



*Duke's Redemption*

THE SAMSON BOYS: BOOK 1

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**T**his book doesn't go into extreme detail on any particular violent or graphic scenes, but for a full list of trigger warnings, please visit

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Acknowledgments

Also By Stephanie Renee

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To all the guys out there with the rough exteriors and hearts of  
gold.

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## Chapter 1

### AVERY

“Miss Mathis?” The new office assistant pokes her head into my office.

She’s a mousy little thing. Half the time, she looks like she may run away from me at any moment. I don’t know why. I’m not mean to her.

“Yes, Danielle?” I ask without looking away from my computer screen.

“There’s a lawyer that’s here to see you.”

“Lawyer?” I ask. “I’ve got nothing on my calendar. Tell him he needs to make an appointment with you.”

I assume that’s the end of the discussion, but Danielle clears her throat, gathering up her courage to speak again.

“I tried that, but he said he’s already made two appointments, and you’ve cancelled on both.”

*Oh, it’s THAT lawyer.*

I've been dodging this guy for a month now. He says he has an estate matter to discuss with me. I figure he has to have the wrong Avery Mathis because I have no family to leave me anything. I've tried telling him that, but he's persistent.

Danielle adds, "He says he's not leaving until he gets a moment with you."

I close my eyes and let out a small sigh. "Fine. Send him in."

She disappears, and a moment later, a short, portly man comes waddling into the office. He's balding on top but has a thick white mustache.

When he opens his mouth to speak, his words drip with a strong Southern accent.

"Hello, Miss Mathis. I apologize if my intrusion seems rude, but I'm only here in Boston one more day before heading back to Texas. I'd like to get this matter taken care of before then."

"It's fine," I reply, trying to hide my annoyance. "Please have a seat."

"Thank you. I'll try not to take up too much of your time." He clicks open the latches on his briefcase before pulling a handkerchief out of his pocket to wipe a couple beads of sweat off his brow.

*Too late.*

"It's fine, Mr.?"

“Abernathy. Clyde Abernathy.”

“Alright, Mr. Abernathy. What do you have to show me?” I ask, anxious to get this show on the road.

“I’m representing the affairs of Mr. Samuel Whitmore—your father.”

“My?” I stammer. “Mr. Abernathy, my father left my mother when I was born. I haven’t heard from him since. I can’t imagine why I’d be included in any affairs of his.”

“Well, he’s always kept a close eye on you. In his will, he listed your address as well as your job. It’s how I found you so easily.”

*Should I be flattered or creeped out?*

“When did he die?” I ask.

“About a month ago.”

“How?”

“Cause of death on his death certificate is listed as a heart attack, but honestly, I’m not certain.”

Unsure of how I should respond to that, I try to get back to the matter at hand. “So, what do any of his affairs have to do with me?”

“Well, he left them all to you.”

“What?” I exclaim. “Why?”

“I assume it’s because you’re his only living relative, but I suppose I can’t really answer for sure.”

I sit in shock for a moment because I truly can't fathom why a man who seemingly wanted nothing to do with me my entire life suddenly puts me in his will. Is this some sort of penance he's trying to atone for?

The lawyer pulls me from my thoughts. "Shall we go over what he's left you?"

I shake my head, trying to snap back into the moment. "Of course. Please begin."

He pulls an 8x10 photo out of an envelope and hands it to me.

He says, "This house is now yours."

"A house?" I ask, taking the photo out of his hands. Sure enough, it shows an old farmhouse with a large wrap-around porch. It looks awfully big for just one person. I'm sure at one point, it was beautiful, but now it looks pretty dilapidated.

"Where is this?" I ask.

A small town called Maple Oaks, Texas.

*Texas? What am I supposed to do with a house in Texas?*

"This house used to belong to my father? It doesn't look like it's been lived in for quite some time," I say.

"He bought the house awhile ago, determined to fix it up. But unfortunately, it just fell further into disarray. I couldn't tell you why. Honestly, I didn't know Samuel all that well, but he seemed to be a good man."

I could argue with him about how I don't think running out on your woman and child makes you a good man. But why bother?

The sour taste in my mouth makes me not want to deal with anything my father had any interest in.

"So, I can just sell it, right?" I ask.

"I'm afraid not."

"What do you mean?" My tone signals my annoyance.

"There are some conditions for you taking possession of the property."

"Conditions?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

"I'm afraid so. For starters, you may not sell the house. Your father insisted that it stay in the family. You may pass it on to whomever you wish in the event of your death or after a period of twenty years."

*Well, isn't that cheerful?*

He goes on. "You're welcome to rent it out, but I will warn you that the house needs a lot of work. And another stipulation is that you need to be there to supervise any renovations that take place."

"What?" I cry. "That's insane. I live in Boston." I say the words slowly, trying to convey my shock.

"I understand that, Miss Mathis. The house is over a hundred years old. Your father wanted to ensure that it's adequately taken care of."



*Why care now? He didn't seem to take care of it when it was alive.*

A million thoughts run through my head. Having a property to rent out doesn't necessarily sound like a bad thing. But I'm not sure if all the hassle is worth it. Renovations are expensive.

"Did this *wonderful* father of mine leave me any money for these renovations?" I ask with a slight eye roll.

"There is a small trust at the local town bank. You only get it if you—"

"Are in the town." I finish his thought. "Yeah, I got it."

"Correct."

"Mr. Abernathy, I have a job... here in Boston. I run this publishing house. As small as it may be, it still needs my attention. I don't know that I can just skip off to Texas. What happens if I choose not to do anything with the house?"

