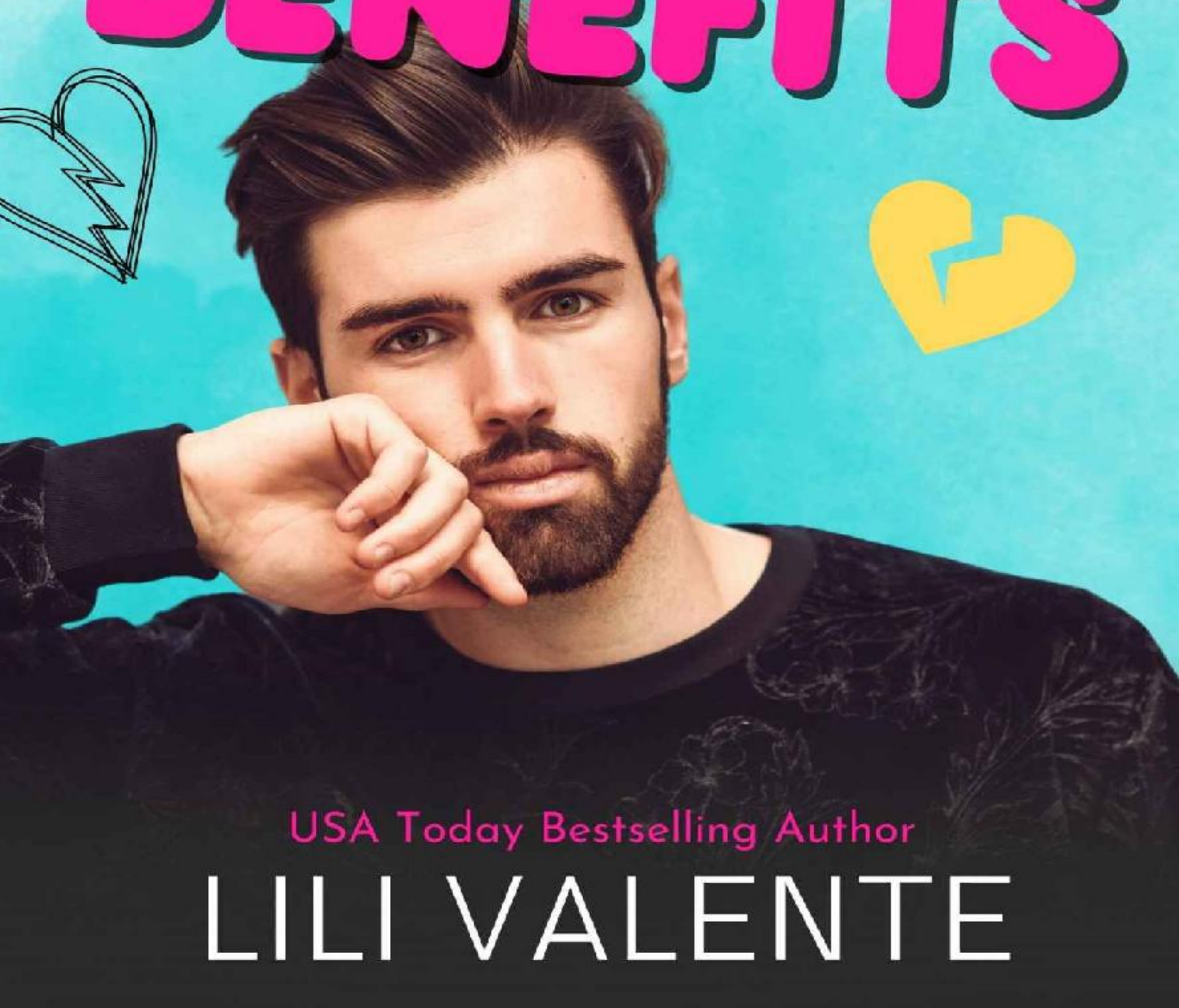


A BAD DOG NOVEL



BOSS WITHOUT BENEFITS



USA Today Bestselling Author

LILI VALENTE

Poss Without Benefits

A BAD DOG ROMANCE

THE MCGUIRE BROTHERS

BOOK ONE

LILI VALENTE

Poss Without Benefits

A Bad Dog Novel
The McGuire Brothers Series
By Lili Valente

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Contents

[About the Book](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Lili Valente](#)

About the Book

Last night, I met the funniest, *sexiest* single dad on the planet.

I also managed to get into the kind of co-ed naked trouble with him that involved a nurse, a shotgun, a feral turkey, and a pair of pliers. But all's well that ends well, and we already have plans to meet up again.

It's early days, but I'm already thinking Drew might be The One.

Then I show up to my new nanny gig and who steps out on the front porch, holding the cutest little redhead in the world?

Yep, that's right. Drew is *Andrew McGuire*, my new boss, and he's not about to date the nanny. His daughter's happiness and stability are his top priority.

Considering I just fell in love with this precious, motherless girl at first sight, I would be inclined to agree with him. If it weren't for one thing—my heart already has a Drew-shaped hole in it.

I'm pretty sure I would miss him, even if we'd never met.

But how to convince this amazing man that his heart—and his family—are safe with me? And that he should be my boss *with* benefits? Forever.

Welcome to Bad Dog where the men are incredible, the animals are ridiculous, and the happy ever afters are super

emotional and steamy! Boss Without Benefits is a Standalone Romance with Spice!

For Nina. Thanks for the nudge.

Chapter One



**A woman in search of a fresh start
where no one knows her name...**

Every small town has that *one* family. That one, marches-to-their-own-kazoo family that's been the butt of town jokes for years.

In the O'Learys' case, it's more like a century.

My great-grandmother moved to Fair Shot, Kentucky in the 1920s, presumably hoping for a "fair shot" at a new life with her American husband. But thanks to her thick Irish accent and habit of saluting magpies to ward off bad luck, she was pegged as an odd one from the start. Then she started attending the funerals of people she didn't know—another very Irish thing to do, she swore to my embarrassed great-grandfather—and quickly found herself uninvited to every social event not held at the Catholic Church.

My grandmother didn't have a shot of growing up to be anything but a spiritualist who talked to ghosts way before that was cool. After my grandfather died of a heart attack, she moved to the forest at the edge of town and reared my mother like a wild fairy.

Mom got knocked-up at seventeen by a guy who bailed, leaving Gram, Mom, and a string of deadbeat boyfriends to do their best with me. Spoiler alert: the boyfriends didn't care

about raising a toddler. As far as I could tell, they didn't care about anything but drinking beer and playing video games.

Then Mom met Bruce, my sweet stepdad who mounts dead birds for a living. And there, in the woods, they brought forth six more children who they allowed to run weird and free, no matter what anyone in town had to say about it.

The rest, as they say, is history.

The O'Learys are the punchline of every Fair Shot town joke, the first suspects when strange crimes are committed—Gram *did* steal a headstone once but took it back when she was done cleansing it of bad vibes—and the last to be offered good jobs or juicy promotions.

By the time I left, I'd been working at the local daycare for five years and was still the lowest paid worker in the center. I'd been passed up for advancement so many times I had Candace, my supervisor's, "So and So is just a better fit" lecture memorized. I showed up early and left late almost every day, leaving my heart on the playmat with those kiddos, but it didn't make a difference.

No one seemed to be able to see past the O'Leary last name or the rumors that my six siblings all have different fathers.

Which *isn't* true—I'm the only one with a different father; Bruce sired the rest of this generation's weirdos—but even if it were true, that's no reason to deny me, or my mother, career advancement. Mom's been a kickass nurse at the same urgent care clinic since my little sister Molly was a baby and still hasn't made shift supervisor.

Molly is now twenty-four and has a baby of her own.

It was at Molly's baby shower that I finally realized I couldn't stay in Fair Shot. I couldn't take being judged by my flaming red curls and last name for the rest of my life.

Which is why I'm here, in Bad Dog, Minnesota, hundreds of miles from home, about to dive headfirst into my fresh start at a lakefront bar full of drop-dead gorgeous ice fishermen.

Ice fishing! That's a cool thing you can't do in Kentucky.

I'm fascinated by the frost in their beards when they swing through the pub door, and they look pretty interested in the new girl. These men are actually *smiling* at me. Smiling, without a snarky "she's one of *those O'Leary* girls" look in their eye. One even bought me a martini and nicely backed off when I said forty years was too much of an age gap for me.

But props to grandpa for shooting his shot!

I can't remember the last time someone bought me a drink. The best I could hope for back home was to sneak into the local Eagles club after everyone else was too tipsy to notice I was there. All O'Learys were banned from the club when the owner's wife had a falling out with my grandmother over a spiritual reading gone wrong. Apparently, Gram *correctly* deduced that the woman's husband was cheating on her, the woman *incorrectly* decided he was cheating with Gram, and our family was denied beer forever more.

The Eagles was the only place in Fair Shot that served drinks. We had one bar, two restaurants, and roughly ten thousand horse stables.

That's it.

In Bad Dog, they have a super cute Victorian downtown with shops, restaurants, and coffeehouses, and a waterfront area with pubs and a restaurant called The Dirty Taco. The name sounds filthy (in more ways than one), but the fish tacos are legitimately delicious.

Good thing, since I'll be staying in the apartment above the restaurant for the next month, until I'm able to sort out a long-term living situation.

The single dad I'm nannyng for offered me the guest suite above his garage but was understanding about me wanting to put off moving in until we meet in person, and I make sure I click with his daughter. We chatted several times on the phone, of course, and he and Sarah Beth seem great, but like Gram always said—don't bless the fish until it reaches land.

She also said never bolt the door with a boiled carrot.

Both seem like good advice for a sheltered twenty-eight-year-old on her first adventure away from home. I want to make sure Mr. McGuire is as great as he seems—and not inclined to get creepy with the nanny after hours—before I move into his guest suite.

I also want to have a little fun before I have to worry about my employer spying on me on Saturday nights. I want to stay out too late and dance until my feet hurt. I want to kiss a cute Minnesota boy, hear his heroic ice fishing tales, and maybe even take him home for the night.

I've never had a one-night stand or even kissed too much on the first date, but now seems like a great time to start. I'm the cute new girl in town, the men are definitely interested, and it's been two years since Josh and I called it quits. I need to get laid nearly as much as I need this fresh start.

And I've spotted the perfect candidate for my "Start Life in Bad Dog with a Bang" mission...

The man at the opposite end of the bar is gorgeous—dark brown hair that's shaggy in a cute way, sexy beard, and broad shoulders that fill the hell out of a flannel. Not to mention those moody brown eyes a movie star would kill for.

He's also alone, playing solitaire with real cards, not on his phone, and has peeked my way more than once. But so far, he hasn't made a move toward my side of the bar by the pinball machine with the talking trout on top.

If my sister, Peach, were here, she would insist I stay where I am and summon Mr. Sexy Flannel with my vibes. Peach is a big believer in vibes and making boys come to her. But the light is dim in Sawyer's Lakeside Bar and Bistro and this move is about taking my destiny into my own hands. No more waiting for other people to give me a shot or forget that my last name is O'Leary.

I grab my still half-full martini, slide off my stool, and amble over to Sexy's position near the jukebox, figuring I'll whip up a "want to flirt?" line on the fly. I've had enough vodka to be feeling loose and brave, but not enough to say

something stupid. If he turns out to be married, I'll be able to extricate myself with minimal damage or embarrassment.

I'm about to ask him if he knows Crazy Eights, my favorite card game as a kid, when he glances over and says, "Go Fish? The one with the most points buys the next round. The loser shares his or her most embarrassing story?"

His voice is deep, rumbly. Absolutely *perfect*.

It's also a tad familiar, but I chock that up to his male narrator vibes—I listen to a lot of audiobooks—and slide onto the stool next to his with a grin.

"That sounds like a good time." I cock my head as I reach for the deck. "But I'll warn you, I'm God Tier at Go Fish. You don't stand much of a chance, new friend."

"Then loser buys drinks *and* has to tell their most embarrassing story. I don't want you to think I'm just after a free drink."

I shuffle like the card shark I am. "You're not? Then what are you after, Mr..."

"Drew," he says, extending a hand. I clasp it tight, fighting a girlish sigh as his warm palm swallows mine whole.

I'm a petite woman, but not *that* petite. He's simply enormous and even more handsome up close. He also smells like warm linen fresh out of the dryer with a top note of cedar and spice. I'm pretty sure I would be openly drooling if I didn't have a martini glass to hide behind.

"I'm looking to blow off a little steam and enjoy a pretty woman's company," he continues. "Been a rough couple of weeks at work. You?"

"Friends call me Tatum, and I'm new here," I say resuming my shuffling. "So, I'm looking for the skinny on all the best places to get breakfast and a detailed list of people to avoid if I want to stay sane in this particular small town."

He laughs, his eyes crinkling delightfully at the edges.

He's a little older than I am, but not too much older, and I've always had a thing for slightly older guys. They're less

likely to get mad at you for wanting to go to bed early or not wanting to have sex with cartoons blasting in the background. I rode Josh to the sound of Bart Simpson fighting with Homer so many times that The Simpsons memes give me flashbacks.

I'm looking for something more grown-up this time around...like a man with clever eyes that twinkle as he says, "Sounds like you have experience with small towns."

"Grew up in one," I say. "Have the invisible scars to prove it."

He winces. "Hope they're not too deep."

"Nah," I say with a smile, "but deep enough to be excited about a fresh start. So, who's the town gossip? She's the one I'll really want to steer clear of. What she doesn't know, she can't spread around the Shop 'n Save."

"Too late." The bartender with the full, handlebar moustache sets a fresh bowl of peanuts in front of us. "You sat down by the son of the biggest gossip around these parts."

"That's not true," Drew says with a charming roll of those warm brown eyes. "My mom isn't a gossip. She just likes to talk. A lot. About everything."

"Uh-huh," the bartender says, sounding unconvinced. He shoots me a wink as he adds, "Be careful with this one. Drew's one of our most eligible bachelors and related to half the town. Do him wrong and you'll have your share of enemies. Do him right and you're also in trouble. But if I were you, I'd rather fight a flock of pissed-off single ladies than this guy's entire clan."

"Clan," I repeat, glancing warily Drew's way. "You come from a big family, too? I'm the oldest of seven."

"Second oldest of eight with triple the number of cousins." He laughs again and it's instantly one of my favorite sounds ever. It's just so cozy and rumbly, like an oversized cat purring just for me. "But my clan is harmless, I promise. As long as you're not afraid of big Irish families who think ghosts are real and never met a holiday they couldn't drink under the table."

I beam at him. “That sounds familiar. And lovely, actually. Like the good parts of home.”

His gaze warms, and I find myself falling even further under his spell. “Then you’ll do just fine around here, Miss Tatum. And if you’re as good at playing cards as you are at shuffling them, I might have a poker game for you. My little sister, Binx, has a running game on Sunday nights.”

“Binx?” I grin as I deal the cards for Go Fish. “That’s a fun name.”

“Her given name is Beatrice, but she renamed herself when she was four or five. She refused to put on pants until everyone in the family started calling her Binx. The protest lasted about two hours before Mom gave in to keep her from running outside to play in the yard half naked.”

I laugh. “She sounds like my kind of people.”

“Oh yeah?” He leans closer, dropping his voice as he asks, “You have a wild side?”

“Maybe,” I say, fanning out the cards in my hand. “And maybe if you stick around long enough to let me trounce you at Go Fish and Trout pinball, you’ll get to see it.”

He bites his bottom lip, and my panties melt clean off. They’re already sliding down the inside of my black jeans to pool in a puddle on the floor when he says, “I’ll stick around as long as you’ll put up with me.”

Stifling the insane urge to tell him that I’ll take Forever, please, and thank you, I drop my voice to a husky whisper and say, “Sounds good. Sounds even better if you have any threes.”

“Go fish,” he whispers back, somehow managing to make those two, kid-friendly words sound completely filthy.

By the time I trounce him three times at Go Fish, and we take our fresh drinks back to the pinball machine, I’m buzzing all over. I haven’t been this attracted to a man in years.

Unfortunately, I also haven’t asked a man back to my place in...ever.

I have no clue how to close a seduction deal, but before I can stress too much about it, Drew's hands are on my hips, positioning me at the optimal angle to master the game. He then proceeds to lean around me, practically cradling me against him as his hands cover mine on the buttons.

We battle the whirlpools and evil octopuses trying to thwart our ball's progress for nearly half an hour. As we play as a team, my bottom keeps brushing against the front of his jeans, his hands flit from my waist to my fingers and back again, and his breath is warm on my neck as he murmurs tips and encouragement.

By the time we're down to our last quarter, I'm ready to beg him to bend me over the pinball machine and take me from behind like the horny little Trout pinball player I am.

I've never said anything that crass, but I'm not in my right mind. I'm drunk on hormones and buzzed on martinis and determined not to go home alone tonight.

So, when Drew asks if I'd like to get another roll of quarters and continue our quest to get the ball in the secret trout fishing hole, I shake my head and say, "No, I think I'm ready to head home." Disappointment flashes in his eyes, giving me the courage to add, "But I have beer in the fridge and three different kinds of pretzels, if you'd like to come watch a movie or something."

His hands drop to my hips, giving them a squeeze that makes my thighs tingle. "I'd love to come watch a movie and explore your wide variety of pretzels. I have a thing for pretzels...and sexy redheads."

Now, it's my turn to bite my lip, and silently celebrate as his focus shifts to my mouth, hunger sparking in his eyes. "Then let's get going." I nod to my right. "I'm just down the street, above the taco restaurant."

He winces. "I'm sorry. I feel the need to apologize to everyone who's new in town for that name. The owner's the sweetest old lady, but her English isn't very good. She has no idea that The Dirty Taco sounds scandalous."

We start toward the door, waving at the bartender as we go. “No need to apologize. With a town name like Bad Dog, I think people would be understanding about weird names. How did it get called that anyway?”

We step out into the brisk winter wind. He instantly wraps one side of his big coat around me, sheltering me from the cold and giving me the perfect excuse to snuggle closer. “That’s a long story. One better told over pretzels. You have any of the kind filled with peanut butter?”

“I have peanut butter filled, almond butter filled, and the skinny stick kind with lots of salt that are perfect for dipping in hummus.”

He groans low in his throat, and I instantly decide I need to hear him make that sound again. While he’s inside me.

I don’t know when my spicy side got so supercharged, but I’m too weak to fight it. I’m helpless against this man’s sex vibe, a fact I prove when we get back to my place by shutting the apartment door behind us and launching myself into his arms.

Chapter Two



ANDREW MCGUIRE

**A man about to reconnect
with his long-dormant wild side...**

Her apartment door snicks shut behind us and suddenly Tatum is in my arms with her lips on mine.

I've been fascinated by those plush lips since the moment she flashed her crooked smile my way from across the bar. I also indulged a few fantasies of what it would be like to kiss her while we were playing Trout pinball, but every fantasy pales in comparison to the real thing.

This woman is...fire.

She tastes like salt from her dirty martini, wood smoke, and something warm and comforting I can't quite name. I only know that as I lift her up and her legs go around my waist that the warm and comforting part goes straight to my heart while everything else about this firecracker of a woman surges straight at my dick. The Herculean control I exerted to keep from stabbing her in the back with my erection while we played pinball vanishes.

I'm instantly hard and aching behind the fly of my jeans, groaning into her mouth as I find my way to the living room in the dark. We tumble onto the couch, shedding coats and shoes and then coming back together for an even hotter, deeper kiss.

"I won the sexy fisherman lottery," she says, her fingernails digging into my shoulders through my flannel.

I smile against her lips. “I’m not a fisherman, but thanks. I’m feeling pretty lucky myself.” I glide my tongue against hers as I squeeze her hip again through her jeans. “I’m obsessed with this part of you,” I say, squeezing again.

“My birthing hips?” she murmurs into my mouth with a husky laugh. “Thanks. My mama always said they’d bring all the boys to the yard. Didn’t happen in high school or community college, but I figured the magic would kick in sooner or later. My mama is always right.”

“So is mine,” I say, thinking of how many times my mother told me not to marry Nicky, even though she was pregnant, and I’d been raised to take responsibility for my actions. But she seemed to know from the get-go that Nicky would leave me high and dry and being married would only make things harder, not easier. I sigh. “It’s the fucking worst.”

Her giggle becomes a swiftly drawn breath as I push her sweater up around her ribs. “It really is. But let’s not talk about our moms, shall we? Let’s talk about other things.”

“Like how much I also enjoy your ass?” I reach around to grip her perfectly round, firm backside and shift lower, bringing my lips to the marble white skin on her stomach. “Or how soft this part is right here?” I kiss the skin right above her belly button, loving the way her breath shudders out and her hips lift closer to my chest, silently asking for more.

“I think your lips are magic,” she says. “Or possibly conducting some kind of electrical current. Have you recently been struck by lightning?”

I smile and kiss her again, swirling my tongue into her navel as I continue to squeeze her delectable ass, now with both hands. “I don’t know. I don’t remember a lightning strike but I’m pretty distracted right now.”

“Distracted by me?” she asks, a hint of hope in the words that makes me think she isn’t always the confident sex goddess she’s shown me tonight.

I look up, catching her gaze in the dim light streaming into the window from the streetlamp outside. “Distracted and

fascinated and maybe a little addicted. Already. And I haven't even tasted you yet."

"You've tasted..." She trails off as she gets my meaning. "Oh. Well, yes, that's true. You *haven't* tasted me yet. And you probably should, just so we can evaluate how serious this addiction is. You might need professional help of some kind."

"Like an intervention?" I ask, popping the button at the top of her jeans and slowly dragging down the zipper. The sound of it is enough to make my pulsing dick even thicker.

"No. No way am I going to try to stop you. I'm not a dream killer." She holds my gaze with softly parted lips that make me think even more filthy thoughts. Thoughts about how much I want to do everything a man can do to that mouth, including feeding it the best breakfast of its life tomorrow morning.

I need all night with this woman, and I've never been so glad Binx wanted a sleepover with her favorite niece as I am right now.

Sarah Beth is my world, but even the most devoted father needs a night like this now and then. A night to be the man he was before he gave up closing down the bars to be home in time to read stories and give good night kisses.

Nights when he doesn't need to watch his language or keep conversation PG.

"I could see that right off the bat," I murmur as I drag her jeans slowly down her thighs. "You're not a dream killer. You're sexy as fuck and need a man who will treat your pussy right."

"Thank you," she breathes. "I really do. It's been way too long."

"Which is bullshit," I say, tossing her jeans to the floor and teasing my fingertips along the waistband of her panties. "You clearly deserve the best as often as you want it."

Her eyes sparkle into mine as I slowly curl my fingers around the strings on either side of her bikini panties. "Screw the best, I'd rather have you."

I laugh—I can't help it, this woman is funny, even when she's teasing me—and promise, "You're going to regret that." I notice a small lump beneath the thin fabric of her panties and arch a delighted brow. "Is that a piercing I see down there, Miss Tatum?"

She nods. "I told you I had a wild side. Hope it's not *too* wild..."

"As long as you don't mind that I have one, too," I say, intensely aware of the barbell piercing through the head of my cock as it presses against the fly of my jeans. I got it near the end of my wild phase but haven't regretted it for a second. It heightens every sensation for me, and I've never had any complaints from the ladies, either.

She moans. "Hell, yes. I've always wanted to know what that would feel like."

"It's going to feel amazing," I promise. "But first, I'm going to have to keep you on the edge for an hour or two. Can't let you orgasm until you confirm that I'm the best you've ever had, right?"

She bites her bottom lip. "Wow, that's evil. And wonderful. Yes, please, Drew. Make me beg. Make me beg hard."

"Your wish is my command, sweetheart."

With a wicked grin, I prove I'm a man of my word.

Tatum

Drew is *so bad*.
And so *good*.

And fifteen minutes later, I'm deeply regretting agreeing to erotic torture because he's a master at it.

"Please, you're the best," I pant as he swirls his tongue around my clit and the ring-and-ball piercing above it just hard

enough to make me writhe like a woman possessed. “You’re the best. The very best. No other man can compare.”

“That’s good,” he says, dipping his finger inside me, but not far enough to make me come, just enough to make me squirm. “But still not good enough. Make me believe you, Tatum. Make me believe you can’t live without coming on my mouth.”

“Please.” Whimpering sounds emerge from low in my throat as he massages the sides of my clit with his thumbs while he flicks my piercing with his tongue, taking me closer, closer, but still not close enough. “I feel like I’m dying. Or like I want to die but can’t. I don’t even know what I’m saying anymore. All I know is I need more, Drew.”

“And I need more begging,” he murmurs, flicking his tongue again.

“Fine,” I cry out, my head tossing from side to side on the couch cushions as words pour out of my mouth. “You are the King of my Clitoris. And the Duke of my Desire. I worship at the altar of your tongue, and other really nice things I can’t think of right now because words are hard and all I can think about is how much I want to grab your hair and pull you so tight against me, you can’t breathe. So please. Please!”

“I don’t need to breathe, I just need you to come,” he says, pressing his mouth hard against me for the first time. He kisses my pussy almost the same way he kissed my mouth, deep and intense and passionate as hell, and I explode into stardust.

I come so hard and fast it literally feels like my body’s coming apart at the cellular level. I lose all control and when I finally regain enough clarity to become aware of myself again, I’m shocked to find my hands fisted in his hair as I grind against him like a greedy little beast who hasn’t just had the best O of her life.

I release him with a rush of breath. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to suffocate you.”

“Suffocate me,” he says with a groan that vibrates my clit and the ring just above it, threatening to send me off the cliff

again. “I want to drown in the taste of you. You’re so sexy, Tatum. So sweet and sexy and fuck...I’m dying to be inside you.”

“Yes, yes, that,” I pant, pulling at his shoulders, urging him up my body.

“Condom,” he says, reaching back to fumble in his jeans. He grabs his wallet and the condom inside, but instead of quickly rolling it on, he pauses above me, slowly unwrapping the protection as his gaze sweeps up and down my bare body.

But for the first time with a new lover, I have no urge to cover myself.

I don’t mind being completely exposed to Drew.

In fact, I rather love it.

Maybe it’s the orgasm sparkles still dancing before my eyes or the fact that he’s looking at me like I’m the most glorious thing he’s ever seen, but I feel so bold I part my thighs even more, showing him how wet I am.

He curses beneath his breath before bringing the condom to the tip of his lovely erection. It truly is lovely, thick and long, and the piercing through the top is the hottest, most savagely sexy thing I’ve ever seen.

“Don’t worry, it won’t tear the condom,” he says, clearly noticing the direction of my gaze as he rolls it on.

“I’m not worried,” I say. “I trust you.”

His gaze softens a little, even as the heat burning there intensifies. “I’m so glad. You *can* trust me, Tatum. I have nothing but the best intentions, I promise.”

“And you can’t wait to get my number and see me again,” I say, the words out before I can warn myself to play it cool.

“As soon as you’ll let me,” he says, proving I shouldn’t have worried. “I can already tell it’s going to be really hard to get enough of you.”

Before I can tell him how happy I am to hear that, he’s lengthened himself on top of me and his cock is pushing into

where I'm desperate to feel him, and it is perfect.

"So perfect," I breathe, wrapping my legs around his waist, drawing him even deeper, relishing the feel of that wicked ring rubbing against all the delicate places inside me.

He curses and threads his hand into my hair, making a fist as he kisses me hard. "Beautiful," he murmurs against my lips as we start to move, finding our rhythm like we've done this a hundred times before. "Being with you is...so beautiful, Tatum."

It's not the kind of thing men usually say, at least not in my experience. I've only had a few lovers, so I'm no expert, but guys usually say that *I'm* beautiful or that I feel good. Not that being with me is beautiful, that what we're sharing together, creating together, is the thing he's most struck by.

It makes my heart melt, too, right along with the rest of me, and I can't resist whispering, "You're the sweetest bad boy with a cock piercing I've ever met."

"And you are adorable and so sexy, I'm going to come way too soon," he says, moving faster, harder. "I'm sorry. I'll last longer next time. It's just been a long time and you're incredible."

"Never apologize for telling me I'm incredible," I say, bucking into his thrusts, letting him take me to the edge all over again. "And we have all night."

"All night," he says, squeezing my hip as he shifts his angle, hitting my G-spot with his piercing and setting the world ablaze.

I come crying out things way naughtier than The Dirty Taco's name and Drew follows me a few seconds later, his cock pulsing inside me. The ball on the end of his piercing draws out my orgasm until I'm boneless with pleasure.

I'm so starry eyed, I don't realize there's a problem until he curses.

"What's wrong?" I ask, still a little breathless.

“I’m so sorry, Tatum, but it did break. The condom. I’ve never had that happen before,” he says, his voice stricken as he reaches between us.

I smooth my hands down his back, instinctively wanting to comfort him. “It’s okay. I’m on the pill and I never miss one. And like you said, it’s been a long time for me, too. I was tested after I broke up with my boyfriend a couple years ago. I found out he’d been cheating, and I was worried, but I’m fine.”

“Same,” he says, relaxing a little. “I was tested after I found out my ex-wife had been with other people. Thankfully, I was negative for everything, too.”

I cup his face. “I’m sorry that happened to you. Cheaters suck.”

He flashes a brief smile but seems distracted by whatever’s going on with the condom. “They do. And right back at you. That guy must have been one dumb asswipe.”

Touched, I sigh. “Thanks. You’re very sweet. But now you have to roll off me. I should pee so I don’t get a UTI.”

“I would,” he says, his troubled expression deepening, “but I can’t.”

I blink. “What?”

“I um, can’t,” he says, tugging lightly on my piercing, sending a wave of dread rolling through me like a riptide.

Chapter Three



Tatum's eyes go so wide that I'm reminded of the spooky stuffed animals on Sarah Beth's bed, the ones with the enormous glitter eyes that I plan to hide (and eventually get rid of) if she doesn't notice they're gone.

I consider myself a reasonable man, but those things give me the creeps.

But then Tatum squeaks, "What do you mean you *can't*?" in a horrified voice and my attention shifts fully back to the disaster at hand.

"I mean, it seems a little...stuck," I say, reaching between us again. "But don't worry, I'm sure I can..."

"You're sure you can what?" She yips. "No, don't pull that. That's definitely connected to my body."

"Sorry," I say. "I was just trying to untangle mine from yours." I pull back a little farther, glancing down into the shadows. "Maybe if we turn on more lights?"

Tatum lets out a nervous laugh. "Right. Smart. Lights. Duh, Tatum. Seeing things is easier with the lights on. So... how do we manage that? Considering we're currently cojoined twins?"

I smile, grateful she's keeping a sense of humor about this. "Wrap your legs and arms around me. I'll carry you over to the light switch and we'll take it from there."

"Great." She locks her limbs around me tight enough to make me grunt.

“Good, but maybe not so tight. I don’t want to pass out on the way and drop you.”

“Sorry.” She laughs again but loosens her grip. “I’m nervous. I usually try to look on the bright side, but right now my head is full of worst-case scenarios.”

“Like we’re stuck together for life and have to take turns going to each other’s jobs with a big blanket wrapped around our lower halves?” I ask as I rise from the couch with Tatum wrapped around me.

She exhales a wheezing breath. “Oh my God, no. I work in childcare. If I never have to tell a kid that my privates got stuck to another grown-up’s privates, I’ll consider myself a lucky woman. I was thinking a weird trip to the ER. Or getting caught by my landlord on the way to the ER. Or having to tell my future husband why I have a weird scar above my clitoris from where my piercing was ripped out in a tragic boinking incident.”

Ignoring the flash of irrational jealousy inspired by talk of her “future husband,” I assure her, “Don’t worry. If we have to seek outside assistance, I have a place we can go. They’ll keep it private and discreet.”

