

When we make it to the hospital, they only allow Addi and I back to see Charlie. They say only family is allowed in the room and that’s probably a good thing. Charlie’s going to be scared enough, she doesn’t need six strange men entering her room.

“Auntie Addi! Uncle Nicky! Where’s my mommy? They won’t let me see her!” Charlie stares at us with wide eyes. She’s clinging to her stuffed dog as tears stream down her little cheeks.

Addi goes straight to her and gathers her tiny body in her arms. We slowly explain what happened to her mommy. I hold Charlie against my chest as she weeps and Addi rubs her back in slow circles.

The three of us sit and cry for what seems like hours. We do our best to comfort her, but we both know she'll need time to process and deal with what's happening to her. She's so young; she just turned four. No matter how many times you explain what death is to someone this young, they still won't be able to grasp it. After a while Charlie falls asleep in our arms, Addi lays back in the hospital bed and snuggles close to her.

"I'll go talk to the guys and tell them to go home unless you want them to stay," I whisper so I won't wake Charlie.

"No, they can go home. Tell them I said thank you for their support. And thank you, Nicky, you really have always been my rock," she mumbles.

I lean over and kiss her forehead. "Anything for you, princess."

When I walk into the waiting room, the guys jump to their feet and surround me.

"How's Addi? How's Charlie?" They all ask at once.

"She's staying strong for Charlie but this is killing her. Her parents were murdered about five years ago, she knows how hard this is for Charlie. It's going to be even harder since she's younger. Charlie's ok physically. They're just keeping her for a few more hours for observation, but she'll be discharged soon. We explained what happened to Kasey and answered all her questions but she's too young to fully understand. You should all go home, there's nothing for any of you to do here. Addi asked me to thank you for your support though."

“I’m not going anywhere, man,” Blake replies quickly, followed by everyone else agreeing. “Can we see the little rugrat?” He whispers.

“I’ll go ask, but I’m not sure if they’ll let you.”

I’m surprised when the doctor agrees to allow the boys to visit for as long as they want. Everyone’s torn up knowing this little girl lost her mom and they’re willing to bend the rules a little.

I hurry back and grab the guys, leading them to Charlie’s room. When we walk in Addi’s softly singing to Charlie and she’s staring up at Addi like she’s her whole world. Addi glances up, surprised when she sees us.

“Hey guys, I didn’t think they’d let you back here,” she says quietly.

“They said it was ok as long as we’re not too loud, but we can all leave anytime you want.”

“No, I’m glad you’re here.” She turns to Charlie. “Charlie, I want you to meet my friends. This is my boyfriend, Wes.”

“I remember you and mommy talking about him,” Charlie whispers and I chuckle to myself.

Wes steps forward, drops down to his knee, and stares up at her. Telling her he’s so happy to meet the beautiful girl who makes Addi so happy and proud. He tells her he can’t wait to get to know her and maybe later they can convince Auntie Addi to let them have some ice cream.

“This is my friend Blake.” Blake walks over and gently holds Charlie’s hand in his and kisses it, saying she looks like a little princess and they’ll need to find her a tiara.

“This is Cole.” Cole being the jokester he is, pretends to trip and fall when walking towards Charlie, he gets her giggling and smiling.

“This is Hunter.” Hunter says *Hi* and flashes his signature smile at her.

“I remember you and mommy talking about him too,” Charlie says, staring up at Addi. Addi blushes and quickly moves on with introductions.

“This is Nate.” Nate just waves hi, he seems pretty uncomfortable, but there’s no way he’s leaving Addi at a time like this. They really have become like siblings over the last few months.

“And last but not least, this is Lincoln.” Lincoln tousles her hair and tells her it’s a pleasure to meet her.

Charlie tugs on Addi’s arm, when she glances down, she asks, “Auntie Addi, am I going to live with you now? With Uncle Nicky? With all of these guys?”

Sadness washes over Addi and tears gather in her eyes. “I think so, honey. Is that ok with you?”

Charlie hugs her tight. “I want to live with you, Auntie Addi... Do they still have cooties? I don’t want to catch cooties?” Charlie whines.

“Oh no, I gave them all a special bath that got rid of the cooties, I’d never let anything bad happen to you. Especially not cooties... Nicky, can you sit with Charlie while I talk to Wes privately?”

I glance over at Wes wondering if he knows what’s going on, but he looks just as surprised as I am.

“Sure.” I watch them walk out of the room and pray she doesn’t do something she’s going to regret.

Chapter 41



Wes



I follow Addi out of the room and into the waiting room. Her arms are wrapped around her waist and she looks like she's barely holding it together.

“What’s on your mind, baby?” I ask as I pull her into my embrace and rest my chin on her head.

She buries her face in my chest and her arms are tightly wound around my waist. After a few moments, her body starts to shake. Her sobs tear my heart in two. All I want to do is take away all of her pain. This beautiful woman has had so many people taken away from her. She’s stayed strong, but this is killing her.

I gently lift her into my arms and carry her to the couch in the waiting room. I sit down and place her on my lap. Addi refuses to meet my gaze, she keeps her eyes down and her face pressed against me.

“Sweetheart, look at me.”

“I can’t.” A hoarse whisper comes from her.

“Please, look at me, Ad,” I beg. “I need to see those lovely eyes of yours.” She feels like she’s slowly pulling away from me and I can’t handle the thought of that happening.

She lifts her chin and locks her gaze on mine. Her eyes are full of pure pain and regret. I instantly know that whatever comes out of her mouth next, I’m not going to like.

“I can’t do this, Wes.”

“I know, baby, but we’ll get through this together. Nick will help and so will all the other guys. Everyone’s here for you, especially me.”

“No... no, Wes... that’s not what I’m talking about... I can’t... I can’t do us anymore.”

I feel my heart physically break. An immense pain fills my chest and makes it hard to breathe. My stomach churns and I feel like I’m going to throw up.

“What?... Why?... Baby, don’t do this... please... I love you.” Pain and agony saturate my voice as I speak. I can’t lose her. She means the world to me.

“I’m so sorry, Wes,” she whispers as another sob rips through her body causing her to shake. “I need to focus on Charlie. I need to be a mother to her. You didn’t sign up for this.” She draws in a deep breath and slowly lets it out. Gently raising herself off my lap, she peers down at me. “I’m sorry. I love you, Wes.” She places a kiss on my cheek and disappears down the hallway that leads back to Charlie’s room.

Her kiss feels final. Like a goodbye. Fuck.

I lean forward, placing my elbows on my knees and hanging my head down low. I try to take slow steady breaths to keep myself from losing it, but Addi got under my armor. I let the walls between us crumble and let her into my heart. Now I'm paying for that.

If I thought Mercedes had destroyed me, I was horribly wrong. Mercedes meant nothing to me compared to Addi. Tears silently make their way down my cheeks until they drip off my chin and onto the ground. I couldn't care less if people see me breaking down. Nothing matters if I don't have Addi by my side.

The couch dips on either side of me as people plop down next to me, I don't check to see who it is. I don't care, all I can think about right now is Addi and how I don't want to lose her. I need to figure out a way to convince her we should stay together; we have to stay together. I don't care if she's now a mother to Charlie, I'd never prevent her from doing that. I'll support her and help her in any way I can. Why can't she see that?

A heavy hand comes down on my shoulder and gently squeezes, it makes the tears come faster. I don't have to look to know it's Blake. Nate's probably on the other side.

"I'm sorry man... what can we do?" Blake asks.

"Help me get her back... I can't lose her."

"We'll do whatever it takes," Nate assures me.

“What was she thinking?” Blake asks more to himself than to us.

“She thinks I don’t want to date someone with a kid.”

“That’s stupid. You love kids and Charlie seems pretty awesome.”

“Well, let’s show her that. You can tell her you love her and you’ll be there for her until you’re blue in the face, but it’s just words until she sees you actually doing it. Prove to her that you can be the man she needs by her side.” Nate pats me on the back.



We finally make it back home a little after six o’clock. The sun has almost completely set and our entire day was spent in that hospital.

Nick had his parents go to Kasey’s house and get everything Charlie needs for the next few days. They have her things waiting for her in the living room. Nick must spend tons of time with Charlie for him to know which toys are her favorite and which blankets she needs to sleep at night.

He had his parents bring her favorite outfits, books, movies, and they even stopped to pick up her favorite foods and snacks. Nick has to be the world’s greatest uncle. I don’t think anyone could ever compete with him.

Maybe Addi doesn't need me when she has someone like Nick at her side. She's always had him to lean on and maybe she doesn't want anyone else.

But I can't let her go. I can't just walk away. I'll find a way to prove to Addi I want to be there for them, that I can be the man she needs by her side.

I don't care if Addi has a child to take care of. I love kids. I don't care if it makes our relationship more difficult, I'm up for the challenge when it comes to Addi. And Charlie's adorable. I know from Addi she's very stubborn, too smart for her age, and has a huge heart. She sounds just like the woman that stole my heart without me knowing it.

When Charlie walks into the house, she's nervous. Her eyes widen as she takes in her surroundings and knows this is where she's going to live now.

While Addi talks to Sadie and Shaun, Nick's mom and dad, I take the opportunity to kneel down in front of Charlie and take her chubby little hand in my own.

"Sweetie, I'm here for you no matter what. If you need me, you just yell for me and I'll come running. I'll protect you and do everything in my power to make you happy," I whisper to her.

Her eyes mist and she throws her arms around my neck. I hold her close and continue to whisper to her. I'm going to be someone this little girl can rely on for the rest of her life. I don't care if Addi's in my life or not.

“It’s all going to be ok, princess... I’ve got you... You’re going to be ok... We all love you.”

My shoulder grows damp as her little tears soak through my shirt, breaking my heart. I stand to my full height with her still in my arms. Her little legs and arms are wrapped so tightly around me that I could let go and she wouldn’t move an inch.

Her face is snuggled into my neck and shoulder. I place my hand on the back of her head, gently stroking her hair as I sway back and forth. I try to calm her, repeating the same words in her ear over and over again.

A warm hand settles on my back, turning I find Addi staring up at me with tears in her eyes.

“I can take her from you. You don’t need to do this,” she whispers.

“Don’t be silly, I’ve got her.” I place a kiss on Charlie’s head and continue my swaying.

“Oh... ok... well, dinner is ready. Can you bring her into the kitchen? She needs to eat.”

I nod and follow Addi. I gently place Charlie into a booster chair, but she refuses to unwrap her arms from around my neck.

“Baby girl, you need to let go so we can eat dinner,” I murmur in her ear. She shakes her head in response. “What if I sit next to you and hold your hand?” I get a small nod before her arms loosen and fall to her sides. She quickly grabs my hand and holds it tightly in hers.

Chapter 42



Wes

Two Weeks Later



Charlie was shy when she first arrived, but she seems to be adjusting quickly. After a few days of living here, she's running around like she owns the place. She doesn't understand that the guy's rooms are their own space, but they're being good sports about it.

The days have flown by in a blur. There was a small service for Kasey and we went to the beach to scatter her ashes. Now, we're slowly becoming our own little family.

We've all slid into the adoptive uncle roles fairly easily. We love making Charlie laugh and we play tag or hide and seek constantly.

She's decided I'm her personal protector and makes me hold her hand when she eats or is scared. It's made me feel a little bit better with everything happening between me and Addi.

We've barely spoken since the accident. Addi keeps her distance and avoids making eye contact with me. I hate the distance between us, but I'm not the one who insisted this happen.

I refuse to stay away from Charlie. I'm going to continue being me and do all of the things I would've done if Addi and I were still dating. I've kept my distance from Addi, even though I feel my heart breaking every second she's nearby. Nick told me she just needs time and I'll give her that, but it isn't easy.

I can't tug her into my arms and kiss her breathless anymore. I can't tell her how much I love her or how I want to be with her for the rest of my life. I can't be a shoulder for her to cry on or listen to her as she spills all of her worries and fears.

I feel bad for Addi. Since Charlie moved in, she seems to have taken on the mothering role to all of us. Every night she makes dinner for everyone. She cleans up and does the dishes even if one of us offers to do it for her. I think she does it to give herself some space to breathe. We always entertain Charlie while she cooks or cleans.

For the most part, I'm confining myself to my room when Charlie isn't around. I want to be supportive of Addi, but being around her is too painful when I can't have her.

Today I've decided I can't take it anymore. I need to talk to her and we need to work this out. As soon as Charlie goes to bed, I'm confronting her.

"It's time for bed! Come on, hurry it up!" Addi calls while we're playing tag in the living room.

"Aww, Mom, I don't wanna!" Blake whines. He jumps over the couch, narrowly missing Nate's hand from tagging him. He

does a little victory dance and Nate rolls his eyes.

“Come on, kids, bedtime. Now.” Addi laughs and shakes her head.

“Fine, but tomorrow can we go to the park?” Blake grumbles.

He acts like more of a child than the actual kid does. Charlie loves him and thinks he’s hilarious to play with. I know he’s hamming it up for her and she loves it. He’s made the transition easier for her and I’m thankful for that.

“Only if you go to bed right now.” Addi arches a brow and plants her hands on her hips. When Blake tries to sneak by her, she wraps him in a hug and kisses his cheek. “Thank you, you’re amazing with her,” she whispers to him.

“She’s awesome. I love having her around. I’m not the only one who’s good with her, ya know.” He shrugs, glancing at me before walking upstairs to his room. I’m left standing awkwardly next to Addi.

“You’re doing a great job, Snow,” I whisper.

She tosses her silky soft hair that always smells like vanilla over her shoulder before she acknowledges me.

“Thanks, I don’t know which kid is harder to deal with, Blake, Cole, Charlie, or Lincoln.”

“Definitely Blake,” I reply, chuckling at the way our lives have changed so drastically in the past two weeks. Addi’s eyes are on me, want and pain filling them.

I'm craving to tug her into my arms and beg her to take me back. I want to tell her exactly how I feel and find out if we're on the same page.

My gaze turns down when the sound of little feet pitter patter towards us and big blue eyes stare up at us.

"Can we snuggle for a little before bed?" Charlie asks with the most innocent look on her face.

"Sure, honey. I'll be right in, ok?" Addi answers.

"Umm... is it ok if Wessie comes and cuddles with us too?" She whispers, twisting the toe of one foot on the hardwood floor. She refuses to make eye contact with us.

This little girl breaks my heart on a daily basis. She's adorable, but so worried that we don't want her around.

I slowly kneel down so we're eye level. I want her to know I'm always there for her and will always want her around.

"That's up to your Auntie Addi, but if a pretty girl wants to cuddle with me, I'll never turn her down," I wink at her and Charlie's face lights up with a huge smile.

"Can he? Pretty please!"

"You know I can't say no to a pretty please," Addi moans as Charlie grabs my hand and hers, leading us into Addi's room.

After we get into bed, Charlie positions herself between us and holds our hands in hers while she gets comfortable. I stay with them until Charlie decides she's gotten a sufficient amount of cuddling in for the night, then she kicks me out.

I take a seat on the couch and wait. I'm sure Addi's going to come out at some point and I'll be waiting.

It's been about an hour when Blake comes down from his room and drops onto the couch across from me.

“What's up, man?”

“I'm just thinking about what I'm going to say to Addi... I love her and I can't let her go. I can't stand not being able to touch or kiss her. Every time she walks in the room I want to wrap my arms around her.”

“Don't give up. I think she regrets pushing you away.”

“Really?” Hope drenches my words, making me wince and Blake laughs at me.

“Yeah, I do. More than once I've walked in to find her just sitting here, staring at your door. It's like she's hoping if she stares long enough, you're going to come out. When you're in the same room, her eyes are almost always on you, especially if you're interacting with Charlie.”

Staring off into space, I think about everything that's happened, trying to find the words that need to be said to fix everything that's happened between us. Blake pats my shoulder as he stands.

“Just speak from your heart, man. She loves you even if she's pushing you away.” He walks away, leaving me alone with my thoughts once again.

I don't think she's coming out of her room tonight.

Chapter 43



Addi



“Come on, Charlie,” I call over my shoulder. “I need to put all these groceries away and start making dinner. Do you think you could sit at your table and draw me some pictures or play with your dolls?”

“I can do that, Auntie Addi. I’m gonna draw a picture of our family!” She hugs my legs before rushing off to entertain herself for a while.

I’m thankful Kasey taught her to be so independent. I’m not sure I could handle this if she couldn’t be by herself for short periods of time.

I head into the kitchen and put away the groceries. Then I start washing and cutting the vegetables for dinner. I’ve been trying to make healthy meals every night. Kasey was big on eating healthy and I want to continue that for Charlie.

Before Charlie came to live here, the guys would all make their own meals and we rarely sat down to eat together. Our Saturday morning breakfasts were the only time we were all together.

I love Charlie like she's my own daughter, but I feel like life's been crazy the past three weeks. Everyone's world has been turned upside down with Kasey's death. I miss her like crazy and have to fight the urge to break down crying at least ten times a day.