"It stays tied up in litigation. In the event that you never take possession or leave it to anyone, it will eventually be auctioned off. Any proceeds from said auction will be given to a local charity."

He hands me another piece of paper. "Here's an estimate of what the house is worth as is. And here's a projection of what it could be worth if it's fixed up."

"Holy shit!" I exclaim, impressed by the number. "Why are you showing me these numbers if I can't sell it?"

“To give you an idea of what you could get if you rented it out.”

He then shows me the amount that is in the trust. He wasn't lying when he called it small.

“Mr. Abernathy, I don't like to look a gift horse in the mouth, but I don't know that this will be enough to hire a team to do all of this work.”

“If you decide to take possession, I can get you in touch with the local handyman.”

“Handyman?”

He nods. “He's a retired Navy SEAL. Now, he does odd construction work around town. He works for cheap but does a good job.”

“Guess you've thought of everything, huh?”

He gives me a weak smile. “Just trying to help, ma'am.”

I think for a moment, but my mind is too frazzled. I don't even get offended by the 'ma'am.'

Sighing, I say, “I'm sorry. This is just a lot to take in.”

“I understand. How about you take the evening to think about it? My flight isn't until noon tomorrow. I'll stop back by first thing in the morning.”

“Okay, that will be fine. Thank you.”

We say our goodbyes with a quick handshake, and Mr. Abernathy is out the door with his briefcase and trench coat.

I sit back down in my desk chair and try to process everything. I'm quickly interrupted, though, when Danielle pokes her head back in.

“Your one o'clock is here.”

*Guess processing will have to wait.*

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## *Chapter 2*

### **AVERY**

**I** shimmy in the hot water, trying to get comfortable—which is no easy feat in this small bathtub. I swear this thing was not made for someone with any type of curves.

But it's the best I've got, and all the decision making I have to do requires candles, bubbles, and wine.

I spent the better part of the afternoon researching everything that I could about this entire situation. I learned that Maple Oaks is an extremely small town that barely even warrants its own map dot. But from the photos, it looks cute—in a quaint sort of way.

In the area, I could make a decent chunk of change on a rental the size of my recent inheritance. But honestly, what the hell do I know about being a landlord? And how hard would that be living all the way across the country?

I guess I could hire a local company to help me manage the property and tenants, but that would eat into my profits.

My mind has done this back-and-forth tennis match so much all day long that I think I'm getting whiplash.

I use the towel next to me to dry off my hands before grabbing my phone. Earlier, I made a pros and cons list that I thought may help me decide what I want to do.

"Let's start with the cons," I mutter out loud, as though someone can actually hear me.

Texas. Enough said. I know absolutely nothing about Texas, nor do I think I would fit in even a little bit. Hats hurt my head, so a cowboy hat is out of the question, and flannel makes me itchy. Plus, you know, it's all the way across the country.

Restorations. Not only do I know nothing about any type of house projects, but I have to go to Texas to supervise said projects. Nothing about it is exactly convenient.

Work. I don't know how much of a con this one actually is. When the entire country was basically shut down, I was able to do my job from home without any issues. Theoretically, I could do it again. I need to talk to my staff, though, to make sure they could handle everything in my absence.

You have principles. Do I really want to be associated with anything that my father has touched? The man walked out when I was a baby, and my mother never got over it. Why does he want to make up for his sins now? And do I really want to let him?

This is insane. I think that one is self-explanatory.

Alright, let's take a look at the pros.

Money. I make a decent living, but any extra income I have, I pour back into my business. It would be nice to have a little extra cushion in my bank account in case of emergencies.

No one to miss me. Okay, I could have worded that one a little differently, but the sentiment is true. I have no family left alive. All I ever had was my mom, and even before she died, we were never close. Her alcoholism kept me at arm's length. And I don't have any close friends.

Or a boyfriend.

Just thinking about that last part makes me laugh out loud. I've basically given up on dating. I got tired of men treating me like shit. Just because I don't look like a supermodel, they think that I owe them something for sleeping with me.

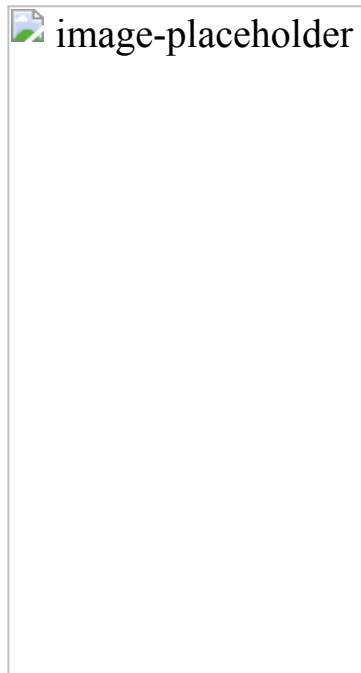
*Stop thinking about your awful track record with men and get back on topic.*

Father? Although I don't necessarily want anything to do with my dad, a little more information about him might be insightful. My mother refused ever to talk about him, so I know nothing about that side of my family. Maybe this trip would answer a few questions.

I stare at my lists for I don't know how long. The more wine I have, the more this whole thing starts to seem more like a good idea. Maybe it's just the alcohol talking, but I'm actually considering doing it.

It's only for a couple of months, right?

How much could my life really change in a couple of months?



The following morning, my wine has worn off, but I still think I'm going to pull the trigger on the house thing. I'm not exactly sure why, but something tells me that it's the right thing to do.

It's probably that little voice inside that really likes money.