“Why isn’t that comforting?” she asks as I flip on the light and glance around the small main room of her apartment. “Try the kitchen table. You can maybe sit me on it, and we can... examine things from there?” She sighs before adding, “So much for wowing you so deeply with my grace and sex vibe that you can’t wait for that second date. There’s nothing sexy about crotch piercing surgery.”

“Sure, there is,” I say as I carry her over to the table. “Traumatic experiences are bonding. And we’re proving we can handle stress and problem-solving together. If that’s not proof that we should go on another date, I don’t know what is.”

She looks up at me, the sweetest smile on her face. “Really? You mean it?”

“I mean it,” I assure her, moving a chair out of the way and setting her gently on the table. “I like you even more than I did before our unfortunate incident.”

She wrinkles her nose. “Promise me you’ll still feel that way once you’ve seen how badly I need a pedicure? I just haven’t had time, what with getting ready to move and all. My polish is all chipped.”

I arch a dubious brow. “Do other guys really care about stuff like that?”

“Some do,” she says, with a shrug. “My ex said it looked tacky.”

I huff. “We’ve already established he’s an idiot. And I have a kid. Once you’ve changed an exploded diaper and cleaned vomit out of your undershirt, nothing about a normal human body can gross you out.”

She nods, not seeming bothered by the news that I have a little one at home. “Good point. Like I said, I work with kids. I know those horrors well.”

“So, you know I’m right. Besides, you wouldn’t be grossed out if my manscaping needed a touch up or I forgot to wear deodorant one day, right?”

“No way.” A bit of the mischief returns to her eyes. “I think I’d like you furry and stinky, actually. We could role play as Tarzan and his proper English lady. You can grunt a lot and I’ll try to teach you to eat with a spoon. I’ll wear a corset you can rip off me and everything.”

I grin. “I’m holding you to that. Though right now I’m hoping ripping is nowhere in our near future.”

She sobers quickly. “Right. Please be careful. I’m attached to my clitoris. More than literally. She’s more than my favorite body part. She’s a friend I can count on when times are tough. She’s always there to listen and deliver good feelings, all while asking nothing in return. She’s just a gem, you know?”

Pretty sure I’m falling in love with this woman, simply based on that single comment alone, I say, “I get it. She’s amazing and will be handled with care.”

Tatum nods. “Okay.” She pulls in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “Then let’s do it. You go first, and if the situation needs another set of eyes, I’ll be ready. Though to be honest, I’m really hoping I don’t have to look because I think seeing it is going to freak me out.”

“Noted,” I lean in, pressing a soft kiss to her cheek and promising, “We’ll get through this. We just need to stay calm and take it one step at a time.” Bracing myself, I pull back to get a better look at the situation.

My cock piercing is indeed caught in her piercing, as expected, but it’s more complicated than I anticipated. When I try to unhook the ball at the end of my piercing from between her ring and ball piercing, I can’t get the balls to part from their respective clasps. It’s like they’ve been fused together by the heat between us.

Which would be kind of hot, I guess, if we weren’t stuck together and likely on our way to seek professional medical assistance.

I keep working at it, sensing her growing anxiety. Though to her credit, she stays pretty quiet aside from the occasional, “You’ve got this. You’re doing a great job. I can tell.”

But finally, there’s no denying the reality of the situation.

I glance up, catching her gaze with a sigh.

“No luck?” she asks.

“No luck,” I say. “Unless you have needle nosed pliers, I don’t think we’re going to get very far on our own. And I’m honestly a little hesitant to start messing around in such a sensitive area with tools. I can fix a broken garbage disposal and stuff like that, but I’m a lawyer, not a handyman.”

“You’re a lawyer?” she asks, sounding shocked. “But you don’t seem anything like a lawyer. You’re not snotty or stuck up at all.”

I smile. “Well, thanks. I’m a real estate lawyer so maybe that helps. It’s not very glamorous.”

“I think it’s glamorous. You did all that schooling and graduated and passed the bar and that’s badass. I barely made it through two years of community college. I’m reasonably intelligent, but I’ve never been great at school.”

“I think you’re very sharp,” I say honestly. “Very sharp and very funny, which is great because you’re going to need your sense of humor for what comes next.”

Her eyes go big again. “Oh no. We’re going to the ER after all.”

“No, we’re going to a private medical office,” I say. “Or we may luck out, and I’ll be able to convince the doctor to come here since driving in our current condition wouldn’t be easy.”

She exhales, her shoulders sinking away from her ears. “Oh wow, that would be so great. Tell her I’ll bring her cookies every week for the next year if she’ll do the house call. And my cookies are really top notch. I’ve had people offer to commit crimes for my cookies.”

“I’m sure your cookies are as fabulous as the rest of you, but the doctor isn’t a woman. He’s a man and...my brother.” I laugh, the horror on her face too intense not to be funny. “It’s okay. He’s a great guy.”

“But he’s your brother,” she wheezes. “If we do start dating, which I hope we will because I like you, then I’d run into him in social settings. And when I do, I will always think of this night and how he’s seen my private parts in the weirdest context possible.”

“He’s a gynecologist,” I say. “I’m sure he’s been in weirder contexts. You should hear some of the stories—”

“No!” She screeches, making it clear I’ve said the wrong thing. “I don’t want to hear the stories, and I really don’t want to become one of them. Let’s just go to the ER. It’ll suck and might require reliance on my old gymnast training to get in the car, but it’ll be worth it in the end.”

“Then the story will be all over town,” I say, hating that it’s true, but it is. “Steve the bartender was wrong. My mom

isn't the biggest gossip in town, the brother and sister who run the billing department at the medical center are. We breeze in there joined at the you know what, and by tomorrow morning, all of Bad Dog will know we had to be surgically separated."

"But what about HIPAA? They can't gossip about a medical procedure!"

"They shouldn't, no, but that's never stopped them before," I say. "And I try to avoid suing people who are distant relations. Third cousins, but still..."

Her forehead furrows. "So, we're screwed? There's no hope? I'm going to be known as the loose hussy with the clit ring no matter what?"

"You're not a loose—"

"Because I don't know if I can handle that, Drew," she says, her voice rising. "I never did anything this embarrassing in my old hometown, but people gossiped about me nonstop anyway. My family was the butt of every joke around there, for generations. We're the weirdos people feel free to make fun of even though it sucks and negatively impacts the lives of odd, but otherwise perfectly great people. I came here for a fresh start, a chance to be known for who I am apart from all that." Her face begins to crumble and her voice to waiver. "But if this happens, then it's over. I might as well pack up and go home because there won't be a fresh start. There will only be shame and humiliation and probably soreness because it's starting to hurt a little already and will probably hurt even more by the time we get all the way to the hospital."

"Don't cry, sweetheart," I say, cupping her face in my hands and kissing her forehead. "Don't cry and don't you dare think about packing up and going home after you just promised me a second date."

She sniffs. "I'm sorry, I just wanted things to be better. More normal. And now it's all ruined because we had to get spicy with our piercings. Why didn't we get pierced in a nice, normal place like the ear or the nose or through the loose skin on our necks?"

“Well, I can’t speak for you, but I’m a lawyer and visible piercings are frowned upon in the office and courtroom. Also, nose rings seem unsanitary, and that neck skin thing sounds disturbing.”

“It is,” she says, still sniffing. “It’s just what popped into my head because I’m sad.”

Fuck. I have to fix this.

I can’t let our wonderful night end this way, not when I’m already feeling things for this woman I haven’t felt in ages. She doesn’t want me to call my brother, which I understand, but maybe there’s someone else? Someone—

“Wren!” I blurt out, earning a strange look from Tatum. “Sorry. I was just thinking about who else we could call, and it made me think of Wren, my brother’s head nurse at his practice. She can be a little shy with new people, but not when she’s in nurse mode. I could reach out, see if she’ll help us? I know she’ll keep this quiet. She’s not the type to gossip or even think about violating her HIPAA oath.”

Tatum’s glassy eyes fill with hope. “Yes, please. Let’s try her. And the cookie offer still stands from me. Any flavor she likes.”

Five minutes later, we’ve navigated our way back to the couch—and my cell phone—and have a sleepy-sounding Wren on the line. But even though we’ve clearly woken her up and it’s nearly midnight, she promises to be right over.

“Oh, thank God. And praise Wren. I love her already.” Tatum sags with relief, her forehead touching mine.

Me seated, with her straddling my hips, turned out to be the least painful position for both of us.

We’re still in it when Wren walks in twenty minutes later, wearing bright pink bunny print pajamas and carrying a shotgun.

Chapter Four



Wren walks in and I'm instantly torn between thinking the tiny woman with the long black hair and big green eyes is the cutest thing I've ever seen and being terrified that she's going to shoot me for banging her secret crush.

"You aren't going to use that to separate us, are you?" I ask, really hoping my "secret crush" theory is wrong.

If it's not, there's not much I can do to make an apology for banging her man seem sincere while I'm still hooked to him in such an intimate fashion.

"What?" She blinks, pushing her glasses up her nose. She follows my no-doubt horrified look to the shotgun and lets out a nervous laugh. "Oh, no, of course not. I'm sorry. I just didn't want to leave it in the car. There have been break-ins around the lakefront lately." She sets it in the corner behind the door and shrugs off her backpack. "And I can't afford to have it stolen. I'll need it to get back into the house later."

"That turkey still bothering you? Even at night?" Drew asks before I can form a coherent theory as to why she might need a gun to get home.

Safe to say, turkey troubles would not have been one of my guesses.

Wren sighs, shrugging off her coat and hanging it on the coat tree. "Yes, darn it. It's out for my blood. Pecks at me every time I leave the house without a gun to fire into the sky to scare it off. And animal control is no help since I won't let

them shoot the pesky thing.” She reaches down, grabbing the backpack from the floor. “Tim thinks it’s hysterical, laughs his stupid butt off every time I call for advice. He thinks the turkey’s in love with me, but if that’s love, it’s not the good kind.”

“You’re in a toxic relationship with a turkey,” I observe as she slowly approaches the couch.

She laughs again, more relaxed this time. “I am. And there aren’t many self-help books about that, I’ll tell ya.” She casts a pointed glance at our blanket-covered lower halves. “Not much online about separating people with conjoined private piercings, either so I just brought a little of everything. I grabbed my first aid kit, a small set of surgical implements, and a few things from my toolbox in the garage. I figured between all of that, we should be able to get things sorted out for you guys.”

“Thank you,” I say with a gulp. “But if we could make surgical tools the last resort, I’d appreciate it. I’m not good with blood. I think it’s because my little brother, Maximus, used to get nose bleeds all the time as a kid and I had to help clean it up. But it could just be genetic. My grandmother also hates blood. My mom is okay with it, obviously, since she’s a nurse. Thank you for your service, by the way. Nurses don’t get enough credit. You’re freaking warrior heroes.” I gulp again. “Sorry, I’m babbling. I’m nervous. I’ve never been in a situation like this before with a total stranger.”

“Well, we can fix that part,” she says, with a kind smile. “I’m Wren Marie Baxter. I grew up in Bad Dog with my mama and little sister, went to college in St. Paul, then came right back to my hometown because I love it here. I’m a nurse for Drew’s brother, Barrett, at his OB-GYN office. In my spare time, I enjoy making jewelry, trying new recipes, and plotting ways to scare off the turkey terrorist living in the woods across from my house. Better?”

I grin. “So much better.”

She sets her tools on the coffee table. “Good. And you can tell me all about you over coffee and cookies tomorrow. I’m

partial to marshmallow and chocolate chip, but open to just about anything. Now, let's get a look at what we're dealing with here before I go scrub up in the kitchen."

"Ready?" Drew asks, shooting me a meaningful look.

Pulling in a breath, I nod. "Let's do it. But I'm going to close my eyes because—embarrassment."

Drew pulls back the small throw blanket we wrapped around our lower halves, and I squeeze my eyes shut. I sense Wren moving closer and hear her soft, "huh, okay then," but almost no time passes before the blanket is back in place and Wren's at the sink, running water.

"Think you can bust us loose?" Drew asks, making me gulp, yet again.

"Or gently wiggle us loose?" I counter. "No busting or anything violent sounding required?"

"Right," he says, adding in a whisper, "Sorry."

"I don't like to count my chickens before they're hatched, but I think this will be pretty easy," Wren says, soaping her hands up to the wrist. "And I don't think we'll need anything but my jewelry pliers."

I cringe at the mention of pliers, but Wren seems to read the worry on my face and adds in a comforting voice, "And I told you, jewelry making is basically my only hobby. I'm obsessed with it and pretty handy with a pair of pliers if I do say so myself."

"She makes amazing earrings," Drew says. "Barrett bought sets for all the women in our family last year for Christmas. They were everyone's favorite present."

"And next year, I'll tell Barrett to buy jewelry for the boys, too," Wren says, a teasing note in her voice that makes me like her even more. "I already have a few ideas on something unique I can make for you, Andrew."

"I'm never going to live this down, am I?" he asks as Wren returns to the coffee table, pulls out her jewelry pliers, and gives them a quick swab with an alcohol pad.

“Oh, sure you will,” she says, laughter in her voice. “Because I am *never* going to tease you about it again. I just couldn’t help myself, just this once.”

“You’re a goddess among women,” I say. “And I’m really sorry we didn’t have a chance to become better friends before you had to see my lady parts.”

She laughs as she pulls on a pair of surgical gloves. “Oh, sweetie, don’t worry. I’m a nurse. I’ve seen it all and there’s nothing to be embarrassed about. We’re all just people getting by as best we can.”

I make a considering noise and Drew says, “You’re a wise woman, Wren, and I appreciate you.”

“Of course, that’s what friends are for. And honestly, I’m glad to see you in this kind of pickle after all the years you’ve spent alone,” Wren says. Before I can properly digest this juicy bit of information on Drew’s dating history—or lack thereof—she adds, “Now, both of you lean back a bit, close your eyes, and think of England.”

Drew and I both laugh, even as we try to hold still in our weird positions. By the time we stop, I hear a sharp snipping sound and the pressure vanishes from my nether regions.

I exhale a relieved breath. “Oh my God, is it out?”

“It’s out.” Wren says, holding my now broken ring up, still clasped in the pliers. “Yours was the easiest to get free, so I took it out and left Drew’s in. I hope that’s okay. I’m assuming you can buy another one to replace it?”

“I’m going to leave it out,” I say. “For now. And maybe forever. It was a fun, impulsive thing I did with my crazy younger sister, mostly to shock our mother. But in light of the evening’s events, it seems better to go ring free for a while.”

Wren smiles. “I have to agree. No sense letting jewelry get in the way of a good time.” She pats Drew on the shoulder. “Okay, you two are good. Just give me a second to grab my things and I’ll hit the trail.”

“Wait,” Drew says. “Just turn around for a second and let us get dressed. Then I can pay you for your trouble.”

Wren snorts as she turns her back to us, loading up her bag. “Oh, hush. I don’t want your money. You’d do the same for me if I had a property law problem that could only be solved by a midnight house call while I had my pants off.”

“I would,” Drew agrees with a laugh, reaching for his boxer briefs and my panties on the other side of the couch. “But I want to do something to show my thanks. I mean, Tatum’s making cookies. I have to do something.”

“I am,” I agree. “I’ll go shopping for ingredients first thing tomorrow. It’s my last day before I start my new job so the timing’s perfect.” I glance at Drew as we slide out from under the throw blanket and quickly pull on our underwear while Wren’s back is turned. “You could help if you want,” I whisper.

“I would love to,” he whispers back, “but I’m back on dad duty at eight a.m. Rain check?”

“Of course,” I murmur. “Gotta make Sunday pancakes for your little...boy? Girl?”

“Girl,” he says, the instant softening of his voice making me positive he’s an amazing father.

“Cool,” I say. I’m about to ask how old she is when Wren starts toward the door, calling, “See you two later.”

“Wait,” Drew says, hopping on one leg as he struggles into his jeans and starts after her. I take the chance to pull on my jeans, too. “At least let me give you an escort home. I can watch your six while you head inside, keep you from having to defend yourself from another turkey attack.”

Wren pauses, peeking back carefully, then turning fully once she sees we’re both dressed. “Well, if you’re calling it a night anyway...”

“Totally. I have to get some sleep.” I don’t want Drew to go, but I also don’t want this poor angel of a woman to have to wield a shotgun at a deranged gobbler at one in the morning all by herself. “And you really should give Drew the chance to be your hero after you were ours. We’re so very grateful.”

“All right, then,” she says, with a shy grin as she pulls on her coat. “And maybe Kyle will be afraid of you since you’re bigger than I am and leave me alone for good.”

“Kyle?” Drew asks.

“That’s what I named the turkey,” Wren says. “Because he’s a jerk and what’s a jerkier name than Kyle?” Her eyes fly to mine as she lifts a hand. “Not that it’s a bad name, if you have a friend named Kyle or something. Not all Kyles are jerks, it’s just if you meet a jerk, there’s a good chance, he’s named Kyle. You know?”

“Oh, I do,” I say, grinning her way. “I like you. A lot. I’m going to make you a double batch of cookies. Which reminds me, let me give you my phone number so we can connect tomorrow.” I move to the kitchen, grabbing the small pen and pad I noticed by the landline phone earlier. I quickly write my number down—twice—and cross back to the door. “Here you go. One for you. And one for you.” I let my fingers linger on Drew’s for a second, willing him to text me tomorrow with my eyes.

“I’ll text you as soon as I get home,” he says in that warm, rumbly voice of his. “Let you know I got there safe.”

“You do that,” I murmur. “And let me how things went with Kyle. Tell him to quit being a dick for me.”

“I will,” Drew says, with that same flirty grin.

Our dating future hasn’t been ruined by our weird sex accident, after all! And if this goes as well as I hope it will, we now have a kick-ass “The Night we Met Story.”

I shouldn’t be thinking weeks down the road, let alone months or years, but there’s just something about Drew. I already feel so comfortable with him, like I’ve known him my whole life.

Or like, I’ve been waiting to know him...

After Wren and Drew head out, I cross back to the kitchen and scrawl on the pad, “*I think I’d miss you, even if we’d never met,*” and stick it to the refrigerator with one of the Bad Dog magnets left there by my landlord. I write down inspiring

quotes and stick them where I'll see them all the time, but this is my first time writing a quote straight from the heart.

But it feels so right.

Just looking at it makes my tummy do a happy flip...even at seven a.m. the next morning when I'm awoken by a clanky garbage truck only five hours after hitting the sheets.

It cheers me as I make cookies and put a few pictures of family and friends out around my new place. Later, after a great afternoon chatting with Wren at a local coffee shop, it makes me smile as I whip up a grilled cheese for dinner.

And then I get my third text from Drew since he left last night, a simple—*Can I take you out for dinner Wednesday night? I have a short day at work and my new childcare situation should be sorted out by then*—and my already happy heart does a touchdown dance.

I text back—*Yes! I should be off work at six. Excited to see you again*—and settle in to watch reruns of *Absolutely Fabulous*, feeling a little smug about my love life for the first time in years.

I can imagine the conversation with my sisters now—

You just moved to town and met an incredible, kind, funny, sex god of a man on your first night?

Why, yes...yes, I did. Thank you for asking.

But I should have known better.

The course of my love life has never run smooth and smug is a dangerous emotion. It's cocky, arrogant. Indulging in smugness is just asking the universe to give you the kick in the ass you so richly deserve.

It's a fact proven Monday morning when I pull into my new employer's driveway and Drew steps out of the front door, carrying a little girl with fiery red hair and his big brown eyes.

Chapter Five



At first, I think Tatum got my address from Wren and decided to surprise me with breakfast or something. And though I would usually be irritated by someone showing up unannounced when I'm trying to get Sarah Beth settled with a brand-new nanny and myself off to work, when I see Tatum's curly red head emerge from her ancient hatchback, I can't help but smile.

I'm just so happy to see her again.

She looks even better than she did at the bar, adorable in a pair of bright pink jeans and a rainbow-striped sweater under her blue peacoat. The clothes conceal most of her curves, but I know they're under there, and the combo of cute on the outside and red-hot underneath is a kink I didn't realize I possessed until she showed up on my doorstep.

"Is that my new nanny, Daddy?" Sarah Beth asks, running her fingers back and forth across the stubble on my chin, the way she does when she's feeling a little nervous.

"No, that's Tatum, a friend of mine," I say. "But she's super nice. You're going to love her."

"She has red hair like me," she says, sounding pleased.

"She does. And as we know, redheads are the best," I say as Tatum climbs the stairs to meet us on the porch, her purse and a larger duffel bag slung over her shoulder.

Whatever her surprise, it's clear she brought a lot of it.

“We really are,” she says, stopping in front of us with a nervous smile of her own. “Hey there, cutie, I’m guessing you must be Sarah Beth.”

Sarah Beth ducks her head, shy, but smiling as she whispers, “Yes.”

My slow-on-the-uptake, pre-coffee brain is still trying to figure out how Tatum knows my daughter’s name—did I mention it Saturday night and forget about it in all the excitement—when she says, “Cool. I love your name. My name is Tatum, and I brought a bunch of my favorite games for us to play today. And a craft project with tons of glitter glue because glitter is my favorite color.”

Sarah Beth giggles while I try to pick my jaw up off the floor. “Glitter isn’t a color,” she says.

“Oh yeah?” Tatum shoots back, still grinning. “I think it can be if we want it to be. We’re going to make our own rules around here. And the first rule is that you should always eat breakfast with a crown.” She reaches into her bag and pulls out a child-sized crown with big, pink jewels set in the plastic. She holds it up, asking, “I’m assuming you enjoy being the Princess of Pancakes?”

Sarah Beth laughs again, louder this time, proving her shyness is wearing off much faster than usual. “I’ve never been the Princess of Pancakes.”

Tatum’s eyes go wide. “You haven’t? Well, we must remedy that immediately, my lady.” She places the crown on Sarah’s head then plucks a larger crown from the bag and settles it onto her own curls. “Now, we’re crowned and ready to handle princess business over breakfast. First, we’ll have to pick a place to have lunch after your roller-skating class. I’m new in town, so I’m trusting you to take point on that. Then, we’ll hear grievances from any cranky stuffed animals who need our advice, teach your teddy bears their letters, and see if we can find any fairies at the park. It’ll be warm enough to hunt fairies this afternoon, assuming we bundle up and wear our mittens.”

Sarah Beth beams with excitement while my stomach continues to sink. “I love fairies!” She squirms in my arms, wanting to be set down. As soon as her tennis shoes hit the porch, she grabs Tatum’s hand and pulls her toward the door, saying, “Bye, Daddy. We’re busy today.”

Tatum chuckles and even I can’t help but wheeze out a laugh.

Even though this is fucking horrible.

If Sarah Beth hadn’t taken a liking to Tatum, maybe we could have headed this off at the pass, but my daughter is clearly smitten. It’s love at first sight, and I’ve been through too many failed babysitter experiments to put what seems like a perfect match at risk.

But that means another potentially perfect match is going to have to go by the wayside, which feels like it’s killing me a little...

As we step inside, I tell Sarah Beth, “I’ll head to work soon, but I need to talk to Tatum first, okay? About some grown-up stuff. Why don’t you go grab your favorite stuffies from upstairs and bring them down? I’m sure Tatum will want to meet them first thing.”

“I’ll get my wand, too!” Sarah Beth dashes for the stairs, calling out over her shoulder, “I’m going to be a magical princess of pancakes with special powers!”

“Perfect!” Tatum enthuses, before turning back to me with wide eyes and not a hint of her child-charming grin. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea! None! Not until you stepped out on the porch.”

“Me, either,” I hiss back. “Your phone number was different than the one I had for the interview.”

“So was yours,” she says. “I changed mine to a Minnesota number before I left on the drive here. New life and all.”

“And I was chatting with you from my work cell before,” I say.

“Well, that explains that, but I *know* Drew is short for Andrew. I should have thought of that,” she says, “but it just didn’t connect in my head. Maybe it was the dirty martini or the fact that I assumed you were a fisherman, at first, but it just...did not compute.”

“And my new nanny’s name is supposed to be Margaret.”

“Yeah, Margaret Tatum O’Leary,” she says, wincing. “Sorry I didn’t say that on the phone when we talked, but you started the interview off by calling me Margaret, and I didn’t think I should correct my boss right off the bat. And then, by the time we were done, it felt like we’d been talking too long for me to suddenly switch names. I was afraid you would think I was weird, and you seemed so nice and cool, and I really wanted the job. So, I figured I’d sort out the ‘I go by my middle name’ thing on my first day.” She bites her bottom lip. “Are you mad?”

“No,” I say honestly. I’m not mad. I’m something much, much worse. I swear, my guts feel like they’re tied in knots as I add, “It’s clear you’re great with kids and Sarah Beth is already in love with you. And she doesn’t love everyone. She’s very shy most of the time, so it’s amazing you’ve made so much headway with her in five minutes.”

Tatum beams and her shoulders relax a little. “Aw, thanks. I love her, too. And I love working with four-year olds. They’re the best. They’re so creative and fun. They’re just my people. Probably because I never fully grew up.” She lifts a hand, fingers spread. “I mean, I’m responsible and can totally be trusted, I just still like to play. And remember how. A lot of adults don’t.”

“No, they don’t. You’re...really special, and I’m so glad you’re here,” I say, hating that I have to add a ‘but’ onto that statement. “But there’s no way I can date my daughter’s nanny. It just wouldn’t feel right. And I wouldn’t want to put your relationship with Sarah at risk.”

Tatum blinks faster, disappointment filling her eyes. “It wouldn’t. Even if things didn’t work out between us, I’d never abandon a child who was counting on me, Drew. I can keep

my relationship with you and my relationship with Sarah Beth separate, I promise.”

“But I can’t,” I say, just as Sarah Beth’s footfalls pound across the ceiling above our heads. “If you decided you didn’t want to date me anymore and I still had to see you every weekday morning, it would be too hard. I’d have to let you go and then you’d lose a job, and my daughter would lose someone she’d grown attached to, and she’s lost enough already. Her mom left when she was a year old and my Aunt Tia, her favorite sitter, moved to Florida last year. She needs a caregiver she can count on, and I really want this to be a long-term situation. That’s why I was so nosy in the interview.”

“Not quite nosy enough,” Tatum says, pain clear in her voice as she adds, “Ugh, if only I’d told you my full name on Saturday, this could have been avoided.”

“Or if I’d paid better attention to the background check,” I say. “I’m still not sure I would have connected the dots but seeing the unusual middle name might have sparked something.”

“Yeah,” Tatum says sounding as miserable as I feel.

“But I’m glad we had Saturday,” I whisper as Sarah Beth gallops down the stairs. “It was as unforgettable as you are.”

Tatum nods, her brow furrowed as she clearly fights through another wave of disappointment. “Okay, well, then...I guess that’s that.” She pulls in a breath, forcing a smile as Sarah Beth skids to a stop in front of her, holding her wand and three of her favorite stuffed animals.

“This is Ajax, Tatum,” she says, handing over her favorite St. Bernard stuffy, the one she’s had since she was a baby. “He’s a hero and saves all the other stuffed animals when they get in trouble. And they get in a lot of trouble. The stairs are super dangerous, and they fall all the time.”

“Oh, wow,” Tatum says, dipping into a little curtsy. “I’m so honored to meet you Ajax. It’s an honor to be in the presence of a real-life hero. Thank goodness we have you here to help us keep the rest of the stuffies safe.”

Sarah Beth nods seriously, clearly enraptured by this grown-up taking her pretend as seriously as she does. “And this is Petra Picklepants, she’s—”

“Hold on for one second, honey,” I cut in, glancing at my watch. “I need to be out the door in ten minutes, and I haven’t given Tatum the keys or money for lunch.” I turn to Tatum. “I know you already have her schedule for the week, but I put a copy on the refrigerator just in case. The keys to the house and the minivan in the garage are by the microwave. Please use the van, not your car. It’s safer and I already have her car seat set up properly.”

Tatum smiles, a little indulgently, I think. “Of course. I brought a car seat and am a pro at installing them, but I’ve always wanted to cruise around Minnesota in a van.” She winks at Sarah Beth. “And we’ll have more room to bring stuffies with us in the van. After hearing about those stairs, I’m not sure we should leave them all at home. It might be too much for Ajax to handle all alone.”

Sarah nods, her eyes bright. “I can put them in my backpack.”

“Or we can make miniature car seats out of paper towel rolls so they can be safe in the car, too,” Tatum says.

“Yes! That would be so cool!” Sarah Beth says, on the verge of some kind of blissed out, excitement seizure.

My daughter has met a kindred spirit who’s going to bring such joy to her life, and I’m so happy for her.

But I can’t help feeling a little sorry for myself. As I give Tatum money for lunch and promise to be home a little earlier than usual to see how their first day went, I have to fight to keep the disappointment from showing on my face.

By the time I get out to the car, my stomach is in knots, and I think I might take my piercing out, once and for all. It will always remind me of that incredible night with Tatum, and I don’t need any reminders that we were ever anything more than boss and employee.

And maybe friends.

Maybe we can be friends someday. As soon as I convince myself I wasn't already falling in love with her.

"Good luck with that," I mutter as I start the car and pull out onto to the street, leaving my favorite girl with the incredible woman who can never be mine.

Chapter Six



I'm a compartmentalizing champ, a skill I acquired to help deal with the fallout from my drama-inclined clan. With six siblings and a large extended family, someone in the O'Leary orbit is always going through it. If you're not careful, it's easy to let the weight of all the emotional commotion drag you down.

I learned early on how to listen to a loved one, empathize and advise, and then lock my worry for them away inside while I took care of business and enjoyed my life.

Once I've swallowed the initial wave of disappointment that Drew won't be my sexy new boyfriend, I get through the day just fine. It helps that Sarah Beth is a complete doll, smart as a whip, and shares my love for pretend. She also loves that I put on skates and take her roller-skating class with her, while the other grown-ups sit in the café, and that I don't mind crawling under the bushes in the park to look for fairies.

We have such a great time that it isn't until I put her down for her nap at two that the tightness in my chest comes rushing back. Soon, I'm so bummed, I can't enjoy my afternoon coffee or the cookie I brought as a first day of work pick-me-up. I think about reaching out to my fam—Lord knows they reach out to me in times of trouble—but no one back home would understand how upsetting this development truly is.

They don't know Drew or how perfect he is.

And I don't want to text Mom or Molly or Peach with complaints on my third day in my new town. They weren't

thrilled about me moving so far away in the first place. They'll tell me this kerfuffle is a sign I should come home, and Mom will promise to set me up with Chris from church.

But I don't want to go home and Chris from church picks his nose in public. A nose picker would have been bad enough pre-Drew. But after banging the hottest single dad in the country, possibly the world, the thought of sitting down to dinner across from Chris and his diggy fingers threatens to send me into a fit of full-fledged despair.

Grabbing my cell, I shoot a text to Wren—*Any chance you'd be up for a happy hour drink tonight? I could use some girl talk. I'm having an unexpectedly rough first day at my new job.*

In just a few seconds, Wren texts back—*Yes, please! I'm having a Monday, too. I had two nurses call in sick and a patient who needed to be rushed to the hospital for an emergency C-section. I have no idea why she waited so long to come in. I swear, if I ever get pregnant, I'm moving into the hospital at the start of month eight and staying there until the baby's safely out. So, what's up with the job? Is the little girl having a hard time adjusting?*

Already cheered by our chat, I say—*No, she's an angel and I think we're going to be great friends. It's the dad who's the issue, but I'll fill you in tonight. This is a story best told in person.*

Okay, Wren texts. My break is almost over anyway, but don't take any guff from this guy. If he's a creep, quit. I can help you find a new job. I can think of four families off the top of my head who are desperate for full-time childcare, and life's too short to work somewhere you don't feel comfortable.