I know I need to keep it all together for Charlie. The only time I allow myself to cry in front of her is when she cries for her mommy.

Last night was one of those times. After Charlie kicked Wes out of her cuddle time, she climbed onto my lap and sobbed herself to sleep. I sobbed right along with her, telling her it was ok to be sad and miss her mommy because I missed Kasey too. I told her I still miss my parents, but they'd all want us to be happy. She can be sad but she can't stay sad all the time because our happy times need to outweigh our sad times.

After she finally fell asleep, I got up to get a drink of water. Carefully cracking the door open so I wouldn't wake up Charlie, I found Wes sitting on the couch. I was frozen in place. He's been keeping his distance from me, but is putting forth a huge effort with Charlie.

His head is leaning back against the cushion, his gaze locked on the ceiling. Every time I look at him my stomach sinks and my chest aches at how pain spills through his eyes constantly. The only time I catch his gorgeous smile is when he's talking to Charlie. Any other time, he looks so miserable

and it makes me feel like a horrible person for pushing him away.

I decided against getting a drink and leaned my back against the wall next to the door. I sank down to the floor and hugged my knees to my chest, but I left the door cracked. Sometimes I just want to feel close to him again.

After a few minutes, Wes and Blake's voices float into my room. I listened to Wes say how much he loves me and wants to kiss me, wrap his arms around me, and be with me. I listened to Blake tell him not to give up on me.

Blake's right, I do love Wes even though I'm pushing him away. I let my tears fall silently until, like Charlie, I cried myself to sleep.

"Are you ok?" A voice pulls me out of my thoughts and I turn around to face him.

"Oh... yeah... just kinda lost in my own head."

"You were just staring out the window," Wes says quietly.

"Sorry..." I glance down, trying to avoid his gaze. Wes has at least a dozen bags in his hands. "What's all that?"

"Oh, I got something for Charlie... We were talking the other day about wanting to do something, but we didn't have everything we needed."

Wes is trying to keep it a secret from me. He almost seems shy about it. My eyebrows draw together and I search his face but he gives away nothing.

“Okay...” I draw out the word. “She’s playing at her table.”

“Thanks.” He hurries out of the kitchen before I can respond.

I finish preparing dinner and stick everything in the oven before grabbing a glass of water and heading out to the couch. What I find in the living room stops me in my tracks.

Charlie and Wes are sitting at her little kiddie table with teacups in hand, having a tea party. Wes is sipping his tea with his pinky sticking out and speaking with a horrible English accent. Charlie’s giggling at everything he says. Her love for him is evident, as is his for her.

Charlie’s wearing a princess dress I don’t remember ever seeing before. There are five more draped over the back of the couch. She has on a new tiara, a feather boa around her neck and several pieces of new jewelry. Wes has on a hot pink feather boa, a purple tiara and clip-on earrings. I stand in the doorway with my shoulder leaning against the threshold, I can’t take my eyes off of the two of them.

“You know what every princess needs?” Wes asks in his horrible accent.

“What?” Charlie giggles.

“Their hair done. Should we give you a braid like Elsa or an updo like Cinderella?”

“Elsa! I love Elsa!”

“Ok, go get your hair brush and a hair tie.” He watches her run off to get it with a smile. He moves himself to the floor

and sits cross-legged. When Charlie returns, she plops herself down on his lap like she's done it a million times.

“I'll try to be gentle, but this princess has a lot of knots in her hair. You must not be doing the princess hair treatment everyday like you're supposed to, Princess Charlie.”

“What's the princess hair treatment?” She blinks up at him with big innocent eyes.

“Well, Princess Charlie, princesses are supposed to brush their hair one hundred times a day to keep their hair smooth and shiny.”

Charlie remains still as Wes brushes her hair one hundred times and braids it perfectly. I'm astonished, not only that he can braid hair like a pro, but that Charlie let him do it.

I fought with Charlie all morning to get her to brush her hair. Obviously, I lost the fight. I feel like I'm failing at everything right now. Tears fill my eyes as the realization hit me.

I was wrong. Wes is ready for this, possibly more than I am. He's not avoiding spending time with Charlie; he's going out of his way to spend time with her and make her happy. Maybe I shouldn't be pushing him away at all.

Wes glances up at me like he can hear my thoughts. He gives me a small smile, but it doesn't reach his eyes. His smiles never meet his eyes anymore. He's going through the motions, but he isn't happy and it's all my fault. He quickly turns his attention back to Charlie.

“Alright, Princess, where’s my kiss for doing your hair?” He arches a brow.

Charlie giggles and plants a big wet kiss on his cheek. I expect him to wipe off the wetness with disgust, but he doesn’t. Instead, he pulls her into a bear hug and tickles her until she’s laughing uncontrollably. He’s so good with her, better than I ever could’ve hoped for.

The timer goes off for dinner, pulling me away from watching the two of them. I sigh and walk back into the kitchen to set the table.

I’m quiet during dinner, letting Charlie and the guys dominate the conversation. I can feel Wes’s gaze on me quite often and I try to ignore it.

After dinner, I take Charlie into our room for a bath. We read a few books and talk about our day before I put her to bed. I’m not tired yet and decided to take my own bath to try and relax a little bit.

I’ve just finished my bath and am combing my hair with a towel wrapped around my body when I hear a soft knock on my door.

“Who is it?” I call out of my bathroom. Charlie’s snoring away on my bed. She’s exhausted from playing all day and I know she won’t wake up.

“It’s Wes... can I talk to you?” His voice sounds broken. He’s always so broken anymore.

“Give me a minute,” I call back.

I quickly drop my towel and grab a tank top and a pair of pajama shorts. I tug my hair into a messy bun and rush to the door, quietly opening it.

Wes has a hand on either side of the door frame with his head hung low. The position makes his biceps bulge and I can't take my eyes off of them.

“Wes...” I whisper.

“I can't do this, Addi. I can't live next to you and not touch you. I can't see your smile and not want to kiss those beautiful lips. I can't watch you play with Charlie and not want to pull you into my arms and hold you close. I can't stand looking at you and feeling my heart break a little more each time. I need you. I want nothing more than to be with you...”

“Wes...” I whisper again, but he continues speaking.

“I know I didn't sign up for a girlfriend with a kid, but you didn't even give me a chance. I have no problem with Charlie being around... I want her in my life. I love that little girl. Seeing her laugh and smile is the only thing keeping my heart together some days...”

“Wes...” I say for the third time, but he ignores me once again. He still has his head hung and refuses to look at me. It's like if he meets my gaze, he won't be able to get it all out.

“I'm not asking you to focus on me instead of her. I'm asking you to let me love you both. I want both of you... I need both of you in my life, Addi. Staying away from you is

killing me. I love you, baby. I love you so fucking much it's killing me.”

“Wes.” I grip his chin between my thumb and forefinger, lifting it until he's forced to look me in the eyes.

Several tears escape his eyes, making a slow trail down his cheek. I grasp his face in both hands, gently wiping the moisture away with my thumbs as my own tears stream down my cheeks. I stand up on my toes and press my lips to his. Tilting my head, I deepen our kiss when Wes's arms wrap around my waist and he pulls me close.

Our kisses becomes heated and full of love and passion as our lips part and his tongue grazes mine. I melt into his arms as I grip his neck with one hand and place the other one on his chest, right over his heart. It's beating wildly like I'm sure my own is doing.

I've been dying to kiss him for weeks. To be wrapped in his embrace. Wes breaks our kiss and rests his forehead on mine as both of us catch our breath.

“I'm sorry I pushed you away. I was wrong. So very wrong. I can't stay away from you either. She loves you... I love you. I love you so fucking much,” I repeat his words with a smirk as his lips come crashing back down on mine.

Chapter 44



Wes



I wake up in the middle of the night with Charlie's head on my chest. Her little arm is stretched across my stomach and my arm is curled around her. I sit up a little to check on Addi. The moonlight streams through the window lighting up the room enough for me to see she's awake.

"Hey," she says with a sleepy smile. "Do you want me to move her?"

"I don't want to wake her," I whisper.

"Trust me she won't wake up. I would've moved her already, but I didn't want to wake you. You were so cute snuggled up with each other. Talk about melting a girl's heart. If I didn't already love you, that would've won me over."

"Baby, I'll strive to win your heart every day for the rest of my life. I want you to fall in love with me over and over again."

Addi flashes me a sexy smile and cradles Charlie in her arms. She carefully lays her in the toddler bed next to the closet door.

She silently climbs up the bed and slips under the covers. I tug her body against mine and breathe a sigh of relief when she snuggles into me and lays her head on my chest.

I know exactly what life without Addi is like and I'm never going to stop thanking God for my second chance with her. Every time she's in my arms or kisses me, I'm sending up another prayer of thanks.

"I think you were just jealous of Charlie and wanted to take her place," I whisper, teasing the woman I love.

"Maybe just a little." She holds her thumb and index finger close together.

"If she keeps being so cute, she might give you a run for your money."

"Luckily for me, there are things she can't do that I can." She laughs.

"Like what?" I egg her on.

"Like this..." She slips out of my arms and straddles my waist with the blanket covering both of us. Her hair falls in my face as she leans down to pepper me with kisses.

A lopsided smile tugs on the corner of my lips, I love when she's like this. She sits back on her heels and I stare into her eyes.

My whole life and future are held in those eyes. Nothing will ever go wrong in my world as long as I have those eyes staring back at me.

I gently place a hand on either side of her cheeks and pull her down for a deep passionate kiss. Her tongue glides across my bottom lip before dancing with mine. We melt into each other's arms, fitting like we're made to be together.

She knows exactly how to make me feel loved and worthy of her. She has a way of making me open up to her in ways I've never done before.

"I love you," she whispers, laying back down in my arms. I gently kiss her head and tug her closer.

"I love you too, baby."

Her back is against my chest and she's drawing little designs on my arm with her fingers.

"I'm sorry I almost ruined things between us." Her voice is so soft I almost don't hear her.

"Addison..." I sit up on my elbow and lean over her so I can see her face. "Stop, baby. I understand why you did it."

"Yeah, but we lost so much time together. If I had just given you a chance..."

"If you had, we'd still be in this bed right now. I'd still love you just as much as I do right now." I kiss the soft spot of skin right under her ear.

"How did I get such an amazing man like you to fall in love with me?" She peeks up at me with a soft smile.

"I found you prettier and you have boobs." I smirk, repeating what I told Blake when he asked why I bought

Addi's ticket for the movies and not his.

“Wes!” Addi's soft laugh fills the room as she grins. She kisses my arm and we're quiet for a while.

“You saw passed the walls, baby. You weren't afraid to knock them all down and find the man hiding behind them.”

We snuggle closer and drift off to sleep in each other's arms.

Chapter 45



Addi



“Auntie Addi!” Charlie whisper yells in my ear, as I struggle to open my eyes.

“Yes, sweetie?”

“Can we have a tea party breakfast with the boys? Pretty please!” Her eyes are bright and hopeful. I can’t say no to that face, she’s too adorable.

“Sure, baby. Let’s go make them some breakfast.” I slowly inch my way off the bed, careful not to wake up Wes.

It takes us a while to make everything, but Charlie’s having a blast dancing around the kitchen with me while we cook. Once breakfast is ready and the table is set, I fold my arms over my chest and stare at Charlie.

“Only one thing left to do!” I wiggle my eyebrow.

“Let’s go jump on them!” Charlie bounces on her toes, clapping her hands.

“Ok! Who do we start with?”

“Uncle Nicky!”

“Alright, but we have to be quiet.”

We creep up the stairs and open Nicky’s door as quietly as we can. Charlie shoots me a devilish grin before she runs and jumps on top of Nicky.

“Ugh... Baby girl, you’re gonna kill Uncle Nicky,” Nicky moans as Charlie continues to harass him. I can’t help but laugh at them.

“Sorry, Uncle Nicky, but I made you breakfast! It’s a breakfast tea party! Get up! I’m gonna go wake up Uncle Blakie.”

“Ok, you go wake up Uncle Blakie. Make sure you give him a wet willie, he loves those.” Nicky winks at me. Charlie grabs my hand and pulls me to Blake’s door. He’s lying on his back snoring away.

“I don’t know how to do a wet willie,” Charlie whispers.

“Do what I do,” I whisper back.

We tiptoe to the edge of Blake’s bed and Charlie watches me carefully. I stick my finger in my mouth to get it nice and wet. Charlie does the same and I motion for her to stick her finger in Blake’s ear. We each shove a slimy finger in one of Blake’s ears at the same time.

“Wakie, wakie, Uncle Blakie!” Charlie yells.

Blake shoots up in bed and knocks his phone onto the floor. Wide eyes bounce around the room before landing on the little girl staring at him.

“What the fu-... Charlie, what are you doing, sweetie?”

“Uncle Nicky said you like wet willies. I made a breakfast tea party. I can’t have a tea party without my Uncle Blakie.” Charlie’s eyes turn down, her lip popping out in a pout while using her saddest voice possible. “I didn’t mean to make you angry.” She adds with the most adorable frown to her face. Blake instantly melts at her feet and pulls her into a big hug.

“Oh, sweetie, I could never be angry with you. You’re my favorite girl in the whole wide world... Uncle Nicky’s in trouble though, no one likes wet willies. I think we need to get him back. How about we get some water guns today and soak him.”

“Yay! I love water guns! Can we all have water guns and have a big fight with them?”

“Anything you want, sweetie,” Blake answers with a kiss on her head. “Now you and Auntie Addi should go scare the rest of the boys awake. And Auntie Addi better watch her back.” Blake shoots me a devilish grin.

“Auntie Addi isn’t afraid of Uncle Blakie,” I sing over my shoulder. I turn my back to Blake as I walk away. He slaps my butt and makes me jump. “Hey!”

“Told ya to watch your back, sweet thing.” He winks, chuckling at me.

Charlie goes from one room to the next, waking up all the guys. Most of them are good sports about it once they realize it’s Charlie. Hunter, of course, isn’t as nice as I would’ve

liked. He doesn't yell at her, but he firmly says to leave him alone and stay out of his room. Charlie looks like she's going to cry as we exit his room.

I quickly try to explain how some people just aren't morning people. I know that isn't what's wrong with Hunter but I don't want to involve Charlie in our drama.

We make our way back down to my room and Charlie carefully climbs onto the bed. She gently places a hand on Wes's chest and kisses his cheek.

"Wesssssss... Wesssss it's time to get up," she whispers until his eyes finally pop open. "It's time to get up, silly. We made breakfast for a tea party."

"Alright sweetie, I'm coming. Give me a minute." Wes groans as he gets out of bed and stretches his arms over his head.

Charlie tugs me into my closet while Wes heads into the bathroom to get ready. She insists we have to dress up as princesses. She wears her blue Cinderella dress and makes me wear a hot pink prom dress that was shoved into the back of my closet. We both have one of the little plastic tiaras Wes bought on our heads.

When we're ready for our tea party, I lead her to the kitchen and we wait for the boys. As the guys walk in, they all snicker at our outfits.

"How are my beautiful princesses?" Wes asks as he strolls in. He gives Charlie a kiss on her hand and sweeps me into a

deep kiss while dipping me backward.

Charlie giggles, “You’re like Prince Charming, Wessie!”

“Hey! I think I’m the most Prince Charming-like person in this room!” Blake whines.

“Uncle Blakie,” Charlie says sternly as she glares at him. “Prince Charming does NOT spank a princess’s butt. He kisses them and loves them.”

“Whose butt did Uncle Blakie spank?” Wes asks with a raised eyebrow.

“Auntie Addi’s!” Charlie folds her arms over her chest and glares at him.

“Tattletale!” Blake narrows his eyes at Charlie. She sticks her tongue out at him and laughs.

“Oh really... Uncle Blakie needs to be disciplined for spanking my princess,” Wes growls, twisting a towel up really tight and flicking it at Blake.

“OW! Shit, man, that hurt! Addi gave me a wet willie! I was just getting back at her. We both know it’s not like that,” Blake groans, rubbing at his side where Wes hit him. Wes flicks him with the towel again. “Ok! Ok! I won’t touch your girl again!” He holds up his hands in defeat.

“Damn right,” Wes mumbles, wrapping his arms around my waist and kissing my neck.

“Why do none of you wear shirts?” Charlie glances around the room at all the shirtless men. “Do I have to wear a shirt,

Auntie Addi?” Charlie asks, her head tilted to the side.

“Yes, sweetie, you do. Girls must wear shirts all the time. We don’t want the boys seeing our boobies.” I have no clue if that’s the right answer, but what else am I supposed to say?

“We’d prefer it if you didn’t. We’d love to see your boobies,” Blake grumbles under his breath. Wes shoots him a glare and he chuckles to himself.

“But I don’t have any boobies,” Charlie whines.

“It’s ok, you will in a few years,” I assure her while trying to hide my smile. That seems to end the conversation on boobs for the time being. I don’t know how parents deal with these awkward conversations with a straight face.

Charlie sits quietly while she eats. She has something on her mind, but I leave her alone. I know when she’s ready to talk, she will.