Whatever the reason may be, I'm doing it. But when Mr. Abernathy gets here, I have a few conditions of my own.

At nine o'clock on the dot, Danielle comes into my office to confirm the lawyer's arrival.

He enters a moment later. "Ms. Mathis, it's lovely to see you again."

"Likewise, Mr. Abernathy." I gesture for him to have a seat.

"Well, I'm eager to hear what you've decided."

"I've decided to take possession of the house."

He flashes an unexpected smile. "That's wonderful!"

"But I need us to be on the same page about a few things."

He leans back in the chair. "I'm listening."

"For starters, I'm going to need a full copy of the will for my records. Plus, I want to make sure that there aren't any other little caveats."

"Of course. I can get you a copy."

"I assume there aren't any conditions to how I choose to renovate the home?"

"As long as the original framework of the house remains intact, there are no other stipulations."

"Alright," I say. "I won't be able to make it down to Texas for a week or two. I have to handle some business up here."

"Of course." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a business card. Handing it to me, he says, "Call me when you're coming into town, and I'll meet you at the house with a notary, and we will hammer out all the paperwork."



I nod. “And just email or fax me a copy of the will at your earliest convenience.”

“Will do, Ms. Mathis.”

He starts to stand up to leave.

“Oh, and Mr. Abernathy?”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to need the name of that handyman.”

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## *Chapter 3*

### **DUKE**

“**D**uke? Dude, are you even listening to me?” My brother, Devon, snaps his fingers in front of my face.

I know he’s annoyed with me, but I can’t help but tune out. I’m tired as fuck, and he’s going on and on about his girlfriend who just broke up with him... again.

That’s all he ever does.

“Sorry, Dev,” I say. “Just tired. I’m listening.”

When my younger brother invited me out for a beer, I should have known it was so that he could bitch to someone. Our youngest brother, Tanner, must be busy. He’s a better sounding board than I will ever be.

And he’s far better with women than I am.

Twenty years as a Navy SEAL has given me my fair share of one-night stands but never anything more serious. Most women don’t want to deal with the scarred mess known as Duke Samson.

I don't blame them.

I wouldn't want to put up with my shit, either.

Devon asks, "So, what do you think I should do about Kyra?"

"What about Kyra?"

"I need to get her back."

"Why? All you do is fight."

"That's because she's always bitching at me for something. I don't know how to keep her happy."

Without giving it much thought, I reply, "Fuck her so good that she shuts up."

"I've tried. It works while I'm doing it, but then, she's right back at it."

"Maybe you're not doing a good enough job."

He rolls his eyes. "Shut up, Duke. When was the last time you satisfied a woman?"

"Satisfying them in the bedroom is easy. It's everything else that I suck at."

Devon laughs and sips his beer. "Just feels like maybe shit shouldn't be this hard."

"Maybe it's time to cut your losses and move on," I tell him, trying to be helpful.

"Maybe."

He pretends to think about it, but I know better. Devon can't seem to leave Kyra alone. Sure, she's hot, but not hot enough to deal with that bullshit. My brother must see something the rest of us don't.

Maybe Kyra has beer-flavored nipples. I don't fucking know.

And normally, Tanner's the one who listens to Devon gripe about it. My head is so fucked up that typically, no one asks me for any type of advice.

Devon must realize he's being annoying because he changes the subject. "Have you talked to Momma?"

I shrug my shoulders. "A little. She told me she was spending the weekend with Rob."

Rob is our mother's newest boyfriend—or 'man-friend', as I like to call him. 'Boyfriend' just seems weird at her age. Our mother has always been unlucky in love. That's why my two brothers and I all have different dads. I don't think she'll ever stop looking for Mr. Right.

Her type, though, isn't exactly Prince Charming.

Devon says, "Yeah, same here. She said she wants us to meet this Rob guy."

I grab one of the peanuts out of the bowl in front of me and pop it into my mouth. "Why bother?"

Devon shifts in his seat, and I can tell he's trying to decide if he wants to say what he's thinking. He finally asks, "So, how are you adjusting, man?"

Now, I eat a handful of peanuts and chew, stalling before answering.

“I’m doing alright,” I reply.

I don’t know how true it is, but I’m not going to get into all the touchy-feely bullshit. I get professional help for that.

I was in the Navy for the past twenty years of my life. I’ve seen and done things that would horrify most people, and I’m not about to put the burden of that knowledge onto anyone else... ever. And no one needs to know how fucking hard it’s been since I’ve gotten out.

An injury took me out of the Navy, but it was nothing compared to the agony of coming home. After twenty years of living my life one way, I now feel a little lost.

Okay, *completely* lost.

And that doesn’t even touch on the fact that I can barely get any sleep, and when I do, I have nightmares.

Yeah, my life is a fucking picnic.

But I’m not about to say any of this to Devon. I don’t want him to worry—or anybody else, for that matter.

He looks at me and asks, “You sure?”

“Yep. Just been trying to keep busy.”

He looks like he wants to say something else but thinks better of it and just nods.

We sip our beers in silence for a moment until Clyde Abernathy walks over to the table. Clyde’s the only lawyer in

town. I typically don't care for lawyers, but Clyde's been great at pointing me in the direction of handyman jobs.

And working with my hands helps to keep my body and my mind occupied.

"Evening, boys," Clyde says.

We both say hi, and Devon says, "Haven't seen you around lately."

"Just got back into town. Had to take care of some business up in Boston. Duke, I wanted to come over and tell you about some work that will be coming your way if you're interested."