She's right, and maybe I should consider quitting, but the possibility doesn't sit well with me. I already adore Sarah Beth and my gut says she needs me, that I can bring a kind of joy to her life that she's been missing. And what better work is there than to make a child feel safe, seen, and happy?

I reply, *Thank you, but I can't quit. Like I said, the little girl is a sweetheart, but she's been through some hard times in*

her life already. I think she needs me, and the dad isn't a creep. He's actually amazing.

Wren sends a puzzled emoji. I'm confused but intrigued. Meet me at six at The Root and Barley? It's a bar downtown, next to the library. They have two-dollar drafts and discounted chef salad until seven.

Telling her that sounds perfect, I wish her a great rest of her day—with no more emergency C-sections in it—and listen to my audiobook until it's time to get Sarah Beth up at three-thirty.

When I tiptoe into her room, whispering, “Miss Sarah B, it's time for tea. Wake up and come play with me,” she wakes up with a smile on her precious little face and mumbles, “You're still here. I was afraid you were a dream,” and seals my fate.

In that moment, I silently vow to be here for her as long as she needs me.

I sit down on the edge of her small bed, saying, “Nope, I'm not a dream. And I'm going to be here every day except Saturdays and Sundays. So, you'd better get used to me, buddy.”

She grins wider, making her dimples pop. “Okay, buddy. Can we really have tea? Daddy says it's too hot for little kids.”

“I'll make sure it's not too hot and we'll have a tea party with Ajax and friends before we do afternoon crafts. I don't know about you, but I need a little time and tea to wake up after a nap before I jump into making art.”

“Me, too,” she says, sitting up and wrapping her arms around my neck, sighing as she relaxes into me with a trust that makes my heart ache. “Carry me downstairs?”

“Of course,” I say, picking her up, cradling her warm body in my arms as I head for the stairs. “My pleasure.”

By the time we finish our tea and make a huge mess glitter gluing wooden shapes together to make a tribe of tiny elves, I've decided Sarah Beth is the most adorable child ever to

walk the face of the earth. She's just so sweet and creative and eager to soak in the magic of the world.

I hope she stays that way as she grows up, and I hope I'm there to see it, to nurture it.

Maybe Drew was right. Maybe it's best not to put this at risk.

After all, my relationships with men always go to shit, sooner or later, but there's no reason I can be a loving force in Sarah Beth's life for the long haul. I know plenty of childcare providers and nannies who keep in touch with their kids for years, all the way until they're grown-up and starting families of their own.

The attraction—and loss—I feel when I'm with Drew will fade, with time.

Or so I tell myself when he arrives home at five-thirty, sending Sarah Beth running for the door, shouting, "Daddy, we had such a good day. I had chicken nuggets for lunch, and we had a tea party and made elves and Tatum's going to come back tomorrow! She's going to come back every day except Saturday and Sunday!"

"That's awesome, kiddo." Drew casts a glance my way over her head. Just making eye contact with him is enough to make my tummy flip. "Thanks, Tatum. Sounds like you knocked your first day out of the park."

I grab my duffel bag and backpack from beside the couch, where Sarah Beth and I were just starting *The Princess and the Frog*. "Easy to do with a great person like Sarah B. I can't wait for gymnastics class tomorrow. Are you going to teach me to do a cartwheel? A backflip? Two backflips?"

Sarah Beth giggles as I come to meet her and her dad at the door. "No, silly. I can't do a backflip, but we can do front rolls and back rolls and jump in the foam pit. Jumping in the foam is the best part. You get to do it three times if you're good during the rest of class."

"Good to know," I say, with a wink. "I guess I'll be good, then. Don't want to miss out on that sweet foam action."

Drew smiles, but he looks tired, signaling it's time for the nanny to get lost. And yes, a part of me wishes that I could stay and help him cook dinner, ask him about his day, and share every hilarious thing his daughter cooked up in her brilliant four-year-old brain while he was gone, but...that's not what this is. We're not dating or here to give each other emotional support.

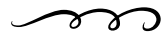
He's my boss, I'm his employee, and if I want to keep my heart from aching every time, I see his handsome face and oh-so-kissable lips, I would do well to remember it.

Forcing a purely friendly smile, I say, "See you guys tomorrow. Have a great night," and walk through the door, telling myself it will get easier to walk away from them.

Of course, it will.

It has to.

Chapter Seven



Wren's eyes go saucer wide, while her lips open and close without making a sound.

"I take it you're as surprised as I am," I tease, thanking the bartender as he sets two Pabst Blue Ribbons—the tasty beer of people perpetually on a budget—in front of us on the polished wood.

I slide him eight bucks, enough for both beers and a tip.

Thank you, happy hour.

Wren emits a soft squeak and shakes her head, making her long, black ponytail swish around her shoulders. She's still wearing pale pink nurse's scrubs, but looks adorable, and it's not like she's the only one still in work gear. There are two other nurses at a table in the back and an entire fleet of firemen in uniform just settled at the other end of the bar, near the dartboard.

Usually, a fleet of firemen would be all the reason I need to thank the happy hour gods for their blessings, but tonight I barely notice all the bulging muscles and sexy, close-cropped hair.

All I can think about is Drew and how amazing he looks wearing nothing but me stuck to him and a smile...

"I can't believe it," she says. "What are the chances? I mean, Bad Dog isn't a big town, but it isn't that small, either. And Drew hardly ever goes out. I bet that was the first time he's left the house after dinner in months."

“I know. It’s rotten luck,” I agree, taking a sip of my ice-cold draft, hoping it will numb my heart on the way down. “I almost fell out of my car when he stepped out onto his porch.”

Wren shakes her head again. “Oh my God, I can imagine. Especially after the night you two had. It wasn’t like it was a normal one-night stand without a nurse involved.” She winces. “I know I promised never to mention it again, but I forgot. I was distracted by the craziness of it all.”

I wave a hand. “No worries, it’s fine. And yeah. It wasn’t a normal one-night stand. It wasn’t going to be a one-night stand at all, actually. He’d already asked me out for dinner on Wednesday before I showed up this morning.”

“Oh, well that’s good,” Wren says, her features lifting. “Maybe you guys can work things out over dinner, find a way to make dating and being his nanny work at the same time.”

I shake my head. “He cancelled. He said he can’t date his daughter’s nanny and her happiness and stability comes first so...” I shrug. “It’s over.”

Wren’s brow furrows with empathy. “And you don’t think you can change his mind? I don’t usually put my oar in with things like this, but you guys seemed really great together. I don’t know many married couples who could have handled what happened to you Saturday night with as much grace and humor as you did. A connection like that doesn’t come along every day.”

“Har har,” I say.

She grins. “I know, but seriously. I’ve been looking for something like that for a long time.”

I sigh and take another swig of my draft. “I know. It was special. It feels like I’ve known him way longer than a couple days. We just had this, like you said, this...connection.” I’m tempted to tell her about the note I put on my fridge, the one about missing Drew even if we’d never met but decide that’s too personal.

And too sad.

So, I sigh and say, “But those are the breaks, I guess. And I get it. Dating your employee can be tricky and complicated. Most of the good guys I know wouldn’t want to do it, either.”

Wren slumps and sadness creeps into her expression. “I know. Dating your boss would be hard, too. Especially if you really love your job and there’s nowhere else in town you can do that job. If the romance failed, you’d lose everything and have to move and look for work and that would be so stressful.”

I lean forward on my stool, making a “come on give it up” motion with my fingers. “Spill.”

She blinks and reaches for her beer. “Spill what?”

“You’ve got the hots for Drew’s brother, don’t you?” I ask, as she chokes on her first sip. “Your boss? Barrett? Isn’t that his—”

“Shush!” She leans in, covering my mouth with her hand as her eyes do an anime expression once again. She glances back and forth before turning to search the space over her shoulder. Only when she’s certain I haven’t been overheard, does she set my lips free.

And because I’m me, I can’t resist grinning and finishing, “Barrett McGuire, the OB-GYN of your dreams? The one you want to give you a private, after-hours exam?”

“Shut it, woman.” She mimes zipping her lips. “Your cookies are fantastic, and I got a strong ‘we should be friends’ energy from you when we met, but I’m serious. No talking about stuff like that in public.” She glances over her shoulder again. “There are McGuire eyes—and ears—everywhere. As long as you’re in Bad Dog, you’re never more than ten feet away from a McGuire, a McGuire cousin, or someone who’s known one of them since they were in elementary school. And I would die if he found out.” She shudders. “Just shrivel up and die. Someone would mistake me for a raisin, throw me in a salad, and that would be that.”

I shudder with her. “A salad? What kind of monster puts raisins in salads?”

“Better than raisins in a cookie.”

I grunt. She has a point. But she’s also potentially making a big mistake. “You don’t think B returns your feelings?”

She shakes her head. “No. He doesn’t think of me that way. Melissa, his little sis, and I were best friends in middle school, when I was in my even more awkward phase. He saw me giggling over boy bands in my kitty cat pajamas and crying in the bathroom because I was scared of the horror movies the other girls were watching in the basement. The damage is done. In his head, I’m perpetually twelve years old.”

I take another thoughtful sip of my beer, scanning Wren up and down. Even in her shapeless scrubs, she’s a hottie, but she does look young. A hazard of being only five feet tall and wearing her hair in a ponytail for work. “Have you tried to do anything about that?”

She frowns. “Like what?”

I lift a shoulder. “Like find some low-cut scrubs and ask *him* to happy hour? Help him see that you’re a gorgeous, funny, fully grown woman who’s a total badass?”

She giggles before reaching for her beer. “I’m not a badass. I’m the girl voted most likely to become an accountant in high school.”

“But you didn’t become an accountant. You became a nurse who doesn’t blink an eye while separating two people joined at the crotch and totes a shotgun around to protect herself from killer poultry. That’s a badass in my book.”

She sags on her stool. “Ugh, don’t remind me. Kyle was in rare form this morning. When I looked out the window, the yard was empty, so I thought it was okay to head to work without the shotgun. But as soon as I stepped off the porch steps, he rushed me from behind. The jerk was hiding in the holly bush. He pecked me in the bottom twice before I made it to the car.”

“Jeez.” I wince. “You poor thing. Can’t you call animal control? Get them to do something?”

“I could,” she says. “But Tim, the head of animal control, is crazy about turkey hunting. He’d get a depredation permit and kill Kyle, even though spring turkey season doesn’t start for months, and I can’t do that. Kyle’s a terrorist, but I don’t want him dead, just far away from me and my front door. And my butt.”

I tap my chin, brain whirring. I have zero experience with feral wild turkeys but dwelling on Wren’s problems is highly preferable to pondering my own. My situation is hopeless. Hers might not be...

“What if we relocate him?” I ask.

She snorts. “How? He’s huge and mean and really fast. You should have seen him run the other day when I started throwing tennis balls at him through the car window. He’d beat us in a 5K any day. Then he’d wait at the finish line to peck our eyes out.”

“That’s why we don’t try to outrun him. We outsmart him. I may not be a nurse with a master’s degree, but I’m smarter than a turkey. And you’re clearly a genius, getting through all that school and becoming head nurse at your practice by thirty. If we can’t Big Brain a solution to this, who can?”

She takes another thoughtful sip of her beer. “If we do this, will you promise to stop trying to get me to make a move on B? I know you mean well but I’m not a ‘get a makeover and win the guy’ kind of girl. I like sports bras and loose scrubs and too much makeup makes me feel like I’m suffocating. I also love being an OB-GYN nurse and B’s is the only practice in town. If I made a fool of myself and couldn’t bear to show my face in the office again, I’d have to move, and I would hate that. Bad Dog is my home—gossipy neighbors, killer turkeys, and all.”

I extend a hand. “Agreed. I’ll brainstorm turkey traps and we can meet up this weekend to buy supplies and plot Kyle’s relocation.”

“Sounds perfect.” She takes my hand, shaking it with a grin.

“In the meantime, I’m following you home tonight,” I say, draining the last of my beer. “I can throw empty coffee cups at Kyle while you run into the house.”

“Really?” Wren’s expression brightens. “You wouldn’t mind?”

“Not at all. What are friends for? And I was raised in the woods. I’m not afraid of animals unless they can gut me with a swipe of their claws.”

She arches a nervous brow. “Wait until you see Kyle. My friend Brie followed me home once to help and left bleeding from both arms. Now we only meet for jewelry making at her house and her entire family prays for me at church on Sundays.”

“I’m tougher than I look,” I assure her, sliding off my stool. “Come on. Let’s get you home safe, then I’ll head back to my place to cook dinner. A to-go salad sounds good, but I’m on a budget. I need to save up another grand to afford a down payment on an apartment closer to Drew’s place.”

Wren pulls on her coat as she follows me to the door. “But I thought Drew was offering the garage apartment at his place as part of the compensation package?”

“He is. But I’m not about to move in with him. It’s going to be hard enough seeing him every morning before he leaves for work and a few minutes when he gets home. If I had to go to sleep every night, knowing he was only a quick jog across the driveway...”

“You might find yourself sleepwalking over to his bedroom?” Wren asks.

“No, because I wouldn’t be sleeping. I’d be lying in bed, lamenting my cruel fate. It’ll be easier to forget how much I like him if I have to drive to get to his place.”

At least, I hope it will be...

“That makes sense,” Wren says, shivering as we push outside and start down the street to the cute downtown’s parking area. “Jeez. I can’t believe it’s almost March. Winter feels like it’s dragging on forever this year. But at least the ice

fishermen are happy. Their season got cut short last year with all the rain.”

Her words remind me of those few bright, beautiful hours when I thought Drew was a sexy ice fisherman—or a lumberjack—and dating him wasn’t a conflict of interest.

But it’s good that he’s a lawyer. I’m sure he does lots of important lawyer-y things for this town. And I remember how stressed he sounded on the phone during the interview. He needs full-time help he can count on when Sarah Beth is sick or needs to go to the doctor or the dentist or gymnastics class. He can’t keep taking off work and he doesn’t want to lean too heavily on his parents or siblings.

And I get that. I really do. I love my family, but the more you ask for help, the more you open yourself up to other people being in your business. As a strong-willed, independent person that can get really old really quick.

Wren and I reach our cars and I promise to only get out of my car at her place if absolutely necessary. She’s adorably concerned for my welfare, proving yet again how lucky I am to have her as my first friend in town. I follow her small SUV through town and out into the surrounding countryside, thoughts turning back to Drew no matter how hard I try to keep them on the task ahead.

But I’m just not that worried about the turkey. I *eat* turkey. I can hold a turkey’s entire body in my hands and slick it up with olive oil and herbs without breaking a sweat. If Kyle refuses to back off, I’ll give the little clucker a swift kick in the can, tell him to stay away from hardworking nurses, and that will be that.

As I pull into Wren’s driveway behind her, I’m not pondering my defense strategy, I’m replaying every minute of my steamy night with Drew. I’ve just gotten to the part where he said we were beautiful together when Wren swings out of her truck and all hell breaks loose.

The hell beast comes out of nowhere, exploding from the shadows beside the road like he was born from the darkness itself. His massive wings spread like an avenging angel of

death and his long neck stretches toward his target, the sharp beak at its end locked on Wren's cute little backside.

Wren yelps and runs for the front door of her cottage, but she's not going to make it. She's slowed by the giant purse slapping against her side and that turkey is clearly part cheetah.

Jolted out of my shock by her second scream, I spill out of my car and sprint after Kyle, not sure what I'm going to do when I reach him but refusing to let him get a piece of Wren on my watch. I'm hoping to get my hands locked around his neck and wrestle him to the ground long enough for her to get inside—figuring I'll worry about how to get back to my car once she's secure—when I slip on a patch of ice under the freshly fallen snow and go down hard.

My hands hit the cold ground and I bleat like a startled sheep, wincing as agony flows up my bruised knees into my hip sockets. But I'm not hurt, not seriously, and my squawking stops Kyle in his tracks.

He spins, feather rippling, as he spots me in the snow.

Wren calls out from the porch, "Do you need help? Should I get my gun?"

I call out, "No, I'm fine. I just slipped. Get inside and I'll call you tomorrow." I don't wait to see if she's going to follow orders. I'm already scrambling to my feet and dashing back toward my car, Kyle in hot pursuit.

He gobbles and gurgles as he closes in, sounding more like an orc unleashed from the bowels of Mount Doom than poultry. Despite the cold, sweat breaks out on the back of my neck and my hands are shaking as I reach for the driver's side door. I'm shaking so badly; my fingers slip off the handle.

By the time I reach for it a second time, Kyle's on me.

Literally, *on me*, his vicious beak latched onto my bottom through my jeans.

I bite down on the inside of my lip, stifling my cry of pain, not wanting Wren to rush outside to save me. I don't want my sacrifice to be in vain, and I'm honestly a little ashamed of

myself. If I hadn't been deep in sex thoughts, this wouldn't have happened.

I grit my teeth and ignore the fire flaring from my brutalized bottom as I open the door, reach in for the flashlight I keep in the compartment between the seats, and whack blindly in Kyle's general direction. I hit my own thigh the first time, but the second, I connect with some part of my gobbling tormentor. By the fourth whack, he lets go and I tumble into the front seat and slam the door.

I sit there, pulling in harsh breaths, as he parades around my car, wings held high, taking his victory lap. I'm sorely tempted to shift into reverse and floor it when he showboats past my bumper, but Wren was clear about wanting a humane solution to all this.

But damn, this jerk really is the worst.

My backside stings all the way home and when I get up to my apartment, I find a hole in my favorite pair of pink jeans and bruised, torn skin beneath. It looks like I was stabbed with a knife—a very small knife, but still!

As I clean the wound and layer three small Band-Aids, the only size I have in my toiletry bag, over the top, I feel terrible for Wren. We have to get rid of Kyle before she's a prisoner in her own home. Or covered head to toe in turkey fighting battle scars.

The only good thing about the literal pain in my butt is that it keeps my thoughts off Drew for the rest of the night. Mostly. That weird dream featuring Drew as a warrior wearing a coat of turkey feathers while he pleasures me orally and vows to destroy the beast who wounded me doesn't count.

But my night of tossing and turning does leave me beat the next morning, so beat I don't take time to clean my wound again, which turns out to be a bad decision.

Very bad indeed.

Chapter Eight



I arrive home from work on Tuesday, expecting Sarah Beth to run to the front door with tales of the day's adventures, only to find the house weirdly quiet and all the lights off downstairs.

"Sarah Beth?" I call out as I hang my coat in the hall closet and flick on the lights. "Tatum? Are you here?"

But of course, they're here. The van is in the garage and Tatum's car is in the driveway. I'm headed upstairs to see if maybe they're watching a movie in my room—Sarah Beth likes to snuggle up in my bed, sometimes, and watch the big screen—when my daughter's head pops up over the couch, nearly giving me a heart attack.

"Shh!" she hisses, pressing a little finger to her lips. "Quiet, Daddy. Tatum's sleeping."

"What?" I frown as I cross to the couch, peeking over to see Tatum indeed asleep beside Sarah Beth. She's curled up in a ball with her head on one of the throw pillows.

I'm on the verge of getting angry—I understand watching a four-year-old all day can be exhausting but falling asleep and leaving Sarah unattended isn't okay—when Sarah Beth adds, "I think she's sick, Daddy. Her head is really hot. Like when I had the flu and had to go to the hospital."

I reach down, resting gentle fingers on Tatum's forehead, my stomach sinking as I feel the waves of heat coming off her skin. "You're right, honey. She has a fever."

My daughter's face crumples. "Oh no, Daddy. We have to help her. I don't want Tatum to die."

I hold out my arms, gathering Sarah Beth up and holding her close. "She won't die, sweetheart. It's probably just a cold, like when you were sick. The doctors will get her some medicine and maybe an IV and she'll be just fine. We just need to get her to the urgent care place before it closes."

"No, I can't," Tatum mumbles, sitting up on the couch, her hair a fuzzy red ball around her flushed face. "I don't have insurance and I need to save money. I can't go to the doctor."

"You're going to the doctor," I insist, setting Sarah Beth down, telling her to go get her coat before turning back to Tatum. "I'll pay for it."

Tatum stands, swaying a little but holding out a hand when I reach to steady her. "No, seriously, Drew. I'm fine. I think it's just a little infection and I have some old antibiotics at my apartment. I just need to clean the wound better and take those and I'll be fine."

"The wound?" I echo, her words doing nothing to allay my fears. "What happened?" An idea leaps into my head, adding a healthy dose of guilt to my concern. Glancing over my shoulder to see Sarah Beth still donning her coat and mittens, I turn back to Tatum and whisper, "Is it from the other night? Did you... Did you get an infection from when we were... stuck?"

Her already pink face flushes a deep red. "No. It's not that. It was Kyle."

"Kyle?" I ask, an irrational surge of jealousy rising inside me. "Who the hell is Kyle?" If he's an ex who's roughed her up, I'm going to kill him. Or at least strangle him, threaten him, and promise to cut off his hands if he doesn't leave town and keep his wound-giving mitts off Tatum for the rest of his miserable life. "If you're having trouble with a guy, you should stay here tonight, where I can keep an eye on you. I have a cousin on the police force I can ask—"

“No, it’s not a guy, Drew,” Tatum cuts in. “It was Kyle. You know, Kyle.” In response to my no-doubt still confused look, she adds, “The turkey who’s terrorizing Wren? I followed her home to play hero last night and ended up getting pecked for my trouble. He broke the skin and I guess the wound is getting infected.” She winces. “It’s been aching all day, but it really hurts now. It feels like it’s on fire.”

“I’ll go get some water to put it out!” Sarah Beth says, dashing past us into the kitchen in her pink coat and snow boots.

Tatum smiles and calls out, “It’s not that kind of fire, sweets. But thank you.”

Sarah Beth pokes her head around the fridge. “Are you sure? I can get a cup all by myself. Daddy put the plastic cups on the bottom shelf so I can reach them.”

“Well, that was smart. How can I refuse an offer like that,” Tatum says, swaying again as she moves around the couch. “I’d love a cup of water. Then I’ll get out of your hair and let you get dinner started. I took the chicken out of the freezer this morning so it should be...” She trails off as her knees buckle.

I step in, catching her around the waist as she sags, and swinging her into my arms.

“Oh no, you can put me down,” she says, pushing weakly at my chest. “I’m fine. I’m sorry. I just... There were stars for a second. Black fuzzy ones. In front of my face. But I’m fine now.”

“You’re not fine and we’re going to the doctor,” I say. “Now.” To Sarah Beth, I say, “Fill up a water bottle, honey. We’ll take that in the car for Tatum.”

“Roger that,” Sarah Beth says, making me raise an eyebrow.

“We were playing Stuffed Animal Air Force earlier,” Tatum says. “Ajax was the pilot and Petra Picklepants had to be rescued from the top of a mountain.”

“She tried to go skiing on the highest mountain in the world but got too scared to go down and had to jump into the

helicopter,” Sarah Beth says, running in with her glittery purple water bottle and grabbing Ajax from the couch. “I’m ready, Daddy. Let’s go. We have to save Tatum. Ajax is going to help.”

“Thank goodness,” Tatum says. “Then I’m in good hands. In fact, if you’d just drop me at my place with Ajax for the night, I’m sure I’ll be fine by tomorrow. Old antibiotics work, you know. They tell you they expire before they really do so you’ll buy more. It’s all a racket.”

I set Tatum down briefly by the door, bracing her against me as I reach into the closet for her coat. I brush her lower back as I shift my arm. She winces and sucks in a breath on a hiss. “Ouch. Jeez. How did that get so messed up so fast? I don’t know if I’m going to be able to sit down in the car. That’s why I laid down on the couch and accidentally fell asleep. It hurt to sit.”

“Sarah Beth, can you go grab the neck pillow from upstairs?” I ask. “One of the blue ones we used on the plane when we went to Disneyland last year?”

She sets the water bottle and stuffed dog on the floor and races for the stairs. “On it! Roger that!”

“I’m so sorry,” Tatum whispers as she dashes off. “I hate that she’s scared. I’m going to be fine, really.”

“Let’s let the doctor be the judge of that.”

“I can’t go to urgent care, Drew. Please, it’s so pricey,” she begs. “At least let me try to take care of it first. And if I’m not better by tomorrow, I’ll go to the doctor. I swear.”

I nod toward her lower half. “Show me.”

Her brows lift. “What?”

“Show me. Quick. Before Sarah Beth comes back downstairs.”

Tatum chews her bottom lip. “But it’s on my…backside.”

“I’ve seen your backside before, Tatum,” I say, doing my best to keep this professional. Or professional adjacent, anyway, considering I’ve already been balls deep in this

woman and think about being balls deep in her again almost constantly. “Let me see how bad it is.” She hesitates and I push, “Or I’m taking you to the doctor tonight, even if I have to throw you over my shoulder and carry you there on foot.”

“That’s awfully caveman of you,” she says, a different kind of shine in her glassy eyes. “If I didn’t feel like garbage, I would have a hard time not making a flirty joke about that. Even though we’re not those kinds of friends anymore.”

“Bottom. Now,” I say, refusing to flirt with her when she’s burning up with fever. No matter how much I want to.

“Fine.” She huffs, swiping her hair from her forehead as she turns and tugs down her black leggings.

“Shit, Tatum,” I say, as I gently pull back the Band-Aids covering the swollen lump beneath her skin. “It’s infected. No doubt about that, and it looks...” I trail off, bending down low to get a better look at the center of the wound.

“It looks like what?” she asks, sounding worried for the first time. “Did Kyle give me rabies? Or gangrene? Am I going to lose my right butt cheek?”

“I don’t think you can get rabies from birds,” I say, pressing gently on one side of the wound.

“Ouch,” Tatum yips. “But gangrene is still on the table? I can’t lose my booty to gangrene. It’s one of my best body parts, and I need it for sitting and lifting heavy things. They say lift from your legs, not your back, but the butt is absolutely involved in that process, Drew. You can’t carry a four-year-old to the van because she’s exhausted after gymnastics without a butt. Dear God, what did you find in there? Tell me before I imagine something horrible like worms, horrible maggoty worms.”

“I...” I shake my head; pretty certain I’m going crazy. “It looks like a tooth.”

“A tooth?!” Tatum screeches, craning her head back, trying to get a look. “What the actual fudge? I’m no turkey expert, but I’m pretty sure they aren’t supposed to have teeth, Andrew.”

“Agreed,” I say, ignoring how much I like the sound of my full name on her lips. “Can we also agree we need to get this checked out ASAP? Before it gets any worse?”

“Or any weirder,” she agrees, tugging up her pants and lifting wide eyes to mine. “I knew Kyle wasn’t a normal turkey. He’s a beast from the depths of hell, Andrew. He has an unholy hunger for blood and human flesh.”

I smile. I can’t help it. She’s adorable. Even when she’s scared, feverish, and potentially has a mutant turkey tooth lodged in her right ass cheek.

“Why are you smiling?” she asks, her lips also starting to twitch. “This is awful.”

“It really is,” I agree, brushing her hair from her sticky forehead. “I guess I just like it when you say my full name. Most of the time, I’m not a fan, but there’s something about the way you say it.”

Her lips part, her eyes soften, and for a moment I think she’s going to say the words that have been playing on endless repeat in my head since I called it quits with her yesterday morning.

I think she’s going to say—*We can’t walk away from a connection like this, Andrew. We just can’t*—but before she can speak, Sarah Beth shouts from upstairs, “Daddy, I can’t find the neck pillow! It’s not in my closet or your closet or anywhere. I think it’s losted!”

Dragging my gaze from Tatum’s, I call back, “That’s okay, honey. Just come downstairs. We’ll let Tatum lie down in the back behind your car seat.” To Tatum, I say, “Come on, Turkey Butt, let’s get you in the car.”

She groans as I scoop her into my arms again. “That can’t be my new nickname. I’ll never live it down. Never.”

Sarah Beth clatters down the stairs, grabbing the water bottle and Ajax before rushing in front of me to open the door to the garage. “What nickname? I want to know.”

“Your dad wants to call me Turkey Butt,” Tatum says. “Because a turkey bit me on my backside.”

Sarah Beth starts giggling hysterically. “What? On the booty?”

“Yes, right on the booty,” Tatum says, playing up the silliness as I open the sliding door on the side of the van. “But you can’t let him call me Turkey Butt, Sarah B. You have to come up with a better nickname. Quick. Before we get to the doctor’s office.”

“Roger that!” Sarah Beth says as Tatum gingerly crawls into the very back seat to lie down. Sarah hops up into her car seat and reaches for the straps without waiting for me to do it for her, the way she usually would. “Don’t worry, Daddy,” she says, clicking the two locks into place. “Tatum taught me how to do it myself. That way I can get out on my own if I ever need to in an emergency, like if there was a car wreck and the person driving was hurted. Girls have to be prepared to take care of themselves sometimes.”

Brows lifting, I agree, “They do.”

Sarah Beth already seems more grown-up and confident after two days with Tatum. I can’t imagine the transformation after a month, or a year.

I kind of don’t want to, honestly. She’s already growing up so fast. A part of me wants my baby girl to stay little as long as possible. But Tatum’s right to teach her how to take care of herself. I never thought to consider what might happen if I was injured in a car wreck and couldn’t get Sarah Beth out of the car to safety.

I also never imagined she was capable of coming up with nicknames like, “Tatum the Red Ninja” or “Queen T the Fairy Tickler.”

But I love them. I love my daughter, more than anything in the world, and don’t want to do anything to put her happiness at risk.

But I’m also starting to have very serious feelings for the woman laughing in the back seat, teasing and comforting my daughter even though she feels terrible.

It’s a conundrum. One I’m not sure how to sort out.

Chapter Nine



“All good?” I glance over my shoulder, fingers crossed for good news.

I’m lying facedown on an exam bed in Bad Dog’s only urgent care, feeling a little better now that the foreign object has been removed from my rear end. “It’s not a tooth, right?” I ask. “No way it could be a tooth because turkeys don’t have teeth. I googled it on the way over to be sure.”

The doctor, a kind-looking older woman with her gray hair cut in a neat bob, glances up from my recently probed bottom with a reassuring smile. “No, it’s not a tooth.” She holds out the tweezers she used to remove the whatever-it-was from my backside. “It’s a corn kernel. Feed corn, to be specific.”

“Corn.” I frown. “So, Kyle was eating before he bit me?”

“Maybe. But more likely he’d swallowed it a while ago and had it stored in his crop. Like you said, turkeys don’t have teeth, so they break down their food in a pouch at the back of their throat with the help of their gizzard.”

“Gizzard is a funny word,” I say, feeling a little loopy after the painkillers she gave me before we got started.

She nods. “It is.” She plunks the corn kernel in a sterling silver bowl on the rolling cart beside the exam table. “I’m guessing Kyle was already digesting this kernel, exposing it to bacteria in his digestive tract, and therefore making your wound much more likely to get infected.” She rests a gentle hand on my shoulder. “But you’re all cleaned up now and a round of antibiotics will take care of this. You’re going to live,

Miss O’Leary. I’ll tell your family you’ll be right out. Take your time getting dressed.”

“Thank you,” I say, not bothering to correct her.

Drew and Sarah Beth aren’t my family, obviously, but it sure feels good to know the two of them are out there waiting for me. I play it tough most of the time, but I’m glad I’m not alone at my apartment right now, trying to fish a piece of corn out of my own booty and rolling the dice on expired antibiotics.