Chapter 46



Wes



After lunch, we change into our bathing suits and hide around the indoor pool. We each have a big water gun and we're waiting for Nick to come down to swim. I'm not quite sure how Blake roped all of us into his little vendetta, but he did.

"Charlie!... Charlie, where are you?" Nick calls out as he enters the room.

"GET HIM!" Blake screams. "Uncle Blakie doesn't like wet willies!"

Each of us jumps out of our hiding spots with our guns pointed at Nick. He's soaked in a matter of seconds and swipes at the moisture on his face.

"Ok! Ok! I get it! No more wet willies!" He chuckles, being a better sport than most of us would've been.

The guys all refill their guns and get ready for another fight, but I don't really want to participate if I'm going to be squirted in the face with water. I hand off my water gun to Nick as I stare over his shoulder at my girl.

Addi's pulling off her shirt, revealing a tiny black bikini that makes my mouth go dry. She has a blue gem hanging from her belly button piercing. I notice a small tattoo that curves under her left breast, but I can't make out what it says. I'm pretty sure my mouth is hanging open as I appreciate Addi's body. She gives me a sexy knowing smirk.

"I think Auntie Addi's ready to jump in!" Blake yells as he runs up behind Addi and wraps his arms around her waist. He lifts her into the air and races towards the edge of the pool, launching both of them into the air. They make a huge splash, covering the walkway around the pool in water.

"Blake! I can't believe you!" She shrieks when she comes up. She splashes water at him, he laughs and does the same thing right back.

"I wanna jump in too!" Charlie whines.

"Let's go jump in front of them and get them all wet!" I whisper to her.

Charlie's so excited. She balls her little fists up and is jumping on her toes. As soon as she's in my arms, we jump into the water, soaking Blake and Addi immediately.

When we resurface, Charlie swims after Blake and pretends to be a shark. She's doing a great job swimming as long as she's wearing her little floaty vest.

I take the opportunity while she's distracted and tug Addi into my arms. She lets out a soft gasp as my lips touch the shell of her ear.

“You’re going to make it very hard for me to keep my hands to myself and pretend I’m not dying to worship your body if you’re prancing around in this,” I whisper. My fingers splay across her stomach, holding her tightly against me.

“Well, I feel something very hard.” She arches her eyebrow and glances down as I grind myself into her again. She’s killing me. I want to carry her to my bed and lay her out to have my way with her, but I promised we wouldn’t do that. Not yet.

“Eyes up here, missy. What’s going on down there is for the missus only.”

“Mmmm, but I want to be the missus.”

“And I want you to be the missus,” I mumble into her neck, peppering her smooth skin with kisses. She starts melting back into my arms, enjoying the feel of my lips on her. I decide to choose that second to change the mood, I can’t take it anymore. I’m going to end up dry humping her in the pool if I don’t do something.

“WES!” Addi shrieks as I tickle her.

She thrashes around trying to get away from me, but she can’t get out of my grasp. She laughs and jumps around with a huge smile on her face. My own smile spreads across my lips and I laugh right along with her. Her happiness is infectious.

When I decide to give her a break, I pull her back into my arms. They wrap around her and my chin resting on her shoulder.

“What’s your tattoo say?” I whisper.

Her gaze snaps to me and her eyes narrow. “How’d you know I have a tattoo?”

“Babe, your itty-bitty black bikini doesn’t cover much,” I say, laughing at her. She’s quiet for a few minutes before she finally speaks.

“It says ‘Whom shall I fear?’”

“Why do you seem embarrassed by it? I love that you have a tattoo.”

“I’m not embarrassed by the tattoo. I’m embarrassed by what it reminds me of. It reminds me of my past and everything I’ve been through, but it also reminds me that with God by my side, there’s nothing I should fear.”

“That’s beautiful, babe, just like you.”

I hold her a little tighter as we watch Charlie play with the boys. She’s jumping off the edge of the pool into each of their arms. She laughs and yells at them when they do something wrong. Even Hunter’s laughing and playing along with her.

Addi hasn’t brought up kicking out Hunter again and I’ve left it alone. He seems to be doing better at keeping his mouth shut and I think the less drama going on around here the better it will be for Charlie.

It’s nice to see that little girl so happy after everything she’s been through. I wasn’t sure how Kasey’s death and her life being flipped upside down would affect her, but she’s doing well.

“She’s going to be ok, isn’t she?” Addi asks quietly.

“She’s going to be perfectly fine.” I press a kiss to her temple. “I’ll do everything in my power to make sure of it.”

We enjoy watching her play the rest of the afternoon. It’s weird how she lights up the room just by being here. Charlie’s made us into a little family since she moved in. She’ll be perfectly fine as she grows up. After all, now she has six extra uncles to take care of her and she’s constantly surrounded by love.

Chapter 47



Hunter



We're getting closer and closer to midterms and I'm starting to feel the pressure. School doesn't come easily to me, but if I work hard, I always get good grades.

My books are spread across the coffee table and my notebook is in my lap. I learn best if I write the information down a few times, somehow that helps me retain it better.

Addi and Wes ran to the grocery store to get something for dinner and they left Charlie here. She's laying on the floor playing with her dolls. She's being so quiet I almost forgot she was here.

The rest of the guys are around here somewhere. I think Nick is officially the one watching Charlie, but he's nowhere in sight.

Charlie's an absolute sweetheart. No matter what life throws at her, she always has a big smile on her face. I think she got that trait from her aunt. She reminds me so much of Addi.

"Did you and Auntie Addi date?" Charlie breaks the silence, peeking up at me from her spot on the floor

“Umm... no,” I answer honestly.

“Did you want to date her?” She asks.

“Yes, I did. I liked her very much.”

“Do you still like her?” She smirks.

“I’m not answering that,” I growl, narrowing my gaze on her.

“Silly, Uncle Huntie, that means yes.” She covers her mouth with her hand and giggles. “Is that why you’re always so sad and angry when you see Wessie and Auntie Addi kissing?”

“I’m not sad or angry.”

She gives me a knowing look, “Yes, you are, Uncle Huntie. I remember Mommy talking to Auntie Addi about you. She said she really liked you. She said you were really nice and cute, but you tried to kiss her. She lived with me when you met her. She said she was scared and couldn’t kiss you back. She was sad after that and she cried a lot. It made me unhappy too. Now you’re miserable, which also makes me unhappy.”

“It’s alright Charlie, Addi and Wes love each other and they’re good for each other.”

As the words come out of my mouth, I realize just how true they are. Wes is good for her. He’s the perfect man to be at her side through all of this.

I honestly don’t think I’d be able to be there for her and be a shoulder to cry on. I wouldn’t have gone out of my way to play with Charlie and take care of her if Addi had pushed me

away. I most likely would've walked away and sulked in my room... kinda like I've been doing.

“But it doesn't make you happy. Mommy always said if you love someone then you'll do anything you can to make them happy. You should be happy that Auntie Addi's happy. And I can always help you find a girlfriend. Girls love me. Uncle Blakie wants to take me out all the time to get girls to like him.” She lifts her shoulders to her ears in a shrug before dropping them again.

I can't help but laugh at the pure innocence of Charlie. She's right though. If I love Addi then I should care about her happiness more than my own. I just needed a four-year-old to point that out.

Chapter 48



Wes



I lean my head back against the wall and let my eyes slide shut. I'm exhausted. It's been a long week already and it's only Thursday.

Charlie's taking a nap at the foot of the bed and Addi's laying with her head on my lap. I slip my fingers through her silky strands and rub her scalp. She loves it when I play with her hair and I know she's more than stressed out right now.

Her professors have been great this semester. They're all letting her attend classes virtually to give her a chance to get Charlie settled and figure out childcare, but Addi wants to get back to normal.

"Mmm, that feels so good," she mumbles. "Can you do this all night?"

"If that's what you'd like, I'll happily do it all night. Or until I fall asleep."

"Wes, you sound like you're almost asleep."

"I'm tired, baby. I had to get up at four to get my run and workout in before practice. If I didn't have a baseball

scholarship, I would've quit by now."

My phone buzzes on the mattress next to me. I glance at the screen, letting out a sigh. I really don't feel like dealing with my sister right now, but most days she's too busy to talk and it takes forever for her to get back to me.

"Hey, Kels," I say, accepting the call.

"Wes! Hey, baby bro! I've missed you!" Kelsey's excited voice rings through the phone, making Addi's face light up.

"I've missed you too. How are you?"

"Eh, I've been better. Just broke up with the asshole I've been dating for the past year. He thought it was cool to cheat on me when I was out of town for shoots. How have you been? Any girls in your life?... Why am I even asking that? The answer is always no." She chuckles. I can picture her shaking her head, a smirk playing on her lips.

"Ha-ha. For your information I do have a girlfriend and I'm in love with her." I puff out my chest with pride.

She starts laughing even harder and I stay quiet, waiting for her to stop. It takes a full minute before my older sister can act like an adult.

"Wait... you're serious... WES! You have a girlfriend! What the hell! Why am I just hearing about this!" She shouts at me. I hold the phone away from my ear and roll my eyes at Addi, she giggles as she watches with amusement.

"Are you about done, Kelsey?"

“Wow, Wes, I just don’t even know what to say. What’s her name? Where’d you meet? What’s she like?” She questions me so quickly I have a hard time processing what she’s saying.

“Her name is Addi. Remember Nick’s friend AJ?”

“The one you moved in with?”

“Yup. Turns out that was Addi. She’s smart, beautiful, funny, adorable, loving, confident, and stubborn.”

“Damn, you’ve got it bad, bro.” I can hear the smile in her voice. She’s been after me to date since everything happened with Mercades, but I wasn’t ready.

“Yeah, I think I do,” I whisper, staring down at the woman I love.

If you had told me six months ago that I would be in love with a single mom, I would’ve laughed in your face and asked if there was something in your brownies. Now, I can’t imagine my life without Addi or Charlie.

I know I can be the man they need in their lives. I can be the support Addi needs with raising a child. I can love both of them better than anyone else can. I can be the dad Charlie’s always wanted and make sure she always has someone to talk to. I’ll make sure I’m someone they can rely on forever.

“I’m so happy for you, Wes... I was calling to see if you’re free this weekend? I have a shoot near you next week and figured I’d come early so I could spend some time with my baby brother.”

“Shit, I don’t know. Here talk to Addi,” I mutter, shoving the phone into Addi’s hands. I slide lower in bed until my head is resting on my pillow and close my eyes again.

I can feel Addi’s eyes on me and she threads her fingers through my hair. She massages my scalp the same way I was just doing to her and I feel myself drifting off to sleep.

Chapter 49



Addi



“Hey Kelsey, this is Addi. It’s nice to sorta meet you.” I’m nervous as can be and I’m sure she can tell.

I want Wes’s family to like me. I don’t have a family of my own anymore and if we’re really going to get married, I want to make a good impression.

“Addi! Oh my gosh, you’re real! I can’t believe Wes finally has a girlfriend! I can’t wait to actually meet you!” She sucks in a deep breath and blows it out slowly. “Ok, so are you guys free this weekend? I have a few days before my shoot and wanted to come to see Wes... obviously now it’s more important I meet you though!”

“Perfect! We’re free all weekend.” I glance down at Wes and smile when I find him sound asleep. “When do you think you’ll be here?”

I know he’s been running himself ragged between school, baseball, and us. I appreciate everything he’s doing for us and I wish I could do something to thank him.

“I should be there on Friday morning, but I have to leave early Sunday morning. Just have Wes send me your address so I can make sure I get a hotel close to you.”

“Kelsey! You’re not getting a hotel room. You can stay here. I’m sure Wes won’t mind giving you his room.”

“If you’re offering to share your bed with him then I’m sure he won’t mind at all.” Kelsey’s laugh filters through the phone and I chuckle right along with her. I think Kelsey and I are going to get along great. She’s like a peppy and outgoing version of Wes.

“I’ll have Wes text you the address and we’ll figure out this weekend!”

“Awesome! Oh crap! I have to go. I didn’t realize how late it is and I’m going to be late for a shoot. See you this weekend!”

She hangs up before I can even say goodbye. I toss Wes’s phone on the bed and snuggle down closer to him. I wish I could cuddle with him and fall asleep for a few hours.

I’m so excited to meet Wes’s sister. Meeting someone in his family makes me feel like what we have together is somehow more real. Like things are really going to work out between us and I’m starting the beginning of the rest of my life.

“Charlie, honey?” I whisper when I hear her starting to wake up. She quietly pads across the room and climbs up on the foot of my bed.

“Yes, Auntie Addi?” She’s so cute, her head cocked to the side, her big eyes staring down at me.

“How would you like to have a pizza party and watch a movie tonight?”

I’m not ready to get out of bed yet, but if I order pizza, I can lay here for a while longer.

“Oh, I’d love that! Can I call Auntie Kendra and invite her too?” She clasps her hand in front of her chest and sticks out her bottom lip in a pout.

“Sure, honey.” I hand her my phone and put it on speaker so I can hear the conversation.

“Hey, sexy thing, how are you?” Kendra’s voice floats into the room. I quickly turn down the volume so it doesn’t wake up Wes and glance back down at him.

He’s snoring softly, his long lashes resting against his cheeks. He looks so peaceful, so adorable.

“Auntie Kendra, it’s Charlie, silly.”

“Oh, sorry, baby girl! How are you?”

“That depends... will you come over tonight? We’re going to watch a movie and have a pizza party and I want you to come. Oh, please come, Auntie Kendra, it won’t be fun without you here. Pleeeeeeeease,” Charlie begs.

Kendra laughs in the background knowing she really doesn’t have a choice in the matter.

“Sure, I can come. How about I come at five and bring the pizza?”

“Yes! Make sure you get pepperoni for Wessie, he really likes that. I’m gonna make all my boys come too, so make sure you get enough.”

She’s adorable, she even glances at Wes when she mentions what kind of pizza he likes and smiles. These two are closer than peanut butter and jelly.

“Oh, we can’t let Wessie be sad. I’ll definitely get pepperoni. I can’t wait to hang out with you and *your* boys. Are there any other kinds of pizza I *need* to get for the boys?”

“Auntie Kendra,” Charlie says, planting her hands on her hips, “the other boys will eat what we give them. I only care if my Wessie’s happy.”

Kendra laughs even harder and I can’t blame her. This girl is a handful.

“Alright, Princess, you go make sure Wessie’s happy and I’ll see you soon!”



Nick knocks on my door and pops his head in. I sleepily blink my eyes open and glance over my shoulder at him.

“Hey, Kendra’s here with the pizza. Are you two coming or do you want me to entertain Charlie a little bit longer?”

“I’m coming. Thank you for watching her, you really didn’t need to do that.” I push myself up into a sitting position and rub my eyes.

“Ad, I know you’re getting up at the same time as Wes, Lincoln, and Blake do for baseball. You’re doing all of your work before Charlie wakes up and it’s killing you. You need to rest and lean on some of us for help. I’m happy to watch her any time the two of you need a break or just want a night alone.”

“Thanks, Nicky. We’ll be right out.”

Nick nods his head and disappears into the living room. I let myself fall back onto the bed and let out a small groan. I’m still so tired.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were getting up at four in the morning?” Wes mumbles, his face half covered with a pillow.

“Because it doesn’t matter. I’ll do whatever I need to do to make sure everything is handled.” I brush some hair out of his face and toss the pillow on the floor. “Let’s go get some dinner, baby.”

It takes us a few minutes to get out of bed and stumble into the kitchen. Everyone already has a few slices of pizza on their plates and they all glance our way when we walk in.

“Wow, Addi, I can’t tell if that crazy hair is from... playing with Wes,” Lincoln wiggles his eyebrows, “or if you’re just an absolute mess when you sleep.” He smirks.

“They weren’t playing, Uncle Linkie. Auntie Addi was sleeping with Wes, duh.” Charlie rolls her eyes and bites into her slice of pizza.

“I wonder how much sleep they got,” Blake mumbles with amusement.

“Shut it, I’m exhausted.” Wes elbows Blake in the ribs, making him grunt in pain.

Everyone chatters amongst themselves the rest of dinner and Charlie convinces them to watch a movie afterwards. She picked *Frozen* because what else would we watch?

I glance around the room as I take my place next to Wes and snuggle into his side. Kendra’s quietly talking to Nicky and I can’t help but wonder if there’s something blossoming between the two of them.

“So that’s Prince Charming?” Lincoln asks.

“No silly! That’s Hans, he’s a bad man. He hurts Anna.”

Lincoln fakes a gasp, “No! Not Anna! How dare he!”

“Boys should never hurt girls, Uncle Linkie. My mommy said so.” Charlie lifts her chin up, full of confidence.

“Your mommy’s a very smart woman,” Blake says sincerely, pulling Charlie onto his lap. “Just like my girl is.”

“Uncle Blakie, I’m not your girl. We’re finding you a girl, ‘member, silly.”

“Oh sweetie, you’ll always be my number one girl! But I’ll accept your help in finding me a girlfriend!”