"You know I am," I say with a small smile. "What's the job?"

"You know the old Whitmore place?"

We both nod. Devon says, "That place seems like it's been empty for a while. Even when Samuel was alive, it seemed like he was never there."

The lawyer smiles. "It won't be empty anymore. His daughter is taking possession."

"Daughter?" We both ask in unison.

I never knew Samuel very well at all, but I think I would have remembered if I'd heard he had a daughter. In small towns, people seem to know everything about one another.

"Her name is Avery. She lives in Boston, but she's coming down for a couple of months to get the house ready to rent out.

I gave her your information, so she should be calling you. It's a huge job, but it'll keep you busy for a while."

"I really appreciate it, Clyde. I should be done with the Montgomery job in about a week."

"Perfect." He grins. "I'll see you boys around. I'm going to head home to the Mrs."

As Clyde walks away, I feel like a weight has been lifted off of me. I've been worried about what I'll do once I finish the Montgomery job. Idle time is not my friend.

Knowing I will be busy for the next few months makes me feel a whole hell of a lot better.

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*Chapter 4*

**AVERY**

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“Please proceed to the route.” My GPS tells me for the hundredth time.

It keeps instructing me to turn onto these back roads and then acts like it has no idea where I went.

Small Town America—where technology goes to die.

I quickly look at the list of directions. Stay on this road for two miles. Turn right on Peach Street. Your destination will be on the right.

Tired of listening to my annoying GPS, I turn it off. I think I can find my way from here.

The town of Maple Oaks comes into view. I slow my speed to the 20 miles per hour that the signs instruct. Each of the small businesses is painted a fun, quirky color. Pretty flowers line the flowerbeds along all the sidewalks. American flags hang out front of most buildings, and bright, pastel-colored Spring flags hang on each light pole. It looks even cuter than the photos I saw online.

People walk down the street in their cowboy hats and matching boots. Everyone smiles and waves at each other. Hell, some of them even give me a friendly wave. I can't imagine why; I'm sure I stick out like a sore thumb.

As quickly as I drive into the center of town, I drive back out. I come upon Peach Street and turn right like the directions said. I pass a couple of beautiful houses, each of them on a pretty decent piece of land. Since I live in a loft apartment in

Boston, I don't quite get the idea of neighbors not being on top of one another.

The next house I come to must be the one that I'm looking for. I'm sure at one point this house was just as gorgeous as the others, but now, it's just a mess.

I gaze up at it as I pull into the driveway, and try to picture what it looked like back in the day. It's still a pretty house. It just needs a little TLC.

Slowly, I step out of my car, trying to stretch my stiff legs. I don't know why I thought that driving from Boston to Texas was a good idea. Okay, yes, I do know. I didn't want to fly and then have to rent a car for the next two months. It was a logical idea in theory, but even with stopping at a couple of hotels and taking multiple pit stops, I'm absolutely over it.

The hot Texas air slaps me in the face. It's only Spring, but it's already hotter than Satan's asshole. Being a curvy woman, I can't stand the heat. I sweat like a freaking pig.

I try to ignore the fact that I'm already roasting and turn my attention back to the house. It looks like a colonial style. The bottom story has a porch that wraps all the way around, and the second story has a balcony that seems to mirror it.

To the right of the front door is an old porch swing next to a large picture window. I wonder how many people have sat on that swing through the years. Now, I'm positive if I sat on it, the whole porch would collapse.

I walk up the creaky steps to the front door. I type in the code that the lawyer gave me into the lockbox and pull out the key.

I put it into the lock and turn it, preparing myself for the new journey ahead of me.

*Here we go.*

I swing the front door open, and a wave of musty air rushes past me. At least it's cool air. I had the utilities turned on a couple of days ago, and Mr. Abernathy was nice enough to crank up air yesterday when he stopped by.

Honestly, I was surprised that a house this old has central air. But I guess somebody along the way got tired of suffocating in this heat and had the system upgraded.

I close the door behind me and start to look around. The foyer has a staircase off to one side, and there are closed double doors on either side of me.

I open the ones on the right first. It's a living room that looks like it's stuck in 1975. There are two old couches with orange and yellow floral prints on them. The TV looks a bit newer, but it's accompanied by an old VCR.

“How retro,” I mutter to myself.

Mind you, I'm no young chicken. Being in my late thirties, I have used a VCR—mostly when I was a kid. But as I've grown up, I have always fully embraced technology. I rarely even watch DVDs anymore. I stream almost everything, but the internet isn't hooked up down here yet.

And judging by my lack of cellular bars down here, streaming on my phone may not be an option.

*So, I have a TV and a VCR but nothing to watch?*

But when I see the cabinet next to the TV, I open it and find it full of VCR tapes. None of them are less than twenty years old, and most of them are Westerns.

Not exactly my choice of genre, but I guess I'll take whatever I can get. I start to make my way around the living room, looking at all the photos on the walls. Some of them are in black and white and are of solemn looking families.

The newer ones include a couple looking like they're about to go to Woodstock, a couple of kids playing outside, and a man riding a bull at the rodeo. I assume that most, if not all, of these people in the photos are people I'm somewhat related to. That seems so odd to me that I have a whole side of my family that I've never met, and I know nothing about.

I stop dead in my tracks when I recognize myself in one of the photos—myself as a baby. A man with my same dark blonde hair and caramel eyes holds me. He has the biggest smile on his face... and so do I.

That must be my dad. My mother always told me he left right after I was born. She said he didn't want to be a dad, and he only saw me once or twice. In this photo, though, I look like I'm at least a couple of years old. I always knew she had her fair share of secrets when she was alive, but now I wonder how many of them involve me.