I dress carefully, but my wound already feels so much better. It makes me wonder how Wren’s doing. She said she got pecked in the backside, too, after all.

I shoot her a quick text, explaining what happened and warning her that Kyle is not only terrifying, but potentially diseased, and encourage her to call animal control in the morning.

She doesn’t reply right away, so I slip my phone into my purse and head out to the waiting room to find Drew already at the check-out window. I hurry over, nudging him away with my elbow. “Don’t you dare. I’ll pay for it. I’m the one who thought it would be a good idea to take on a wild turkey. I deserve to pay the price.”

“It’s already settled,” Drew says, tucking his wallet into the back pocket of his dress pants. He’s still wearing his work clothes—dark gray dress pants and a blue button-down shirt with a deeper blue tie—and looks good enough to eat. I still prefer him in cozy flannel and jeans that hug those incredible thighs of his, but there’s something to be said for fancy Drew, too.

He arches a brow and I clear my throat; afraid I’ve been caught staring. “Well, thank you,” I say, forcing my gaze to stay fixed on his face. “I appreciate it. And I’ll pay you back as soon as I get my first paycheck. My employer is good for it. I promise.”

“I don’t want your money,” he says, leading the way back to where Sarah Beth is deep in play at the toy train table in the

corner. “What I want is a promise you’ll stay away from Wren’s place until we get this situation sorted. I called Barrett while you were back getting check out. He drove home to get his shotgun and headed out to Wren’s house, but I don’t know if the mission was successful yet.”

Hmmm, Barrett is over at Wren’s place, and she isn’t responding to texts.

Interesting...

But I know better than to express that to Drew. Wren trusted me with her secret and I’m not about to betray her. So, I simply nod, and promise, “Absolutely. I have no urge to get another piece of corn stuck in my backside.”

He huffs. “Corn?”

“Yep. Corn. Feed corn. Seems like someone’s been feeding Kyle.”

Drew makes a considering sound. “That would make sense. Probably part of why he’s lost his fear of humans.”

“Hopefully he’s nicer to whoever’s feeding him than he is to Wren or me. Wren got pecked on the backside yesterday, too, but hopefully Kyle didn’t break the skin that time. I sent her a text to warn her that he’s got a nasty, dirty bird mouth, just in case.”

“Nasty dirty bird mouth,” Drew repeats, his lips curving. “Band name?”

“A metal band, maybe,” I say, grinning.

“We’re Nasty Dirty Bird Mouth, you’ve been great Chicago,” he says into a fake microphone, making me laugh. He smiles. “You seem better.”

“I *feel* better. Thank you for making me come here. You were right.”

His chest puffs up. “That’s the kind of a thing a guy likes to hear.”

I grin. “Yeah? You enjoy praise?”

“Only when I deserve it,” he says, holding my gaze for a beat too long, making heat rise in my cheeks again and my thoughts turn to how worthy of praise he was the other night.

“Daddy, I’m starving,” a little voice says from inches away, making Drew and I both jump and laugh. “Are you okay, Tatum?”

“Sorry, honey,” Drew says, as I assure her, “I am, thanks. Sorry I kept you guys from your dinner.”

“It’s okay, we were having grilled chicken,” Sarah Beth says, sticking out her tongue in a “yuck” face. “But we can’t now. It’s too late to cook it, right, Daddy?”

Drew narrows his eyes on her face. “You’re getting way too clever, kiddo. I’m not going to be able to get away with anything anymore, am I?”

Sarah Beth grins. “So, we can have pizza?”

“Sure,” Drew says. “Pizza for everyone, then back home to get ready for bed.” He glances my way. “Would you want to sleep over? I have fresh sheets on the guest room bed already. Might be good to have people nearby, just in case something goes wrong tonight.”

I don’t think anything is going to go wrong—I really do feel so much better—but I nod and say, “Thank you. I’d appreciate it.”

“Sleepover!” Sarah Beth crows, grabbing my hand and bouncing toward the door. “We’re having a sleepover!”

I wrinkle my nose. “Nah, this is just a guest night. For a real sleepover, we’ll have to do it on a Saturday, make tons of popcorn and a cozy bed on the floor in the living room, and convince your dad to let us stay up until ten. Or maybe even ten-thirty.”

Her eyes go big as she glances from me to Drew. “I’ve never stayed up until ten-thirty before. Can I, Daddy? Can we do a real sleepover?”

“Sure,” he says. “When we have time to plan it in advance.”

“This Saturday?” she presses, making us both laugh and Drew say, “Let’s give Tatum a little more time to recover, okay? I’m sure she’ll be ready for a restful weekend after her first week at work.”

In truth, the thought of spending the weekend with Drew and Sarah Beth sounds wonderful, but I don’t say anything because that would be weird. No matter how right it feels to share pizza and laughter and stories with the McGuires, I’m not a part of their family, and I never will be. I’m the nanny, not the girlfriend.

And even if I *were* the girlfriend, this would be way too soon to start indulging fantasies of belonging to these people.

I don’t know what’s wrong with me.

I’m not usually the kind to rush into things like this. I take my time, make sure I can trust new people, and am careful about giving my heart away. My love life hasn’t been all that traumatic, but I’ve seen the fallout of insta-love gone wrong way too many times.

My mom fell hard and fast for several losers before she found Bruce, my stepdad. I watched her cry and toss clothes out the window too many times to think a crush is a harmless thing.

So, when Drew shows me to the guest room and asks if I need anything aside from the sweatpants and t-shirt he’s loaning me to sleep in, I assure him, “Nope. I always have a toiletry bag in my purse for emergencies so I’m all set. Thank you again for your help and kindness tonight. I appreciate it so much.”

“My pleasure,” he says. “You can count on me and Sarah Beth any time you’re in trouble. You’re not just our nanny; you’re someone we care about.”

Heart twisting, I force I smile. “I feel the same. And I promise not to get partially digested corn stuck in my backside and fall asleep on the job ever again. You can count on me.”

He laughs. “Sounds good.”

Down the hall, Sarah Beth calls out, “Daddy are you going to read me a story?”

Drew calls back, “Be right there, honey.” To me, he says, “Sleep well.”

“Thanks.” I shut the door to the guest room and lean back against it, pressing my fist to my chest.

What is up with all this aching and longing? I barely know Drew.

Or so I tell myself as I lie down on the plush mattress and snuggle under the sheets, wishing my bed at my short-term rental were half as comfortable. But as I listen to the soft drone of Drew’s deep voice, reading to Sarah Beth down the hall, I don’t feel like a guest. I feel like I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be. Like I’m...home.

It’s the painkillers. They’ve clearly scrambled your brains. You’ll be fine come tomorrow morning. Just sleep it off and stop being ridiculous.

Doing my best to follow the Voice of Reason’s advice, I turn on my side and curl up into a ball. But sleep is a long time coming and when I finally do nod off, I dream of walking through a country fair in summertime, with Drew and Sarah Beth’s hands in mine.

It’s not even a sex dream. It’s a “I wish we were a family” dream.

I wake up feeling like I swallowed a box full of rocks and know I can’t let things go on like this. I have to nip this crush in the bud before it ruins my fresh start in Bad Dog.

A plan forming, I grab my cell from the bedside table and pull up my texts. There’s still no response from Wren to my text from last night, but I go ahead and shoot her a few more messages anyway—*Hope you’re okay and Barrett took care of your Kyle problem.*

Assuming you’re still single this morning, I was wondering if you’d want to go dancing this Friday night. One of the other nannies at gymnastics yesterday said there’s a great bar with live music not too far from the lake, on the way out of town.

We could get ready at my place and go together if you want. I'm clearly terrible at defending my friends from foul fowl, but I do a great blowout. Let me know and feel free to invite anyone else you think might enjoy a night out. I'm ready to make lots of new girlfriends and enjoy being single!

I leave out the part about hoping to find a cute guy to make out with at the bar to help banish Drew from my besotted brain and swing out from under the sheets. I make the bed, shower, and change back into my clothes from yesterday, pleased to see my wound is already looking a thousand times better. At this rate, I should be healed up and ready to shake a tailfeather by Friday, no problem.

And it looks like I'll have a friend to take with me.

As I'm brushing my hair, a text comes through from Wren—*Dancing sounds amazing. I'm in. And of course, I'm still single. Kyle was waiting for me outside this morning and is no longer afraid of the shotgun blast. I had to poke him in the chest with the barrel to get him to let me into my car. He was hiding last night when Barrett was here, just like when Drew followed me home. I'm beginning to think he's scared of men.*

Thumbs racing as I hear Sarah Beth pound down the stairs, I say—*Well, don't worry. We'll figure out a way to make him afraid of women, too. Or you'll call animal control and let the chips fall where they may. Just don't let him bite you again. You don't want to end up at urgent care the way I did.*

Wren replies—*I saw that! You poor thing. I'm so sorry I didn't message you back last night. I didn't see the text until late and I didn't want to wake you. Take it easy today and be sure to eat something with your antibiotics. They can really mess up your tummy otherwise.*

Will do, I say. I'm off to make Sarah Beth breakfast. Text with more details on Friday soon!

Tucking my cell into the little pocket on the side of my leggings, I hurry downstairs. By the time Drew comes down a few minutes later, I have Sarah settled with a bowl of berries and am sautéing onions and peppers for an egg scramble.

“That smells amazing,” he says, pausing beside me to pull in a deep breath, making me want to lean back and offer him my lips for a morning kiss.

Instead, I force my stupid body to stay exactly where it is and cheerfully announce, “Good, because there’s plenty for all of us. Scrambles and coffee on the table in five minutes.”

Yep. I need a “Get My Mind off Drew Rebound Boy” and I need him quick.

Friday night can’t get here soon enough.

Chapter Ten



I arrive at work with a smile on my face, a fact that's noted by not just one, but three of the people in the office.

I hadn't realized my smiles had become so rare. But it's hard not to smile with Tatum's amazing scramble in my belly and memories of laughing with her and Sarah Beth in the kitchen over coffee fresh in my mind.

Around ten a.m., Tatum sends a shot of her and Sarah Beth at the park pointing at the trees behind them, where they've added to the fairy village they're building on the trail secret, hoping to suck the rest of the walkers into the magic. A second later, another shot comes through of a tiny row of snowmen by the swing set. We only got a few inches of snow last night, but they're making the most of it, complete with tiny scarfs and baby carrot noses.

I grin again. They're just so damned adorable.

"Oh my God, your wife and daughter are so pretty," a voice coos from over my shoulder, making me jump in my chair. "Oops, sorry to scare you." Our new temp office assistant, Marjorie, sets a fresh mug of coffee by my now empty one. "Dolores said you liked another cup of coffee at ten."

"I do, thanks so much," I say, smiling as I add, "I have a caffeine problem, but I make myself quit at noon every day."

"Smart," she says, her brown eyes widening. "I always have a cup at three when I get draggy, and then regret it when I'm trying to get to sleep at night." She nods toward my

phone. “It’s so cool that your daughter’s a redhead like your wife. My mom has the most beautiful red hair.” She motions toward her head. “But I got brown. Dull brown with frizz and no curl. Must have done something to get on God’s bad side.”

“Your hair is great,” I say, feeling uncomfortable for several reasons. But that’s Marjorie. So far, she seems to have a knack for not knowing how to pull off the “keeping it professional” thing. We’re a friendly office, but not *this* friendly, and I’m not sure how to tell her that Tatum’s my nanny, not my wife.

I guess I should just spell it out. She’s new in town, and I don’t want her gossiping about “my wife” with the other assistants and getting everyone confused.

“But um, that’s Tatum, my nanny,” I add. “I’m not married.”

“Oh, really?” Something sparks in her eyes, something I’m not even *remotely* interested in. I’m so not interested, I have to fight the urge to cringe as she moves closer, leaning a hip against my desk. “Wow, I thought for sure you’d be married. You’re so good looking and successful. And over thirty, right?”

“I’m thirty-three,” I say, wondering what that has to do with anything as I scoot my chair as far away as I can get without rolling off the thick plastic beneath my rolling wheels.

“My mom says all the good ones are married by thirty,” she says, adding hastily as if she’s worried that she’s offended me, “But thirty-three isn’t that much older, you have time. And you were probably married before, right? Since you have a kid and all?”

“I was, yes, for a short time,” I say, clearing my throat. “But I’m divorced now and I’m also...busy.” I soften the words with a smile. “I need to get this environmental report to my clients by two, so...”

“So, you want me to order lunch in?” she says, taking the hint. Sort of. “I can go get Philly cheesesteaks from the food truck the next street over. They’re real good. I don’t know if

they taste like they do in Philadelphia, but the peppers are super tasty with the cheese. Do you like peppers?"

"I do," I say, thinking of the peppers in my scramble and Tatum and how much I wish I were with her and Sarah Beth right now instead of Marjorie. "That sounds great. You can drop that off at one, please, but I'll need to focus until then."

"Okay, no problem," she says, starting for the door only to turn back and ask, "Have you ever been to Philadelphia? I hear it's cooler than most people think. Like, lots of museums and a cool bar scene and history and stuff."

"No, I haven't." I cast a pointed look toward my computer monitor. "I really should get back to this."

Marjorie laughs, a high-pitched bray that sets my teeth on edge. "Yeah, sorry. I know. I'm just a little scatter-brained on Wednesdays. It's two for one taco night at The Dirty Taco and I look forward to it all day. Can't stop thinking about those discount margaritas, either. I always have too many, but I'm never late to work the next day. Just hung over." She brays again before suddenly sobering and asking in a suggestive voice, "Would you want to join us tonight? A bunch of us from the office are going to meet up there at six-thirty. Should be fun."

I'm about to say no and encourage her to leave me alone again nicely one more time before I guide her out and lock the door but hesitate...

The Dirty Taco does have great food and margaritas. More importantly, it has the sexiest redhead I know sleeping right above it on the second floor. Two-for-one taco night would be a great excuse to spend more time with Tatum and the work gathering offers a perfect cover. I'm not violating our "purely business" policy, not at all. Inviting her to join us would just be good manners. Hell, it would be rude not to ask her if I can buy her dinner and walk her back to her place after.

"Yeah, that sounds good," I say. "Though I may have to bring my daughter if my mom can't watch her."

“Oh sure, that’s fine. I’d love to meet her,” she says, striking what I’m guessing is supposed to be a sexy pose against the door, with one arm up and her hip stuck out at an angle. “And to see *you* after hours, big boy.”

I cough uncomfortably, at a loss as how to respond.

In her sensible brown wool dress, brown orthopedic shoes, and tan stockings, Marjorie doesn’t look like the kind of woman who’s overflowing with sexual confidence, but she clearly doesn’t have a shy bone in her body. And that’s great—more power to her—but I haven’t given her any signals that I want to be anything more than her boss.

Have I?

I rack my brain, but I’m positive I’ve only been polite and friendly, nothing more. She may just be the kind of person who needs to have things spelled out clearly.

Even though I hate to make things awkward or hurt her feelings, I force myself to say, “Thanks, but I’m not up for more than friendship right now, Marjorie. Not with someone I work with. I hope you can understand.”

She smiles, her hips swaying slightly as she points a finger my way. “But I don’t work here, Andy. I’m just a temp. I’ll be on to my next gig in a few weeks and...who knows what might happen then. I make a mean Hot Dish, by the way. I do something special with the tater tots that no one ever sees coming. Play your cards right and you just might find a casserole dish on your doorstep. I know where you live. It’s in the company files.”

Eyes wide, I mutter a stunned, “Uh-huh, well, I need to get back to work now, Marjorie. And forget about that Philly cheesesteak. I forgot I have other plans for lunch.”

“What plans? Do you need me to—”

“Goodbye,” I say, standing and crossing the room in three long strides. “I’ll let you know if I need anything else.”

She starts to speak but I close the door in her face and lock it for good measure. I’m not usually the kind who would even consider doing something that rude at the office, but Jesus...

The woman is unhinged. I was born and raised in Minnesota. An offer to bring a man Hot Dish—a casserole filled with meat, cheese, sin, and topped with tater tots—is a sign that things are getting serious. I know people who have been dating for years who still haven't moved on to the “she brought over Hot Dish” stage of courtship.

I have to do something to make it clear to Marjorie that I'm not on the market and that she absolutely should never come by my house with a casserole dish or anything else, but that will have to wait until I finish this report.

I dive back in, my focus undisturbed until twelve-thirty, when Tatum sends another update on Sarah Beth's day, a short video showing me the “ants on a log” they're making for lunch. Celery with peanut butter in the middle and raisin “ants” on top sounds revolting, but my daughter is beaming as she lines up her ants and flashes me a double thumbs up.

I love that Tatum does this, that she makes me feel like I'm included in their day, that I'm not missing out because I have to work a full-time job that keeps me away from my kiddo Monday through Friday. These texts don't feel like interruptions; they're fuel that keeps me going, reminding me why I work so hard.

I'm doing it for her, my baby, so she can have a safe, warm house, vacations in the summertime, and a college fund so she won't be paying off loans until she's thirty. Thanks to a killer score on my LSAT, I received a full ride to law school, but I had debt from undergrad until just last year.

I don't want that for Sarah Beth. I want her life to be as easy as I can possibly make it and I'm willing to sacrifice for that. I just don't want to miss out on watching her grow while I do it. Until a few days ago, however, I did.

But now that Tatum's here, I suddenly feel like I get to do both—be the hardworking provider and the dad who's looped in on the fun.

I'm feeling pretty damned lucky until one o'clock, when a loud knock on my door once again startles me out of my seat. I turn to see Marjorie staring in through the long thin window

on the side of door with a big grin. “I brought you a sandwich anyway,” she says, holding up a grease-stained bag. “You have to eat to keep up your strength to keep lawyering like a boss, Andy.”

On impulse, I discreetly grab my cell phone and call Tatum, pretending I was already on the phone as I turn back to Marjorie and lift a hand. “I’ll get it in a second Marjorie, I’m on a call. Just leave it outside the door.”

Before she can respond, I turn back to my computer screen. A beat later, Tatum answers with a bright, “Hello, Mr. Dad, how’s your day at work so far?”

I hear Sarah Beth giggle in the background and smile again, even though I can feel Marjorie behind me, still watching, waiting, clearly hoping I’ll be off the call soon and she can hand deliver the cheesesteak.

Probably along with more unwanted flirtation.

“Work is good. I’m nearly done with my environmental report and only have two meetings this afternoon,” I say, dropping my voice as I add, “But I’m having a little trouble with the new temp. She’s being a little...aggressive.”

Tatum makes a concerned sound. “What? How so?”

“She um... She offered to bring me a casserole and said she knows where I live.”

Tatum laughs. “Oh my. Did you tell her you don’t date your employees?”

“I did,” I say, starting to regret reaching out to Tatum about this, considering our history, but she’s the only woman I trust to give me advice without running back to tell my mom about it. My sisters are great, but they all love to gossip, too. It apparently runs in the McGuire women’s blood. “But she said she was a temp and basically insinuated I was free game in a few weeks when she moves on to her next job. I had to shut the door in her face to get her out of my office.”

“Wow,” Tatum says, murmuring “I’ll be right back, sweets. Just need to check on something in the living room,” to Sarah Beth. A few seconds later she continues in a softer voice,

“That sounds intense, Drew. Maybe you should report her to human resources? Sexual harassment goes both ways, you know. Just because you’re the boss and a guy doesn’t mean you can’t be a victim.”

I exhale a short laugh. “No, no way. I don’t want to get her in trouble. She seems like a nice person just...maybe not the best at reading social cues. And she’s never crossed the line until today. She saw one of the pictures you sent on my phone and assumed you were my wife. As soon as she heard you were the nanny and I was single, it was like a flip switched or something.”

“Ah, I see,” she says, sounding a little down. I’m kicking myself for putting her in an awkward position and am about to ask her to forget I called when she adds, “Then what you need, my friend, is a fake girlfriend.”

“What?” I laugh. “A fake girlfriend?”

“Yes. If she left you alone when she assumed you were married, she clearly respects another woman’s prior claim. She’ll probably respect a girlfriend, too. I’ll take care of it. Expect a text in about fifteen minutes. It’ll be coming from another Kentucky area code. I have an old internet phone number I used to use for online dating, so creeps couldn’t track down where I lived.”

“Smart,” I say. “And sad. I’m sorry you had to worry about things like that. Men are the worst.”

“Women can be creepy, too,” she says. “As you’ve learned today. But that’s why I’m committed to meeting people in real life from now on. I feel like I can take a guy’s measure better in person than over text message.”

I wince. “I agree. And I’m sorry I ended up being your boss. I would really have liked to be the man who proved that there are still some good ones out there.”

“You did,” she says softly. “You’ve been great to me, Drew. And now I’m going to do you a solid in return. Keep your phone where your unwanted lady friend can see it and you’ll get a surprise in a few.”

“Okay. See you later. Oh, and a bunch of people from work are going to The Dirty Taco for two-for-one taco night and discount margaritas tonight. I’d love to treat you as a thank you. I may bring Sarah Beth, too, or drop her at my mom’s if my parents are up for watching her. She’s not the biggest fan of tacos. Says she doesn’t like the way they smell.”

“Sounds great,” Tatum says with a laugh. “I was planning to be there anyway. You can’t keep me from a cheap taco. I’ll try to talk Sarah Beth into giving them another try. She didn’t think she’d like ants on a log, either, but she’s on her fifth one now with no signs of stopping.”

I smile that too-big smile that’s becoming an increasingly common occurrence around this woman. “Great. See you tonight.”

“Oh, you’ll see me a little sooner than that,” she says in a mischievous voice that makes my cock perk up in my pants.

But just thinking about Marjorie waiting on the other side of the door is enough to get that situation under control pretty quickly. I tidy a few things on my desk, killing time to give Tatum a chance to send her “fake girlfriend” text, then rise and cross to the door, where the temp is still grinning through the window.

“I knew you’d get hungry,” she says, pushing inside with the bag in hand. “You lawyer types think you can live on coffee, but we girls know better. You clearly need someone watching out for you. Someone with a soft touch.”

I pull in a breath, bracing myself for another awkward conversation. “About that, I actually do have someone watching out for me. I don’t like to talk about it at work, but ___”

As if on cue, my phone pings with an alert, and Marjorie grins. “Oh, is that another picture of your daughter? She’s the cutest little thing!” She turns to look and instantly goes stiff. “Oh my.” She clears her throat and sets the cheesesteak bag on the corner of my desk. “Well, then, I see how it is.” She turns back to me with a sniff and her nose lifted higher in the air. “You could have told me you had a girlfriend. I don’t like to

waste my time, either, you know. I may not be a big fancy lawyer, but my time is still valuable.”

“Right,” I say. “But like I said, I like to keep certain things private, especially at work. This isn’t the place for flirtation or anything else. Are we clear on that?”

She nods stiffly. “Of course, sir. Sorry to bother you. I’ll be at my desk if you need anything else.”

Marjorie departs with a swiftness that makes me send a silent prayer of thanks to the gods for sending Tatum my way. Whatever she did, it was fast, effective, and priceless. I’m going to owe her a lot more than a few tacos after getting Marjorie off my back.

My shoulders are relaxing away from my ears for the first time since my aggressive temp set me in her sights this morning. Then, I sit down and see the text Tatum sent and every nerve ending in my body is once again on high alert, but for entirely different reasons.

The text—*Can’t wait to see you tonight, honey. Just wanted you to know I love you and am so grateful to have the sexiest boyfriend in the world!*—is tame enough.

It’s the picture that makes my mouth go dry and my cock do things a cock should never do at work.

It’s Tatum in my guest bathroom. It shows her from the chin down wearing nothing but a white bra. The bra is simple, modest even. The only thing special about it is the satin fabric and the small blue stone set between her breasts.

But the way it compliments her pale skin with the pink undertones and the fact that these are *Tatum’s* breasts, the breasts I was lucky enough to suck and lick and tease while she writhed beneath me on Saturday night is dizzying.

All the blood in my body is suddenly in my cock and my head is spinning. If I didn’t have that damn window beside my door that looks out on the bullpen of the office, where the assistants and junior associates are hard at work, I would have stretched out on the carpet to do some deep breathing exercises until I regained control.

Instead, I settle for propping my head in my hands and doing my best not to think about my nanny's incredible body, and how much I want to worship every inch of her with my hands, my mouth, my...everything. I save the photo to a private folder on my phone and delete the text, but the damage is already done. My mind is full of scenes from the other night, of Tatum's perfect pussy slick and swollen for me as I fucked her with my tongue, of the way she moaned and clung to me as I pushed inside her for the first time.

I try to force my mind back to environmental contaminants and their effect on the price per square foot of reclaimed dairy land. But my cock is throbbing, aching, and Fantasy Tatum is still waltzing through my thoughts, unhooking that bra and sliding it down her arms while she whispers, "Come on, we have time for a quickie."

And then I do something I never thought I'd do. Ever.

I'm not the kind of guy who takes advantage of my private bathroom for anything but using the lavatory in peace. But today, I prove I'm not the kind of man I thought I was, after all.

I step into my private bathroom, take out my cock, and bring up the picture of Tatum. I set the phone on the edge of the sink and imagine the way I'd kiss the curves of her beautiful breasts, the way I'd tease her nipples until they're so stiff beneath my tongue. Then I jerk myself up and down to fantasies of her riding me, her pussy slick and wet and as desperate for me as I am for her. I come with a stifled groan, catching the hot jet of my release in my other hand, making such a mess I'm ashamed of myself.

"Never again," I admonish myself aloud as I clean up with a paper towel that I wrap in toilet paper for good measure before tossing it in the trash. Then I wash my hands, splash water on my face, and give my flushed cheeks a hard look in the mirror. "Stop this shit. She's your employee. That's it."

Unfortunately, just seconds after I've pulled myself together, another text comes through from Tatum, on the usual

thread—*Hope that did the trick. And wasn't too inappropriate?*

Closing my eyes and praying for strength I text back—*It was perfect. Marjorie left as soon as she spotted another woman on my phone. I owe you one. I'm buying tacos tonight.*

She sends back a smiley face emoji and a thumbs up, then—*Sweet. Sarah Beth and I have to go teach Ajax how to tie his shoes now. A stuffy mom's work is never done. See you tonight!*

Tonight, I send back.

When I glance back up at my reflection, I'm smiling again.

Shit.

So far I really suck at not falling for my nanny.

I suck really, really hard.

Chapter Eleven



I don't know where I got the guts to send Drew the shot of me in my bra, but I don't regret it. My logical brain knows that Drew is my boss and seemingly on the way to being a good friend—that's it.

But my mischievous sex brain doesn't care that we've decided flirting is off the table, let alone anything more. No, the Mischievous Sex Brain™ is trouble, and it's flat-out *delighted* when he comes in the door at six with heat in his eyes that's all for me.

"Daddy!" Sarah Beth cries out as she rushes to meet him.

He sweeps her up for a hug, but over her shoulder his eyes are locked on mine as he says, "Hey there, cutie. I missed you today."

And I missed you, cutie, I say silently, while my rational side rolls its eyes and throws up its hands, giving up on making the rest of me behave. At least for tonight.

Tonight, we're having our second date, after all—Sarah Beth staunchly refused tacos and will be heading to her aunt's for dinner—and I intend to enjoy every off-the-clock minute with this incredible man.

"Just let me change and we'll head out," Drew says, loosening his tie. "I'm starving."

"Me, too," Sarah Beth says. "And not for gross tacos." She sticks her tongue out with a gagging sound. "I just hope you two don't get sick after. It's a fact that tacos make people very sick."

I grin. “You have a lot of facts in your back pocket today, Miss S. She also told me it’s a fact that it’s against the law to make four-year-olds take naps if they don’t want to.”

She grins. “That’s true. I heard it somewhere.”

Drew laughs and ruffles her hair. “Well, I think this four-year-old should keep her nap for a little longer. She’s in a much better mood at night when she’s had her nap. And she gets to stay up until nine at her aunt’s house as a special treat.”

“I do?” Sarah Beth jumps into the air at Drew’s nod. “Yippee! I’ll get to play three games of Candy Land with Cousin Chase and Jenga and basement bowling. I’m going to get Ajax. He loves basement bowling.”

She dashes for the stairs, and I start for the door, but Drew stops me with a gentle hand on my elbow on my way by. “You’re leaving? I thought maybe we could drive over together and drop Sarah on the way.”

“I’d love to,” I say, my skin burning simply from the feel of his fingers warm on my inner arm. “But I’m still wearing the same clothes from yesterday. I’d like to refresh myself. Put on something worthy of a big night out at The Dirty Taco.”

He grins and my heart flips. “I can’t wait to see what that outfit looks like. The others are getting there around six-thirty and I told them you’d be joining us. Just look for the table full of people in glasses. I may be a few minutes late if my sister and her husband want to chat.”

“No worries,” I say, grabbing my coat from the closet. “I may be a little later, too. I’m going to grab a quick shower. Sarah Beth and I played pretty hard in the park today. I pulled her around on the sled while pretending to be Sharona the snow dog.”

He laughs, but there’s still a spark in his gaze as he says, “I would have paid money to see that. Why Sharona?”

“We heard My Sharona by The Knack in the car. She loved it. I downloaded it so we could blast it while we made lunch.”

“Sounds like a great day,” he says.

“It was,” I agree. “I loved working at the daycare but there’s something really nice about getting to spend time with one special little person. Especially when the little person is Sarah Beth.” As much as I want to get home and shower, I have to take a beat to gush. “She’s really amazing, Drew. So smart and funny and creative and kind. You won the kiddo lottery with that one.”

“Agreed,” he says. “I think I won the nanny lottery, too. She’s so much happier with you here. I am, too.”

Feeling like I’ve swallowed the sun—and also a little sad because my greedy heart wants even more than this friendly, mutual appreciation society we’ve got going on—I smile. “Thanks, Drew. That’s amazing to hear. I’m so glad it’s working out for everyone. See you soon!”

He smiles, making his dimple pop beneath his neatly trimmed beard. “Yeah. I’m excited for you to meet the people I work with. They’re all really friendly. And they’ll be able to give you advice about things like breakfast restaurants and things people do without kids. Things that aren’t in my wheelhouse.”

I arch a brow. “And finally tell me the story of Bad Dog? You never did get around to sharing that the other night, you know.”

“No,” he murmurs, holding my gaze with an intensity that makes my blood fizzy. “I didn’t. You’ll have to get Ashley to tell it. She’s a better storyteller than I am. She’s my boss’s assistant and knows everything there is to know about Bad Dog, the history of the region, and real estate law.”

“Cool, I can’t wait to meet her. And Marjorie.” I wink and he laughs.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but Marjorie cancelled. Apparently, she has a Hot Dish to make for Trevor who works on the window cleaning crew.”

“Woof,” I say, furrowing my brow in false sympathy. “You poor thing. Were you broken up that she’s moved on so fast?”

“Not even a little bit. I wish her and Trevor a long and happy Hot Dish union, and I’ll be making my address private in the work database first thing tomorrow morning.”

I laugh. “Sounds smart. See you soon!”

I head out the door full of energy and eager to start my night, something that rarely happened when I was back home working at the daycare. I leave it all on the field with Sarah Beth, too, but it’s different somehow. Maybe it’s because she has calmer periods in her day, when we’re reading or watching one of the educational cartoons Drew approved. Or maybe it’s just that I feel such a connection with her that work doesn’t feel as much like *work*. It feels like spending time with a very small, very sweet little friend.

It’s probably what being a mom will feel like.

The thought makes me put on the brakes a little too hard at the last stop sign in Drew’s subdivision. I shouldn’t be thinking that way about Sarah Beth, shouldn’t be feeling that way. It’s way too soon for me to be getting so attached, but I can’t seem to help it.