“I love you, Blakie!” Charlie places a big kiss on Blake’s cheek and wraps her little arms around his neck for a tight hug.

“I love you too, baby girl,” Blake whispers, hugging her back just as tightly.

The love in his eyes is overwhelming and I find myself fighting off tears. The guys have accepted Charlie so quickly and easily. They treat her like she’s the center of their world and I couldn’t ask for a better family for her. The more I see them interact with her, the more I realize she really is going to be ok. She’s still sad and cries over missing Kasey, but she knows she’s loved. Loved by all of us.

Nate emerges from the kitchen carrying a tray of chocolate sundaes for everyone. He slowly lowers the tray onto the coffee table and glances around.

“Who wants ice cream?” Nate asks, winking at me.

“I do, Uncle Natey, I do!” Charlie jumps out of Blake’s arms.

“Who’s your favorite uncle in the world?” Nate asks.

“You, Uncle Natey! You!” Charlie yells.

“Hey! What about me?” Blake pouts. Charlie puts her small hands on the sides of his face and pulls him closer so she can stare into his eyes.

“Oh, Uncle Blakie, I love all of my boys.” She pats him on the head and then whispers in his ear, “But Uncle Natey has ice cream. He’s only gonna give me some if I say he’s my favorite.”

Laughter erupts around the room. We're so lucky to be surrounded and supported by such amazing men.

Men who have stepped up to help me and Charlie in our time of need. They've had my back since the very beginning, even when they barely knew me.

I snuggle a little closer into Wes's arms and let out a little sigh. Wes leans down and presses a soft kiss to my head, squeezing me a little tighter. I really am the luckiest woman in the world.

Chapter 50



Wes



Once Kendra leaves and the guys go upstairs, I head into the kitchen to load the dishwasher. As I'm pressing the start button, delicate fingers slide under my shirt and across my abs. Addi hugs me from behind, pressing a kiss to the center of my back.

I turn to face her, snaking my arms around her waist. I nestle my face in the crook of her neck and breathe in her wonderful scent. Addi always smells like pomegranate or vanilla and I love it.

"You're the love of my life," I whisper as I feather kisses onto her skin.

"Auntie Addi?" Charlie asks sweetly. I didn't even hear her come in here. I swear she's trying to be as silent as possible. She's a little nervous but I'm not sure why.

"Yes, baby girl, what do you need?" Addi's eyes soften, her heart melts whenever she looks at Charlie.

"I'm going to live with you forever, right?"

"Yes, sweetie"

“So, you’re kinda like my new mommy then, right?”

“Well, your mommy was a very special lady and I’ll never take her place. But I’ll kinda be like your mommy now. I’ll do everything your mommy did when she was alive.”

“Could I... maybe... if you don’t mind... call you mommy then?”

Addi drops to her knees, tears filling her eyes instantly. “I’d be honored if you called me mommy. I’ll always love you like you’re my own child.” She wraps her in a hug, allowing her tears to silently fall down her face.

Charlie pulls out of the hug and gazes up at me. Her little eyes looking me up and down, judging me before she pulls on my arm.

“Wessie?”

“Yes, sweetie.” I drop to one knee in front of her.

“Does that make you my new daddy?” Her question catches me by surprise and I don’t seem to be able to form any words. “I used to have a daddy, then he had to go away forever.”

“I’m sorry, Charlie, I’m sure you miss him a lot.”

“He was a bad man. He went away because he hurt my Auntie Addi,” she whispers.

My gaze shoots to Addi as blush spreads over her cheeks. She glances away with pain in her eyes. An ache spreads through my chest at the thought of anyone hurting my girl.

“I’m sorry he hurt your Auntie Addi. I’d never hurt your Auntie. I promise you that.”

“She’s my mommy now, silly. You’re supposed to call her Mommy, not Auntie Addi. And you didn’t answer my question, Wessie!” She scowls at me.

“Well, I promise I’ll never hurt your mommy,” I rephrase with a wink. “Now, what question did I not answer, sweetheart?”

“Does this mean you’re my new daddy?”

“Well, to be your daddy I’d have to marry your mommy. Your mommy and I aren’t married though.”

“Oh... well, could you marry her? I really want you to be my daddy.” She throws her tiny arms around my neck and snuggles into my shoulder.

I hold onto Charlie tightly, closing my eyes. It’s taking everything in me to keep the tears at bay. Charlie has the biggest heart I’ve ever seen. She’s thawed my cold heart even more than Addi has already. Between the two of them, I’m going to be a giant teddy bear soon.

“Alright, sweetie, I think it’s past time for bed,” Addi chokes out through fresh tears.

“Ok, Mommy! I love you! I love you, Wessie! Have a good night!” She runs off to Addi’s room with a big smile on her face.

“That girl’s going to have everyone in this house wrapped around her little finger in no time.” I shake my head with a

smile. Tears trickle down Addi's face and I open my arms, inviting her into my embrace.

Addi throws herself into my arms and bursts into tears. I hold her until her sobs slow down to a few tears silently trickling down her cheek.

"Baby, is there anything I can do?" I whisper softly.

"No. I can't believe she wants to call me mommy...or you daddy," she says with a sad little laugh.

"First off, you're doing an amazing job with her and she loves you very much. And second off, I'd make an amazing daddy!" I stick out my bottom lip in a pout.

Addi places a hand on either side of my face, gently kissing my lips. "You'll make a terrific daddy, but you need to find a mommy first," she teases me.

"I'm working on it." I smile before turning serious. "Babe, what happened to Charlie's dad?"

Addi drops her hands from my face and stares down at her feet. She sucks her bottom lip between her teeth and nibbles on it gently. I give her a few minutes before I place my hands on her waist and duck to meet her gaze.

"Addi, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to. I won't be upset, sweetheart."

She peers up at me with those big blue eyes of hers, full of pain and misery.

"No, I want to tell you, Wes, it's just hard."

“Take your time,” I whisper.

I lead her to the couch, settling onto the cushions with her in my arms and wait for her to continue. Sharing this story needs to be on her terms, not mine.

“Five years ago, my parents were murdered in our house. It was a robbery gone wrong. I was staying over at Nicky’s that night otherwise I probably would’ve been killed too. After my parents died, I lived with Kasey. She’s seven years older than me and had just gotten married to Charlie’s dad a few months prior and he seemed great. He was sweet and caring, he seemed to really care about me.”

She speaks slowly, picking her words carefully, reliving the events in her head. Her body tenses in my arms before she starts talking again.

“About two years ago, Kasey was out with Charlie and I was home alone with Craig. Craig had been flirting with me for weeks when Kasey wasn’t around, but I was naïve and thought he was just being nice.” She picks at a piece of lint on her pants.

I don’t know if she’s getting lost in a memory or if she’s trying to regain her composure, but I wish I could do more to help her.

“He cornered me in the kitchen and was flirting more than normal. I had just turned sixteen and he kept commenting on how I looked like a woman instead of a girl. He pinned me against the counter and started kissing me roughly. I was able to push him off of me, but it wasn’t easy. I ran to the bathroom

and locked the door. I was panicking and didn't know what to do. There was no way I could fit through the small window to get out. I ended up calling Kasey and told her what was happening. She said she'd be right home..."

She sighs, looking tired and in so much pain. My heart breaks, watching her relive these events just so she can share this part of herself with me.

"I've got you, baby. No one will ever hurt you again," I whisper, tightening my hold on her.

"Craig broke down the door and threw me over his shoulder. He carried me to his room, dropped me on his bed and tied me down. I tried to get away, but the knots were too tight and he was laying on top of me. He ripped off my pants and shirt, leaving me in just my bra and underwear. He told me he was going to make me his. That he'd be my first and I'd be his forever. He said he saw the way I looked at him and he knew I wanted him just as much as he wanted me..."

A sob rips through Addi and breaks my heart. She's the sweetest woman I've ever met and I can't imagine something like this happening to her.

"I'm so sorry, baby. I promise you're always safe with me." I kiss her head and grab the blanket off the back of the couch to cover both of us.

"I screamed and tried to kick and punch him. I told him to get off of me and not to touch me. He said I was too young to know what I wanted... He didn't know I called Kasey or that she'd called the police. His hands were all over my body. He

was rough, squeezing my flesh hard enough to leave bruises. When I kept screaming and kicking, he tied down my legs and slapped me across the face. After what felt like a lifetime, the police stormed into the room, but he pulled out a knife and held it against my throat. It was so cold against my skin.”

My stomach recoils with the thought of anyone touching my girl like that. What sort of person could do that to a girl and then hold a knife to their throat?

“I was paralyzed and ashamed to be laying practically naked in front of all these people and have no control over it. I felt like it was my fault for not realizing his intentions before that night. I should’ve told Kasey about Craig’s flirting, but I didn’t want to cause problems.”

“Don’t you dare feel responsible for any of that shit, Addison. You didn’t do a single thing wrong.” I lift her chin and stare into her eyes, wanting to make sure she realizes how serious I am.

“Because I was tied to the bed, Craig wasn’t able to use me as a shield. The cops shot him several times and he fell to the ground. Sadly, none of the bullet wounds were life-threatening. He was arrested for attempted rape of a minor and for attempted murder. Turns out, I never ended the call with Kasey and she was able to record everything she could hear on her end. Craig was sentenced and was going to spend a long time in prison.”

She blows out a long breath and takes a minute to calm herself. I can feel her pulse beating wildly against my fingers.

I'm sure talking about all of this is really hard for her.

“Kasey would get calls every now and then updating her on Craig since they were legally married. He refused to sign the divorce papers, but had lost custody of Charlie. All three of us had restraining orders against him even though he was in prison. Craig was beaten very badly at least a dozen times. Evidently, prisoners don't like rapists but especially hate child rapists. About a month before I met you, Kasey got a call that he had died. Someone beat him again, but this time they finished the job and killed him.”

She's emotionless as she states these facts. I know she's trying to keep herself from feeling anything towards the man who destroyed her.

“I feel guilty over how happy I was to hear he died. To know he could never touch me or anyone else again... I went through a lot of therapy to get over what Craig did to me. I couldn't handle anyone, except for Nicky, touching me. It took about eight months before I could deal with someone trying to shake my hand and about a year before someone could hug me.”

She stares down at her hands and slowly shakes her head. I hold out my palm to her and smile when she doesn't hesitate to stick her hand in mine and intertwine our fingers.

“When Nicky was visiting, he'd lay in bed with me every night and hold me tightly against his chest. I'd sob for hours and he'd just hold me. I don't know if I cried because of what I went through or because without Nicky living close, it meant

I barely had physical contact with another human. It felt good to be held and touched by someone. I only felt safe when he was with me. I had terrible nightmares every single night Nicky wasn't there with me."

She pauses and takes a deep breath, squeezing her eyes shut. I can only imagine how hard this is for her to talk about. For her to be this vulnerable in front of me.

"I had to drop out of school and finish high school online. I couldn't handle walking down the hallways of the school without having a panic attack. Nicky spent every night he could at my house or I'd go to his just so I could sleep."

I'm speechless as I listen to her story. I never would've thought something this terrible could have happened to my girl. She's amazing and loving, so open and welcoming to everyone she meets. I can't believe she made it through all of this.

I briefly wonder what she'd be like if she still had her parents and Craig never touched her. Yet I know I'd love her no matter what.

"That's the main reason I chose to buy a house instead of living in dorms. I can't handle the thought of living close to someone who could possibly hurt me. I needed Nicky close, but wanted to make sure he also gets a semi-normal college experience. That's why I chose a large house where he could invite all of you to live here."

She's quiet for several long minutes. I assume she's done sharing with me tonight and I'm ok with that. I'm not sure

what else she wants to tell me, but I feel like there's something. Right when I'm about to suggest we go get some sleep, she continues again.

“I met Hunter about a year after everything with Craig happened. It was right after I made my breakthrough and could handle someone hugging me. I had a crush on him by the end of the summer and we were spending all of our free time together. When Hunter tried to kiss me, I lost it. I felt like I was suffocating and I couldn't suck in a full breath. I felt like I was strapped to that bed all over again and I couldn't handle it. I was so embarrassed at how I'd responded to him. He was the first guy to try to touch me since everything happened with Craig. The trial was right after I ran from him, it kept getting pushed back. Craig's lawyer was trying to come up with a way to dismiss the recording to get him off the hook. The trial was so emotionally draining I couldn't get out of bed for weeks and I fell into a deep depression.”

The thought of her going through all of this without me there to support her kills me. I wish I could go back in time and save the innocent girl she once was. I wish I could protect her from all the bad in the world and make her smile.

“Nicky and Kasey were the only ones I had through all of it. Seeing Hunter now, it brings up a lot of emotions. I'm dealing with it, but sometimes it's hard. I know he's still interested in me and thinks he loves me, but he can't love me. He has no idea what happened to me and doesn't understand how he reminds me of that time. Caleb's the only guy I've dated. I think it worked because he wasn't a touchy person. He didn't

like to hold hands or hug. He's a germaphobe and really hated kissing."

The thought of Caleb makes me want to clench my fist and punch something. Just his name brings up so much anger inside of me. He doesn't deserve someone like Addi. No one does. My girl deserves perfection.

"He saw me as the perfect trophy wife and I went along with it. I didn't want to be single forever and figured Caleb kinda made it easy for me. I couldn't handle being touched and he really couldn't either. Kasey was amazing through everything. She immediately made sure I was taken care of in every way. She took me back to the psychologist I saw after my parents died and made sure I handled my emotions correctly. She was a great mom. Now I need to be that for Charlie. I don't even know where to start, Wes."

"Addi, you're an amazingly strong woman. I don't know anyone who could survive all of that and still be such a happy and loving person. I'm sorry you went through it, I wish I could erase all of your pain, babe. I'd do anything to take it away."

I kiss her cheek softly, letting my lips linger. As much as I want to cover her lips with my own, I'm afraid of upsetting her, especially after this story.

"As far as Charlie goes, I'll do everything I can to help you with her. I can cut down on classes to be home to watch her too. I can quit baseball if I need to."

“Babe, no. You don’t need to cut down your classes or quit baseball. I appreciate it, but I could never ask you to do that. I’m going to quit my job though. I don’t need the money and Charlie needs me here.”

“I think that’s a good idea. And I won’t deny it makes me happy knowing men won’t be hitting on you every night anymore. Also, you didn’t ask me to do anything, I offered.”

“I’m going to talk to Nicky tomorrow. We can try to look at our schedules and see if there are classes that overlap. Maybe I can switch classes to make it work so Nick or I have Charlie at all times...maybe you too if you don’t mind.”

“I’d love to watch her and help. Use me however you need me... ask Blake too. He loves that girl. I’m sure he’ll be more than happy to help. Plus, she’ll help him get more girls.” I wink, trying to lighten the mood a little.

“Oh my gosh, he’s going to try to steal my daughter to get girls!... Oh my gosh, I have a daughter now,” she whispers in disbelief.

“Yes, you do. Thank you for sharing all of this with me. It means the world to me that you trust me with it. I’m kinda curious though, why are you ok with all of our touching?” I search her eyes, wanting to know every little detail of how she’s feeling.

“There’s something about you, Wes. I felt safe with you from the beginning, you always seem to be protecting me. I was never afraid of what you’d do to me. This instant calmness spreads over me every time you’re around.”

“I’ll always protect you, baby... I think you need to tell Hunter what happened though. He needs to understand why you pushed him away. It’s the only way he’ll be able to move on.” I stare into her baby blues, I know this will be hard, but I think it’s important.

“I can’t do it again. It was hard enough telling you everything... Will you talk to him?”

“You want me to tell him?” I ask, completely surprised.

“Yes... you can tell him anything I told you tonight. I agree it’s the only way he can move on, but I can’t do it. If you don’t want to then I’ll talk to Nicky and ask him to.”

“Baby, I can do it, you just surprised me. Let’s get to bed, I’ll talk to Hunter tomorrow. I know Charlie told everyone we’re having a tea party in the morning.”

I lead Addi into our room and crawl into bed with her. I couldn’t even tell you the last time I slept in my room. The space is practically empty because most of my things have been moved in here.

After I’m sure Addi’s asleep, I gently wiggle my way out from under her. I creep out of our room and go upstairs to find Hunter. I knock on his door and hear a muffled, “Come in.”

“Hey, Hunter, can we talk for a minute?” I ask as nicely as I can. I know I’m the last person he wants to see or talk to. Though things have calmed down, they’re not exactly pleasant between us.

“What do you want?” He asks.

“Addi just told me what happened the summer you met. She agreed when I said you deserve to know the truth, but she said she can’t relive it again. She asked me to tell you. We can talk now or we can do it whenever you’re ready.”

“Nah man, you can come in and sit down. I’ve been waiting over a year to hear this. I’d rather get it over with.”

I sit on the edge of his desk chair, leaning my elbows on my thighs and take a deep breath trying to figure out where to start. Hunter’s sitting on the foot of his bed, only a few feet away from me, looking more nervous than ever.