I reach up and touch the dusty frame, wondering what my dad was really like.

A voice from behind me says, "He was a good man."

I about jump out of my skin. My hand hits the frame, knocking it off the wall. I manage to catch it before turning around to see Mr. Abernathy.

"Oh, Miss Mathis," he says. "I'm terribly sorry to startle you. The front door was cracked. I tried knocking, but you must not have heard."

"It's fine," I reply, trying to slow my heart. "I was just starting to look around the house. I guess I got distracted in here."

He walks over to join me. He holds out his hand, and I give him the photo. He looks at it and smiles warmly. "Your daddy must have loved you a lot to leave you this big ol' house."

"I wouldn't know," I mumble. "Do you know why he left when I was so young?"

"No idea. To be honest, I didn't know he even had a daughter until I did his will."

I take the photo from him and hang it back on the wall.

Mr. Abernathy says, "How about I show you the rest of the house?"

I agree, and he takes me on a tour. Across from the living room, there's a big sunroom that I think will be perfect for me to work out of. It already has a big, beautiful cherry desk. And

there's still plenty of floor room for me to do yoga in the mornings—when I actually get motivated to exercise.

Toward the back of the house is a large kitchen with an open dining area. The kitchen has so many cabinets that I'm in awe. Cooking has always been a passion of mine and doing it in a kitchen like this would be a dream.

I don't think anything else could beat out the kitchen as my favorite room in the house... until I see the master bathroom. My jaw drops open when I see the massive clawfoot tub—a tub deep enough to keep my boobs and my knees under the water. It needs a good cleaning, but it's gorgeous all the same.

Mr. Abernathy may be a lawyer, but one may think he's a realtor by the way he shows me the house.

“Mr. Abernathy, you don't have to sell me on the house. I'm already here.”

He lets out a soft laugh. “Oh, I know. But maybe you'll fall in love with the charm around here and decide to stay.”

I make a noise that can only be described as an obnoxious cackle. “Oh, that'll be the day, Mr. Abernathy. I wouldn't hold your breath.”

A knock on the door interrupts us. The lawyer says, “That must be the notary.”

We head back downstairs and get settled around the table.

I say, “I'd offer you something to drink, but I have absolutely nothing yet. Do you think one of you can point me toward the nearest grocery store?”

Mr. Abernathy says, “There’s a Five and Dime in town for odd and end things. If you want more options, there’s a Walmart one town over.”

I decide that after we get done doing paperwork, I’ll unpack the car really quick and then go shopping. I’m going to need a few things to make this place livable.

When we are finishing up, Mr. Abernathy says, “I talked to Duke Samson, and he’s expecting your call.”

I can’t help but crack a smile at the handyman’s name. He sounds like a character in a John Wayne movie or something.

Since I’m pretty sure I lost his phone number, Mr. Abernathy gives it to me again. While my two guests pack up their paperwork, I walk into the other room to make the call.

It rings twice before a gruff voice answers. “Hello?”

“Uhm. Hi. Is this Duke?”

“Yep.”

“Hi. This is Avery Mathis. I just moved into the Whitmore house.”

“Oh, right. Clyde said you’d be calling.”

“Yeah,” I reply. “Is there a time you can come over, and we can talk about details?”

“I can come whenever.”

Deciding to test my luck, I ask, “Can you stop by later this evening? Maybe around six o’clock?”

“Yep. I’ll be there.”

Okay, then.

A man of few words.

Alright then.

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## *Chapter 5*

### DUKE

**M**y tires hit the gravel on the driveway leading to the Whitmore house. I look up at the home I'll be working in for the next couple of months.

Well, hopefully. I guess it depends on how this meeting goes.

I pass this place damn near every day, but I never pay much attention to it. The bones of it are beautiful. It's a shame that no one has kept up on it over the years. I do love a good project, though. It will be fun bringing it back to life.

I have no idea what I'm walking into—when it comes to the house or my new potential boss. But I guess I'm about to find out.

The front door swings open, and I find myself staring at the woman who walks onto the porch. I assume it's Avery because I don't recognize her. And I'm sure as shit that I'd remember seeing this woman walk around town.

She's average height, I'd say. Her long hair is a dark blonde color and wavy.

But her body is what has me practically drooling. Although I love women of all shapes and sizes, I've always been crazy about a woman with some curves. I'm a big guy, and I like a woman with some meat on her bones. And Avery Mathis has a whole lot of curves. Her low-cut shirt and tight jeans show off her large tits and round ass.

I try not to gawk because I'll look like a pig. Reminding myself I don't play where I work, I vow to keep any feelings that may arise to myself.

As I walk toward her, I say, "Miss Mathis?"

"Please, call me Avery."

I hold out my hand to shake hers. "Duke Samson."

"Nice to meet you, Duke. Please, come inside."

When we hit the door, she says, "Get ready to step back in time."

I wonder what she means until we step through the door. Then, it all makes sense. It's like nothing has changed in years.

"Wow," I mumble.

"Yeah. To say it needs updating is an understatement."

Avery walks ahead of me, and I try not to stare at her ass. Holy fuck, it's nearly impossible, though. Unable to help myself, I sneak a few little peeks. And it's hot as hell.

She ushers me into the kitchen and asks. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“I’m okay. Thank you, though.”

She opens the fridge and pulls out a beer. “You sure? I went a little crazy at Walmart and bought enough to feed a small army.”