Still, the realization bothers me enough that when I’m done with my shower and finished drying my hair, I put my phone on speaker as I’m doing my makeup, and call Wren. “Hey, do you have a few minutes to chat?” I ask as I blend my foundation with a sponge, covering up the freckles on my nose.

“Yeah, sure, I was just trying to talk myself into going to the gym,” she says. “But it’s so loud in there and the cardio pump teacher always yells at me when I do the push-ups on my knees.”

“I think you should be praised for doing push-ups of any kind.”

“Right?” She laughs. “You should be a workout class instructor. Lots of praise and cookies after.”

“I’ll keep that in my back pocket if I decide I’m not cut out to be a nanny.”

Wren makes a sympathetic sound. “Oh, no. I thought things were going well.”

“They are. Too well. I’m already so smitten with Sarah Beth. I caught myself thinking this must be what it’s like to be a mom today. Is that weird? Crazy?”

She seems to ponder that for a moment. “No, I don’t think that’s something to worry or feel bad about. It’s natural to have warm feelings for a sweet kid you take care of every day. And Sarah Beth is ridiculously cute.” Wren hums beneath her breath. “And now that I think about it, she sort of looks like she could be your biological child. With the red hair and everything.”

“Someone at Drew’s work thought I was her mom,” I say, briefly retelling the story of Drew’s real estate law stalker. “So, I sent him a flirty text from a different number to help scare her away.”

“Well, well,” Wren says, a knowing note in her tone. “I think he owes you a drink.”

“He’s buying me one tonight,” I say, barely stifling my grin as I sweep on eye shadow. Wren makes a whooping sound of celebration that I silence with a shush. “It’s not like that. A bunch of his work friends were meeting at the restaurant underneath my apartment for half-priced tacos anyway. He just asked me to join. It’s not a big deal.”

“He’s introducing you to everyone he works with, Tatum,” she says. “That’s a huge deal. The only person Barrett has ever introduced to the nursing staff was Lane, his ex-wife.”

“It’s different. I’m also someone he works with, in a way,” I say. “And I’m new in town. He just wants to introduce me to more people who can help me find my way around.”

“Right. Keep telling yourself that and I’ll head home to rest up for all the ‘I told you so-ing’ I’ll be doing in the future.”

I chuckle. “If that’s the excuse you need to avoid getting yelled at by the mean push-up instructor, I support you.”

She exhales a relieved-sounding sigh. “Thank you. I just can’t today. I need peace, quiet, and turkey chili in front of the fire.”

“Speaking of turkeys,” I say, turning my head to see if my eyeliner is straight. “Have you formulated a plan for getting out of the toxic relationship with Kyle?”

“Barrett’s going to leave work early on Friday and stake out my place while the rest of us catch up on paperwork. We don’t do office visits on Friday afternoons, so it’s the first time he can get away. But he’s promised to capture and humanely remove Sir Pecks-a-Lot so...fingers crossed.”

Now it’s my turn to put on the knowing tone, “And this is all because he’s such a great boss. Not because he secretly has as much of a thing for you as you have for him.”

“Exactly,” she huffs. “You just don’t understand. You’ll see when you meet Barrett. He’s not like Drew. He doesn’t have feelings. Especially not for me.”

“We’ll see,” I say, slicking on a final coat of lip gloss. “But I think I’m going to be the one doing the ‘I told you so-ing.’ In the meantime, I won’t worry about getting attached to Sarah Beth. I’ll consider it normal until someone tells me otherwise.”

“Which no one will,” she assures me. “You became a childcare provider because you love kids, right?”

“Right,” I agree.

“So loving Sarah Beth is just proof you’re in the right field and great at your job. Don’t stress and have a great night. And have a grilled octopus taco for me. They’re my favorite.”

We hang up and I step back from the mirror, tugging down my brown sweater with the gold sparkly fox on the front over my jeans. With my hair freshly dried and hanging in waves around my face and a little more makeup than I usually wear, I decide I look good, but still casual enough for taco night. I head downstairs, thinking how nice it is that I don’t have to drive home tonight. I still don’t intend to overdo it—I have work tomorrow, after all—but being able to have two

margaritas instead of one isn't something I'm going to complain about.

I push through the door leading from the downstairs hallway into The Dirty Taco's bathroom area, entering through the side of the restaurant to avoid having to go outside into the snow. The restaurant is already hopping, and people are crowded onto the benches at the front, waiting for a table.

But I spot Drew's crew right away, already seated at big circular table in the back.

He said they would be the people with glasses, and he wasn't kidding. Every single one of the men and women chatting over a shared pitcher of margaritas has glasses save one, a man slightly older than Drew with a little silver at his temples. It's that man who spots me and lifts an arm, waving me over.

I smile and start toward the table, weaving through the other boisterous diners. I'm a little nervous—meeting new people is fun but can be a little scary too. But by the time Rick, the glasses-free guy, introduces me to the rest of the table and clears a spot for me between him and a younger guy named Peter, I'm starting to feel more at ease.

The lawyers and their assistants are all so nice and welcoming. Rick tells me about his little sister, Kelly, who moved to town last year, and how happy she would be to take me out with her kayaking club once the weather is warmer. Two of the older women promise me Midwesterners are way nicer, and more welcoming than most people think and Peter, the youngest lawyer on staff, assures me the local singles' scene is pretty great.

I notice he says this with a certain shine in his eyes but decide to ignore it.

Yes, I want to find a guy to get my mind off Drew... eventually. But that can wait for Friday night and a guy that doesn't work at Drew's practice.

I settle for a polite smile and settle in to hear Ashley's tale of a particularly tricky case she and Rick are working on for

the county. It's pretty fascinating actually, full of intrigue and property claim lies and an unexpected time capsule found inside an old grain silo. I'm so swept up in the story, I don't realize Drew's late until the waitress stops by to take our taco order.

I order two fish and two grilled octopus tacos, in Wren's honor, and shift back in my chair to glance at the door. There are fewer people waiting at the front now, but still no sign of the man I came here hoping to see.

"Drew's always late to things like this," Ashley says as she ties her long brown hair up in a knot on her head. It's getting weirdly warm in here, considering it's freezing cold outside. "It always takes longer to drop his daughter at his sister's than he thinks it will."

"That's because Melissa can talk the leg off a dog," Rick adds, good naturedly. "She's a lot of fun, though. Especially at the annual company pontoon party on the lake."

Ashley's blue eyes get big. "Remember that game she made up? Pool noodle pong? I don't think I've ever laughed so hard."

Rick chuckles. "My wife still talks about it. She's already collecting noodles for this year. Asked for a few for Christmas." He glances my way. "Have you met Melissa?"

I shake my head. "No, not yet. I haven't met anyone in the family except Sarah Beth, but she's pretty special, so I have no doubt the rest of the McGuires are a blast."

"They're a great family. And I'm not just saying that because I've had three margaritas on an empty stomach." Ashley grins as she scoots back her chair. "On that note, I'll adjourn to the ladies room."

I scoot my chair back. "I'll come along. Only one margarita, but very small bladder."

Rick nods. "My wife's the same way. I'll watch your drinks."

We thank Rick and head across the room. "You'll have to tell me the story of Bad Dog when we get back," I tell Ashley

as we go. “Drew said you’re the one to ask about it because you know how to spin a yarn.”

Ashley laughs. “I appreciate his work as a hype man. I’ll do my best, but it’s really not that exciting. It involves a fisherman, a preacher, and a dog.” She lifts her hand to one side of her mouth as she adds in a stage whisper, “Spoiler alert: the dog was bad.”

I laugh. “Sounds like the set up for a joke. I’m all ears.”

“As soon as we get back to our drinks,” Ashley promises, dashing into the women’s restroom.

I follow her, but finish before she does. After washing my hands, I step out into the hallway and pull out my phone from my purse, wanting to check and see if Drew’s sent a message updating his arrival time. Instead, I find two messages from my mom asking how I’m settling in that I decide to return later and an ad for shaping underwear.

I’m considering using the underwear ad’s discount code—what can I say, I’m a sucker for a push-up bra—when a man’s hand settles on my lower back.

I turn, expecting to see Drew, but it’s Peter, the single guy with the interested eyes. His eyes are even more interested now, and a tad red. He looks like he’s had a few too many already and it’s not quite seven-fifteen.

“Hey, I hope I didn’t scare you off,” he says, slurring his words a little. “Jumping right into talking about the singles’ scene. I just thought, from looking at you, that you’d want to know.”

I shift discreetly away from his hand, which he thankfully removes without being weird about it. “Oh yeah? Do I have that desperate single woman look about me?” I tease.

He shakes his head a little too loosely. “No, not at all. You’re just a knockout and I didn’t see a ring, so…” He lifts his hands at his sides. “But if you’ve got a boyfriend waiting for you somewhere, my apologies.”

“You should apologize,” a deep, menacing voice says from the entrance to the bathroom hallway. The voice is so ominous

sounding that it takes me a beat to realize it's coming from Drew.

I've never heard him sound threatening before, but he's certainly giving out some "fuck around and find out" vibes as he steps forward, positioning himself between Peter and me. "We talked about this Peter. It's not okay to get drunk at work functions, even if they're off the clock. It makes you look unprofessional and hitting on my nanny before she's had a chance to sit down isn't cool. She's new in town and deserves some time and space to find her footing without men breathing down her neck in bathroom hallways."

"She's been sitting down for half an hour," Peter says. "It's not my fault you're always late."

Drew draws his shoulders back, until he's towering over the shorter man, and I'm worried I'll have to step in to prevent a scene, but Peter quickly adds, "But yeah, you're right. I should have eaten something first. I know I can't hold my tequila. I'll get a taxi home and call it a night. Just let me get a box for my tacos. Can't leave without tacos."

"No, never leave without tacos," Drew says, his voice gentling. "And be sure to drink a couple glasses of water before bed so you're not hungover."

"Good idea, thanks, boss," Peter says, lifting a hand to me in a sheepish wave. "And apologies, Tatum. I didn't mean to overstep."

"No worries at all, and nice to meet you, Peter," I say, waiting until he's out of earshot to turn to Drew and say, "He didn't overstep. *You* overstepped. I'm not a child, Drew. I don't need you to protect me from cute single guys or anyone else."

His jaw drops in surprise, but before he can speak, I step around him and make my way back to the table with my head held high.

It's fine that Drew doesn't want to be more than friends, but he doesn't get to have it both ways. He can't put me in the

friend zone and get all territorial and possessive at the same time.

That's not the way dating—or *I*—work.

Chapter Twelve



Just when I thought this night couldn't get worse.

First Sarah Beth had a fit at Melissa's because Mel's husband was making lasagna instead of the angel hair pasta she likes, then my mom called and insisted on having a conversation about the summer family trip we don't need to book for at least two more months, and then I hit a patch of ice on the way over and ended up in ditch.

Thankfully, I was able to push the car out with the help of an old friend who happened to be driving by, but the slip made me even later.

And more short-tempered.

When I saw Peter being Peter—drinking too much and hitting on every pretty girl who doesn't know he's the biggest player in town—I just...lost it.

I'm not proud of myself, but I don't think I deserved a dressing down from Tatum, either. I was just trying to protect her and make sure she felt comfortable tonight.

Instead, I've made things weird.

She barely looks at me after Peter excuses himself for the night and I take his seat. She keeps her gaze on Ashley, laughing as she finishes the story of Bad Dog with a flourish. "The preacher agreed to keep his cats on the other side of the lake, near his trapping cabin, and the fisherman agreed to keep his bad dog penned up on this side of the lake, where it couldn't terrorize the cats. But he loved that stupid dog so much that the pen kept getting bigger and bigger, until it was

nearly the size of a town. So, eventually he founded the town of Bad Dog, Minnesota, vowing bad dogs would always be welcome here.”

“And they are,” Rick pipes up. “You can ask Duchess, my corgi. You have to see a picture, Tatum, she’s the cutest thing you’ve ever seen.”

The entire table groans good-naturedly—Rick spoils his corgi more than I spoil my kid—but they all lean in to see the latest shot of Duchess in her pink and black pom-pom sweater.

“Precious,” Tatum declares. “What a perfect little lady.”

“Don’t let the cute face fool you,” Ashley says. “Duchess will poop in your bathroom if you go too long without giving her a snuggle.”

“Or run the vacuum cleaner,” Rick says, still grinning. “She hates the vacuum cleaner.”

“Sounds like Duchess and I have something in common,” Tatum says. “Cleaning is the worst.”

The table chuckles, clearly as charmed by Tatum as I am, and then the server is tableside, delivering another pitcher of margaritas. I pour myself a little more than I usually would in the name of catching up with everyone else, but the usually delicious lime concoction tastes like dirt in my mouth.

I hate this distance between Tatum and me.

I hate that I made her angry or, even worse, disappointed her. I liked the reflection I saw in her eyes before, of a man who went the extra mile for his daughter and drew boundaries because it was the right thing to do, not because he was jealous.

That’s what all that was with Peter.

At the time, I thought I was just cracking down on a wayward junior lawyer who has a habit of tying one on, but with the benefit of five minutes of hindsight, the truth becomes pretty clear.

I’m ashamed of myself and angry that I ruined what I hoped would be a good night with Tatum. I knew it wouldn’t

be a date night, obviously, but I hoped to enjoy more of her company in an adult setting. I adore my daughter, but there are times when it's nice to spend time with other grown-ups. I don't get much of that, and now I've fucked up one of my few opportunities to enjoy down time with my colleagues and treat a woman I like to a nice night out.

It's more than sexual attraction with Tatum.

I just...like her. Being in her company makes even silly things like the story of Bad Dog and a game of poker with my work friends feel special.

When we finish our fourth round of cards and Deborah excuses herself for the night, I lean in and murmur, "I'm sorry. Forgive me?" to Tatum too softly for the people bidding Deb goodbye to hear.

She shifts her gaze, glancing up at me from the corners of her eyes. "For what?"

"For being a jealous asshole when I have no right to be jealous. Or controlling. Or anything but supportive and kind and happy that you're happy, whatever it is that's making you happy," I say, forcing my tone to remain light as I add, "Even if that's Peter, the guy who always drinks too much and sleeps around. A lot. Like...a lot, a lot."

Tatum's lips curve. "I have no interest in Peter. But I also have no interest in being treated like your little sister. I'm not your little sister, Drew."

"No, you're not," I say. "And again, I apologize. It won't happen again."

She nods and reaches for her drink, lifting it my way. "I'll drink to that."

I lift my glass, clinking it to hers. "Forgiven?"

"Forgiven," she says. "So what kept you? Is Sarah Beth okay?"

With a sigh, I relay the Tragedy of Being Forced to Eat Lasagna. By the time I finish, she's laughing so hard I can't help but find it funny, too. "And then my mom kept me on the

phone, and I slid off the road on a patch of ice and it was just a cursed start to the evening.”

Her eyes go wide with concern as she grabs my hand under the table. “Are you okay? Is the car okay?”

“We’re both fine,” I say, my fingers closing around hers, holding her hand the best thing that’s happened to me all day. “An old buddy from high school drove by and helped me push it out,” I assure her. “I truly was giving being on time my best shot, but it didn’t work out.”

“I’m just glad you weren’t hurt,” Tatum says, detangling her hand from mine. She clears her throat as she adds in a brighter tone, “I’m not used to driving on icy roads, so I take it very slow around here. One guy honked at me on the way to the park the other day, but people are mostly very nice about the woman driving at granny speed. I figure it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“On the whole, people are great here,” Ashley confirms from the other side of the table with a yawn. “But we fade out early. We’re all farmers’ kids who grew up getting up at the ass crack of dawn and going to bed right after sunset and we never quite break the habit. I’m heading for home. See you all tomorrow. Nice meeting you, Tatum.”

“Nice meeting you, too,” Tatum says, pushing her chair back and reaching into her purse. “I should go, too. My boss has a zero-tardiness policy.”

The grin she shoots my way can’t banish the disappointment filling my chest. “Your boss will understand if you want to have one more drink and play a couple more rounds of poker. You’re on a winning streak,” I say, nodding toward her pile of quarters. Seems a shame to quit now.”

Her smile only falters for a second, but it’s enough to make me suspect my “zero tardiness” policy isn’t the reason she’s leaving. “Thanks, but I should go. I could use some time alone to read my book and just...focus.” She pulls out a twenty-dollar bill. “Is this enough to cover my part? I’m not sure how to split the margarita costs.”

I cover her hand, guiding it back to her purse. “Don’t worry about it. It’s on me. Consider it a bonus for a great first week.”

She laughs. “It’s only been three days, but I’ll take it. Thanks, Drew.” She stands, waving at those of us left at the table. “Bye everyone. Drive safe and so nice to meet you!”

A chorus of “goodbyes” rise from our table as she moves toward the side exit.

I watch her go for a moment, my stomach in knots, before reaching for my wallet. “I’d like to pay for everyone if that’s okay. My apology for being so late to the party.”

“Yeah, I think that would be just fine,” Coleen says, with a laugh.

“You’re a hero among men,” Rick says, motioning to the waitress. “We’ll have the check. But add another pitcher to it before you bring it over, please. I need to win back all the quarters I just lost.”

Now that Tatum’s gone, I really don’t want to linger any longer, but I can’t excuse myself without making it obvious I was here to indulge my entirely inappropriate crush on my nanny, so...I stay.

I stay and I lose every quarter in my pile to Coleen. But Rick loses his, as well, and it’s nice to spend time with the two of them. Coleen has been with the company since not long after I was born and Rick’s a great guy. He’s one of my role models, actually. He has a great relationship with his wife, raised two great girls who just started college and high school, and finds time to be an incredible attorney, a good friend, and an obsessed dog dad at the same time.

As we head for the door, pulling on coats, I ask him, “How are the girls? Is Alyssa enjoying her freshman year?”

He sighs, but smiles as he says, “She’s having a blast, but Dad is having a harder time. Every time we go out for breakfast, I ask for a table for four. I just can’t wrap my head around the fact that she’s five hours away. I still visit her every other Saturday. I worry I’m cramping her style, but she says

she likes our early suppers, and I can't stand not seeing my baby girl for months on end."

I clap him on the shoulder. "She's lucky to have a dad like you."

"Well, thanks. I hope so," he says. "I did my best to love her with every piece of my heart. I know you do the same with Sarah Beth. But hug her tight and treasure every memory, even the hard ones. They aren't lying when they say it goes by like a flash. Before you know it, she'll be off to college, too."

I shudder and hold up a hand. "Don't say that. Even after a twenty-minute tantrum about being forced to eat lasagna, I don't want it to go any faster. Even on hard days, she's the best thing in my life."

Rick smiles a knowing smile and returns my shoulder clap. "Maybe not for long."

I blink. "What do you mean?"

"Don't shut out happiness for no reason, Drew. You deserve someone to share your life and all the fun and hardship of raising children with." He shrugs. "And Tatum seems like a strong young woman. If she isn't interested, I'm sure she'll let you know it."

I pull in a breath and start to sputter something about not wanting to make my employee uncomfortable, but Rick cuts me off with another clap on the shoulder. "Don't make life harder than it has to be. Believe, me, it's hard enough on its own without any help from us. I'm off to take Duchess out for her late-night walk. If she doesn't get to walk right before bed, she'll whine all night and keep the whole family awake. The things we do for love!"

"The things we do for love," I agree.

I watch him push through the door, my pulse picking up.

I'm about to head upstairs and knock on Tatum's door, ask if we can talk more about what a possible relationship might look like, when my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out to see a text from Melissa—*Sarah Beth is yawning big time.*

Should I put her down here? Or will you be back to get her by nine?

I glance at the time. It's already eight-forty-five.

Shit. I don't know what I was thinking. I don't have time for romantic gestures, and I can't afford to alienate my nanny. I need Tatum to show up at work tomorrow. I don't have anyone else lined up to take care of my daughter, and Sarah Beth comes first.

I'll be there in ten minutes, thanks, Mel. I text back.

Then I put my cell in my pocket and leave without looking back. Rick's right, I would love someone to share the joys and hardships of parenting with, but I've been through five babysitters and none of them clicked with Sarah Beth. What she has with Tatum is precious and I have to protect that at all costs.

Even if that means protecting it from myself.

Chapter Thirteen



I watch Drew leave the restaurant, hurrying to his car without so much as a glance over his shoulder and tell myself it's for the best. That's why I left when I did, after all. Because I couldn't stop touching Drew inappropriately or be trusted not to make a fool of myself in front of him and his work friends.

I should be glad he's leaving without a shred of hesitation.

I shouldn't even be at this window to see him go!

I should be in bed with the book I checked out at the library earlier today on the history of butts. It's definitely not kid friendly, but Sarah Beth was so fascinated by it—and giggly over the fact that someone wrote a three-hundred-page book on the history of booties—that I felt obligated to do this deep dive for both of us. She's counting on me to tell her when our species developed butts, why they're smooshy, and what this means about humanity as a whole.

I can't let her, or myself down by standing here, moping and wishing things with her dad were different.

Determined to put my boss out of my mind and concentrate on expanding my knowledge of human evolution, I crawl into bed and snuggle under the covers. But like the glutton for punishment that I am, the more I read about other people's booties, the more I think about the way Drew squeezed *my* butt. Those thoughts lead to even naughtier thoughts and pretty soon my hand is slipping down the front of my pajama pants.

I come in seconds, sent tumbling over the edge by Pretend Drew's voice in my ear, telling me how much he loves to fuck me, but I do my best not to enjoy it.

The only thing worse than guiltily masturbating to thoughts of my boss would doing it with a clear conscience.

* * *

The next morning, I awake from a dream that Drew, Sarah Beth, and I are living in a giant Peach—a result of reading James and the Giant Peach to Sarah yesterday and all my research on butts—and am forced to face facts.

I'm so gone on this man and his little girl that I keep *dreaming* about them.

Almost every night.

I need an intervention. Stat.

Glancing over at the clock, I see I have fifteen minutes before my alarm goes off and decide to start my "Friday night hunt for a man to keep my mind off Drew" a day early.

Online dating was clearly created by the devil himself, but it's the only way to meet people these days. I suppose some people still meet at work, but as someone who works with small children and mostly other women, that's never been an option for me.

I've created and deleted dating profiles so often, it only takes me five minutes to whip up a profile and start scrolling. The first thing I notice is that the men in Bad Dog are much cuter than the men I left behind in rural Kentucky. Most of them also seem to have jobs that don't involve horse poop.

I love horses, but Kentucky men are obsessed with their horses, to the point they feel no shame standing you up if America's Darling has gas or is off her feed for some reason. I swear, getting stood up for horses is a pattern for men in my hometown.

Or maybe it's me.

Maybe my picker is broken.

But you picked Drew. And he's amazing. Like the way he apologized last night. It was so kind and honest and grown-up.

“Stop,” I chide the inner voice with a sigh. Yes, Drew is a full-fledged unicorn, a dirty talking man with a cock piercing who's also incredible at adulting, but he's not on the menu for me.

I have to live in reality, not fantasyland.

In the name of coming back down to earth, I swipe right on a couple of nice-looking guys in their early thirties who, judging by their bios, seem to have a decent sense of humor, and call it good. I'm about to shut the app and start the kettle for tea when I come across a very sexy guy on a motorcycle.

He's gorgeous, with huge muscles and piercing blue eyes, but it's his face that really gets me.

He looks so much like...

“Like Drew,” I say aloud, my jaw dropping as I enlarge the picture on my screen. Aside from the blue eyes, instead of brown, lighter hair, and the more solid, square-shaped jaw on the biker, the two of them could be twins.

What are the chances this man *isn't* related to my sexy boss?

Probably pretty damned small.

I glance at his name—Christian—and take a gamble, typing “Christian McGuire, Bad Dog, Minnesota” into a new search window.

In just a few seconds I have loads of information on Drew's slightly younger brother, who owns a motorcycle shop and organizes a charity event to fund the local animal shelter every year. He's hot, sexy, and loves helpless animals in need. The man is the entire package, and he's *not* my boss.

Too bad I didn't meet him before I met Drew. Maybe things would have been different, and we could have had a

good time together. But now...

Well, I would never date a member of Drew's family. It would be too weird.

Which makes me wonder...

Hastily, I glance at the names of the two men I swiped right on. Neither of them looks like Drew's clone, but they're both tall, have great smiles, and dark hair, just like Drew. I add McGuire to both of their names in a search window and—*damn it!*

"You certainly have a type, woman," I mutter. Theodore McGuire is Drew's first cousin. So is Jacob McGuire, but he isn't Theo's brother. They have different parents, a fact made clear by an obituary for Theo's grandmother from a few months back.

I quickly unmatch with both men and set my profile to private. It's not safe to stick a toe in the dating waters around here without a complete McGuire family tree. Making a mental note to start working on my "Do Not Date List" during Sarah Beth's nap today so I'm ready to play the field on Friday with confidence, I get dressed and head to work.

I'm a few minutes early, but head up the steps at Drew's place anyway, figuring I can help get Sarah Beth's breakfast and give him more time to get ready for work. But when I step inside with a bright, "Hello, McGuires!" I'm not met by the cheery kitchen scene I've become accustomed to.

Instead, Sarah Beth is hiding under the table with tears streaming down her cheeks while Drew leans over, pleading, "Come on, Sarah Beth. I don't have time to make pancakes and you can't have pancakes for breakfast every day. It's not healthy. Sometimes you have to have oatmeal and fruit."

"I hate oatmeal," Sarah Beth sobs. "It's as bad as lasagna."

"Hey guys." I finish hanging my coat and move cautiously into the room. "Rough start this morning?"

Drew looks up, the stress on his face making me want to rub his shoulders and tell him it's all going to be okay. But I haven't had a margarita this morning, so I easily resist the urge

to touch him inappropriately and settle for a sympathetic smile.

“Sarah Beth wants pancakes,” he explains. “But we only do pancakes once a week, twice at the very most. It’s just too much sugar first thing in the morning.”

“It’s not fair,” Sarah Beth shouts from under the table, a hitch in her voice as she begins to cry harder. “I had to have lasagna last night at Aunty Melissa’s, and I hate it so much. I don’t want to have oatmeal, too. It’s not fair!”

I crouch down, bringing my face nearly level with Sarah Beth’s. “Hey, buddy. I hear you. We all have foods we don’t like and it’s hard when you’re a kid and don’t get to decide what you eat all the time. Why don’t you come out and we can talk about this, see if we can find a compromise.”

“I can have pancakes?” she asks, her tears beginning to slow.

I shake my head. “Nope. Dad said no.” She starts to protest, but I cut in, “And he’s right. It’s not healthy to have pancakes too often. It can make you sick and he loves you so much he doesn’t want you to get sick. Sometimes grown-ups say no because they love you and want to keep you safe. I know that doesn’t always make it easier, but I promise you, your daddy would never make a rule just to be mean. You’re the most important person in the world to him.”

“She’s right,” Drew says in a softer voice. “I love you and want to help you grow up healthy, honey. That’s all. Come out and let’s talk about it. If you really don’t want oatmeal, we can try to find another healthy choice.”

Sarah Beth swipes at her cheeks with her fist. “I like eggs, too. With cheese and toast.”

I smile as I glance Drew’s way out of the corner of my eyes, taking his swift nod as confirmation this compromise is Dad approved. “Well, that sounds like a great idea. I can scramble eggs with cheese and make toast while you have some strawberries, and you’ll have a healthy breakfast that’s also super delicious.”

“You don’t mind making them?” Drew asks softly, glancing at the clock on the wall above the kitchen table. “I’m not sure I have time.”

“Absolutely,” I assure him, standing as Sarah Beth crawls out from under the table. “Not a problem at all. You guys hug and make up and we’ll start the day fresh with no fights in it.”

Sarah Beth goes to Drew, reaching her arms up to him for a hug, whispering, “Sorry, Daddy,” as he scoops her up.

He wraps his arms around her, hugging her tight, closing his eyes as he whispers back, “I’m sorry, too. I’ll try to be better about finding compromises, like Tatum said. I know food can be tricky as a kid sometimes. My mom used to make me eat cabbage every Friday and I hated it so much that sometimes I’d hide in my closet and skip supper altogether. Even when I was really hungry.”

Sarah Beth giggles as she pulls back to pat his beard. “That’s silly, Daddy. Cabbage is delicious.”

Drew pulls a face, sticking out his tongue. “Ew, no. I hate it. No way am I eating cabbage.”

“You have to at Grammy’s house,” she says, gleefully. “She makes everybody eat the vegetables.”

“I guess I’ll have to ask her to compromise next time,” Drew says. “Or find somewhere to hide. Will you help me?”

Sarah laughs again. “Yes, I will. I know all the good places to hide at Grammy’s.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I say, a little choked up by the exchange. It was just so sweet, to see them work things out with so much love for each other. “Now, let’s let Daddy get ready for work. I’ll get your berries and start the eggs.”

Drew sets Sarah Beth down. As she crawls into her booster seat at the table, I whisper, “Good job, Dad,” on my way into the kitchen.

His gaze locks with mine. “Thanks to you. How did we manage without you?”

“Not too good sometimes,” Sarah Beth says, making it obvious she can hear our quiet exchange.

Drew and I both laugh, then he mutters, “From the mouths of babes. Anyway, I’m grateful, and so happy we found you.”

“I’m happy I found you guys, too,” I say, my heart breaking a little.

I’ve never felt so torn. One part of me is proud that I’m doing good work for my new boss and his kiddo. The other part of me desperately wishes this had nothing to do with work.

As I prepare Sarah Beth’s breakfast, I fantasize about what it would have been like to have met Drew out in the community, maybe while I was working at a daycare in town or something. I imagine how nice it would have been to get to know him, to earn his trust, and then be introduced to his baby girl as his girlfriend.

But the fact remains that I never would have come to Bad Dog if it weren’t for the nanny job. I found it on a job board for nannies and au pairs. If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t know this small town even existed, let alone have met this special single dad.

It’s a conundrum. A cruel twist of fate.

And sadly, it looks like I’m going to have a hell of a time finding a rebound guy who’s *not* a McGuire.

At story time at the library later that morning—a weekly event Sarah Beth and I learned about on our book collecting mission yesterday—I sneak over to the computers while Sarah is listening to a truly gripping rendition of Little Red Riding Hood. I settle in to do a little genealogy research at one of the public computers and realize the bartender the night I met Drew wasn’t kidding. A good fifty percent of the town’s population seems to be full-blooded McGuire or McGuire adjacent.

So, it’s probably good that Wren and I are headed outside the city limits for Friday Night Fun Times tomorrow night. Maybe there will be some fresh blood at Bubba Jump’s. The

club sounds like something that would be more at home in Kentucky than Minnesota, but I like it. It seems like a place that isn't taking itself too seriously and after a week of taking myself *way* too seriously, I'm down for that.

I close the browser and head back to story time, taking a seat with the parents and babysitters in the chairs behind the colorful carpet where the kids are seated criss-cross applesauce. On my way, I notice a cute woman with warm brown eyes watching me with a curious expression. I smile her way, and she lights up.

A beat later, she's in the empty chair next to mine, whispering, "So, you're Drew's new nanny? I'm Sofia by the way."

"Tatum," I whisper back. "And yes, I started this week."

"So cool! How's it working out so far? I applied for the job but didn't get it." She waves a hand, hurrying to add, "But that's fine, I actually love Conrad, the little boy I watch now. My boyfriend just thought I should apply since it was a higher salary than what I'm getting. So, are you local? I can't remember seeing you around before."

"No, I moved here from Kentucky," I say. "And it's working out well so far. Drew's so nice and I adore Sarah Beth. She's the sweetest kid."