I tell Hunter everything Addi told me, not leaving anything out. I might not be a fan of Hunter, but I know if I was in his position, I’d want to know exactly what happened.

As I repeat Addi’s story, I pay attention to Hunter’s face. Surprise, anger, fear, and understanding each take over his expression at different times.

When I’m done, Hunter paces his room. He runs his hands through his hair and tugs on the ends in frustration.

“Shit, Wes... Shit! I never knew she went through that. I never would’ve tried to kiss her if I’d known any of it! I never would’ve moved in here or kept trying to make a move with her. You have to believe me!” Hunter’s so upset. His eyes fill with tears as he grabs the back of his neck in frustration.

“I know, Hunt. She didn’t want anyone to know. I think the only reason she told me is because Charlie told me her daddy

hurt Addi and I questioned it. She's still hurting but she'll be ok. I'll make sure of it."

"This makes so much more sense. Nick went to visit AJ every chance he got. Some days he'd leave right after school, stay the night, then get up really early the next morning to come back for classes. I never understood why he'd do that. He really has always put her first and does everything in his power to help her and protect her. Then I stroll in here and fuck it all up. Shit, man, I'm such an idiot. I even criticized her for dating Caleb." He drops down onto his bed and hangs his head. He looks completely defeated.

"Don't worry about it. She's ok now and she'll continue to be ok. Caleb wasn't good for her anyway. I'm not saying I'm perfect for her, but I can promise I'll do whatever it takes to protect her and make her happy... That being said, I need you to cool it on the negativity around her. You can hate me and be pissed I'm with her, but you can't let her see it."

I take a deep breath and blow it out slowly. I think Hunter needs to hear about the conversation Addi and I had the night before the accident too.

"She overheard you talking to me the night I took her out for dinner. She wanted to kick you out of the house, but then the accident happened and she seems to have forgotten about it. I haven't brought it up because I don't think you deserve to be kicked out anymore, but I also won't allow you to make her feel bad over her decisions. She feels guilty she can't be the girl you want her to be and that she feels safe with me. She

deserves to be happy, Hunter. Her life has been one terrible thing after another.”

“I’m sorry, Wes. I’m such a selfish dick... I promise I’ll stop. Now that I know what happened I understand why she can’t be with me. I feel terrible about ever pushing it or making her feel guilty. She definitely deserves whatever she wants in life. You’re good for her... Do you think she’ll accept my apology and stay friends with me? I don’t want to completely lose her.”

“I think that would make her happy, Hunt. I’m going back to bed. Talk to her tomorrow, she wants you to be friends too.”

“Thanks, man, I’m sorry for everything. I should’ve had your back in that fight too. I fucked up.”

“It’s in the past. I probably would’ve felt the same if I’d been in your shoes. Just don’t let her down again.” I clasp a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it lightly.

“I won’t,” he whispers, finally understanding everything going on.

Chapter 51



Nick



I've been working on my English paper since we finished movie night with Charlie. There's nothing I hate more than writing papers, so I always put them off until the last second.

I hop off my bed and head down to the kitchen to grab a bottle of water out of the fridge. There's a dull ache beginning in my temples and I want to take some medicine before it turns into a full-blown migraine.

I slowly climb the stairs as exhaustion starts to set in. This feels like a never-ending day. I know as soon as my head hits the pillow, I'm going to be out cold.

Wes steps out of Hunter's room and closes the door softly behind him. I narrow my eyes, searching for blood or any bruised skin. The two of them are bound to have another blow up soon.

"Is he still alive?" I ask half joking and half serious. I never know what to expect when those two are involved. Wes chuckles and shakes his head.

"He's alive... Addi told me about Craig."

My mouth falls open, I can't find the words to respond. I never expected her to tell anyone. I thought I'd be the only one privy to her secrets for a long time. I can't imagine how she's feeling right now, but I'm so happy she trusts Wes enough to tell him.

"She told me how you were the only one who could hold her and stop the nightmares. About everything that happened with Hunter." Wes runs a rough hand through his hair and glances over his shoulder at Hunter's closed door. "I told her I thought he deserved to know the truth and she agreed but said she couldn't do it. I'm just leaving from telling him."

"Shit. I write one paper and all this happens... Is she ok?"

"She will be. I think she feels better now that I know. She doesn't know I talked to Hunter already, she fell asleep before I came up here. I can't believe she survived all of that, Nick," he whispers as he scrubs his face with his hands.

"That's why I said you were good for her. She trusted you from the beginning. She now turns to you instead of me. I can't say it makes me happy to be replaced, but it was going to happen sooner or later." I smirk.

"Nick, we both know I can't replace you. You're her Nicky!" He says in the annoyingly cute voice Addi tends to squeal my name in.

I laugh before patting his shoulder and stepping past him to my room. I can't wait to climb into my bed and fall asleep.

“Nick, I have a question to ask you. Can we talk in your room?”

“Sure... come in.” I take in the nervousness in his voice. I can't imagine anything that could make Wes anxious.

“There's something I want to do...” he whispers, dropping onto the edge of my desk chair.

Chapter 52



Addi



A blood curdling scream wakes me up in the middle of the night. Charlie's shaking in the center of her bed. She's so upset and no matter what I do, I can't seem to get her to calm down.

Tears trickle down my cheeks. I'm not what she needs right now. She needs Kasey. She needs her real mom and she'll never have that again.

How am I supposed to do this? I'm barely old enough to take care of myself, let alone a little girl.

"Come here, Charlie," Wes whispers.

I stare in disbelief as Wes takes Charlie into his arms and holds her tight. He strokes her hair and rubs her back while softly singing to her. He keeps reminding her how she's safe and he'll always protect her. Charlie calms down quickly in Wes's arms. She snuggles closer to him and falls asleep faster than ever before.

I find myself crying even harder as I witness the love Wes has for my new daughter. He didn't sign up for any of this, but he's happily taking on this role.

“Baby, stop crying, everything’s ok. You’re doing a great job. I’m always here for you,” he whispers to me, tugging me to his side. It’s like he can read every thought running through my mind.

“You’re unbelievable, Wes. How did you know what to do?”

“I have three older sisters, two of them have kids. I’ve had more than enough upset kids wake me up when they’d sleep over at my parent’s house. I’m the fun uncle and they liked sleeping in my room. If they had a bad dream, they’d climb in my bed and I’d have to calm them back to sleep.”

“Thank you for everything you’re doing. I know you didn’t sign up for a girlfriend with a daughter.”

“Snow, I love Charlie and I love you. I’d gladly sign up for anything that keeps both of you by my side.”

I fall back asleep on Wes’s chest quickly. He has one arm around me, the other around Charlie. My last thought before I fall into a deep sleep is, how did I get so lucky to find a guy like Wes to love me?



When I wake up in the morning, Wes and Charlie aren’t in bed. I throw on a pair of jeans and a long sleeve t-shirt before I venture out of my room.

The guys are all in the living room, hovering around the coffee table. They have papers spread across the large surface, covering every inch of the wood. They're looking them over, shuffling between a few of them and they're deep in thought. Charlie's watching cartoons while she munches away on a plate full of mini pancakes.

"What's going on out here?" I rub the sleep from my eyes, moving closer to all of them.

"Morning, babe... we're looking over class schedules for the spring semester. I think we've figured out a schedule of who can watch Charlie so no one has to change classes. All of the guys volunteered to help out as much as they can. You can check the schedule and see if it's ok with you." Wes peeks up from the papers and watches me.

Tears gather in my eyes instantly and I'm overwhelmed by their thoughtfulness. These men are so selfless to give their time to help Charlie and me. They treat us like family and not just roommates.

"I don't know what to say," I choke out. "Thank you so much. All of you!"

"C'mon, Addi, we're a family and we'd do anything for the rugrat. Plus, I'm taking Charlie to campus so she can help her Uncle Blakie get a hot new girlfriend." Blake wiggles his eyebrows.

I can't help but laugh at him. "Just make sure she finds you a nice girl who will last. Don't bring her around your one-night stands, please."

A look of pure shock and horror crosses over Blake's face. "Addi, I'd never do that. Seriously. I want what you and Wes have. You've genuinely changed my viewpoint on having a real girlfriend. If you can change broody, mean Wes into this funny, loving, gentle giant then there's still hope for me."

"Speaking of me being loving and caring, I have a surprise for Charlie and you." Wes grabs Charlie's hand and mine, leading us to his room. He twists the knob and pushes the door open.

I gasp and glance around what was once a boring room with white walls and cream-colored carpets.

His room has been completely transformed into every little girl's dream. There's a white canopy bed with sheer blue curtains hanging down. Cinderella's castle is painted on the wall and the whole room is decorated in a Cinderella theme.

He even transformed part of the walk-in closet into a dress-up changing room. It's full of her princess dresses, tiaras, jewelry, and little plastic heels. There are quite a few things that I don't recognize and I'm sure they bought for her.

This room is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

"Is this for me?" Charlie whispers with wide eyes and her mouth hanging open.

"If you want it to be. I thought you might want your own room. This way you can still be right next door to Mommy and me in case you need us for something." Wes uses the gentlest

tone whenever he's talking to Charlie. She pulls him down to the ground and gives him the biggest hug and kiss.

"Thank you, Wessie! I love it!" She shrieks before running around to examine every detail of her new room.

"How'd you do all of this?" I ask, still in awe of what this man can do.

"The guys helped. Cole did the painting and we all helped however we could. I might've called my sisters to get some ideas too." Wes smiles shyly. I throw my arms around his neck and kiss him with as much passion as I can.

"I don't deserve a man like you. Thank you!... And thank you guys for helping... Cole, you did an amazing job on the painting." I meet each of their gazes. "I'm exhausted after last night, I'm making some coffee if anyone else wants some."

A cheeky grin spreads over Blake's face, he wiggles his eyebrows suggestively.

"Oh, not like that! Charlie had trouble sleeping." I roll my eyes and leave them with Charlie so I can make coffee.

I quickly fill the coffee maker with water and new coffee grounds. I turn it on and spin around to lean against the counter to wait for the liquid energizer to drip out.

"Hey, Addi, can we talk?" Hunter steps cautiously into the kitchen.

I open and shut my mouth. I don't really want to talk to him right now. I should have some caffeine in my system before that happens.

He must sense my hesitation because he drops his gaze and whispers, “Please, Addi.”

I nod my head and jump up on the counter next to the coffee maker. Hunter hops on the island and faces me. Both of us swing our legs and let silence fill the room.

“I spoke with Wes last night...”

“He told you already?” I whisper.

“Yes... why didn’t you tell me, Tink?” Hurt is evident in his voice.

“I couldn’t. I had a hard time dealing with everything the summer we met. I was finally getting to a good place and didn’t want to fall back into that bottomless pit of emotions it would’ve caused by telling you.”

“But why didn’t you tell me after we met again?”

“Hunter... seeing you already brought back so many emotions. I couldn’t handle talking to you about it. I could barely tell Wes last night. I know, even now, I wouldn’t be able to tell you. That’s why I asked him to.”

Hunter jumps off the counter and moves next to me. He takes my hand in his, but I avoid eye contact. I know if I look at him I’m going to start crying and I don’t want that right now.

“Addison... look at me, sweetheart.”

I slowly glance up at him through the tears threatening to spill onto my cheeks. I suck in a deep breath and try to keep

my emotions at bay.

“I’m so sorry. I’m sorry you went through that. I’m sorry I tried to kiss you. I’m sorry I demanded to know what happened so many times. I’m sorry seeing me has opened up old wounds. I’m sorry I broke your trust. I’m sorry I’ve made you feel guilty about being with Wes and I’m sorry I’ve been such a jerk.”

“That’s a lot of things to be sorry about.” I smile, trying to break some of the tension in the room.

“I promise I’ll change. I want you to be happy. I know Wes is good for you and I promise to be supportive of your relationship. I’ll stop acting like you’re mine. I understand it will never happen between us and I honestly can’t blame you. I need to know we’re going to be okay though. Can we still be friends?”

“Of course we can, Hunter.” I hop off the counter and throw myself into his arms. I hug him tightly and breathe a sigh of relief, knowing this is going to be a huge weight off my shoulders.

When I pull away from him and wipe the tears off of my cheeks, I find Wes watching us from the doorway. He’s giving us space to talk, but he’s making sure I’m ok and being available if I need him.

The doorbell rings and Wes walks away to answer it. I follow him into the living room and watch as he wraps a beautiful blonde woman in a tight hug.

“Babe, Kelsey’s here,” Wes announces with a big smile lighting up his face.

He motions for me to come closer and snakes his arm around my waist as soon as I’m within reach.

“Addi!” Kelsey squeals, pushing Wes out of the way so she can get to me. She launches herself into my body, almost knocking us both over in the process. “It’s so nice to meet you! I can’t believe you’re real!”

“Wow, thanks, Kels. Way to be supportive and make me sound like a huge loser,” Wes mumbles.

“Oh, come on Wes, it’s been so long. Michelle and Sarah harass you so much about finding a girlfriend. It wouldn’t be that far-fetched to think you’d make up a girlfriend to get them off your back. I used to do it.” She shrugs without a hint of remorse.

“Seriously? Who was fake?”

“Axel,” Kelsey giggles, rolling her eyes.

“Wait a minute, I met Axel.” Blake cocks his head to the side, his eyes narrowing.

“Nope. You met Josh who pretended to be Axel when Michelle and Sarah insisted they needed to meet him. Josh was just a friend. In fact, we lived together for a while.”

“I told you there was no way that guy’s name was Axel.” Wes smacks Blake in the stomach. “No guy named Axel could be that scrawny.”

“I’m pretty sure most guys look scrawny next to you and Blake.” I chuckle.

“Damn straight!” Wes cups my face, kissing me long and hard. Several throats clear, but we ignore all of them.

“Are they like this all the time?” Kelsey’s voice breaks through the love-induced haze.

A chorus of ‘Yup!’, ‘Pretty much!’ and ‘All. The. Time.’ ring out from each of the guys.

“Sorry, boys.” I shrug and chuckle, even though I’m not sorry at all.

“Mommy, who’s this lady?” Charlie asks with a tug on my arm.

“Sweetie, this is Wessie’s sister. Her name’s Kelsey.”

“Oh, ok. Hi, Wessie’s sister Kelsey.” Charlie speaks quietly, adding a little wave with her chubby hand before hiding behind my legs.

Kelsey drops to her knees and tries to peek around my legs at Charlie. I’m shocked she’s so willing to get down on the same level with her. So many adults won’t do that.

“Hi, Charlie. How old are you?” Kelsey’s voice is so kind and gentle. She’s trying really hard to make Charlie comfortable. Charlie peeks out from behind me and holds out four fingers before hiding again. “Wow, you’re four years old! You’re such a big girl!”

“And I have another big surprise for this big girl and her mommy!” Wes stares down at me with a lopsided grin.

I narrow my eyes on him. What else could he possibly have for us? He’s already done so much. I love all of his surprises, but this is too much.

“Just one more, Ad.” He’s nervous as he takes my hands in his and I don’t know what I should expect. Wes drops down to one knee and my eyes widen. My free hand flies to my mouth as a small gasp slips out.

“Addison Jane Fields, you’ve made me the happiest man in the world these past few months. I never expected to meet anyone like you, but once I set my eyes on you, I knew I was never going to let you go. I know we haven’t known each other long, but I know I never want to live without you by my side. Will you marry me? Be my wife, baby.” Wes blinks up at me with tears in his eyes.

He slips a little black box out of his pocket and pops it open to reveal a gorgeous engagement ring with three large diamonds sparkling from a white gold band.

“Yes! I’d love to be your wife!” I squeal.

He slides the ring onto my left ring finger and stands to his full height. I frame his face in my palms and kiss him like he’s the air I breathe.

We pull away from each other with everyone around us cheering and offering up congratulations. The smile taking up residence on my face is so big my cheeks hurt.

I can't believe I'm getting married! I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with someone as amazing as Wes.

Before I can even let this sink in, Wes calls Charlie over. He drops down to one knee again and holds Charlie's hand in his.

"Charlie, you're an extraordinary little girl. You have such a big heart and you make me so happy. Will you be my daughter and let me be your new daddy?" Wes chokes out as tears start falling down his cheeks.

I love how he doesn't care that the guys and Kelsey are watching, all he cares about is the little girl standing in front of him.

He holds out a small box and opens it to show Charlie a little necklace that says *Daddy's girl*. I'm overwhelmed by this man's love and affection towards us.

I glance around and find everyone with misty eyes or they're wiping away tears. I swallow hard and try to compose myself. This is a joyous day and I don't want to spend it crying, even if they're happy tears.

As a junior in college, Wes is not only willing to settle down with me, but also take on the role of father to my beautiful niece. I'm speechless, I can't even fathom the emotions I'm feeling.

"You mean you're gonna be my daddy?" Charlie asks with big eyes. "Forever? You'll hug me and love me and take care of me and protect me. Forever? And be my daddy?"