Not wanting to be rude, I walk over and accept the beer. “Thank you.”

“Come on. I’ll give you a tour.”

“Do you mind if I take photos and measurements?” I ask. “It will help when I go to buy materials.”

“Go for it.”

Avery leads me around the house, and I try to keep my attention on the tour and not on my gorgeous tour guide. Most of the work appears to be cosmetic, so there shouldn’t be anything too major.

When we get to the master bathroom, she walks over to the bathtub against one wall. “See this?” She asks. “This is my favorite part of this place. I thought it just needed a good cleaning, but when I turn on the faucet, it makes a funky noise. The sooner we get this fixed, the happier I will be. Having a nice bathtub will help keep me sane while I’m here.”

“Noted,” I tell her.

When the tour is finished, we walk back downstairs and each take a seat on either side of the table.

I ask her, “So, besides fixing the bathtub, what else are you wanting done to the house?”

She lets out a heavy sigh and rubs her forehead. “Look, Duke, I’m going to level with you. I have no idea what goes into renovating a house. I’ve never been a landlord before. Truthfully, I don’t want to be one now, but I can’t sell this place, so here we are. I just need to get it ready—the sooner, the better.”

She pulls out a piece of paper and hands it to me. “This is how much money I have to spend—all in. I can maybe add a little to it, but not a lot. I know you’ll need to buy materials. Whatever is leftover at the end is yours. I don’t know if that’s enough, but if we run into roadblocks, we can reevaluate.”

I look at the number and am pleasantly surprised. It’s more than I thought it would be.

“This should work,” I tell her. “Should we go over exactly what you want to have done?”

“Like I said, I have no idea where to even start. I just know this house needs a facelift. Fresh paint. Maybe some new flooring and cabinet hardware. And just some general repairs here and there. But as for specifics on any of those things, I’m at a loss. I’m decent at decorating, but that’s where my knowledge ends.”

She runs her fingers through her hair, pushing it out of her face. I can see how much this whole thing is stressing her out—even though I really don’t know her.

I say, “How about before I work on each project, I bring you a few samples for you to take a look at. We can go from there.”

She gives me a smile. “That would be great. I’d really appreciate it.”

Normally, I wouldn’t go out of my way to do anything extra in a job, but I sort of feel sorry for this woman. I may not know much about Avery’s situation, but I can see she’s overwhelmed.

Great, I barely even know this woman, and I’m already being way nicer than normal. But I need to get my head on straight. I’m sure Avery thinks of this as nothing more than a business deal.

I need to do the same.

## Chapter 6

### AVERY

*L*ord, this man is built like a fucking tree.

When I heard Duke Samson was a retired Navy SEAL, I figured he was probably in good shape, but I also kind of figured he'd be old. That's what I think of when I hear the word 'retired'.

But Duke can't be much older than me. I'd say we're both approaching forty, but neither of us is quite there yet.

And man, he's fun to look at. He's probably a little over six feet tall, with broad shoulders and a thick chest. He has dark eyes and equally dark hair with a beard to match.

He comes off a bit gruff, but overall, he seems pretty nice. I appreciate that he offered to show me samples to try to help with my indecisiveness. He definitely didn't make me feel as dumb as I made myself feel.

As we've spent the past hour together, I find myself imagining what Mr. Duke Samson may be like in bed. I figure

it's probably because I haven't been laid in quite some time, and now, I'm like a dog in heat.

I wonder if he would be rough in the sack.

Probably.

But how rough?

The look Duke gives me makes me wonder if I accidentally said any of my inappropriate thoughts out loud. But it becomes clear that he asked me something, and I have no idea what.

"I'm sorry. What?" I ask, feeling embarrassed.

"When do you want me to get started?"

"Oh," I stammer. "Right. Well, I'd say the sooner, the better. I'd like to get this job done as quickly as possible."

He nods.

"Understood." The way he says it shows his military background. "I can get started tomorrow if that works for you."

"That would be great," I reply.

"What time do you want me to be here? I'm usually up pretty early, but I don't want to wake you."

I shake my head. "Don't worry about it. I'm up at five every day."

"You and me both. I know you're in a hurry to get this project done. I can be here every day to work except for Thursday afternoons. I need those off."

Curiosity makes me wonder what he has going on Thursday afternoons, but frankly, it's none of my business. So, I just say, "Sounds good."

"Tomorrow, I'll start with patching some of the drywall around the house, and we can go from there."

"Sounds like a plan."

He stands up to leave but first walks over to throw his empty beer in the trashcan. "It was nice meeting you, Avery. I look forward to doing business with you."

"You too, Duke."

We shake hands, and I walk him to the door, staring at his large frame the entire way.

A moment later, he's gone, and I'm all alone in this big empty house again. I was here by myself earlier, but I was so busy unpacking and putting away groceries that I didn't have much time to notice. Now, the silence seems absolutely deafening.

I should probably get some cleaning done, but exhaustion is starting to take hold. I decide to call it a night and head upstairs. I turn on some music on my phone to drown out the silence before stepping into the shower. The water pressure sucks, but it feels good all the same.

When I finish, I head into the bedroom, grateful that I made up the bed earlier.

Not knowing what the bed situation was going to be like, I brought all of my own sheets and blankets. Even though the



bed wasn't in awful shape, I still took a vacuum to it and put about four or five sheets on before I'd even sit on it.

I slip on some pajamas and throw a movie into the VCR. I get comfortable in bed while the opening credits start to play.

Out loud, I say, "Wow. A man on a horse in the opening scene of a Western. How original."