Her gaze softens. "She really is. She was always the first one to share her toys at Gym with Me when she was a toddler. Drew stopped bringing her because one of the other girls kept pushing her down and pulling her hair, but we really enjoyed Sarah Beth." She lowers her voice even further to whisper, "Wish we could have kept Sarah Beth in the class and gotten rid of Martha. I hate to speak ill of little ones, but that kid is a menace."

I frown. "That's horrible. Drew didn't tell me that."

Sofia's brows lift. "No? I would have thought he would have warned you. Martha's still around. She's actually here today." She nods toward the carpet. "The girl with the blond curls and the pink sweater."

My frown deepens. “Huh. She looks like a Victorian doll.”

“Looks can be deceiving, friend,” Sofia says. “Keep an eye on that one.”

“Thanks for the heads up,” I say as the storyteller finishes and the kids are invited up to get a packet of seeds to plant in the spring, just like Red Riding Hood did in the reimagined tale.

“Of course.” Sofia beams my way. “And welcome to Bad Dog. Hope to see you around.”

“Same, thanks,” I say, truly impressed by the kindness of almost everyone I’ve met in the community so far.

No sooner has the thought passed through my head than a very unkind little blonde shouts, “Go away, ugly stupid,” and shoves Sarah Beth.

I’m in motion before she hits the carpet.

Chapter Fourteen



I'm just finishing up a meeting with Rick and a few of our senior staff when my phone rings. It's a number I don't recognize, but with a local area code, so I answer on the second ring, "Andrew McGuire speaking."

"Drew McGuire, you'd better come rein in your help right now," a vaguely familiar voice screeches, loud enough to make me pull my cell away from my ear. "She's trying to get Martha banned from the library!"

"Carrie?" I ask, my stomach sinking. I've managed to avoid Carrie Cummings the past two years, pulling out of Gym with Me and avoiding the community pool in the summers to keep Sarah Beth safe from her out of control child.

"Of course, it's Carrie," she says, her pitch sliding to an even more ear-piercing decibel. "And that nanny of yours is a red-headed menace. She's picking on an innocent little girl, and I won't stand for it. Come make this right this minute or you can forget any more work from my husband or family. You hurt my little girl and I'll make your bottom line hurt, McGuire. You can count on that."

"Which library branch are you at?" I ask, fighting to keep my voice calm, even as my blood starts to boil.

Carrie snorts out an ugly laugh. "Oh, that's rich. You don't even know where your own kid is and your nanny's taking it upon herself to critique mine."

"I trust Tatum to pick activities for Sarah Beth," I say. "So no, I didn't know she was going to the library. But tell me

where you are, and I'll be right there. I can take an early lunch."

"Oh, thanks so much, so glad you can fit doing the right thing into your busy schedule," she says, her tone dripping with sarcasm. "The Main Branch downtown. We'll be right here. My baby isn't going anywhere. Your nanny is the one who should be banned."

My jaw clenched, I say, "I'll be there in ten minutes, and we can discuss this further in person."

I end the call and turn to find Rick standing a few feet behind me, a sympathetic look on his face. "I heard," he says. "Didn't mean to eavesdrop, but it was hard not to."

I sigh. "Yeah, sorry. I'll take care of it and be right back."

"No rush," Rick says, jabbing a thumb toward Henry, our boss's office. "I'll tell Henry what's up and that we may be losing the Cummings account."

My brows shoot up. "No, I can smooth it over. I'll tell Tatum not to take Sarah Beth to that library or—"

"Like hell you will," Rick says, surprising me. He isn't usually a profanity-using guy, not even mild profanity. "Carrie Cummings is the menace, not your nanny. You go stand up for your family. We'll get by just fine without her husband's business." He grins. "Though I doubt we'll lose it for long if we do at all. We're the best real estate attorneys in the area, and he puts more value on good work than his wife's personal grudges."

My shoulders relax a little as I nod. "Thank you, Rick. I really appreciate that. I'll try to pacify her, but if I can't, it's good to know I have your support."

"And mine, too," Henry calls out from his office. "I'm half deaf in one ear and I could hear that woman all the way in here. Ridiculous."

Rick and I share a look and a grin. Henry's a man of few words. That was practically a speech from him. It's clear Carrie Cummings doesn't have the leverage she thinks she does.

Though, honestly, I'm not sure it would have made a difference if Henry had told me to play nice. As soon as I reach the library and see Sarah Beth sitting in a tiny yellow chair in the kids' corner, with a bright red rug burn on the side of her face, all concerns about business go out the window.

I hurry over to Tatum, who's positioned herself in front of Sarah Beth like an avenging Valkyrie, ready to take down any threat to her charge. A nervous-looking librarian with glasses and an oversized gray cardigan stands nearby, wringing her hands.

"What happened?" I ask, as I gather my daughter into my arms, cradling her close with a whispered, "It's okay, honey. I'm here."

Carrie, who's seated in the cushy "storyteller" chair with a pouting Martha on her lap says, "Your child tried to shove to the front of the line and—"

"That's untrue," Tatum cuts in, her voice calm, but firm. "Both girls were in line for seeds. Martha said unkind things to Sarah Beth and shoved her to the ground for no reason at all. Then she kicked her. If I hadn't stepped in, I'm not sure when the abuse would have stopped." She motions toward the librarian. "Which is why I've asked for Martha to be banned from this location until such time as she's undergone counseling for her anger issues and learned to treat other children with respect."

Carrie laughs, an ugly sound that makes the back of my neck prickle. "What a liar. I don't know how you spew that nonsense with a straight face." She strokes Martha's blond curls. "My sweetheart would never!"

"Well, we'll know what happened soon," the librarian says, pushing her glasses up her nose with a trembling hand. "My supervisor is pulling the footage from our camera system."

"We already know what happened," Sofia, one of the women I interviewed for Tatum's position pipes up from the block station where a cute little boy is building a tower. "We all saw it go down. It happened just like Tatum said it did and

I, for one, respect her for taking a stand. Martha's behavior has been a problem for years, especially with Sarah Beth."

"Because Sarah Beth has a horrible temper," Carrie says, making my daughter cringe closer to my chest. "Just like her nanny. They don't call redheads spitfires for nothing. If anything, *they're* the ones who should be banned. And reported to the police."

"I didn't do anything bad, Daddy, I promise," Sarah Beth whispers. "Not like last night with the lasagna. Don't call the police."

"Honey, you weren't bad last night," I say, kissing her forehead. "And no one's calling the police. Especially not on you. I know you didn't do anything wrong. You're such a good kid."

Tatum appears beside us, rubbing Sarah's back with shining eyes. "Absolutely, sweetheart. You're blameless here. Don't worry or be scared. Daddy and I are going to handle this. We've got your back, girl. One hundred percent."

"I've reviewed the footage." A second librarian, a tall, thin man with a prominent Adam's apple comes to stand beside Nervous Cardigan. "It happened exactly the way Miss O'Leary said it did and we have a zero-tolerance policy for bullying, Mrs. Cummings."

"Bullying?" Carrie bleats indignantly. "She's five years old. She's just a baby, not a bully."

"She injured another child," the man continues, standing firm. "And that's not okay. We'll have to ask you and your daughter to leave and refrain from visiting any of the public library branches until you can show proof your daughter's been through a counseling program and can behave herself with other children. I'll be sending an email to my colleagues to make sure the ban is enforced."

"You're going to regret this. I'll sue the library and get all of you fired." Carrie rises to her feet with a huff, gripping Martha's hand hard enough to make the little girl wince.

For a moment, I almost feel sorry for the child—she can't help being raised by a sociopath—but then she sticks her tongue out at me and the moment of empathy fades. This kid is trouble and has made Sarah Beth's life miserable since they were toddlers.

It's high time someone held Carrie accountable for her daughter's cruelty.

It should have been me, two years ago, when Martha started abusing Sarah Beth in Gym and Me.

"And you can forget any more work from my husband, McGuire," Carrie hisses at me on her way by. "Your firm overcharges anyway."

"That's just fine, Carrie," I say calmly, cradling Sarah Beth closer. "You do what you need to do. I hope you find a great counselor for Martha, and we can all move forward in peace."

"You wish. Martha doesn't need counseling," she spits, tugging on her daughter's arm. "Come on, baby. We don't need to go to the library. We can afford to buy books to read at home. Your daddy has a good job, and you have a mommy at home who cares about you enough to stick around. Not like some little girls."

I feel blood rush to my head and experience a moment of shock that she actually took a jab at my innocent daughter for not having a mother. But before I can say anything Tatum steps forward, until her nose is inches from Carrie's.

"I tried to keep this civil, but you just crossed the line," Tatum seethes. "Your soul is the ugliest thing I've seen in a long time and if you dare say anything to Sarah Beth or about Sarah Beth again, you're going to have to deal with me. And I'm not nearly as nice as I look, I promise you that."

"Did you hear that?" Carrie looks up at the librarians. "She just threatened me! Are you still going to believe her side of the story?"

"I believe the footage," the male librarian says flatly. "And I'm inclined to agree with her. I suggest you leave without saying another unkind word to this little girl or anyone else, or

I'll arrange to have you banned from the playgrounds in town, too. My brother works for the park service."

Carrie's eyes bulge in their sockets and her mouth opens and closes like a landed fish. I can safely say I've never been happier to see a person speechless.

"Don't let the door hit you on the way out, Carrie," I say, shooting her a look I hope expresses that I'm on the exact same page as Tatum. If she lets my daughter's name pass her toxic lips again, she'll be sorry.

"Crazy," she finally huffs. "This town's gone crazy." She hustles toward the door, Martha in tow, and a beat later we're alone with the librarians and Sofia and her charge.

"Bravo," Sofia says with a slow clap. "Good job, Mama and Papa bear."

"Don't be sad, Sarah Beth," the little boy with the blocks says. "I'll be your friend. You're way nicer than Martha. She's mean, and took my candy at Halloween."

Sofia brushes his hair from his forehead. "I know! I remember that, Conrad. Thank you for being such a good boy while we waited for this to get sorted out. You want to go get a cheeseburger lunch as a special treat?"

Conrad cheers, his face lighting up. "Yay, cheeseburger!"

Sarah Beth lifts her head from my shoulder. "Can we have cheeseburgers, too?"

"We sure can," I say. "You, me, and Tatum can go to Riff's, and you can have curly fries, too."

She grins. "Yay! I love curly fries. And extra ketchup!"

"All the ketchup your mouth can handle," Tatum agrees. "And if you want to talk about anything Martha's mom said, we can. I know it can be confusing when grown-ups say mean things. Grown-ups should know better."

Sarah Beth's smile fades. "It's okay. I know I don't have a mommy. But I have Daddy and Grammy and Aunt Melissa and my aunts and uncles and cousin. And now I have you, Tatum."

“You sure as heck, do, honey,” Tatum says fiercely. “And I’m going to send the bad fairies after anyone who messes with you. You’re my girl.”

“You’re my girl, too,” Sarah says, reaching for Tatum.

I ease her into Tatum’s arms, my entire body vibrating with a silent promise that I will never do anything to get between the two of them. No matter what I feel for Tatum, no matter how full my heart still is from seeing her stand up for my baby like Sarah Beth was her flesh and blood, I will keep my distance and keep this professional.

Somehow, I got lucky enough to hire the best nanny a single dad could wish for. I would be a fool to do anything to put that at risk.

And I’m no fool, a fact I prove by calling off work the rest of the day and spoiling the two best girls I know. After lunch, we head home and grab our warm clothes and head out to my father’s ice fishing hut, one of Sarah Beth’s favorite winter activities. We spend the afternoon fishing and sipping hot chocolate and cheering every time we catch something big enough to keep for dinner.

Tatum comes home with us to share in the fish bounty, whipping up a batch of hush puppies better than any fish fry restaurant I’ve visited.

“The secret is love,” she says, before adding with a grin, “and maple syrup. Maple syrup makes everything better.”

“Just like on pancakes,” Sarah Beth says, running through the kitchen with Ajax trailing behind her on a ribbon “leash” she made.

“And we’ve come full circle,” I say to Tatum as I flip the fish in the pan on the stove.

She grins. “It’s been a long day. But a good one, even with the little blip there in the middle.”

“We don’t let bullies ruin our day,” I say.

“No, we don’t,” she agrees, leaning closer.

For a second, I think she's going to kiss me, and I want her to so badly my stomach goes into free fall when she reaches for the salt grinder on the other side of me instead.

But I shake off the disappointment and force another smile.

We'll get used to this. To being friends and collaborators in the fine art of raising a sweet little girl. It's going to get easier, not harder. And if I'm ever tempted to cross a line, I'll just look at my baby's smiling face and know my sacrifice is worth it.

She's worth any sacrifice.

Even if it means giving up anything more than friendship with someone, I'm pretty sure I could love more than any woman I've ever met.

Chapter Fifteen



We're about to sit down to a fish dinner, which smells *amazing*, when my cell vibrates in my back pocket.

I pull it out to see a text from Wren—*Sorry to bother you, but I'm trapped in my shed. I came out to grab some jewelry making supplies and forgot to bring my shotgun. Now Kyle's suddenly outside the door, and he's even angrier than usual. I'm afraid he's going to take me out if I try to get back inside the house without backup. Do you think you could swing by and honk your horn at him? You don't have to get out of your car or anything, but I would really appreciate it. I'm so sorry! I tried my sister and mom, but they're in Minneapolis shopping and all the ladies at work are too scared of Kyle to come within five miles of my place.*

“Oh my God, this turkey,” I say, shaking my head.

“What happened now?” Drew asks, from where he’s dishing fish up on plates at the counter.

“He has Wren trapped in her shed,” I say, nibbling my lip. “She wants me to come honk at him, but I don’t think that will do much good. He’s too bold. I’ll have to find a weapon or something.”

“No way you’re going over there. You’re still healing from the last time he got his beak on you,” Drew says, wiping his hands on the kitchen towel hanging on the stove. “I’ll go. You and Sarah Beth stay here and eat while the fish is warm.”

“No, I can go,” I say, feeling terrible. “I don’t want your supper to get cold because of stupid old Kyle.”

“Kyle needs to get help learning to be nice,” Sarah Beth pipes up from the table, where she’s enjoying a pre-dinner lemonade as a special treat. “Just like Martha.”

I stifle a laugh but can’t help agreeing with her. “You make a good point there, Sarah Beth. Though I’m not sure we’d have much luck finding a turkey anger management therapist.”

“I’ll deliver some shotgun shell therapy and call it a night,” Drew says, heading for the garage and the gun safe on the wall.

“You can’t shoot him, Drew,” I call after him. “Wren still wants to handle this humanely.”

“Wren is too nice for her own good,” he calls from the depths of the garage.

“Would we eat him?” Sarah Beth asks. “We eat turkey on Thanksgiving, but we never give it a name.”

I nod. “I think that’s part of the problem. Wren named Kyle. Never name your food.”

Sarah Beth giggles. “I’m going to name my trout Booger Face.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Ew! Gross. You’re going to eat a trout named Booger Face?”

She laughs harder. “I am and he’s going to be *ah*-licious.”

“Delicious,” Drew corrects with a grin as he comes back inside with his rifle. “Though I love that you say it that way.”

“Me, too,” I say, drafting a quick text to Wren. “But hold on a second. Let me tell her that you’re coming over armed and ready to take care of Kyle for good. Let’s see what she says.”

I’m nearly finished typing when another text comes through from Wren—*Never mind! Barrett just pulled up and Kyle ran off as soon as he got out of his truck. I guess I just need to get a boyfriend and this problem will be solved. Sorry for bothering you, have a good night!*

“It’s all good,” I say, quickly typing Wren a note to stay safe and that there’s no need to apologize. “Your brother pulled up and scared him off. And Wren’s decided she needs to find a boyfriend, since Kyle’s apparently scared of men.”

“I’ll touch base with Barrett later,” Drew says. “I think he said something about staking out Wren’s place tomorrow night after work. I’ll volunteer to help and hopefully we can put the Great Turkey Tragedy portion of the winter behind us.”

“Sounds good,” I agree. “Now hurry and put that gun away before Booger Face gets cold.”

Sarah Beth dissolves into a fresh round of giggles and Drew casts a loving look her way that melts my heart all over again. When that look slides my way, still so soft and full of emotion, I stop breathing.

I don’t start again until he disappears into the garage to put the rifle back in the safe.

“Are you okay, Tatum?” Sarah Beth asks.

I clear my throat and thump a fist to my chest. “Yeah just...choked on air for a second there.”

“Your face got really pink,” she says, making my cheeks flush even hotter.

I touch the back of my hands to the hot skin. “Yeah? Must be all the giggling about Booger Face. What should I name my fish? Snot Gobbler?”

Sarah Beth cackles at that and in a few seconds, everything is back to normal. Except that a little voice in my head is shouting that Drew feels what I feel. That he thinks we should be a family, too.

But when he comes back inside, it’s as if that heart-stopping look never happened. He’s back to being warm and friendly, but not too warm and friendly, and dinner passes without so much as a whiff of more-than-friends behavior.

When he says goodbye at the door later, Sarah Beth is in his arms and his focus is all for his daughter as he thanks me for all my help today and promises to see me in the morning.

I head to my car in a daze, wondering if I imagined “the look.”

Thank God I only have one more day of work before the weekend. I could use a couple of days to get my heart under control. Though if Drew’s managed to get this deep under my skin in four days, I doubt a weekend is going to be enough to counter the effect he has on me. My only hope at this point is that I meet Prince Charming at the honky-tonk and he has a magic, Drew-banishing kiss that will wipe all inappropriate thoughts about my boss from my brain.

But at this point...I’m not holding my breath.

And I’m pretty sure Drew *is* Prince Charming, at least the only Prince Charming for me.

Chapter Sixteen



Friday passes much more peacefully than the rest of the week—albeit with plenty of longing thoughts about Tatum I’m still not sure how to control—and I meet my brother at Wren’s place for Operation Turkey Take Down a little after five. He’s been on the hunt since three and hasn’t heard a single cluck or spotted any sign of our prey.

“He’s definitely hiding from us, the little fucker,” my brother whispers from our hiding place behind the bushes beside Wren’s front porch. “Wren’s right. I think he’s afraid of men.”

“Then we find some way to flush him out,” I say, rubbing my gloved hands together.

It’s just above freezing, with the temperature falling fast now that the sun’s beginning to set. This isn’t the way I thought I’d be starting my Friday night—Sarah Beth and I were supposed to go over to my mom’s house for dinner—but I ended up sending Sarah alone so I could help Barrett stake out Wren’s front yard.

He’s as eager to put an end to the Kyle problem as I am. Wren’s been late to work three times in the past two weeks, which isn’t good for keeping things running smoothly at his office.

As for me, this is about vengeance. Fuck with my nanny and you fuck with me, motherclucker. The fact that Tatum feels like so much more than my nanny is something, again, that I try not to think about...

“Wren should be back soon, right?” I ask, a plan forming. “Maybe if we move our cars and sneak back to hide in the bushes again before she gets home, Kyle will attack her, and we can jump out and bag him.”

Barrett and I both have large burlap sacks, rope, and tasers, since Wren’s still insisting Kyle be removed humanely. She only shoots her shotgun into the air to scare the bird and made Barrett and I both promise to leave our hunting rifles at home tonight.

Barrett shakes his head, his dark brows still pinched in the middle. My older brother could be my twin except for those dark, bushy brows and the fact that his eyes are a deep blue. People in Bad Dog always say the McGuire genes run true, and they aren’t wrong. We all look like we were formed from the same Lego parts.

“Nope,” he says. “Wren was headed to Tatum’s place after work.”

My ears perk up at the mention of Tatum’s name. I shouldn’t be nosy about what she’s doing with her time off, but I can’t help asking, “Yeah? Why?”

Barrett shrugs. “They were talking about blowing up someone’s hair before they went out. Sounded dangerous, but I figured it was a woman thing, and I shouldn’t put my two cents in.”

I arch a brow his way. “A blow out, you mean? Even *I* know what that is. It’s when they get their hair straightened.”

He grunts. “Good to know. Do you see something? Over there? Across the street at the edge of the woods?”

I glance over, studying the leafless trees above the thin snow cover. “No.” I turn back to my brother. “How do you know so little about women? Literally all of your patients and staff are women. And I know you’re single now, but you were married for five years.”

His brows pinch even tighter. “I don’t know. Maybe I was as shitty a husband as Lane said I was.”

“Stop it,” I say. “You weren’t a shitty husband. You and Lane were just...different.”

He grunts again. “She’s getting remarried. In the spring. Sent me an invite. It’s going to be at that vineyard on the other side of the lake.”

I exhale. “Wow. Are you going to go?”

“I don’t know. We’re still friends. It hasn’t been anything more in a long time, but...”

“But it might still be hard to watch her promise to love and cherish another man until death do them part,” I finish. “I get it.”

“Would it be hard for you to see Nicky get remarried?” he asks.

I snort. “Hell, no. But it’s different. She abandoned our daughter. I’m too angry about that for any other feelings to have a chance.”

“Sarah Beth will be okay. She’s got the best dad I know,” he says, in a rare display of softness.

Barrett is a good guy, with a great bedside manner, but he’s reserved. Controlled. Even with family, he plays his cards close to his chest.

“Thanks,” I say. “I try. I just hope it will be enough.” I briefly relay what Carrie Cummings said to Sarah Beth about not having a mother yesterday, summoning an angry look from my brother.

“What kind of heartless bitch says something like that to a little girl?” he asks.

“I know. She’s the worst,” I agree. “But Tatum and I talked it through with Sarah Beth after and she seemed okay. I just hope she never blames herself for Nicky taking off the way she did.”

“She won’t. We won’t let her,” Barrett says, making difficult things seem simple, the way he always does. It’s one of his best, and worst, qualities. He sighs. “I don’t think we’re

going to get anywhere like this. I need to think of something else. Some kind of bait to lure him out.”

“Other than Wren?” I ask.

He nods. “I promised I’d take care of this for her before she got home tomorrow morning.”

“She’s staying over at Tatum’s place?” I ask, once again curious about things I shouldn’t be curious about. But I’m having a hell of a time moving Tatum to the “just friends” category in my mind. Hopefully next week we’ll be able to spend more time apart, and things will get easier. Though the thought of not seeing her isn’t a happy making one. Not one fucking bit.

“Yeah.” Barrett rises from his squatting position behind the bushes. “They’re going dancing at that honky-tonk outside of town and staying at Tatum’s after. Probably a good idea they stick together. I’ve heard that place can get a little rough late at night.”

I stand next to him, my pulse picking up. “You mean Bubba Jump’s? The bar where that guy got stabbed by a biker a few weeks ago?”

“I think so,” he says, starting toward his car in the fading light.

“What the hell, Barrett?” I ask. “Did you tell Wren it was dangerous? That she and Tatum should find somewhere else to go?”

He glances back at me like *I’m* the crazy one. “No. I figured it was none of my business. I doubt they’re going to stay late enough to get into trouble anyway. And it was a man who got stabbed, not a woman.”

I shake my head. “Your brain.”

“What about it?”

“I don’t get the way it works. At all.”

“The guy didn’t die,” he adds, continuing to miss the point.

“But it’s still dangerous. That wasn’t the first time someone got hurt there.” He stares at me blankly until I add, “Imagine you and Lane were still married and she wanted to go dancing there with her friends. Without you. With her hair looking amazing and a really short skirt and a top that shows off her cleavage.”

Understanding flickers in his eyes. “Wren isn’t the kind to show off her cleavage. I’m not even sure she has cleavage.”

I roll my eyes. “Of course, she does, Barrett. And she and Tatum are both drop-dead fucking gorgeous. They’re going to walk into that bar, and it’ll be like someone dumped a bucket of chum in the shark tank.” I pull out my phone, leaning against my car as I pull up Tatum’s contact information.

I hesitate for a second, remembering how irritated she was when I treated her like my little sister on Wednesday with Peter. But this isn’t the same thing, at all. I’m truly concerned about her safety and would be sending this text even if it were a guy friend of mine who was going dancing tonight. I might not be as worried, but I’d still be giving him a heads up.

“I’m going to text Tatum,” I continue, “Give her a heads up and the name of a few places that would be safer. Riff’s downtown has dancing on Fridays, too, if that’s what they’re looking for.”

I shoot off the text and continue to stare at my phone, waiting for a reply. Tatum and I don’t text that often, but she’s always gotten back to me quickly.

I wait, huddling deeper into my coat as a cold wind whips across Wren’s yard.

“Call her,” Barrett says, turning up the collar on his jacket. “Faster that way.”

“Only monsters call instead of text their employees when they’re off the clock. Monsters and old people.”

Barrett rolls his eyes. “Fine, I’ll call Wren. I give zero shits about playing it cool.”

Before I can explain to him that this isn’t about playing it cool—it’s about respecting Tatum’s privacy—he has his phone

to his ear. "It's ringing," he informs me.

"I can hear it," I say dryly.

The phone rings four times and then Wren's voice comes on the line, saying she isn't available right now, but to please leave a message.

Barrett scowls at the phone as if it's personally offended him before saying after the beep, "Wren, it's Barrett. Call me when you get this. The turkey's still hiding, and you shouldn't go to that club tonight. It's dangerous. Go somewhere else instead. I'm trying to find something to bait a trap for Kyle. Text you an update later."

He ends the call and starts back toward his truck, as if that wasn't the worst message ever.

"What was that?" I ask.

He turns over his shoulder. "What was what?"

"You just ordered her around like she's your employee and hung up?"

"She *is* my employee," he says, looking mystified.

"Not after hours she's not," I say.

Barrett waves a dismissive hand. "It's fine. Wren doesn't care. And she'll listen. She always listens to me. I'm like her big brother." I want to roll my eyes, but considering I was acting much the same way two nights ago, I really don't have any room to judge him. "Now come help me find bait," he continues. "If we hurry, we might be able to make it the feed store before they close. They carry corn feed and turkey calls in season. Might be a little early, but we can see what they've got in stock."

"Fine, but I'm going to keep trying to reach Tatum," I say, opening my car door. "Just in case Wren misses your message. Or decides you're a bossy jerk who orders her around like a child and she's going to go make out with bikers at the honky-tonk just to spite you."

Barrett casts me an amused look. "You really don't know Wren very well, do you?"

It's more like Barrett doesn't realize Wren isn't our sister's shy little friend from middle school anymore. Wren's the kind of woman who walks into a "joined at the crotch" situation and handles it with professionalism and a smartass sense of humor. But I've learned to pick my battles with Barrett. My brother gets these blind spots, places where he can't see the forest for the trees, and where Wren is concerned, he clearly has a big one.

"I'll meet you at the feed store," I say. "I'm going to stop and get a coffee on the way. You want one?"

"Sure. Black, two sugars," he says, getting into his truck and pulling out of the driveway.

I swing by the coffee shop drive-through, checking my phone while I'm waiting for the barista, but there's still no reply from Tatum. I check it again outside the feed store and a third time after Barrett locates the last dusty turkey call on the shelf and we're waiting in line to pay. But there's still nothing, which is unusual enough that I step outside and call Tatum, after all.

As I wait for her to answer, I mentally compose an apology for bothering her after hours and sticking my nose into her business, but the words die on my lips as an automated message tells me the number I'm calling has a voice mailbox that's full.

I end the call and glare at my cell, telling myself I can't drive by her place. That would be weird and intrusive. Very big brother-y in that way she doesn't like.

Barrett emerges from the feed store to find me frowning and smiles, "You're going to stalk them, aren't you? Just like Mom stalked you in high school, crashing all your keg parties in the woods."

I scowl as I stuff my phone back in my pocket. "I'm not going to stalk. I'm going to perform a welfare check on my employee, who is new in town, and might not know how to keep herself safe in the wilds of Minnesota."

Barrett snorts. “Right. Stalk away, Mr. Stalky. But hurry back. My gut says Kyle is going to be a two-person job. We’re going to need one to chase and one to intercept and capture.”

“Then come with me,” I say, inspiration striking. “We’ll check on Wren and Tatum together, present a united front, and then take care of Kyle. No sense waiting around in the cold for an hour without me.”

My brother smirks. “Right. And you look less crazy if I’m there, too.”

“Might have crossed my mind,” I admit.

He laughs. “Fine. Let’s go. But if they tell us to mind our own business and get out of their blow ups, I’m blaming you.”

I almost correct him—blow *out* not blow up—but decide it isn’t worth it. Barrett only remembers things he’s interested in, and feminine grooming practices aren’t anywhere on that list.

We drop my car at the house and load into Barrett’s truck, the better to argue about who should blow the seductive female turkey call and who should lurk in wait for Kyle with a taser and burlap bag and arrive at Tatum’s place by seven. The taco restaurant is hopping, but upstairs, the windows are dark, and Tatum doesn’t answer when I knock.

“Maybe they went to the bar already?” Barrett asks when I swing back into the truck.

I shake my head. “It’s too early. The music doesn’t start until eight. They must have gone somewhere else first. Do a drive through downtown and I’ll keep an eye out for their cars.”

Barrett complies—grumpily, as he’s now hungry and ready to take care of Kyle and get to Mom’s in time to score some leftovers—but there’s no sign of Wren or Tatum downtown.

“Maybe we should head over to Bubba Jump’s, then,” I say, still scanning both sides of the street, though we’ve been down this road twice. “Maybe they’re starting the music early tonight or something.”

“Maybe we should go take care of the problem we promised to take care of instead of inventing new ones,” Barrett says, pointing to the clock on the dashboard. “I was on call last night and delivered a baby at three a.m. this morning. I have about two hours of functionality left before I need to be in bed with a book and a mug of Sleepy Time tea.”

“Valid,” I mutter. “And I need to pick Sarah Beth up from Mom’s before it gets too late. Let’s go see what we can do about Kyle with the bait, and I’ll keep trying Tatum on her phone.”

But ninety minutes later, Kyle hasn’t responded to the scattered corn feed or the turkey call, Barrett is fading fast, my fingers and toes have gone numb, and Tatum still hasn’t replied to a single text.

My gut insisting something is wrong, I call my parents’ house. “Hey, Mom,” I say when she picks up. “Would it be okay for Sarah Beth to sleep there tonight, and I’ll come grab her first thing in the morning? I need to go check on a friend and am not sure I’ll be able to get back to your place before ten.”

“Of course,” Mom says. “We don’t have any big plans for tomorrow. I’ll get Sarah Beth set up in the guest bedroom and we’ll see you in the morning.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I say, smiling as Sarah Beth cheers, “Guest bedroom! I love the guest bedroom,” in the background.

“So which friend are you checking on?” Mom asks before I can end the call, proving her gossip-collecting instincts are still alive and well. “Not Harry, is it? You know I love Harry, but he’s got to get his act together. If you and your brothers keep rescuing him when he gets drunk and stuck in the mud in the middle of God knows where, he’s never going to learn.”

“The ground’s frozen, Mom,” I say. “No mud to get stuck in.”

“Is it Luke, then? Because he’s trouble, honey. He’s still got a chip on his shoulder about you winning the all-state

wrestling championships your senior year of high school. He might act like he's your friend, but I wouldn't trust him as far as I can throw him."

Rolling my eyes hard enough to make Barrett chuckle on the other side of the truck, I say, "I've got to go, Mom. I'll fill you in later. Thanks for watching Sarah Beth."

"Oh, that reminds me," Mom says, lowering her voice. "Sarah Beth says the new nanny gave her this cell phone to play math games on this weekend, but I suspect that's not entirely true. I don't know a single twenty-year-old who can go two hours without her phone, let alone two days."

"She's twenty-eight," I correct automatically. "But you're right. I'll see if I can get in touch with Tatum on her landline and ask her if that's the truth."