I don't think Charlie can believe everything that's happening to her. She's always wanted a daddy who would be there for her.

The last few months before Kasey died, Charlie kept begging her to get remarried because she wanted a daddy and siblings. It killed Kasey to see Charlie wishing so hard for something that would probably never happen, but Kasey was content with their life.

I think she was afraid of making the same mistake again and marrying someone who could hurt someone she loved. I can't blame her. If I were in her shoes, I'd be hesitant with who I allowed around my daughter too.

“Yes, sweetheart, I want to be your daddy forever and ever. I'll hug you and kiss you and love you every day. I'll take care of you and protect you for the rest of your life. I want to be your daddy forever if you'll let me.”

“Oh, Daddy. I love you forever! You're the best Daddy in the world! I love when you sing to me when I'm scared and hold me in your arms.” Tears stream down Charlie's cheeks as she throws herself into Wes's arms. “I love you so much, Daddy! So much!”

Wes chuckles through his tears as he murmurs in her ear. “I love you too, darling. More than anything.”

“Wait a second. If you're my daddy, then that means Kelsey's now Auntie Kelsey!” A big smile spreads across her cheeks.

“I’d be honored to be your Auntie Kelsey,” Kelsey whispers with tears staining her cheeks. She rushes over and pulls Charlie into a big hug before moving to me. “I’m so glad you guys found each other. You’re so happy together and seem perfect for each other.”



After Wes and I tuck Charlie into bed, we return to the living room to chat with Kelsey and the guys. Kelsey’s hilarious and obviously she hung out around the guys a lot because she knows them pretty well.

“So, Addi, do you have any siblings?” Kelsey asks.

“Kelsey,” Wes groans, but I hold up a hand to silence him.

“It’s alright, Wes. I had a sister but she died in a car accident a few months ago. Charlie’s actually her daughter.”

“Oh my gosh! I’m so sorry! I thought Charlie was your daughter. She seems so at home here. I never would’ve guessed she’d gone through so much recently. I’m sorry about your sister, I had no idea. Someone clearly didn’t tell me much... Where do your parents live?”

Wes lets out another groan next to me and lets his head fall to the back of the couch. He stares up at the ceiling and I know he’s feeling bad about this.

“Great job prepping Kels, jackass.” Blake chuckles. Kelsey glances between Wes, Blake, and I. Her confused expression

shows she has no idea what's going on.

“Did I say something wrong?” She asks nervously. Wes grumbles *Yes* at the same time I say *No*. I pin Wes with a glare and he holds up his hands like he's backing down.

“My parents were murdered about five years ago. Someone robbed our house in the middle of the night and killed them in the process. Kasey had already moved out and I was sleeping over Nicky's house. Had I been home I most likely would've been killed too.”

Kelsey's eyes widen and her mouth drops open. It takes her a few minutes before she regains her composure and narrows her eyes at Wes.

“You could warn a girl, asshole. Now I feel horrible. I'm sorry, Addi! Please don't hate me.”

“It's not a big deal, Kelsey, you didn't know.”

“Yeah, but Wes did,” Nicky mutters under his breath. Everyone laughs as a pillow soars towards Nicky's head.

“Nicky and Charlie are the only family I have left now.”

“That's where you're wrong, sweetie. You'll be gaining three sisters, two brothers, a set of parents and a whole slew of nieces and nephews soon,” Kelsey says, pulling me into a hug.

“Don't forget about us, Addi,” Nate murmurs quietly.

“I could never forget about you guys, Captain.” My gaze softens when it lands on him. I love Nate like a brother and

I'm so glad he's in my life. "Now, I want to hear some funny stories about my man and the rest of the boys growing up."

"Please, no." Wes groans, gripping the back of his neck. Kelsey rubs her hands together like she's evil and laughs at Wes.

"Ok, remember that little kid who lived across the street? He used to play basketball in the road and his ball was constantly hitting your truck or going under it. Well one day, Blake and Wes waited until the kid crawled under the car and then set off the car alarm. The kid freaked out and I'm pretty sure peed himself. He was so scared."

"Wes! Blake! That's so mean." I try to sound stern, but my laughter wins and I crack up. I can imagine them peeking out the window, waiting for him to get completely under before they set off the alarm.

"When Wes and Nate were little, my sisters and I convinced them when there was lightning, God was taking their picture. From then on whenever there was a thunderstorm, they'd both run outside with big smiles on their faces and look to the sky screaming *Cheese!* hoping God got a good picture of them... we weren't really nice now that I think about it." She scratches her chin, her smile slipping into a frown.

"Remember when Mrs. Snyder, our Sunday school teacher, asked you if you prayed before you ate dinner and you said no. She asked why not and you said '*because my mom's a good cook*'. She was so mad at you." Nate chuckles, shaking his head. "I thought she was going to kick you out."

“So, wait. I have a question... Charlie showed me her room and she said most of the stuff was new. How did you get all of the costumes and furniture into the house, especially without Addi or Charlie knowing?” Kelsey watches Wes.

“Well, we went to the store and picked everything out. We all chipped in and I bought the furniture.” Wes shrugs. “We kept it all in the back of my truck and Blake’s until Addi and Charlie went grocery shopping. We’d sneak in there to work on it throughout the day while they were distracted.”

“I’m just picturing all of you massive guys shopping for feather boas and tiaras.” Kelsey laughs.

“Oh, it was amazing. A few moms were staring at us. I’m fairly certain some were cougars and they were trying to decide if they had a chance with us.” Blake does a full body shiver.

“It didn’t help that Blake, Lincoln, and Cole kept trying on everything.” Wes rolls his eyes. “I almost punched them when they wrapped a boa around my neck and placed a pink tiara on my head. They held up a dress and said it didn’t match my complexion.”

“You wear boas and tiaras all the time!” I laugh, picturing this so clearly in my head.

“That’s for my little princess. I’d do anything for her,” Wes whispers, glancing at Charlie’s door.

“Not only did we have to pick out all of that stuff, but we also had to shop for fake jewelry, shoes, and purses. I think the

cashier thought we were crazy.” Nate chuckles. “Seven men standing in line, each with a cart overflowing with girly things.”

“The best part was when we went to get paint.” Lincoln shakes his head. “There were fights over the best blue for Cinderella. I thought there was going to be a fist fight in the paint section.”

“So... who won the paint fight?” Kelsey glances at each of the guys.

“Me.” Cole grins and folds his arms over his chest.

“Only because he refused to paint a mural on the wall if he didn’t like the blue base.” Wes rolls his eyes. “The blue I picked was better. It would’ve made the castle pop even more.”

“Are you for real right now?” Kelsey bursts out laughing. “Are you still mad over the shade of blue on her wall?”

“My little girl deserves the best the world has to offer. And the blue I picked would’ve definitely been the best there was. But whatever, the stupid artist had to be moody and get his way.”

“I had to be moody? Have you looked in the mirror over the last five years?” Cole shakes his head but he can’t hide his smile.

“But does anyone have photos of all of you shopping?” I arch a brow.

“I’ve got you covered.” Nate smiles and moves to the spot next to me on the couch. He pulls up the photos and I instantly start laughing. This is the greatest thing I’ve ever seen.

Chapter 53



Blake



We spend the majority of the weekend hanging out with Kelsey. Addi and her are really getting to know each other and they seem like they're going to be best friends in no time.

Charlie adores Kelsey. The two of them clicked right away and Kelsey played with her a lot. She's excited to meet the rest of Wes's family and all of his nieces and nephews.

Last night, Charlie begged us to go to church with her today. We all agreed, but Kelsey had to leave early this morning for work.

Somehow, she convinced Kendra to come to church, which resulted in a long conversation about what type of clothing is appropriate for church. According to Charlie, Kendra's clothes don't cover enough skin for God.

All last night, Charlie went from one room to the next, picking out each person's clothes for church. She's adorable with how particular she is with choosing our outfits, down to picking our shoes.

I'm shocked everyone played along and even tried on what Charlie selected for them so she could make sure they're pretty for Jesus. This girl's going to be quite the handful.

Charlie picked out black dress pants and blue button up dress shirts for each of us to wear. We're allowed to keep the top button undone and we can roll our sleeves up to our elbows, but we have to keep our shirts tucked in. I don't think I've ever had someone plan my outfit down to the smallest detail like this.

Before we're allowed to leave for church, she makes us line up shoulder to shoulder so she can examine us all at once.

Charlie moves from one person to the next. She fixes our hair, straightens our shirts, or tells us to smile more.

Addi was instructed to wear a beautiful blue dress that makes her eyes pop and Charlie's wearing something that almost matches perfectly. She looks like a little princess and I love it.

Addi was whining this morning about how Charlie lectured her on how to do her hair, her makeup, and even picked out her jewelry for today. This little girl is a force to be reckoned with.

"If you think this is bad, you should've heard the arguments she had with Kendra last night. I thought Kendra was going to hang up and block my number," Addi whispers so Charlie can't hear her.

“Now, boys,” Charlie climbs on top of the coffee table and plants her hands on her hips. “There are lots of cute girls at church, if you smile pretty, they might like you. You all need a nice girl who loves Jesus in your life. Except for you, Wessie. You’re only looking at Mommy.” She levels Wes with a stern expression and points at him. “Keep your eyes on Mommy only, got it?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Wes chokes out, trying his hardest to keep a straight face.

“Alright, let’s get going so we aren’t late.” Addi takes Charlie’s hand in hers and leads us all out of the house.

We split into two groups and climb into the cars. It’s a short drive to church and when we pull up outside, I can’t stop looking at the beautiful white building with large pillars.

We quickly climb out of the cars and Charlie takes my hand, leading me to the door. The pastor is outside greeting everyone and his face lights up when he spots Charlie.

“Miss Charlie! I’ve missed you. Who do you have with you?” The pastor pulls his attention away from Charlie and focuses on all of us.

“Pastor Will, these are my uncles, my Auntie Kendra, my new Mommy and my soon-to-be new Daddy...she used to be my Auntie Addi, but now she’s my mommy. This is Uncle Blakie. Behind us are Uncle Linkie, Uncle Coley, Uncle Natey, Uncle Huntie, Uncle Nicky and Wessie. Wessie can’t be an uncle because he’s going to be my daddy soon, but he says he has to marry my mommy before he can be my daddy. I told

the boys they need to look pretty for Jesus today and I picked out all of their clothes, told them to smile and find a nice girl who loves Jesus at church today. I made sure to pick out a good dress for Auntie Kendra. Jesus wouldn't like her closet one bit! They all need to find Jesus; they just don't know it yet. But I know it and I'm going to help them," Charlie rambles on and on, I swear she never even stops to take a breath.

"Well, Charlie, that's very nice of you to help them. I'm glad you brought everyone with you. You should make sure to have them sit up front so they pay attention." Pastor Will smiles and winks at us.

We file down the long center aisle to the front of the church. I scan the pews the whole time and Charlie wasn't lying. There are tons of hot women here and almost all of their attention is focused on us.

I can't say I blame them. How often do you witness a four-year-old being escorted by seven attractive men and two beautiful women?

Yes, I fully acknowledge we're all very attractive in our house. I'm not being shallow, I'm just stating facts.

I'm not worried about catching someone's eye though, I'm here for Charlie. She asked us to come, so of course we did. We'd do anything for this girl.

We take up the first two rows on this side. Wes has his arm around Addi's shoulders the second we sit down. Cole, Hunter, and Nate sit next to them. Lincoln, Nick, Kendra, and I sit

with Charlie behind them. Charlie plops herself down on my lap and gazes up into my eyes. This girl knows how to make my heart melt, I can't take my eyes off of the huge smile on her face.

“You're so handsome, Uncle Blakie, girls keep looking at you.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, I'm only looking at the little girl on my lap.” I wrap my arms around her and rest my chin on her head.

“Hi, Charlie! How are you?” A beautiful feminine voice asks from my right.

“Hi, Miss Sally! I'm happy. I miss my mommy a lot, but I have a new mommy now and I have six uncles that live with me and Wessie. Wessie is Mommy's fiancé, but I want him to be my daddy so he can't be my uncle. Is fiancé the right word, Uncle Blakie?” I quickly nod so Charlie can finish her story. “This is my Uncle Blakie, isn't he handsome?”

Sally chuckles as Charlie rambles. I glance up and am met with the most beautiful green eyes. Sally has long light brown hair in loose curls. She's tall and lean with an athletic body. She's stunning. My mouth drops slightly, but I quickly regain my composure and aim my signature smile at her.

“He's pretty handsome. It's nice to meet you, Uncle Blakie.” Sally sticks out her hand towards me. I take it in mine and give her a firm but gentle handshake. Her hand is small in mine and so soft. I smirk as a flush takes over her cheeks at my touch.

“It’s nice to meet you, Miss Sally. You can call me Blake though, only this beautiful princess calls me Uncle Blakie.” I wink.

A breath-taking smile spreads across her face. I shouldn’t be staring, but I can’t pull my eyes away from her. Charlie goes on and introduces the rest of the guys and girls to her. Sally says hi to each one of us.

“It was really nice to meet all of you, especially you, Blake. I’ll see you later, Charlie.” Another blush washes over her as she hurries away. I guess it isn’t just me that feels an attraction.

“Damn, she’s hot.” Lincoln leans forward to meet my gaze.

“Uncle Linkie! You can’t talk like that in God’s house. You need to put five dollars in the bad word jar when we get home!” Charlie quietly yells at Lincoln.

“But it’s normally only one dollar, Charlie,” Lincoln protests.

“I don’t care. You’re supposed to behave here! Naughty, Uncle Linkie.”

“Yeah, naughty, Uncle Linkie!” Nick shakes his head in mock disbelief and I chuckle at them.

I glance around and spot Sally to my right, her eyes are still on me. As soon as I make eye contact, she quickly glances down at her hands for a few moments before peeking back up at me with a shy smile on her face. Damn, she’s cute. I grin,

thinking about what I can say to her when Charlie pulls my attention back to her.

“You don’t look like you’re only looking at me, Uncle Blakie,” Charlie sing-songs. She pays attention way too much for a girl her age. She has a knowing authority in her voice. It’s like the girl can read a person’s expression perfectly. “She likes you, ya know.”

“And how do you know that, princess?” I whisper.

“She keeps staring at you when you’re not looking. Her eyes look like she likes you. Look at them.” She leans into me, keeping her voice low.

I peek over at Sally again and see Charlie’s right, she’s still staring at me. When I catch her again, she turns her attention down to the church bulletin, a beautiful smile spread over her face.

“I think you may be right.”

“You should ask her out! She’s really nice and she loves Jesus!”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, sweetie.”

“Hold my purse, Uncle Blakie, I’ll be right back.” Charlie gets off my lap and walks to Addi’s row.

She pulls Addi down and whispers something into her ear. Addi smiles and nods before Charlie quickly walks out of the row and over to Sally.

She's talking a mile a minute, as usual. Sally smiles and glances over to me a few times before whispering in Charlie's ear and giving her a little hug. Sally gives her a piece of paper she's written something on. As Charlie walks back to me, she has a huge smile on her face.

"What did you just do?" I narrow my eyes as I ask her.

"Nuffin," she replies innocently.

"Charlie Ann, what did you just do?" I repeat.

"Nuffin, Uncle Blakie. I just asked Miss Sally for her phone number. I told her I think you like her."

"Charlie..." I moan as I scrub my face with my hand. "I told you that wasn't a good idea."

"No, Uncle Blakie, you said you didn't *think* it was a good idea. But I thought it was. Mommy always said I should follow my heart to lead me in the right direction and to trust my gut when it says something is wrong. And my gut is telling me you're wrong and I'm right. She likes you. I think you like her too." She flashes me a big smirk.

"You're a nosy, nosy girl, Charlie," I say, tousling her hair. She swats my hand away and glares at me.

Pastor Will takes his spot at the front of the church and begins his sermon. He's really good at keeping your attention and I'm surprisingly interested in everything he's saying.

Cole turns around to say something to Lincoln, but is given such a glare by Charlie that he quickly turns back towards the front and keeps his mouth shut for the rest of the service.

When we close with a song, Charlie's belting out the words but stops when she realizes Nick isn't singing.

"Uncle Nicky! You're supposed to be singing!" She whisper-yells at him.

"Sweetie, I'm not a good singer," he whispers back.

"Jesus doesn't care! He loves you no matter what and wants to hear you sing to him! You need to sing for Jesus, Uncle Nicky!"

Nick lets out a deep sigh before he begins quietly singing along with everyone else. Charlie's going to be a handful as she gets older. I can see it now, she's going to boss everyone around and get exactly what she wants all the time.

Chapter 54



Wes



After lunch and play time, Charlie starts making dinner with some of us. She convinced Nick, Blake, and I to help her and Addi.

She uses this innocent charm to con us into doing stuff and we all give in far too easily. I'm fairly certain she's a master of manipulation and we're all too focused on her big blue eyes to realize it.