The movie continues to play, but my mind drifts off. I still can't believe that I'm here.

In Texas.

In this big empty house.

Two weeks ago, I never would have imagined that my life would take this crazy turn. I still think I'm crazy for going through this whole thing. I'm not a person who takes risks... ever. I am the epitome of *stuck in a rut*. I have my routine, and I like it. Deviating from that is a giant step for me, and I'm going to try to embrace it.

Because it's too late to back out now.

My mind moves onto thoughts of my new hot handyman. I thought after meeting someone with a crazy name like Duke Samson, some of the mystery around him would vanish, but now I feel like I have more questions than I had before.

Why did someone that buff leave the military?

Where does he go on Thursday afternoons?

Does he have a girlfriend?

The last one doesn't really matter. He's working for me, so it's probably not a good idea to get involved. And I'm sure a man that fine dates women who look more like models.

Speaking of questions, I have a buttload about my father now, too.

Why did he leave?

Why didn't he fight for me?

Why did he leave me with a woman who would one day turn into a raging alcoholic?

He had to have a good reason, right? One would think so, but I don't know anything about this man. Maybe while I'm here, I can try to get some answers, but not tonight.

Instead, I'll try to shut my mind off and get some sleep. It almost works... until I hear a loud crash coming from outside. My eyes shoot open as my heart pounds in my chest. I listen for a moment, trying to convince myself that it was just the wind—and trying to ignore the fact that there wasn't a single wisp of wind just half an hour ago.

I mute the TV and listen as hard as I can, but I hear nothing. Just when I've convinced myself that I imagined the whole thing, another noise pierces the silence. This time, it sounds like knocking.

Trying to muster up all the courage I can find, I slowly get out of bed and make my way downstairs. I feel like I should have a weapon of some sort, but all I managed to grab was my curling iron.

Halfway down the stairs, I try to peek out the window at the top of the door, but I can't see anything. Too chicken to just go open it, I run into the office and look out the corner of the window.

There's no one there.

Maybe I'm just hearing things.

Or maybe I am going to live in my own version of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre.

Not wanting to figure out which one of those is true, I rush back up the stairs and crawl under the covers. Back in Boston, I live alone and am rarely scared. But I'm also surrounded by other people in a big apartment building. Here, I'm not close to anyone. I doubt anyone could hear my screams.

*Stop being dramatic, Avery.*

Trying to shove my fear down, I turn the TV as loud as it can go and force myself to go to sleep.

## Chapter 7

### DUKE

I'm halfway through my first day of work, and it's already going pretty well. So far, I've fixed a loose railing on the banister and taken a look at the bathtub. I'm going to have to get a new faucet and kit to fully be able to fix it, though. I've now moved on to patching some holes in the drywall. Most are small, but there's one that looks like someone punched a hole through it.

*I bet there's a story there.*

Everything seems to be going well... except for the fact that my new boss is walking around in some of those tight legging things and a tank top. She's making it extremely difficult not to stare.

I try to work in different rooms than her so that my gawking doesn't make her uncomfortable. I don't know what about Avery I seem to be so attracted to.

Yeah, she's gorgeous. But I see gorgeous women all the time. Typically, I don't let them get under my skin. I tend to

keep my distance. With my fucked-up head, that seems to be the best option.

Occasionally, I go home with a woman to have some fun and get my dick wet. But it never goes further than that. I don't even stay the night.

It's just easier to keep to myself.

As beautiful as Avery is, that fact is not about to change.

So, I'll just try to do my job and keep my thoughts out of the gutter. While I'm filling a hole in the kitchen, I hear a crashing sound followed by Avery screaming, "Mother fucker!"

I toss down my tools and run into the office where I last saw her. As I step through the door, I see her once more.

Bent over her desk...

She's messing with some cords... I think. It's hard to see beyond her ass up in the air.

*Sweet baby Jesus.*

I clear my throat, but it doesn't seem to phase her, so I ask, "Are you okay?"

"Oh, yeah," she groans. "Just trying to hook up this damn computer."

Walking toward her, I say, "I'm not great with technology, but I can try to help."

When I reach her, she asks, "See that cord down there? It needs to plug into the back of that little tower thing, but I don't

think it'll reach.”

As I walk around the desk, Avery is still bent over, her head hanging off the side. I try not to notice the fact that her face is eye-level with my dick. The image of Avery's mouth anywhere on or around my cock is not something I need plaguing my thoughts.

It takes a minute, but I help her get everything moved around and all the cords hooked up. When it's finally done, Avery slowly stands up. Her face is all flushed from her head hanging upside down.

“Thank you,” she says. “I'm a bit of a klutz sometimes.”

“No worries. Just glad you're okay.”

As I walk out of the room, she calls, “Do you like muffins?”

“Huh?” I ask, turning back around.

“Muffins. You know, it's like a cupcake but slightly healthier. Do you like them?”

“I guess.”

Seeing my confusion, she adds, “When I'm bored, I like to bake. Something tells me that around here, I'll be bored quite a bit. I thought about making some muffins. Are you allergic to gluten or anything?”

“Nope. No allergies.”

She gives me a wide smile, revealing cute little dimples. This woman is just full of all kinds of surprises.

An hour or so later, I'm finishing up patching the drywall when Avery calls me into the kitchen. I walk in to see a plate full of giant muffins sitting on the table.

"There are muffins if you want one," she tells me with a small smile.

"Thank you." I walk over to wash my hands before touching any of the baked goods. Avery hands me a small paper plate.

"Sorry I don't have any fancy china," she says.