"Sounds good," Mom says. "But don't get too mad at Sarah Beth. You know how addictive these devices are. It's hardly her fault that she can't resist them. And at least she's playing math games."

I agree, ask her to give Sarah a big hug for me, and end the call. When I explain the phone situation to Barrett, he agrees to give Wren's cell another try, but again, he's sent right to voicemail. And by the time he taps the red button, he looks concerned, too.

"I'll come with you to the bar," he says, backing out of my driveway. "You might need backup and that coffee should be enough to keep me up for another hour or so."

We drive back through town, past the lake and the shops and restaurants huddled on the shore, and out into the pitch black of rural Minnesota on a cloudy night.

I can't see a thing outside the glow of the headlights.

It's disconcerting and makes the bright, ten-foot-tall neon cowboy atop Bubba Jump's seem even more garish in comparison. Barrett finds a parking spot at the back of the already packed lot, and we weave our way through rows of pick-ups, dirty mid-winter cars, and a long line of Harley Davidson bikes toward the entrance.

We spot Wren's SUV on our way, easing my worry a little bit. Though the clientele does seem a tad rough, so far. Barrett fits in better in his jeans and sweater, but in my suit, I stand out like a sore thumb amidst the bikers, men in tight white t-shirts in defiance of the winter weather, and women with hair nearly as tall as the neon cowboy.

It takes another twenty minutes to navigate the line to get in, making me glad I don't have to worry about hurrying back to town to pick up Sarah Beth. Just inside the door, the crowd at the bar is so loud, I can barely hear Barrett shout—"I see them."—over the noise.

He points and I see them, too. Wren and Tatum are tearing it up on the dance floor in tiny minidresses, surrounded by five giant men in biker vests with rainbow bandanas tied around their foreheads. They look fine—happy and carefree—and for a second, I feel like an overprotective idiot.

A second later, all I can think about is how happy I am to see Tatum, and how right the world feels now that I know she's safe.

And that's it. I realize I can't do this anymore. I just fucking can't.

I have to talk to Tatum, but...maybe not right now. Not when she's having fun and clearly isn't expecting an emotional bombshell from her boss.

I'm considering asking Barrett if he wants to sneak out without making contact, in fact, when a tall guy with tattoos all over his bare arms and a bleached blond faux hawk pushes into the center of the group and grabs Wren around the waist, lifting her off her feet.

She's clearly startled, but almost immediately begins pushing at the man's chest and shouting something—presumably to be put down. Tatum starts toward the pair, fire in her eyes, but before she can say anything, the man spins away, carrying Wren with him.

I turn to Barrett to make a plan, but he's already gone, charging through the crowd like a wrecking ball.

Chapter Seventeen



One second Wren is giggling beside me, having the time of her life with our new friends. The next, some jerk with a dozen Marvin the Martian tattoos—love Marvin if you must, but more than one tattoo of the same cartoon character is pathological in my book—has kidnapped her like a marauding Viking.

My jaw drops, but before I can charge after them, a man who could be Drew's twin pushes past me, headed for the Marvin lover with murder in his eyes.

“Stay back, honey,” Fred, the head of the Rainbow Warrior Biker Collective says, hooking light fingers through my arm. “Looks like Daddy B is going to take care of it.”

“Who?” I ask.

“Daddy B,” Perry, his partner says with a smirk. “Barrett McGuire is as straight as they come, but he was Fred's first crush back in high school, so...”

“You never forget your first.” Fred grins as he waves at someone over my shoulder and calls out in a louder voice, “Hey there, Drew. Come join us, handsome!”

I spin, my heart doing a ridiculous somersault at the sight of Drew striding my way in a deep blue suit with an intense expression.

“Your brother can take care of that punk on his own,” Fred adds, motioning Drew closer. “Marvin is annoying, but mostly harmless.”

“Marvin? Is that why he has all the Martian tattoos?” I ask, but I’m still looking at Drew, wondering if I conjured him up with my lustful, longing-filled thoughts. I’ve been checking out the local singles all night, but no one can compare to Drew. That’s one reason why Wren and I ended up dancing with the gay bikers instead of the single guys.

The other reason is that the gay bikers are the funniest, best boys in here.

“Yep, he’s that kind of cheesy bastard,” Fred says cheerfully, slapping Drew on the back as he stops in front of me. “How’s it going, Andrew? Glad to see you out having a good time, but we need to talk about your fashion choices. This outfit screams ‘I don’t know how to leave work at the office,’ not ‘I know how to show ladies a good time.’ You feel me?”

“I hear you, Fred. Good to see you,” Drew says, but he barely glances Fred’s way. His sexy brown eyes are all for me, filled with an emotion I can’t place, but that has me fluttering big time. “I hadn’t planned on coming out tonight, but I was worried about my nanny. Not trying to be overprotective or bossy, but I couldn’t get in touch with her on her cell, so...”

I frown. “What?” I slide my tiny backpack off and open it, looking for my phone.

“Nanny? Is that what you straight people are calling your honeys these days?” Perry teases as he loops his arm through Fred’s. “Come on, babe. I need another whiskey sour.” He pats Drew on the shoulder. “We’ll check on your brother on the way. Make sure he isn’t going to commit a felony on Marvin’s dumb ass.”

“Thank you,” Drew murmurs as I continue to paw through my bag.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, shaking my head. “I must have left my phone at my apartment. Wren and I were rushing to get here for the surprise Earth, Wind & Fire cover band that came on earlier. I probably ran out without it.”

“Or a little girl with closely monitored screen time decided to borrow it for the weekend to play math games,” Drew says, making my brows shoot up. “Sarah Beth told my mom you gave her your cell for the weekend, but I figured that probably wasn’t true.”

“Oh, wow,” I say, choosing my words carefully, not wanting to get Sarah Beth in trouble. “Well, no, but I don’t mind if—”

“It’s okay,” Drew says. “I’ll ground her from her tablet for a week, and I’m sure it won’t happen again. You know she hates getting in trouble.”

“She probably didn’t realize how much I needed it,” I say, hating that Sarah Beth’s going to get grounded because of me. Especially after the rough week she had with Martha. “And maybe I did say something about letting her borrow it and just forgot about it?” He arches a dubious brow, and I flash my most winning smile. “How about we talk to her about it together, figure out what she loves about screen time, and try to meet that need in another way *before* she gets grounded? That’s what my mom always did with us when we broke the rules. She knew we were good kids, just like Sarah Beth, and if we were doing something we weren’t supposed to, there was usually a compelling reason for it.”

I lift my nearly empty whiskey sour. “Like me. I shouldn’t have had more than one of these, but this is my second and I may get a third because it’s been a stressful week and I feel like blowing off some steam. There’s probably a better way to do that, though, that doesn’t involve risking a hangover. But am I choosing the better way? No, I’m not. And I’m a grown-up. It doesn’t seem fair to punish kids for doing the same thing without talking things over first and trying to help them make better decisions.”

He watches me for a long moment, the tension between us growing so thick I find myself babbling again.

“I mean, learning about her internal motivations now might help her *not* have three whiskey sours at the honky-tonk when she grows up.” I suck the last of my drink through the

tiny black straw, willing the inner voice to settle down and realize this surprise appearance is just about my phone. It doesn't mean Drew missed me as much as I missed him, even after only a few hours. "So why were you trying to get in touch with me? Did I leave something at your house besides my cell phone?"

"I was worried about you and Wren coming here alone," he says, glancing behind me, where Fred and Perry have returned and are once again wiggling to the music with the rest of their friends. "But it looks like you found a good group. Fred was in my class in school. He's a great guy."

"I thought so," I say, grinning at Fred over my shoulder, before I turn back to Drew. "I happen to be a pretty good judge of character, you know."

"And wise," he says. "As usual, I think you're right about Sarah Beth. We should try your way first."

I beam up at him. "Oh good! I'm so glad you think so. The more we can raise kids who know *why* they do the things they do—good and bad—the better society we'll have in the future, right?"

"You're right. About all of that. There's just one thing you got wrong," he says, taking my glass and setting it down on a tall table at the edge of dance floor.

I follow him, my pulse spiking as I cock my head. "And what's that?"

"You're not having a third whiskey sour."

I arch a brow. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Wouldn't you rather 'blow off steam' without risking the hangover?"

Before I can answer—or figure out exactly what he means—his arm is around my waist and his lips are on mine. And just like the last time we kissed, my entire body lights up and my chest fills with a giddy, electric feeling. But it's more complicated this time. This time, I know this is *way* more than sexual. This time there's relief and gratitude and...fear mixed in there, as well.

Relief that I don't have to go the rest of my life without kissing Drew again.

Gratitude that I'm pretty sure I get to take him home with me tonight.

And fear that this is only a lapse in judgment for him, a one and done "mistake" he'll regret tomorrow before he walks out the door for good.

Maybe after firing me?

I pull back, but before I can ask him if this means he's changed his mind about having a work relationship *and* a personal relationship, Wren appears at my side, her face flushed and her eyes glittering with rage.

"I'm sorry, Tatum, but I have to go home," she says, glancing briefly at Drew before adding, "Drew, can you give me a ride or—"

"I'll drive you home in your SUV and they can take my truck," the man who looks like Drew's twin says, pushing keys into Drew's hand. "Just leave the truck in your driveway. I'll come get it in the morning."

"You're not driving me home, Barrett," Wren says, glaring up at him like she'd enjoy murdering him.

Slowly. With her tiny bare hands.

I'm not sure what he did to piss her off, but it seems like we're both in a sticky situation with our employers tonight...

"I *am* driving you home," Barrett says. "You're drunk and behaving irrationally."

"I am not drunk!" Wren shouts, her eyes flashing so brightly I'm pretty sure they're starting to glow in the dark. "And you don't get to decide what's rational for me. Not on my night off. Or at any other time for that matter."

Barrett murmurs something that sounds like "ridiculous," and Wren explodes.

"I'm not ridiculous!" She pokes him in his muscled chest. "You're ridiculous and I'm about to prove it. Goodbye Tatum,

I'll call you tomorrow." Without another word, she storms toward the front door of the club.

"Nice to meet you, Tatum," Barrett says, even though we haven't actually been introduced, before starting after her, a familiar determination in his stride.

"Your brother?" I ask, just to be one-hundred percent sure. "And Wren's boss?"

"The same," Drew says, holding up the keys. "Should we get out of here? Before Barrett comes back and decides to boss *us* around?"

"Will he be able to find a way home?" I ask. "Because I'm pretty sure Wren is serious about going home alone."

Drew nods. "Yeah, he'll be fine. He can call a taxi. Or ask a friend for a ride. We know more people here than I expected." He flashes me a sheepish smile. "It actually doesn't seem that bad. I might have been being a little...overprotective again."

I pull in a breath, fighting the giddy part of me that loves his protective side, the part that desperately wants another night with him, no matter what the cost. That part would gladly put my job and future as Sarah Beth's caretaker on the line for more co-ed naked fun time, but I can't let it call the shots.

Maybe I could have a few days ago, before I really knew and loved Sarah Beth, but things are different now. I know her, I adore her, and I believe she needs me in her life. *Me*, not some other nanny who won't understand how much she needs magic and pretend and someone who really knows how to listen.

Sarah Beth is a kindred spirit and when you're lucky enough to find one of those, you don't let them down.

I don't want just another hot night with Drew, either. I want *him*, all of him. I want his heart and his humor and all the love I know he's capable of giving to the right person.

And I want that person to be me.

So, as much as it pains me to put a single obstacle in the way of getting him naked and on top of me, I say, “I would love to take you home and do bad things to you all night, especially now that I don’t have any jewelry in the way. But you said this was a bad idea. You said you couldn’t date the nanny. Remember?”

His expression sobering, he nods. “I do remember. But I’ve been thinking.”

I wait a beat for him to finish, my stomach full of butterflies. When he doesn’t, I prompt, “Thinking about...?”

“About you,” he says, curling his fingers around the curve of my hip, making my blood rush faster. “About us. All the time, actually. When I’m at work and at home and in the shower and reading Sarah Beth a bedtime story and cleaning the oatmeal gunk from the sink drain. You’re always there, in my head, and no matter how much I see you, it’s never enough. Not nearly enough.”

I bite my lip, fighting a smile, not wanting to celebrate prematurely. But I can’t help confessing, “I think about you, too.”

“Good.” He pulls me closer, sending the tingle situation shooting off the charts. “Believe me, I’m not taking this lightly. The way you are with Sarah Beth... You’re an angel, Tatum.”

“Hardly.” I shoot a pointed glance down at my scandalously skimpy dancing outfit.

“You’re my kind of angel,” he says, not hesitating for a second. “You’re everything I hoped for in a nanny and so much more. I wouldn’t put that at risk for anything except... this feeling that I’ll regret it for the rest of my life if I don’t tell you the way you make me feel.”

“How do I make you feel?” I ask, breathless with hope.

“Like I might find that happy ending someday, after all,” he whispers.

“I’d bet my hands on it,” I say, my chest tight with emotion as I loop my arms around his neck. “And I promise

you, we'll keep what's best for Sarah Beth at the top of our minds every step of the way.”

“You're what's best for Sarah Beth,” he says, making my chest ache. “I knew that the second you pulled out that crown for Princess Pancake breakfast. And when you threatened Carrie, you made me your fan for life. If we break up, I'll do whatever it takes to keep you around. Even if it breaks my heart.”

“I won't break your heart,” I say, my lips drifting closer to his. “I promise.”

“Oh my God, it's like a movie,” a hushed, but not nearly hushed enough, voice rasps from a few feet away. “They're so adorable! I'm shipping them so hard!”

I glance over my shoulder to see Fred with his elbow propped on the tall table and his chin in hand, watching us with a dreamy expression. Beside him, Perry swirls his straw through his fresh whiskey sour with a happy sigh, “Happy endings are the best endings.”

Fred giggles, clearly a little tipsy. “Happy endings. That reminds me of that massage parlor in St. Paul. Remember Bjorn? The Nordic guy with giant hands?”

Perry wrinkles his nose. “Bring up one of your exes again and the only happy ending you'll be getting tonight is in your dreams, darlin'.”

“Should we get out of here?” Drew asks, amusement in his voice.

I smile up at him. “We should. But let me give Fred and Perry my number first. I'm going to join them for biker brunch next Sunday. It's like Princess Pancakes except with bikers and mimosas.”

“You can come too, handsome,” Perry says, batting his eyelashes at Drew as I take Fred's offered phone and punch in my digits. “As long as you wear leather. Call me crazy, but I think you'd look great in a pair of skintight black pants.”

Drew laughs. “Thanks, but I usually spend Sunday mornings in my pajamas with my daughter.”

“Bring her along. The more the merrier,” Fred enthuses with a red-cheeked grin, proving he’s the happiest drunk around. He leans in, putting his arm around my shoulders and adding in his too-loud whisper, “Ride him like a Harley on a perfect spring day with the wind in your hair, sweetheart. Do it for me and all the people who have crushed on McGuire men throughout the years. And for America. Consider it your goddamned patriotic duty.”

Perry rolls his eyes as he moves Fred’s drink to the middle of the table. “Okay, drunk. Let’s get you some water and cheese fries. I think we need to soak up a little of that alcohol before we have any more whiskey.”

“*Oooo*, cheese fries,” Fred says, his big blue eyes lighting up. “I love cheat day! And cheese!” He puts his arm around Perry, pressing a sloppy kiss to his partner’s cheek that makes the other man laugh. “And you, babe. You’re the fucking best. Bjorn can suck a pickled egg.”

As they head for the bar to order, I turn back to Drew. “Shall we? And you can share your favorite drunk foods on the way back to my place?”

“Pizza,” he says without hesitation as he takes my hand and leads me through the crowd toward the door. “And latkes with sour cream from the diner on Third Street. And cheesy scrambled eggs with extra buttery toast, just like Sarah Beth likes them.”

I arch a brow. “So, you did have a wild phase.”

“I did,” he says with a wink. “But now I keep my wild side under wraps. It only comes out to play on weekends with beautiful redheads.”

I smile and squeeze his hand, waiting until we step out into the cold air to whisper in a voice for his ears only, “That’s good, but just FYI, this redhead also enjoys orgasms on Tuesdays. And Thursdays. And any other night her boss wants her to stay for dinner and do bad things to him after his daughter is tucked in for the night.”

“You mean your boyfriend,” he corrects. “After six o’clock, I’m not your boss anymore.”

Boyfriend! He wants to be my boyfriend!

Never has the word made me so giddy.

“I mean, unless you feel it’s too soon to be exclusive,” he adds, the hint of nervousness in his voice making the butterflies in my stomach go wild.

I tighten my grip on his hand and stop at the corner of the building, needing his eyes on me when I say, “It’s not too soon.”

“No?” he asks, pulling me closer in the red light from the glowing cowboy atop the bar.

“Nope. Not even close.” I lean into his strong chest. “I would be honored and thrilled to be your girlfriend.”

We kiss and it’s even better than the kiss inside. Every time I touch this man, every time I feel his hands on me, it’s better than the last. My fresh start hit a speed bump there for a while, but now things are working out better than I ever dreamed they would. I’m making cool new friends, love my job taking care of Sarah Beth, and have the best, most adorable, sexiest boss in the world, who I’m pretty sure I’m also already madly in love with.

And now he’s my boyfriend!

It’s like a fairy tale with only good fairies in it.

So, basically, I should have known it was all about to go to shit.

I really should have.

Chapter Eighteen



The second I saw my mother's car in the driveway, I should have pulled over and called her to see what was going on. Mom is the queen of showing up unannounced and it rarely means there's a problem with Sarah Beth or anything else. I could have called her, made sure everything was okay, and waited in the car down the street for her to leave—no risk of her scaring Tatum away, no uncomfortable questions about what I'm doing with the nanny after hours, no confusing my daughter.

But there's a reason they say hindsight is twenty-twenty.

Instead, I swing into the drive and park beside Mom's car, worried my daughter is sick or hurt. I only realize my mistake when Sarah Beth comes bouncing out of the back seat with her stuffed dog in her arms.

"Daddy! I forgot Ajax and couldn't sleep, so even though it's late Grammy brought me back to..." She trails off only to continue with an even bigger smile as Tatum gets out of the car. "Tatum!" She throws herself at Tatum's waist, giving her a tight squeeze. "Grammy, this is Tatum! My nanny!"

"So, I see," my mother says through the open driver's side window. She casts a judgmental look up and down Tatum's frame, making me suddenly keenly aware of how little clothing she's wearing. A miniskirt with fishnets and a tank top under a big fluffy coat is perfectly appropriate attire for a dance club, but probably not the best for meeting the parents.

And it's obviously giving my old-fashioned mother the wrong idea.

"I was just giving Tatum a ride home," I lie. "She was out dancing with friends, and I wanted to make sure she got home safe. But then I saw your car in the drive on the way to her place and decided I should check in and make sure everything was okay."

"Right," Tatum says, tugging the hem of her skirt down with a nervous laugh. "So nice to meet you Mrs. McGuire. Sarah Beth has told me great things about you and how much fun she has at Grammy's house."

"Same." My mother emerges from the car in her long, black wool coat, looking like a case worker coming to break the news that I'm an unfit parent. "Sarah Beth hasn't stopped talking about you all night. I was expecting Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*, complete with guitar and puppet show."

Tatum laughs again. "Nope, no musical skills here. But we have a lot of fun playing pretend and doing craft projects."

"And hunting for fairies," Sarah Beth agrees, taking Tatum's hand and giving it a little tug. "Grammy has a forest behind her house, Tatum. I bet there are tons of fairies there. Want to come look for them with me? We can go first thing in the morning after breakfast. Can Tatum spend the night at your house, too, Grammy? I promise I'll be really good and go right to sleep as soon as we get back."

"I think Tatum has other overnight plans," my mother says, her disapproval thick in the air. She takes Sarah Beth by the shoulders, gently detangling her from Tatum and maneuvering her back toward her car. "We'll chat tomorrow, Drew. Nice to meet you, Tatum."

But it wasn't nice. Not nice at all.

By the time she pulls out, my stomach is on the concrete.

"Shit," Tatum hisses as Mom disappears down the street. "That didn't go well, did it?"

"No," I admit, forcing a smile. "But it's okay. I'll talk to her tomorrow and explain."

“Explain that you’re banging the nanny who is actually a great childcare provider even though she looked like a street walker last night?”

“You don’t look like a street walker,” I say, pulling her into my arms.

“To your mother, I did,” she says with a wince. “Ugh. I could tell by the way she looked at me. I felt like I was back in Catholic school, getting in trouble with the nuns for rolling my skirt up to make it shorter, except a hundred times worse. She hates me, Drew. I could tell.”

“She doesn’t even know you.”

“And now she won’t want to,” she continues, her voice rising. “Because I’m the shameless hussy who’s seducing my boss, who also happens to be her vulnerable son who’s desperate for companionship after raising his daughter alone for so many years and is easy prey for a gold-digging ho like me.”

I hug her closer. “Stop. It wasn’t that bad.”

“I can’t stop,” she says. “It *was* that bad. And maybe she’s right. Maybe I am taking advantage of you.”

I frown. “I’m your boss, established in this community, and several years older than you are, Tatum. If anyone is taking advantage of this situation, it’s me. You’re all alone, new in town, and could be in a bind if you lose this job. Knowing you as well as I do now, I’m sure you’d land on your feet, because you’re incredible at what you do, but it wouldn’t be easy or fun. And if I didn’t give you a good reference, it would be hard to explain why you only lasted a week at your first nanny gig.”

Her brows shoot up. “But you would give me a good reference. Right?”

“Of course, I would. How can you even ask a question like that?”

“Because you brought it up,” she says, moving out of my arms. “And you’re right. It would be hard. Wren said she had a couple leads for me, but I don’t know if I’d be a good fit for

those jobs or if they'd pay enough for me to afford to stay here. The only way I could survive on a daycare worker's salary back home was to live with my parents. For such a vital, important job, taking care of little kids doesn't pay very much, you know."

I blink, shocked. "You talked to Wren about helping you find a new job?"

"It came up in conversation," she says, pulling her coat more firmly closed and crossing her arms over her chest. "When I realized the guy that I brought home from the bar my first night was my new boss, I was worried. But I told Wren I wasn't interested in another job because I adore Sarah Beth and I want to be there for her. And that's still true. I do adore her and—" She breaks off with a curse. "My phone. I forgot to get my phone."

"I can text my mom. Ask her to swing back by and—"

"No, it's fine," she says, backing another step away with a shake of her head. "I'll get it tomorrow or Monday or... whatever. I think I should go home right now. I need to think. Maybe being a couple isn't a good idea. Maybe we should keep this all business, after all."

"I don't want to keep it all business," I say, my throat tight. "I want to give this a shot. Me and you against the world."

Her eyes begin to shine as she says in a softer voice, "But I don't want to be against the world, Drew. My whole life, I've been an outcast, one of the family of weirdos my old hometown loved to judge and find lacking. For once, I want to be accepted, respected. I don't want to be the girlfriend my boyfriend's mom loves to hate. Or the nanny who fucked her boss and now the whole town can't stop gossiping about it." She swipes at her cheeks, smearing her mascara. "And the worst part is I did this to myself. Maybe people back home are right. Maybe O'Learys *are* losers who don't know how to fit in with normal people."

I take a step toward her but stop when she takes a matching step away. I want to hold her so badly my bones ache with it, but I settle for funneling all the things I feel for

her into my voice as I say, “Fuck normal and fitting in. Fuck what people think. I haven’t felt this alive in years, Tatum. I’ve been going through the motions, trying to be a good dad and provider, but on the inside, I was faking it as much as I was making it. I was so lonely and so worried I’d never be able to give my daughter everything she needs. And then you showed up and suddenly life was fun again. Beautiful and hopeful again. I don’t want to lose that. I don’t want to lose *you*.”

Tears stream down her cheeks. “I’m so sorry, Drew, I think you’re wonderful, I just...” She shakes her head. “I need to think. I’m too mixed up. But for what it’s worth, this misfit, loser O’Leary thinks you’re a fantastic father. You love that little girl with every piece of your heart and there’s nothing more precious than that. You don’t have to fake it. You’re the real thing, through and through.”

“Tatum wait, please,” I call out as she starts down the street.

“I’ll call you. I promise,” she tosses over her shoulder. “From my home phone since I don’t have my cell.”

“At least let me give you a ride back to your place. It’s freezing out.”

She turns, walking backwards as she says, “It’s fine, my coat is warm, and I want to walk. I need to. It’s how I do my best thinking.” She flutters her fingers. “Good night. Thanks for...everything.”

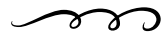
I stand watching her go, feeling like my heart is being ripped from my chest and tossed onto the driveway beside my already pulverized stomach.

Right then and there, I decide this isn’t the end.

I’m going to make this right with Tatum. I’m going to show her how loved and accepted and respected she already is here in Bad Dog. And I’m going to start right fucking now.

A fire in my veins, I jump back into Barrett’s truck and zoom back toward Bubba Jump’s, hoping I’ll get there in time.

Chapter Nineteen



By the time I get back to my place, the restaurants and bars by the lake are clearing out and my feet are frozen in my cheap pleather boots, but the walk worked its magic on my brain.

I've thought everything through and made my decision.

I hate to admit defeat, but there are times when you have to take a step back, survey the wreckage you managed to leave on the field in just a little under a week, and call the game for the other team.

When I get up to the apartment, I change into my pancake pajamas, cry a little because they remind me of Sarah Beth and how much I love her already, then mop up my face and sit down to make a list of all the things I'll need to get done to get ready to move back home.

First up, I'll have to make sure Mom hasn't given my room away to another O'Leary in need. In a family the size of ours, that's always a risk, but in a pinch, I guess I could ask Molly about subletting her basement room. It's damp and only has one tiny window, but my sister would give it to me for cheap. She might even let me stay for free if I agree to watch the baby a couple nights a week so she and Wyatt, her husband, can sleep through the night.

Then, I'll have to see if my old job wants me back. Candace, my supervisor, never thought I was good enough to give a promotion or a raise, but she knew she could count on me to be there on time with a great attitude. And they're

always looking for subs and part-time workers. I'm betting she'll hire me again, at least part-time, until another full-time space opens up.

Or maybe I can find a nanny position in Kentucky. Most people in Fair Shot are too poor to afford full-time childcare like that, but we're not that far from Lexington. I could commute. And if I look really hard, I bet I can find a little girl or boy who needs me as much as Sarah Beth and a place that feels like home.

Tears fall on my list, smearing the numbers on the left side. I toss the paper on the coffee table and give in to the surge of emotion.

No other place is ever going to feel like Drew and Sarah Beth's house. Because it isn't the house that's special. It's Drew and Sarah Beth and how I felt when I was with them.

Like I belonged. Like I mattered.

Like they've been waiting for me as much as I've been waiting for them, even though I didn't know it until they swept into my life and changed everything.

"I'd miss you even if we'd never met," I blubber, crying harder.

And not just Drew. It's Sarah Beth, too. It's probably crazy, but from the second she reached for my hand, a part of me was hers. For life. I want to be someone she can count on in a world that's already let that sweet little girl down.

I'm sobbing so hard I apparently don't hear the knock on the door.

I'm completely thrown when Wren sticks her head in and calls, "Get away from her, I have a gun!"

I bleat out a cry of surprise and fall off the couch.

By the time I scramble to my feet, Wren is beside me, looking nearly as startled as I feel.

"I'm so sorry," she says. "I thought you were being attacked or something. I heard you crying, and I knocked and called your name a dozen times, but you didn't answer so I

tried the door. And it was open, so I came in.” She pokes my arm before rubbing it up and down in a way that’s comforting, albeit a little vigorous. “Lock your door, woman! Always. Even here. Bad Dog has a low crime rate, but you never know when a crazed killer might swing through town looking for dirty tacos and end up attacking you in the middle of the night.”

I sniff and swipe at my eyes with the sleeve of my pajamas. “You’re right. I’m sorry I didn’t hear you knocking. I’m just upset.”

Wren’s brow furrows. “Why? Last I saw, you and Drew were giving each other puppy dog eyes and the whole world was sparkling. I honestly thought you’d be at his place, and I’d have to pick your lock to get my overnight bag.” She lifts a hand. “Not that I would normally pick a lock or invade your privacy, it’s just a bit of an emergency.”

I thump my forehead with my palm. “Your bag! I forgot it was still here when you said you were going home. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Wren says. “It’s Barrett’s for acting like a crazy person and making me forget which way was up. I wouldn’t have worried about it, but my birth control pills are in there. I was getting ready for bed and realized they were still here, and I really didn’t want to risk skipping one.”

Despite my current state of despair, my ears perk up at that little nugget of information. “Oh, yeah? Why’s that?”

“No reason,” Wren says, with a laugh so fake it could give my pleather boots a run for their money. “Just...safety first and all. Especially when it comes to having a baby.”

“I didn’t realize you had a steady date.”

Wren clears her throat. “I don’t. But maybe I’m thinking about having a one-night stand. Just to prove that people don’t know me as well as they think they do.”

I narrow my eyes on her guilty expression. “People like Barrett? The guy you totally had a one-night stand with tonight?”

Wren curses and covers her face with her hands.

I smile for the first time since I walked away from Drew. “Oh, girl, we need to talk.” I move toward the kitchen. “I’ll make the tea while you spill it.”

“I can’t,” she says. “No offense, but I don’t kiss and tell. Not even when it comes to the most infuriating man on the planet.” She bites her lip as worry creases her forehead. “This is going to ruin everything, isn’t it? Work will be weird, and I’ll have to quit and find a new job and a new boss who doesn’t know what sounds I make when I’m feeling really happy.”

“So, he made you feel really happy, huh?” I ask, watching her from the corner of my eyes as I put the kettle on.

“Really happy,” she says with a sigh. “Really, really happy. Three times in one session, which has never happened to me before.”

“Sounds like that might be worth a repeat performance.”

Wren shakes her head with a shudder. “Ugh, no. I hate him. I thought I loved him, but now I’m pretty sure I hate him. He’s so bossy and arrogant and he thinks he knows me, but he doesn’t. It’s like he hasn’t been paying attention. At all! I’ve worked for him for six years, Tatum. *Six years*, and he didn’t know that I go deer hunting every season and am really good with a gun.”

I pause as I’m reaching for mugs and shoot her a worried look. “You didn’t shoot him, did you?”

She huffs. “No, of course not. I just took his shotgun and fired a perfect hole through the street sign to prove that I could shoot Kyle if I wanted to. But I won’t. I think I know why he’s lost it, by the way.”

“Barrett?” I ask.

“No, Kyle,” she says. “My cell was dead, but when I charged it in the car, a message came through from Tim at animal control. Apparently, there’s an old grain shed down the road from my house with a bunch of rotting corn in it. One of Farmer Chastain’s pigs got into it and almost died. But before

he did, he got really aggressive and mean. They cleared the entire shed out, so hopefully Kyle will calm down without regular doses of toxic mold in his system.”

My shoulders sag. “Oh my God, that’s great news! Fingers crossed.” I peel my lips from my teeth with a hiss. “Maybe that’s why my bite got infected so fast?”

“Maybe,” Wren says. “But you should be fine. The antibiotics should clear everything up. You’re feeling okay now, right?”

“I feel great,” I say, my eyes tearing up almost immediately. “Except that I’m in love with Drew and Sarah Beth and we can never be together, and I have to move home to live in my sister’s dank and depressing basement.”

Wren’s brows shoot up. “What!”