Addi asked me to invite my parents to join us for dinner tonight. Now that we're engaged, Addi really wants to meet the rest of my family. According to Mom, Kelsey called her last night and ranted about my girls and how much she loves them.

The closer we get to the time Mom and Dad are supposed to be here, the more anxious Addi's getting.

"Alright, Charlie, I think the potatoes are done boiling, what do I do now?" Nick asks.

"Now you have to mash them and add a bunch of stuff to it. Wessie? Can you help me read the recipe? This is my real

mommy's recipe and I love it! She was such a good cook.”
She speaks with pride.

My heart breaks at the thought that Charlie's always going to miss Kasey just like Addi will. I know Addi's afraid she might forget Kasey over the years, but I'll make sure we take steps to keep her memories alive.

“Wessie, can you put on some music? We should dance while we cook. That's what I used to do with my mommy.”

“Sure, princess... um, what kind of music do I put on for a four-year-old?” I mutter to Addi, making her chuckle. I don't want to put on the wrong thing.

“Let's listen to some 90's alternative music, it tends to be a safe choice. I'm pretty sure that's all Kasey ever listened to at home,” she whispers to me.

Once I get the music playing, we all dance around the kitchen as we make dinner. Charlie's laughing and shaking her butt with Addi the whole time. I can't tear my gaze away from them. I love watching my future little family and how happy they are.



“Oh, Charlie, everything tastes wonderful. You and your mommy did a great job!” Mom coos at Charlie.

“Thank you! Miss Caroline, if you're my Wessie's mommy, does that mean you're going to be my grandma when Mommy

and Wessie get married?”

“I guess it does, Charlie. And this will be your grandpa.” She motions to Dad. “You’ll also have some cousins, and a few more aunts and uncles.”

Charlie’s eyes get as wide as saucers. “I’ve always wanted a grandma or grandpa... I sure do have *a lot* of uncles.”

“Yes, you do, sweetie. You have so many people who love you.” I squeeze her hand gently. Even if Kasey isn’t here anymore, it doesn’t mean Charlie won’t be the most loved girl in the world. She has so many people who want to support her and be there for her.

Charlie’s soaking up the attention from my parents and they seem to be getting along great. They’re awesome with her, loving the soon to be new additions to our family.

Addi’s a little shy, but I know she’s also missing her parents and sister right now. I feel bad having her surrounded by my family when she doesn’t have hers around anymore.

“Why don’t we move into the living room and relax for a little bit before dessert,” I suggest.

Everyone agrees and starts making their way to the living room. There are two huge L-shaped couches, making a big rectangle with a large coffee table in the center.

I sit and immediately tug Addi onto my lap. “Are you alright, babe?” I whisper in her ear and kiss her neck.

“Yeah. I’m just missing my family. I love yours though.”

“I figured you were. I’m sorry, I wish I could bring them all back. My parents love you and Charlie.”

Nick sits down next to us and keeps poking Addi. It’s his go-to move to make her laugh and smile. Hunter flops down on his back, throwing a football up in the air and catching it again.

Blake sits down on the end and puts his arm along the back of the couch. I’m surprised when Mom takes the spot next to him with Dad on her other side. When Nate settles on the other end of the couch, Cole sits down and holds out his arms for Lincoln.

“What do you want?” Lincoln asks.

“I’m lonely, come sit on my lap and we can whisper things into each other’s ears and pretend no one else exists” Cole wiggles his eyebrows, making Lincoln snort.

“Only if I can be the girl,” he protests.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, baby.” Cole winks at him, patting his lap.

“You never want me when other girls are around. I don’t feel special,” Lincoln continues.

“Oh, baby, I’m so sorry,” Cole jokes, burying his face in Lincoln’s neck.

They’re straight, there’s no doubt about that. But they don’t have a serious bone in their bodies. They cuddle up in each other’s arms, watching Addi and me, mimicking us until I hurl

a pillow at them. They start laughing and spread apart to take over the couch.

Charlie shyly walks over to Nate and tugs on his arm. His eyes soften as he gazes down at her.

“What’s up, buttercup?”

“Uncle Natey... can I please sit on your lap?” Her expression saddens immediately and my heart sinks.

“Of course you can. What’s wrong, sweet girl?”

“Wessie’s holding mommy and Uncle Nicky and Uncle Blakie are all busy talking to grownups. Uncle Cole and Uncle Lincoln aren’t good cuddlers and Uncle Hunter’s playing with his football. Everyone’s too busy for me.”

“Sweetie, no one will ever be too busy for you. I’ll always be here for you and so will all your boys, Mommy, and the rest of your family. We all love you so much, darling. Don’t you ever doubt that. Now, come here and let’s snuggle.”

She climbs onto his lap and nuzzles into his arms instantly. She peers up at Nate with her big green eyes and he stares down at her with a smile.

“I bet if you went over to any of your boys and asked them to hold you, they’d all stop what they’re doing and pull you onto their laps.”

“No, they wouldn’t, Uncle Natey.” She shakes her head, so sure of herself.

“Yes, they would. They love you more than anything in the world, Charlie.” Nate holds her a little tighter, resting his chin on her head.

“She’s breaking your heart, isn’t she?” Addi whispers. I gaze down into her eyes, they’re the most beautiful shade of blue I’ve ever seen.

“She knows how to kill me, that’s for sure. I feel sorry for the man who marries her. He’ll be getting an amazing wife who will love him forever and always try to make him happy but he’ll also have his heart ripped out of his chest when she’s sad or cries,” I whisper back.

“It’s so cute how much you all love her in such a short period of time. I was so scared when she came to live with us. I wasn’t sure how I was going to do it. I thought I’d be doing all of this alone. I never imagined everyone would come together and help me figure this all out. I definitely never expected you to be such an incredible person and to accept us both so fully.”

“I’ve always liked kids, but I wasn’t sure I wanted kids until I met her. She’s stolen my heart.”

“I thought I was the one who stole your heart,” Addi mumbles under her breath. I’m not supposed to hear her and I know it. I hold her a little closer and bring my lips to the shell of her ear.

“Now, now, you’re not allowed to be jealous of a four-year-old,” I whisper into her hair and her body tenses. I let out a soft chuckle at her response.

“You weren’t supposed to hear that.”

“I know I wasn’t, but I did, darling.”

Chapter 55



Addi



The doorbell rings and I jump out of Wes's arms to go answer it. Everyone's enjoying themselves and are catching up with Wes's parents. I swing the door open and squeal in delight when I see who is standing on the other side.

"Mom! Dad!" I squeal as I jump into Shaun and Sadie's waiting arms.

Nicky's parents were best friends with mine. They were always like a second set of parents to me. After my parents were killed, they took it upon themselves to step in where they could. They came to my games, dance recitals, and my graduation from eighth grade and high school. They still call to check up on me and Nicky swears I'm their favorite child.

"Baby girl, I've missed you so much," Shaun whispers into my hair as he holds me tighter.

"I've missed you both! Come in! Wes's parents are here. Do you know Chase and Caroline?"

"Of course we do, sweetie. Caroline and I used to organize fundraisers for the baseball team all the time." Sadie walks

past me, hurrying over to greet Caroline.

“So, what’s this I hear about my little girl getting married?”
Shaun asks.

I flash him a big cheeky grin. He laughs, throwing his arm around my shoulders and we walk back into the living room. Hello’s ring out through the room. Shaun walks right up to Wes and pins him with a glare.

“What’s this I hear you asked my sweet baby girl to marry you?”

Wes glances back and forth between Shaun and me, trying to gauge if he’s actually mad at Wes or if he’s just joking.

“I’m sorry, Sir, I would’ve asked for your permission, but I didn’t think you’d mind... I did ask Nick’s permission though,” Wes rubs the back of his neck nervously.

“You did?” I squeak out.

“Of course, baby. Your dad might not be around for me to ask, but I figured Nick was the next best thing.” He reaches for my hand.

Shaun glares at him for a few more seconds before a slow smile spreads across his face.

“You’re a better man than I remember. Welcome to the family, Son.” Shaun pulls Wes into a bear hug and Wes visibly relaxes when he realizes he’s not in trouble.

“Mommy?”

“Yes, Charlie?”

“If he’s calling you his baby girl... does that mean he’s my grandpa too?”

I search my brain for an answer, but Shaun drops down on one knee and takes Charlie’s little hand in his massive one before I can respond. His eyes soften as he smiles at her.

“Would you like me to be your grandpa?” He asks quietly and Charlie nods quickly. “Then I’d be honored to be your grandpa. Should we let Sadie be your grandma too?” Charlie nods again. “I remember when you were born, Charlie. Your mommy was so excited to have such a beautiful little girl. She said you were a gift from God. She let me hold you and you held onto my little finger and wouldn’t let go. Addi was so excited to be an aunt. She and Nick never stopped talking about you. We haven’t seen you in a while and I’m sure you don’t remember us, but we never stopped thinking about you.”

Sadie comes over to Shaun’s side and kneels down as he speaks to Charlie. Charlie stares at them both for a few moments before she says anything.

“I love you, Grandma and Grandpa. My mommy used to talk about you all the time. We had pictures of you on our fridge.” She flings herself into their arms. My eyes mist up again, but I fight the tears.

When they finally break their hug, Charlie looks up at me with huge eyes. She’s counting on her fingers for a few seconds before she finally looks up at me.

“Mommy! After you and Wessie get married, I’m going to have two grandmas, two grandpas, four aunts, eight uncles,

five cousins, two mommies, and one daddy. That's a lot of family." Her eyes widen to saucers, making everyone laugh.

"I can't wait," I whisper as Wes wraps his arms around me and pulls me tightly against his chest.

"Me either," he whispers. I glance up at him, finding his eyes filled with tears and my brows furrow together.

"What's wrong?"

"She said one daddy. She never considered Craig a dad... but she considers me her daddy. Fuck, that girl's going to kill me."

I smile up at him and give him a soft kiss. He really is the perfect man for Charlie and me.

Chapter 56



Wes

Six Months Later



I'm walking through the quad when I spot my beautiful fiancée and my soon to be daughter sitting under our oak tree. They're on a blanket with lunch spread out around them. They're talking and laughing with each other, looking like the perfect family waiting for their man.

A smile takes over my face as I quicken my pace to reach them faster. I get to be the man who claims them and I couldn't be happier about it. My eyes don't leave my girls, they never do. I'm always focused on the two of them and nothing else.

When I get closer, Charlie notices me and takes off running towards me. I drop my backpack on the ground and squat down to catch her as she launches herself into my arms.

"Daddy! I missed you!" She squeals as I spin her in a circle.

"I missed you too, princess. Let's go get Mommy."

I snatch my backpack off the ground and lift Charlie into my arms. We head towards Addi as Charlie talks animatedly about their day.

I just finished my last final exam and am looking forward to our wedding this weekend. We'll have a few weeks to relax before the next semester starts.

Addi's taking summer classes so she can lighten her schedule throughout the year. I just finished my junior year and am excited to start my senior year. I just want to be done with school so we can start the rest of our lives.

Addi stands and I pull her into a hug with Charlie between us. I love holding both of my girls at the same time. I'm the luckiest man in the world.

"Aww, isn't this cute," someone sneers from behind me. I glance over my shoulder and spot Mercedes with her murderous gaze locked on us. I let out a long sigh and roll my eyes at her.

"Go away, Mercedes," I growl.

"I can't believe you're still playing house. Why would you want to be tied down to that when you could have someone like me?" She practically spits at me.

"Mercedes, we're not having this argument again. You're like a broken record and I'm tired of listening to you. Why can't you accept that I don't love you? I never did and I don't want you back," I say in a bored tone.

Mercedes has cornered me at school at least once a week since the first day she saw me on campus. She thinks she's going to be able to convince me to take her back. Even if I had never met Addi, I still wouldn't be interested in Mercedes.

“Wes! I know you don’t mean that. Why do you want to take care of a little brat when we can be out having fun together?”

I hand Charlie over to Addi and close the distance between me and my ex. I’m going to end this here and now. I’m tired of dancing around this subject.

“Don’t you fucking dare talk about my daughter like that!” I hiss.

She takes a step back, her eyes widening in fear. I’ll put up with a lot, but I won’t put up with her talking about my daughter like this.

“My daughter is none of your business and I don’t want to hear you talk about her ever again.”

“Your daughter? Are you serious right now?” She laughs like this is the funniest thing she’s ever heard.

“As a fucking heart attack. This time tomorrow, she’ll be my daughter and Addi will be my wife. It’s over Mercedes. You blew your chance years ago. Tomorrow, you’ll officially lose me forever.”

“No...” she whispers in disbelief as her face falls. This girl is nuts.

“You might be pretty, but your heart is ugly. You need Jesus in your life.” Charlie speaks with such confidence and conviction.

She slips her hand into mine and stares up at Mercedes with pity. She turns her attention to me, seeking confirmation that

she's not in trouble for speaking up. I smile down at her and am rewarded with a big cheeky grin. This little girl melts my heart every time she looks at me like this.

“Goodbye, Mercedes.” I turn my back on her.

With Charlie's hand firmly in mine, I wrap an arm around Addi's waist and press a kiss to her forehead. We walk over to our picnic and take a seat.

Charlie immediately starts telling me about all the trouble Blake got into this morning. She's moving her hands frantically as she talks. A whole slew of emotions cross her face as she talks. She's so expressive and it's a funny sight to see. Addi and I laugh as we watch our precious daughter recount every second of her day.

After a few minutes, I glance over my shoulder, finding Mercedes still standing where I left her. Tears silently stream down her cheeks as she watches us.

I'll never understand what I saw in her, but now that she sees how happy I am, maybe she can finally move on and leave me in her memories.



“I can't tell if you're nervous or excited,” Blake mutters. He almost sounds bored. “Can you please stop pacing?”

“I'm excited. I can't wait for us to do this. I just want her to be my wife. To start our life together.”

“You’ve already started your life together. You literally live together.” Nate tries to reason.

“But he hasn’t hit that home run.” A devilish smirk spreads over Blake’s face.

“Really?” Nate asks.

“Really.” I groan. “I wanted to wait until we got married.”

“Wow.” Nate shakes his head, a grin spreading.

“I can’t believe it was you who wanted to wait and not her. That’s just... weird.”

“Fuck off.” I laugh, straightening my tie for the hundredth time. “I want things to be perfect between us. I wanted her to know she’s the only woman I want for the rest of my life before we take that step.”

“Are you two going on a honeymoon?” Nate asks.

“We’re going away for the weekend. Nick said he’d watch Charlie for us.”

“I feel like you’re going to need more than a weekend.” Blake chuckles. “I’ve seen the way you look at that woman. You’re going to come home dehydrated and exhausted. Should I pack you some Gatorade?”

“How many boxes of condoms do you have packed?” Nate snorts with laughter when I turn a surprised glance on him.

“He’s right! You’re going to need at least a box per each day. Shit, she’s going to come home pregnant.”

“Fuck, I can’t wait to see her pregnant with my baby. That’d be like a dream come true.” I shake my head, adjusting my tie again.

“Sometimes I think about what our lives were like a year ago and what they’re like now... it’s crazy how far we’ve come. And it’s all because of those two girls. If they didn’t catapult into our lives like they did, who knows where we’d be today.” Blake shakes his head and watches me carefully.

“I don’t want to even think about a life without them. It sounds like absolute hell.”

There’s a knock on the door and Dad peeks his head in before entering the room completely.

“It’s time to go get your girl, Son.” He places a hand on my shoulder. I suck in a deep breath as a smile stretches across my face.

“Let’s do this!” Blake yells. We all file into the back yard to wait for my beautiful bride.

Chapter 57



Addi



Kendra places the last pin in my hair and stands back admiring her handy work. She's piled my hair into a beautiful updo. My makeup is done light and is perfectly elegant.

Wes and I decided we didn't want anything fancy for our wedding. I picked a simple dress with a sweetheart bodice and thin lace straps. It has small crystals and embroidered designs on it. The bottom is straight and flowy.

I stare at myself in the mirror and smile. I've dreamed about this day throughout my entire life, but I never knew who I'd want to be walking down the aisle to meet.

Now, I can't picture anyone other than Wes. He's the most incredible man I've ever met and I'm never letting go of him.

"Perfect! You look amazing," Kendra whispers, wrapping me in a hug.

"You're beautiful, AJ." Nicky pulls Kendra and me into his embrace.

Nicky will be my *man of honor* and Kendra's my maid of honor. Wes decided to have Blake and Nate stand up with him,

both of them taking the title of best man. Charlie, of course, is our little flower girl.

There's a gentle knock on the door and Shaun slowly opens it with his hand over his eyes.

"Is everyone decent?" He asks.

"I'm naked!" Nicky shouts. Shaun opens his eyes and shoves Nick out of the way.

"Smartass," he mutters under his breath, laughing at his son. "Addison, you look stunning. Your parents would be so proud of you, sweetie."

"Thanks, Dad," I whisper. "Is it time to go get hitched?" I smirk, more than excited to make this official.

"Unless you want to be a runaway bride. I can distract everyone while you get a head start." He points a thumb over his shoulder like he's going to do it.