I spill out the entire story—meeting Drew’s mom and realizing I’ve screwed everything up beyond repair—and finish up just as the water boils. I fill the mugs and plunk a honey cinnamon stick tea bag in each, sniffing as I add, “So, I have to go home. It’s where I belong. If I can screw up a fresh start in a week, I’m clearly not fit for a normal, drama free existence.”

“That’s crazy, Tatum,” she says sternly. “You’re fitting in great! I adore you and I don’t adore just anyone. I’m picky about new friends.”

I fight another wave of tears. “Thanks. I adore you, too. And I think you and Barrett are going to find a way to be together. I have a feeling about you two. You’re going to have a happy ending. And when you do, I’ll be cheering so loud you’ll hear me all the way from Kentucky.”

Her lips turn down. “Tatum, please, I think—”

She’s cut off by someone shouting my name from the street outside.

No, not just shouting...

That voice is being amplified. It sounds like it’s coming over a loudspeaker or something.

“Tatum O’Leary,” the voice calls again, more familiar this time around.

Wren and I lock eyes and she says what I’m thinking, “Is that Fred? From the bar?”

“I think so,” I say, just as Fred calls out, “Paging Tatum O’Leary! Please come to your balcony at your earliest convenience, pumpkin. We don’t care if you’re in your pajamas. We’re all friends here.”

Abandoning our tea, Wren and I circle around the couch and the kitchen table, shoving aside the curtains shielding the apartment from the street below. I drag open the sliding glass door and step out onto my chilly balcony to see...a parade.

No, not a parade. But it’s damned close. On the street below are five motorcycles with rainbow flags flying from the back and a giant pick-up truck with what looks like a small stage in the bed. Standing on the stage is Fred, speaking into a megaphone, and a man in a snazzy blue suit.

“Drew?” I whisper too softly for anyone but Wren to hear me. I just can’t believe this is real. It becomes even more dreamlike, when Fred says, “She’s here, hit it, boys!” and music begins to play from a speaker by Drew’s feet.

“This is for you Tatum,” he says into his microphone, making my heart leap into my throat.

The song starts with a familiar synthesizer intro and then Drew launches into the first verse of “I Want to Know What Love Is,” by Foreigner.

The first thing I notice is that his voice is terrible—sweet and sincere, but truly awful. My soul mate is tone deaf, but that’s okay. So am I. The second thing I notice is that Fred and the rest of the bikers are dancing along, swirling their rainbow flags in a wild improvisational routine that is both hysterical and incredibly moving.

The third thing I notice is that tears are streaming down my face because these people all cared enough to come serenade me at midnight.

Yes, I managed to screw a lot of things up my first week in Bad Dog, but I also managed to find my people in a way I never have before.

“Here,” Wren says, pressing a tissue into my hands. “You’re going to want to mop up your face before you go to him. You are going to him, right? Because this may be the most romantic thing I’ve ever seen.”

I nod, loosely, sucking in a shaky breath as I swipe at my tears. “Yes. Yes, I am. I want to know what love is, too. And I want *him* to show me.”

She grins and pats my back as more tears pour down my face. “I know you do, love bug. So, get going. I’ll grab my bag and head out, so you and Drew have the apartment to yourself.”

“Thank you,” I say, grabbing her for a quick, tight hug. “Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome,” she says, laughing as I turn to shout, “I’m coming down in my pajamas!” to the street.

Seconds later, I’m shoving my feet into my tennis shoes and dashing down the stairs, hurrying through the hallway beside the now closed restaurant and emerging onto the street just as Drew is hitting the chorus for the second time.

He instantly hands the microphone to Fred, who whispers, “Thank God,” before taking up where Drew left off, but in a gorgeous baritone that makes the moment even more magical.

Drew hops down from the truck bed and runs to meet me, scooping me up in his arms and hugging me tight. “Your arms are my favorite place in the world,” I murmur in the crook of his neck, still teary.

“Good, because I’m never going to let you go,” he says, squeezing me harder. “I don’t care if it’s crazy, I’ve been in love with you since the moment you told me how attached you were to your clitoris. Probably before.”

“I’ve been in love with you since you taught me how to play trout pinball,” I say, kissing his cheek. “I didn’t believe in love at first sight before, but now I do. And I don’t care who

thinks we're weird or wrong or scandalous. I just want to be with you and Sarah Beth and be happy."

He pulls back, beaming down at me, tears in his eyes. "I'm so happy to hear that. You have no idea. Move in with me?"

I blink. "The garage apartment?"

"No, my house. My room, my bed. I don't care what anyone else thinks, either. I feel like I've been waiting my whole life for you, and I don't want to waste another minute. I swear," he says, his throat working as he swallows. "I feel like I missed you before we even met."

I feel my eyes go dinner plate wide and grab his hand, squeezing tight. "I have to show you something. Right now. Upstairs."

"Please show me something upstairs," he says. "And then come home with me. For keeps."

"Goodbye Fred," I call out as we run for the building. "I love you and will see you next Sunday!"

"Love you too, darlin'" he calls back before launching into the big finish of the song, as his biker friends twirl their flags, and a gentle snow begins to fall.

It's magical.

Nearly as magical as the moment I drag Drew to the refrigerator and show him the note I scribbled down our first night together.

Wonder in his eyes, he gathers me into his arms. "I guess that settles it, then. Some things are just meant to be."

"Like you and me," I say, tears in my eyes again.

"Like you and me," he agrees, and then he kisses me and I'm home.

For keeps.

"Pack your things," Drew whispers against my lips.

I pull back with a smile. "How about we sleep here tonight and gather my things in the morning. I can think of something

I'd rather do right now than load my clothes back into my suitcase."

He arches a naughty brow. "Oh yeah? What's that?"

Threading my fingers into his thick, delicious hair, I cock my head to one side. "Start a book club?"

He grins. "A book club?"

"Yes, a book club. Right now. No better time to start a book club than midnight on a Friday night."

"And what book would you suggest we start with, Miss O'Leary?" he asks, backing me toward the bedroom.

"Crime and Punishment? I've always meant to read it. It's a classic. Deals with important themes like alienation and human suffering."

"Yeah, it's a page turner, all right," Drew says as he kisses his way down my throat.

"Oh darn, you've already read it?" I tip my head back, luxuriating in every caress of his lips. Damn, this man can kiss. His lips are a thing of skillful, unparalleled beauty, and they're mine, all mine.

Just thinking about it is enough to make my heart somersault.

"Yep," he says. "Had to do a paper on it in my freshman English class. We could read *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka instead. Similar themes with bonus 'man turning into giant cockroach' action." He stops kissing me long enough to push open the door to the bedroom. He glances in, with a judgmental grunt. "A full bed. I was hoping for at least a queen. I'm going to need space for all the things I want to do to you."

"All the reading you want to do, you mean," I correct, not done with this game quite yet. "And I've decided what book we should choose. It came to me in a moment of brilliance."

He casts an affectionate look my way as we sway into the bedroom, and he shuts the door behind us. "You have a lot of those. Moments of brilliance."

“Except when I walked away from you tonight,” I say, serious again for a moment. “That was a moment of dumbness.”

“More like a moment of fear.” He smooths my hair from my forehead. “And we all have them. So, what’s this book we’re going to read? I’m really hoping I’ve already read it so I can skip straight to getting you naked while you start chapter one.”

“Jane Eyre,” I whisper, as the backs of my knees touch the mattress. “You know why?”

“Because he falls in love with the nanny, of course,” he says, warmly.

“That’s exactly right,” I say with a sigh. “Could you be more perfect?”

“I don’t know,” he says, mischief in his eyes again as he shucks his suit coat and tosses it to the ground. “Let’s find out, shall we?”

He tackles me onto the bed, making me giggle. But pretty soon, giggling is the furthest thing from my mind.

“Yes, take it off,” I say as he unbuttons my pajama top. “All of it. I need to be naked with you.”

“And I need to be inside of you.” He pauses just as he’s about to kiss the top of my breast, lifting his gaze to mine with a stricken look. “Condoms. I don’t have any.”

“I don’t care,” I say, shrugging out of my top and pulling the cami over my head. “I’m on the pill and the condom broke last time anyway.” I loop my arms around his neck, pulling him in for another kiss so I can murmur against his lips, “And I want that savage cock of yours in me bare.”

He curses softly. “Savage, huh? I hope that’s a good thing.”

“It’s the best thing,” I say, moaning as he slips his hand down the front of my pajama pants and panties, sliding a finger inside me.

“You’re already so wet,” he says, adding another finger with an approving sound low in his throat.

“I’m wet pretty much any time you’re close enough to touch,” I confess. “When you came downstairs while I was making pancakes the other day, just feeling you standing behind me was enough to ruin my panties.”

“Fuck, woman,” he says, rubbing his thumb around my clit, making me squirm. I don’t need a ring to add sensation with Drew. Drew’s touch is enough to light me up like a neon cowboy. “Keep talking like that and I’m not going to last any longer than I did the first time.”

“I don’t care how long you last,” I say honestly. “Because I know I’ll get to be with you again and again and again.”

He exhales a shaky breath. “That sounds so good. You have no idea. Every night this week, I just wanted you to stay. Watching you walk out my door was physically painful. ”

I lift my hips, easing his way as he rips the rest of my clothes off and starts to work on the buttons on his dress shirt. “Same for me. It just felt so wrong.” I bite my lip, torn between excitement over the impulsive thing we’re going to do and worry about how it might affect Sarah Beth. “You don’t think me moving in will upset Sarah Beth, do you? Or confuse her?”

“Hell, no.” He eases off the bed, popping the button at the top of his pants. “She’ll be over the moon with excitement. She’s crazy about you.”

“She’s crazy about me as a nanny,” I say, distracted by how hot it is to watch him strip off his pants, revealing the long, thick ridge of his erection straining the fabric of his boxer briefs. “She might not like me as a live-in girlfriend. She might get freaked out. Or jealous.”

“Never. That’s not Sarah Beth. But if she does have problems, we’ll solve them. Because we’re loving, caring adults who work well together in a crisis.” He lips crook up on one side as he teases the top of his boxers low enough to allow

his cock piercing to peek out of the top. “We proved that the night we met.”

My breath rushes out. “Dear God, get in bed. Now. In bed and inside me. I need Elvis rubbing me on the inside.”

“Elvis?” he asks as he crawls on top of me, where I would very much like him to stay for a long, long time.

“I’m naming your cock piercing Elvis,” I say, looping my legs around his hips and arching my aching center upward until my clit rubs against the hot length of him. “I haven’t settled on a name for your cock yet. I feel like I need to get to know him better first.”

“Well, let me help you with that,” he says, reaching between us to fit his erection to where I’ve been missing him so desperately.

I groan as he pushes slowly, languidly into me, holding my gaze as he fills me. “My pussy would have missed your cock if we’d never met, too.”

“I can’t believe we both felt that way,” he says, wonder in his expression as he begins to move, every stroke of his body into mine confirming that he’s mine and I’m his and we should never be apart again. “And that you wrote it down.”

“There *is* magic in the world,” I say, cupping his face in my hands as I lift into his thrusts. “I promise. And I’m going to make sure it never leaves you again, baby.”

His eyes begin to shine once more as he nods, “Right back at you, sweetheart. But don’t even think about running off with the fairies. I’m keeping you right here, in Bad Dog, Minnesota. Home of the world’s largest Swedish meatball sub.”

“Wow,” I say. “World’s largest, huh?”

“We grow ‘em big here in Minnesota,” he says, sinking even deeper, until I’m so full of him I can barely breathe.

“That you do. I guess I’ll have to stay, then. Just to try the meatballs.”

“I’ve got your meatballs right here, baby,” he says, making me laugh as he rolls me on top of him and grips my hips tight in his big hands. “I want to watch you ride me. Show me how you like it when you’re on top.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, bracing my hands on his chest and doing just that, while he rolls my nipples in his fingers, and the room fills with our moans and soft murmurs of appreciation.

I come just minutes later, calling his name, and then he rolls me over and shows me how savage he can be. He fucks me hard and fast and I love every minute of it, because it’s Drew. I love everything he does to me, especially when he comes with a cry, swearing, “No one else. I never want to be with anyone else.”

Later, as we’re catching our breath side by side on the narrow bed, I roll over and press a kiss to his chest. “Good. Because I don’t intend to share Elvis or Chad with another woman.”

His lips twitch, but his eyes stay closed as he says, “You’re not calling my dick Chad.”

“But I like the name Chad,” I tease. “It rhymes with bad, which your dick is sometimes. In a good way, but bad all the same. Bad, bad Chad with Elvis on top.”

He slaps the side of my ass, making me yip. “Hey, what was that for?”

“No Chad. You get spanked every time that name passes your lips.”

I giggle. “But Chad is a—” I break off with another outraged sound as he spanks me again, harder this time. “Looks like your hands are bad, too. I’ll have to name them Biff and Cliff and put them in time-out so they can think about what they’ve done.”

“They’d rather think about what they’re about to do,” he says, rolling on top of me and pinning my arms to the mattress over my head. “To you and Clarissa.”

I beam up at him. “You named my clit?”

He laughs. “Not really. I’m just playing along with your crazy games.”

“Because you love me?” I ask, needing to hear it again.

“Because I love you,” he says, his voice gentle and heartbreakingly sweet. “Desperately and completely.”

He proves it by making me come twice more, until I’m so tired even the announcement that he’ll be going over to his mom’s tomorrow morning while I’m packing to explain that accepting me into the family is mandatory can stress me out too much.

Yes, his mom and I got off to a bad start, but I’ll show her I’m one of the good ones, and that I love her son as desperately and whole-heartedly as he loves me. In time, she’ll see that we were right to jump in with both feet. There’s no doubt in my mind about that.

The thought wakes me up enough to mumble against Drew’s chest, “I don’t have any doubts. I always have doubts about boys. But you? None.”

He kisses the top of my head. “And I don’t intend to give you any reason to find one. I’m also adding insurance to your employee package. I can’t have you walking around without insurance. You’re precious cargo.”

I snuggle closer with a smile. “Thanks. You make me feel that way. Very precious indeed.”

We drift off to sleep as the snow continues to fall softly outside and all is right with the world. The very rightest it’s ever been.

Epilogue



Drew

Three Months Later

“Hurry or we won’t get the chocolate chip and coconut pancakes. They always run out! Get a move on, you two!” Sarah Beth spills out of the van, running toward the lakefront gazebo, where the monthly biker brunch is already in full swing.

Tatum laughs and calls out, “Only get two! Your eyes are always bigger than your stomach!”

Sarah Beth waves a hand to let Tatum know she’s heard, but I seriously doubt Tatum’s warning will have any effect.

“She’s going to have a stack of six pancakes by the time we get to the table, isn’t she?” Tatum asks, gathering the basket of croissants and orange juice that’s our contribution to the meal from the back seat.

I loop my arm around her waist. “Of course. And then she’ll say her tummy hurts in half an hour. But I brought the Tums this time.”

“So prepared,” Tatum says, tipping her head back for a kiss. “That’s some hot dad behavior right there.”

“I aim to make you hot,” I murmur against her lips. “It’s my main mission in life.”

She smiles, making our teeth bump together. “Mission accomplished, handsome. Is it wrong that I’m super excited Sarah Beth is staying at your mom’s house tonight and we’re ordering pizza for a movie night?”

“No,” I say, pulling back and searching the park for signs of my mom’s car. “Is it wrong that I can’t wait for Mom to drink too many mimosas and start singing karaoke with Fred?”

Tatum giggles. “No. That’s the best part of biker brunch. Your mom is hysterical when she’s tipsy and singing Don’t Go Breakin’ my Heart.”

“Agreed,” I say, a wave of gratitude that Mom and Tatum are now fast friends sweeping through me all over again.

But I think my mom realized when I showed up at her house that morning in February, telling her I’d met my soul mate and was going to do whatever it took to keep Tatum with me in Bad Dog that she had two choices—embrace my girlfriend or see a lot less of her son.

Things were a little rocky at first, but after our first family dinner, my parents both pulled me aside and made it clear they saw what I saw. They realized that Tatum was special, kind, and completely crazy about Sarah Beth and me. She was the missing piece we needed to complete our family.

Hopefully, in just a few minutes, we’re going to take an important step toward making that family official.

A wave of nervousness tightens my throat, but it’s a good anxiety. I just want everything to be perfect.

Most of all, I want her to say yes.

“Oh, there’s Wren!” Tatum lifts an arm, waving with a big grin. “I’m so glad she made it. It feels like she’s been gone forever.”

I take the basket from her. “Go say hi. I’ll take this down to the picnic tables.”

“Okay, thanks,” she says, pressing a kiss to my cheek. She starts for Wren, but pauses, turning back to me to whisper, “Did Barrett tell you if she’s coming back to work or not? I’m

dying to know if they're going to make up and admit they have the hots for each other. The suspense is *killing* me."

"Same," I agree, "but you know Barrett. He isn't talking. All he said was that Wren was planning on coming back to work after her sabbatical. That's it."

Tatum nods and squeezes my arm. "Okay. I'll see what kind of dirt I can get out of her. And I have to hear all about her travels. I can't believe she spent three months in Thailand. That's so incredibly cool. Look how tan she is!"

She scampers off to meet Wren, her arms held out for a hug. I wave at Wren with a grin, then start down to the tables, where my mom has just arrived with the last piece of the master plan.

I deliver the croissants and juice and head over to where she's joined Sarah Beth in the pancake line, instantly worried by the shine in her eyes.

"What's wrong?" I murmur, placing a hand on her back.

She swipes at her eyes with a shaky grin. "Nothing, I'm just so happy for you. And Grammy would be, too." She lowers her voice to a whisper as she presses the ring box into my hand. "She told me to pretend it was lost when you asked for her ring for Nicky. Honest to God, she came to me in a dream and made me promise to wait to give it to you until you found the right one. You aren't mad, are you?"

I smile. "No. She was right. And thank you. This means so much to me."

Mom pats my arm. "Of course, honey. Now, go get romantic. I'll keep an eye on Sarah Beth and make sure she doesn't go into sugar shock."

Sarah Beth, who's been laser focused on the pancakes, turns to shoot her grandmother a narrow look. "I can handle four pancakes, Grammy. I can. My stomach is five years old now. I'm starting half day kindergarten in the fall!"

Mom nods indulgently. "Yes, I know. But growing stomachs need protein, too. Not just sugar. How about two pancakes and two pieces of bacon?"

“Three pancakes and one piece of bacon,” Sarah Beth counters.

I leave them bargaining for nutritional balance and head over to the small table by the gazebo that Fred set aside for me and Tatum. There are already two glasses of champagne waiting, as well as the fairy house Sarah Beth and I made at her ceramics class two weeks ago. Her teacher very sweetly fired it ahead of schedule so it would be ready for the big day.

With a quick glance over my shoulder to make sure Tatum isn't watching, I slip the ring out of the box and tuck it just inside the fairy “door,” the small opening at the front just big enough to tuck a candle in. Then I stuff my hands in my pockets and fight to quiet my racing heart.

I've just about pulled my shit together when two large hands clap down on my shoulders, and I nearly jump out of my skin. I spin to see Barrett and our younger brother, Christian, the only actual biker in our family, standing behind me. “Shit, you scared me.”

“You should be scared,” Christian says, grabbing my shoulders again from the front this time. “This is a big deal. This is forever, man. Are you sure you're ready? I mean, Tatum's great, but you've only known each other three months.”

I know he's just teasing—Chris loves Tatum, too—but I can't help but bristle.

Before I can tell my little brother to stuff it, however, Barrett surprises me by saying, “Leave him alone. He and Tatum are perfect together. And when you know, you know.”

I nod his way. “Thanks.”

“You're welcome.” Barrett shoots me a tight smile before glancing over to where Tatum and Wren are getting in line for pancakes, talking animatedly and laughing in the warm May morning. “I'll go tell her you need to speak with her. I should welcome Wren back, anyway, so...”

I hum beneath my breath. “Yeah, you should. Be nice to her.”

“Nice is a stupid thing to be,” Barrett mutters. “I’m honest. Anyone worth their salt knows honest is better than nice.”

He starts toward the food line and Christian sighs. “Well, that doesn’t bode well. Why can’t he see that she’s crazy about him?”

“Or that he’s crazy about her?” I agree with a shrug. “But it’s none of our business, I guess.”

Christian smirks, his blue eyes flashing. “Since when has that stopped a McGuire from sticking their nose in? I’m going to pull him aside later, after he’s had a few, and tell him I want to date Wren.” His laugh is absolutely diabolical. “See what he has to say about *that*.”

I exhale through my teeth. “Okay, but if you need a ride to the hospital, don’t come crying to me. I’m going to be on my way to the airport.”

“With your beautiful new fiancée,” Christian finishes, making me shoot him a hard look. He lifts his hands. “I know, I know, don’t jinx it. But you can’t jinx true love, brother. That’s the best part about it.”

A loud gobbling sound fills the air, making Chris turn and curse beneath his breath as Wren’s little sister, Starling—their mom had a bird fetish, apparently—comes walking down the hill with Kyle on his leash.

“Shit, not that thing again,” Christian says. “I keep telling Starling we don’t need a psychotic turkey in the fundraiser flyer picture, but she won’t listen.”

“To be fair, he’s not psychotic anymore,” I say, though I confess I don’t have much love for Kyle. He lost the chance to win my heart when he attacked my woman’s ass. “But I get it. People want to donate to save cute, fluffy things. Not a giant turkey with a big red thing hanging over one eye.”

“I don’t know why Kane thought I needed a fundraiser co-chair anyway,” he grumbles. “I’ve handled this on my own for the past four years. And Starling is practically a fetus. What does she know about fundraising?”

“I think she majored in it in college,” I say, chuckling as Christian curses some more.

“Fine, but I was here first, so I’m the boss,” he says. “Which means no turkeys in the flyer.” He starts to cross the lawn, but stops to turn back with a smile, “Oh, and good luck. But you won’t need it. She’s going to say yes, brother. Anyone with eyes can see you’re the love of her life.”

“Thanks, man,” I say, my throat tight again, as a wave of love for my brother—for my whole family—spreads through my chest. That’s the thing about love, the more you give it away, the more it keeps coming back to you, multiplied and even stronger than it was before.

I sniff, pulling myself together as I spot Tatum crossing the lawn, a plate in hand. She arches a brow as she sees the private table with champagne. “Well, well, isn’t this fancy?”

“I thought we could start date night early,” I say, glancing down at the plate, seeing that she got enough for two and picked out all my favorite things. Because she collects little facts about me like most people collect treasure. I have never felt more loved than I do when I’m with her and it isn’t any one big thing, it’s a hundred little things that add up to a new life that would no longer be whole without her.

She sets the plate on the table and reaches for my hand with a worried look. “Are you okay?” She bites her lip. “Did Barrett tell you something? Is he firing Wren? She’s planning to go back to work, but I should warn her if—”

“No, it’s not about Barrett or Wren,” I say, deciding I can’t put this off another second. I wanted to wait until she found the ring herself, but I can’t hold it in a second more. “It’s about you. And me.”

She blinks, nodding slowly as she says, “Okay.”

“I need to discuss something serious with you.”

She nods again, pulling in a deeper breath. “Okay, but first, I have to give you something.” She reaches into her purse and pulls out a plastic bag with a white and pink stick inside. Her lips curve in a nervous smile as she lifts it up and says,

“Surprise, my serious thing is more serious than your serious thing! And I guess they weren’t kidding when they said missing one pill could result in pregnancy?” She swallows audibly and babbles on, “I’m so sorry to spring it on you like this. I was going to wait until pizza night tonight when we were alone, but you looked so serious that I wanted to give you some good news. At least, I hope this is good news to you? It’s amazing news for me, because I can’t imagine anything more beautiful than having a baby with you and raising our little one with Sarah Beth, but I could be—”

I cut her off with a kiss, a deep, grateful, elated kiss that I break only when I have to come up for air.

“I’m so happy,” I say, tears streaming down my cheeks. But they’re streaming down Tatum’s, too, so I think it’s okay. “I can’t imagine better news. Unless it’s you telling me you’re having my baby and then saying you’ll marry me.”

Her eyes fly wide.

“Look in the fairy house. And happy belated Mother’s Day. Sarah Beth and I wanted to have it done by last weekend, but we couldn’t get it fired in time.”

“Oh my God,” Tatum whispers, dropping the positive test on the table with shaky hands as she bends, looking into the fairy house. “Oh my God, Drew. Oh my God.” She pulls the ring out, holding it up and immediately dropping it in the grass, she’s shaking so hard. “Oh no!”

“No worries,” I say, bending to collect it and staying there on one knee as I hold the ring up between us. “Margaret Tatum O’Leary, you are the missing piece I longed for every day until I met you. You are my light and my laughter and the best mother any kid could wish for. I’m so grateful you’re in my life. Words can’t express all the things I feel for you. But my actions can, and I intend to show you how deeply you’re loved from this day until the last day I’m lucky enough to breathe the same air as the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met. Beautiful, inside and out.”

She’s openly crying now, but her smile is still the loveliest thing I’ve ever seen when she says, “Yes. Yes, baby. There’s

nothing I'd rather do with this one precious life than spend it with you." She sniffs, adding with a grin, "And Elvis."

It's the perfect thing to say to get us laughing again.

But then, she always knows the perfect thing to say, a fact she proves when I tell her I booked us a three-day weekend in Austin to celebrate and she says, "I'm going to ride you wearing nothing but a cowboy hat and smile, future husband." She arches a brow. "But that was kind of cocky, I'm not going to lie. Just assuming I'd say yes and planning a celebration trip."

I grin. "The fact that you're already sleeping in my bed every night and telling me you love me first thing every morning gave me hope. A little bit."

She laughs. "Valid."

I take her hand and nod toward the crowd of biker friends and family who are trying—and failing—not to stare at the scene we're making. "Shall we share the news?" I whisper. She nods and I lift our joined hands into the air and shout, "She said yes!" A cheer erupts, making it clear all the people we love are overjoyed.

Sarah Beth runs over, her jaw open. "She said yes to what?"

"Tatum said yes to being my wife," I say. "And your mom. We're going to get married."

The joy on my daughter's face as she runs to Tatum, screaming, "You're my mom for real! For real for real!" is enough to make me start crying all over again. I watch them hug and swipe tears off my cheeks with the backs of my hands, feeling so lucky it's pouring out of my eyeballs.

Basically, I'm a hot fucking mess.

But Fred, ever an unexpected source of strength and wisdom, has a hanky and a word of wisdom for me, "You're doing it all just right," he whispers, patting me on the back. "When I proposed to Perry last month, I cried, too. There was snot everywhere. Snot proves it's real love."

I laugh and give him a hug, thanking him again for the part he played in helping me win the girl.

“My pleasure, buddy,” he says. “I had to. Any fool with eyes can see you two belong together.”

“Okay, let’s let Daddy and Tatum eat and get ready to go,” my mom says, putting an arm around Sarah Beth. “Remember, I told you they’re going on a surprise trip for a few days and you’re going to stay with me.”

Sarah Beth nods, still beaming like she just got her Christmas presents early. “I’m so excited. I get to be the flower girl, Grammy, Tatum said!”

My mom smiles. “And you’ll be a beautiful one.” She reaches for Tatum, pulling her into a hug, “Congratulations, sweet girl, and welcome to the—” She breaks off with an excited yelp and pulls back, pointing to the table behind Tatum’s back. “Is that what I think it is? Are we having another baby?”

Tatum laughs and nods. “We are. Surprise!”

My mother is apoplectic with joy and Sarah Beth does a spontaneous dance around the entire group gathered around us, singing, “I’m going to be a big sister! I’m going to be a big sister!” in a lovely voice she definitely didn’t get from me.

But that’s okay. My serenade still helped me win a chance at this woman’s big heart. And now she’s mine, and I’m hers, and we’re going to be a family for real.

A tight, loving, growing family.

No more waiting. No more faking it until I make it.

From now on, I get to live the life I’ve always wanted, with the woman of my dreams.

“We’re having trout pinball at the wedding,” Tatum says as we share a big stack of pancakes. “And you’re going to play inappropriately close to me and fondle my butt. For old times’ sake.”

I grin. “I won’t be able to keep my hands off of you, baby.”

She grins. “Good. That’s very good.”

And it is.

Barrett

Maybe it’s the romance in the air.
Maybe it’s the three glasses of champagne with too little orange juice.

But for some reason I can’t stop thinking about that night with Wren, that night that never should have happened. The one I swore I would forget the morning I got that text from her, the one stating that she was taking a three-month sabbatical and had arranged for Kinsey to take her place as head nurse until she returned.

I tried to text her back, to insist we talk about what happened before she ran away from me like a child, but she’d blocked my number.

Blocked. My. Number.

I was so angry; I swore I’d fire her the second she came back. But she’s the best nurse I have, the office hasn’t run properly since she left, and then there’s the irritating fact that I’m pretty sure I’m in love with her.

“Fucking ridiculous,” I mutter, making Christian jab me in the ribs with his elbow.

“Stop it,” he says. “It’s not ridiculous. It’s awesome. Drew and Tatum are so happy and in love. Drew’s weeping with joy, for fuck’s sake. Since when have you seen anyone in our family weep with joy?”

“Not them. They’re fine, it’s...something else,” I say, as I watch Wren with her sister, petting that contemptible turkey we should be fattening up for Thanksgiving dinner. “How can she coo over something that tried to kill her? Multiple times? The woman’s deranged.”

Christian hums beneath his breath. “You think? I think she’s gorgeous. I mean, Wren’s always been cute, but with a tan and that little sundress...” He exhales a breath. “She’s smoking hot. I was thinking I might ask her to the shelter benefit, actually. If that’s okay with you.”

“Why wouldn’t it be okay with me?” I snarl, sounding like one of the stray dogs Christian volunteers to socialize.

He shrugs. “I don’t know. I heard a rumor you two might have had a thing at some point?”

“No, there was no thing,” I grumble, managing to sound slightly less murderous, but only slightly. “And there never will be. Even if I was interested, which I’m not, I learned my lesson the first time. I’m not a man who can make marriage work and Wren’s the kind of woman you marry. That’s it. No need for you to speculate, or meddle, any further. If you want to ask her to be your date, knock yourself out.”

“Okay, I will,” he says, sliding his hands into his pockets with that effortless cool of his, the one I could never duplicate, even if I tried.

And I won’t try. I’m done trying. I’m done letting myself—and the people I want to love—down. There’s something broken in me, something that makes me very good at keeping my head in a crisis in the operating room and very bad at realizing that I’m letting people down before it’s too late.

Too late to stop my wife from leaving me for another man.

Too late to stop the woman I’m not sure I want to live without from moving on to my brother. Christian’s on his way over to Wren with his dazzling smile and easy charm. She’s going to say yes to the date. And then they’ll dance and flirt and laugh and it will be his cock she’s coming on come midnight next Saturday.

She’ll be in my brother’s bed and there’s not a damned thing I can do about it.

So, I do the only thing a man with any self-preservation instincts can do. I turn and I walk away.

Except that I don’t.

I mean to turn and walk away but suddenly find myself storming down the hill toward Wren Marie Baxter, ready to kidnap her like that asshole on the dance floor last February if that's what it takes to keep Christian from getting his hands on her.

A part of me realizes I'm being unreasonable.

But another part, the part that took Wren against the wall at her house last February, doesn't give a shit. It wants what it wants, and it wants her, even if I know full well this is going to end in disaster.

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About the Author

Author of over forty novels, *USA Today* Bestseller **Lili Valente** writes everything from steamy suspense to laugh-out-loud romantic comedies. A die-hard romantic, she can't resist a story where love wins big. Because love should always win. She lives in Vermont with her two big-hearted boy children and a dog named Pippa Jane.

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