"No. I don't think I've ever been more sure of something. I want him by my side forever."

"Good. As long as he treats you well, I won't have to kick his ass then."

"Oh, Shaun," Kendra giggles and shakes her head, "do you really think you could take on Wes?" Her eyes dance with amusement.

"Nah, but I know every one of those men that live with you would help me. I'm fairly certain we could take him down if we all team up." Shaun smirks. "Let's get you married,

sweetheart.” He holds out his arm for me and I happily take his bicep in my hand.

“Let’s do this!” Nicky yells, pulling us all out the door.

Chapter 58



Wes



I'm standing in our backyard, waiting for my soon-to-be wife to make her way down the little aisle we created for our wedding.

We only have family and close friends watching from their chairs in the grass and it's perfect. The guys strung up white lights in all the trees, creating a romantic setting for us. As soon as the sun sets, we plan to turn them on and surprise Addi.

I laugh as Nick dances his way down the aisle and blows me a kiss when he reaches the front. Kendra's up next, she does her little dance, but kisses me on the cheek when she reaches me. Charlie spots me from the doorway and darts towards me, her basket of flower petals bouncing up and down as she runs, spilling petals all over the place.

"Daddy!" She squeals as she jumps into my arms.

"I love you, princess," I hug her tight to me.

"I love you, daddy! Always and forever!"

“Always and forever,” I repeat, placing her back on the ground so she can take her place next to Nick.

My head snaps up as the wedding march starts to play. Addi appears in my view and my breath catches. She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.

The way her dress hugs every curve has my mouth salivating and me wishing I could sweep her off to our bedroom now.

My eyes stay locked on her as Shaun leads her down the aisle and a massive smile spreads over Addi’s face. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her so happy. It warms my heart to know she wants this as much as I do.

Blake nudges me but I refuse to pull my eyes away from my bride. Happy tears steadily fall from those stunning eyes of hers.

“Take the damn handkerchief and wipe your face, bro,” Blake whispers in my ear.

It’s only then I realize happy tears are falling down my face too. I quickly wipe them away before Addi reaches me. Shaun kisses her cheek then shakes my hand, taking his seat next to his wife.

“Hey, handsome,” Addi whispers as I use the handkerchief to wipe away her tears.

“Hey, gorgeous,” I whisper back, taking her hands in mine.

Pastor Will starts the ceremony, but I don’t hear a word of what he says. I’m too excited to listen to whatever generic

things he's saying. I just want to get to the part where I get to kiss my bride.

After what feels like a lifetime, we say our *I do's* and Pastor Will calls Charlie over to our side. Addi and I each take one of Charlie's small hands in ours, never letting go of each other's hand.

We wanted to have a little part of the ceremony dedicated to us saying vows to Charlie. We promise to love, protect, and be there for her. We promise to take care of her, to give her advice, and to stand by her side for the rest of her life. We sign the adoption papers in front of everyone and they're finally mine.

Pastor Will tells me to kiss my bride and I jump at the chance. I pull Addi into my arms and lean her back, kissing her like she's the air I breathe. Loud whistles and claps ring out from our family and friends. We laugh when we pull apart and face all of them. Pastor Will presents us as Mr. and Mrs. Wes Robinson and Charlie Robinson and the cheering starts all over again.

"I have a new Mommy and Daddy!" Charlie shrieks as she leaps into our arms.

We smother her in kisses as her giggles fill the air. With Charlie on my hip, I take Addi's hand in mine and lead my new family to the other side of the yard where tables and chairs are set up for our catered dinner.

Once everyone has stopped over to congratulate us, we all sit down and Nick takes a mic.

“I’ll never forget the scrawny girl who used to follow me around as a kid. She insisted she could be one of the boys no matter how much we tried to push her away.”

Addi laughs at Nick’s description of them and nods her head with enthusiasm.

“My mom yelled at me until I finally let her play with me. She quickly wormed her way into my heart and refused to leave no matter what happened in our lives. Soon we had weekly sleepovers and were pretty much attached at the hip. It killed me to move away from her because she’s every bit of my sister. We might not share DNA, but I love her like we do. I’m so proud of the woman you’ve become, AJ.”

Nick pauses and takes a deep breath. He looks like he’s about to cry and I know Addi’s going to have tears trickling down her cheeks in a few seconds.

“I know your parents and Kasey are proud of you. They’re watching over you and Charlie every single second of the day. Wes is a lucky man.” A chorus of laughter rings out. “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again... if you hurt her, I’ll have to kick your ass. So please don’t hurt her because I’m pretty sure I’d lose a fight against you.” Everyone laughs even harder at that. “To the happy couple and their beautiful daughter!” Nick toasts us and everyone else joins in.

Addi pulls Nick into a hug and she whispers something in his ear. As soon as she takes her seat again, Blake stands up and stares at us.

“Wes has never been scrawny, I think we can all agree on that,” Blake says with a smirk and Addi giggles in my arms. “When I met Wes, he was trying to kick my ass because I kissed his girlfriend. He realized I needed someone like him in my life so I didn’t screw everything up. I was too stupid for my own good and he took pity on me.”

He swallows hard and glances down at his feet. I know what Blake’s been through in life and I’m sure all of those emotions are bubbling to the surface right now.

“I thank God I made the mistake of getting mixed up in his girlfriend drama because it gave me this amazing friendship. Who knows where I’d be in life if I didn’t have Wes to encourage me or to tell me to stop doing stupid things. Wes is definitely lucky to have Addi, but Addi’s also lucky to have Wes. She’s brought Wes out of his shell and allowed him to be himself for the first time in a long time. I love seeing the caring, loving, big teddy bear more and more. The brooding, dark, badass isn’t gone, but he doesn’t feel the need to be present all the time. I thank you for that, Addi. Thank you for knocking down all of those walls and making him a better man. I wish you both decades of happiness and I plan to witness your love and life along with you. I love you both!” Blake wipes at his tear-filled eyes and I pull him into a bear hug.

“I love you, man,” I whisper.

“We both love you,” Addi corrects me as she joins our hug.

We eat dinner and enjoy spending this joyous occasion with each other and all the people who mean the most to us.

We take tons of pictures so we never forget this night and dance the evening away in each other's arms with twinkly lights hanging above our heads.

I've never been happier than I am at this moment.



“Wes! Stop running!” Addi giggles the entire way to our room.

I insisted on checking into a hotel room tonight. I didn't want to go back to our home with six other men and a child with us. I wanted our first night as husband and wife to be just us.

“I can't.” I stop in the middle of the hall and tug her into my arms. “I can't wait to make love to you and worship this amazing body.” I kiss her neck and slowly move lower.

“Wes,” she moans, turning to putty in my arms.

I slip an arm under her knees and lift her against my chest. I need to get her into our room before I strip her bare in this hallway for everyone to see.

I pause outside of the door and fumble with the key card. Addi takes it out of my hand and carefully unlocks the door as she giggles. I kick it open and head straight to the bed.

After I carefully place my bride in the center, I make sure to place the 'do not disturb' sign on the door and put the extra lock in place. The last thing I want is someone interrupting us.

"Come over here so I can undress you," I rasp out, motioning for Addi to come closer.

She moves to the edge of the bed and slowly climbs down with her eyes locked on mine. I spin her around before I can kiss her. I know I'll get lost in her if I start kissing her now.

Tilting my head to the side, I gently kiss the back of her neck, sucking her soft skin into my mouth. I slowly tug her zipper down, reminding myself of that first night she slept in my arms.

Back then I never would've guessed we'd be here tonight. I dreamed of it, but I never thought it would actually happen.

As soon as her zipper is down to right above her ass, I carefully unhook her bra and slip my hands under the dress, spanning my fingers across her abdomen. Her dress slips down, but my hands keep it from falling down entirely.

I wonder if she remembers me doing the same thing the morning after the party. I wanted to explore her body, but I couldn't do that back then. Now I can.

I slowly move my hands up and down her body. Addi gasps as I massage her flesh and let my fingers wander wherever they want to go. I return my mouth to her neck and softly suck on her skin.

She leans back into my chest and groans when I grind myself against. I can't wait to make her mine and watch her fall apart around me.

I slip my hands down, over her stomach and down her thighs, taking the dress with me. The fabric pools at her feet and she's left in nothing except a black lace thong.

"Is this the same thong from the zipper incident?" I whisper, slipping my thumbs under the waistband.

"Yes. I knew how much you liked it." Addi peeks over her shoulder at me. She's so fucking beautiful. I can't take it. "It's my turn to undress you."

She spins in my embrace and slowly unbuttons my shirt. I stare down at her as reality washes over me. She's mine. No one else will ever get the chance to touch her. She pushes the fabric over my shoulders and I let it fall to the ground. I don't care what happens to my clothing, I want us naked the entire weekend.

Addi quickly works my pants off of me and soon we're both just standing in our underwear. I pull her flush against me and enjoy her naked torso touching mine.

"I love you more than life itself," I murmur, lowering my lips to hers.

"I love you more than the air I breathe," she whispers.

I grip her thighs, lifting her into the air. Addi wraps her legs around my waist and thrusts her tongue into my mouth. I can

still taste the sweetness from our wedding cake on her and the taste is addicting.

Climbing on the bed with her still wrapped around me, I carefully lower her to the bed. I slip my fingers under her thong and slide them down her legs. She's beautifully spread out in front of me and I know this is going to be an unforgettable night.

"I have to grab a condom, then I'm going to make you mine," I rasp, kissing a trail up her leg and over her hip.

"We don't need one," she gasps, threading her fingers through my hair.

"What?" I peek up at her, sure I've misheard her.

"We don't need them. I'm on the pill and if I got pregnant, I wouldn't even care. I want to have a family with you." She cups my cheeks, staring into my eyes with so much love.

She's the dream. The woman every man wants by their side. I don't know what I did to get her attention, but I'm so glad I did it.



She runs her fingers up my back and through my hair. I lower my body onto hers and let out a long breath.

"That was amazing," she whispers, massaging my scalp.

“You’re amazing.” I peek up at her, resting my chin between her cleavage. “Do you want to take a shower with me?”

“Only if we can do that again.” She smirks.

“I don’t plan on doing anything else this weekend.”

I climb off the bed and drag her body to the edge. Lifting her into my arms, I start the shower and climb under the spray with her still wrapped around me.

I press her back against the cold tiles and smirk when she gasps. I think Blake was right, we’re going to need more than a few bottles of Gatorade this weekend.

Chapter 59



Nick



I'm so happy for Wes and Addi. They deserve all the good in the world. But it's not them I can't take my eyes off of.

Kendra's stunning in her lavender gown, her copper hair is hanging in loose curls down her back. She looks like she's not wearing makeup, but I know she is. She likes to hide behind her mask and fake smiles.

I want to know the girl behind the smile. The girl no one else gets to see. I'm drawn to her and I'm not sure why.

Sure, she flirts with me, but she flirts with everyone. There's something more though. Some reason I can't get her out of my mind and it's driving me crazy.

I stroll over to her and hold out my hand, I want to feel her in my arms and there's only one way I can do that. She glances up at me, her face completely void of emotion.

"I want to dance with the most beautiful woman here. Will you dance with me?"

"Oh, you're smooth, Mr. Cohen." She smirks.

"Will you do me the honor, Miss. Montgomery?"

“How can I say no to that?” She takes my hand and stands to her full height.

I lead her to the middle of where people are dancing and wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her close. She snakes her arms around my neck and smiles up at me.

“You definitely should never say no to me,” I whisper in her ear.

“Oh? And why’s that?” She arches her eyebrow.

“Well, because I’ll only ever have your best interest at heart.”

“I’m sure.” She throws her head back and laughs. The photographer snaps a picture of us and I know I’m going to do anything to get that image. Our arms are wrapped around each other as we’re laughing and smiling.

The lights we strung up in the trees turn on and Kendra lets out a small gasp.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispers.

“The most beautiful,” I whisper, never looking away from her.

She snuggles deeper into my arms and lets out a content little sigh. She rests her cheek against my chest and sways to the music with me.

I fall a little deeper for her and know this will turn out one of two ways. She’ll declare her love for me and we’ll live

happily ever after. Or she'll break my heart into millions of pieces and I'll never recover.

My bet is on her breaking my heart. I should walk away now and save myself, but there's just something about her. I know I'm a goner.



Once the party has died down and we clean up the backyard, I lead Charlie into her room and tuck her into bed.

It takes three stories and several promises of what we're going to do this weekend before she finally shuts her eyes and drifts off to sleep. She drives a hard bargain, but tomorrow we'll be having a tea party, playing dress up, participating in a coloring contest, going to the store to make a stuffed animal, and making cookies.

Softly shutting Charlie's door behind me, I glance up to find Kendra sitting on the couch.

“Hey, what are you still doing here?”

“I wasn't ready to go home. I was thinking maybe we could hang out for a little bit if that's ok with you.” She glances away, refusing to meet my gaze.

“I'd love to.

Chapter 60



Addi



Charlie grips my hand tightly and follows me up the bleachers. We claim one of the few empty spots left and take our seat right as the teams enter the field.

I spot Wes, Blake, and Lincoln right away. They're bigger than the rest of the team, by height and muscle. Wes fills out his baseball pants like a second skin and I bite into my bottom lip thinking about exactly what's beneath those pants.

"Is that Uncle Linkie?" Charlie stands on the bleacher next to me to get a better look.

"Yes. He's the pitcher. Uncle Blake is the catcher and Daddy's on first base." I point out each person to her and smile when the guys spot us and wave.

A cheeky grin lights up Charlie's face as she waves back, drawing everyone's attention from around us.

Lincoln strikes out the first two players who step up to bat, but the third one is able to get a hit. The ball soars near third base. One of the guys picks it up and launches it to Wes. He

jumps up in the air and catches the ball, tagging the base and giving his team a third out in just a few minutes.

The crowd loves them. Everyone's cheering and screaming for Wes. I've never been to one of his games before, but I couldn't be prouder of him. I know he works hard to be here and it shows.

"That's my Daddy!" Charlie squeals and points at Wes.

The teams switch spots and the Devils are up to bat. Lincoln is the first one. He stands at home plate and narrows his eyes on the pitcher.

"Number sixty-nine is mighty fine," someone near us murmurs.

Lincoln's bat connects with the ball and it flies into the outfield, away from any players. He sprints to first base with a big smile on his face.

Blake holds his bat over his shoulder and says something to the catcher from the other team. He laughs and turns his attention to the pitcher.

"Number thirteen is someone I wouldn't mind sitting on," another girl mumbles.

Blake easily hits the ball and it sails past third base. The other team scrambles to get it, but they're not fast enough. Blake takes first base and Lincoln moves to second.

The third batter is someone I've never met before. He gets on first base and the little peanut gallery around us is silent.

Wes takes the plate and the first swing is a foul ball. The second swing connects with the ball and makes a loud crack. The ball shoots over everyone's heads and past the fence, giving him a grand slam.

The crowd goes wild and the guys move around the baseball diamond at a leisurely pace. Wes hits home plate right as Blake and Lincoln jump on him.

"Damn, number twenty-seven looks like heaven," someone whispers behind me and I want to punch them in the face.

Wes finds us in the stands and smiles. He motions for us to come down to the fence and I quickly stand. I take Charlie's hand in mine and glance over my shoulder at the women who kept talking about my family.

"Let's go see Daddy, Uncle Blake, and Uncle Lincoln."

The women stare at me in disbelief, but they don't say anything. As soon as we're at the fence, Wes lifts Charlie over and settles her on his hip.

"I love having my girls in the stands. Are you having fun?" Wes glances from me to Charlie and back.

"Yes! You're so good, Daddy!"

"What about Mommy? Is she having fun?"

"Mommy's having fun watching you in those pants," I mumble under my breath, knowing he can hear me.

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What happens next with the Boys of Mulberry Lane?

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I want to know the woman behind the mask. The one she doesn't show the world.

I haven't been able to get Kendra out of my head since we met. She acts confident, but I see the forced smiles and fake happiness. I want to be more than friends. More than anything, I want to show her what true happiness can be like.

If there's one thing I've learned, it's to never trust anyone.

Nick seems like he could be the dream boyfriend. He's sweet and caring, but I'm not sure that's enough. In my life, men use you until you're a shell of a person, then they cast you aside. I need to protect my heart and it's saying I need to keep Nick away from it.

Author's Note



Thank you so much for reading Believe. This was the first book I ever published and I thought it deserved a rewrite. I've grown so much as an author and writer. These characters meant too much to me and I couldn't handle their books not being the best they could be. I fell in love with these characters and love being able to see them pop up in so many series that are still being written and published. I can't wait for the second generation to get their books.

When I published this as Adoring Addi, I was terrified to actually put my work out there for someone to read. I'm still not fond of knowing when people are reading my books because imposter syndrome is real, but I'm slowly getting used to it. Maybe one day I'll be able to tell people I'm an author without cringing when they say they're going to read one of my books :)

~Kristin

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