"Hey, you won't hear me complaining. I live off paper plates. Fewer dishes."

She lets out a small laugh. "Especially since down here, I have no dishwasher."

"Yeah, a lot of the houses around here don't have them." I take a bite of one of the muffins. "Damn, this is really good."

"Thanks. Like I said, I cook or bake when I'm bored or anxious." She fidgets nervously with her fingers.

"Well, it seems like you're good at it."

"Probably why I weigh more than I should, despite working out pretty frequently." As if realizing what she said, she says, "I am so sorry. I have no idea why I told you that. I think being alone in this house has made me starved for someone to talk to."

*Damn, she's cute.*

I try to push the thought out of my mind.

“It’s alright,” I tell her. “I’m a decent listener. It’s the talking that I’m not so good at.”

She jokes, “I’m sure I’ll do enough talking for the both of us.”

We sit in silence for a few moments before she glances at her watch. “What time is it?” She mumbles to herself. “I’ve got a meeting here soon.”

“What do you do for work?” I ask, hoping it’s not too personal.

“I run a publishing company for children’s books.”

“Wow,” I say, raising my eyebrows.

“It’s not quite as impressive as it sounds. It’s still a pretty small company, but hopefully, one day, we can expand.”

Still sounds impressive to me. Although I know next to nothing about children’s books—or children, for that matter—I do like to read. Getting lost in a good book helps to quiet my demons for a little while.

But I don’t say that. I just finish my muffin and thank Avery before getting back to work. She’s on phone calls the rest of the afternoon, but I poke my head into her office when I’m about to head home for the day.

Avery is bent over, digging through a box, looking for something.

*Lord have mercy.*

Still on the phone, she turns around to say bye to me.



*I seriously need to start knocking on this door.*

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## Chapter 8

### AVERY

I've now been in Maple Oaks for four days. I don't know that I'm *fitting in*, but I've fallen into a decent routine. I'm up every morning at five. Sometimes, I do yoga. Sometimes, I skip straight to the coffee. I usually then spend a couple of hours on the phone with my second-in-charge, Sue. We tried doing the Zoom meeting thing, but using the hotspot from my phone doesn't make it easy. So, I may take a call from a rep from a store or an author, but Sue handles a lot of it.

That frees up a lot of my time, and I haven't entirely decided what to do with all of that time. I've cleaned the house as much as I can, but since it's still being renovated, there's not much of a point.

Back in Boston, I didn't have a whole lot of hobbies, and that hasn't changed since I've been in Texas.

The only thing I've taken much interest in is watching my sexy handyman work.

I don't stare, but I catch glimpses where I can. And then I wipe the drool off my chin from watching his bulging biceps. And I try not to notice the other bulge he has just South of his belt buckle.

Over the past few days, I've also gotten to know Duke's routine. He shows up every morning at six o'clock on the dot. He has a travel mug full of what I assume is coffee that he drinks over the next couple of hours.

He sits outside at noon and eats a bologna sandwich and chips that he packed for lunch. He only takes a break for about fifteen minutes before getting back to work and heading home between six and seven.

We always make pleasant conversation, but it's never much more than small talk. With as lonely as it is in this house, though, I'll take small talk over nothing. Although I live alone back home, I get much more human interaction than I do here.

I'm still convinced the house is haunted. The noises continue every night, so I tend to sleep with the TV at full volume. It drowns out most of the terrifying sounds.

In my boredom, I find myself cooking quite a bit. Does cooking count as a hobby? I don't know, but if I keep it up, I'll be gaining ten pounds before these couple of months are up.

*Oh well. It's not like anyone is going to see me naked. Why worry about what I'm eating?*

Now, I'm finishing up an email to Sue before calling it quits for the afternoon. I don't know quite what I'll do with my

time, but I'm not going to spend it working.

Duke lightly knocks on the door before poking in his head.  
“Am I interrupting?”

“Not at all,” I reply. “What’s up?”

“I wanted to remind you that I’ll be leaving early this afternoon.”

“Right. It’s Thursday.”

“Before I go, I’d like to show you something. Do you have a minute?”

“Sure.” I stand up from behind the desk and follow him. He leads me upstairs and into the master bathroom.

I watch his large frame reach over the clawfoot tub and turn on the water. Much to my surprise, the water runs clear and without any funky noises.

“You fixed it!” I squeal.

“Yeah, it just needed a new faucet and kit.”

I smile so big that my cheeks hurt. “Thank you so much.”

I feel like I could hug him, but that would probably be weird—especially considering the fact that if I touched him, I don’t know that I’d be able to let go.

I swear I see a hint of a smile cross his lips, but it’s gone faster than I can tell.

All he gives is a gruff, “You’re welcome.”

I walk Duke back downstairs, and he gathers his things before heading out. The moment he leaves, loneliness hits me. Although my handyman and I aren't close—or even chatty—by any means, having him here somehow makes me feel better. I'm not nearly as scared by my creepy, probably haunted house with the ex-Navy SEAL around.

I try to push that thought out of my head. I don't need a man.

I'm an independent woman, damnit!

I look down at my watch and try to decide what to do with my time. It's still early, so I guess I could stand to get out of the house for a while.

I guess it's time for another trip to Walmart.

A few hours later, I'm back at the house with a whole hell of a lot more stuff that I could have probably lived without.

Oh well.

I'm in Texas. Go big, or go home, right?

I light a buttload of candles around the tub that's now filling with water and bubbles. My bathtub is fixed, so I'm going to enjoy it with some wine and a good book.

When the water is getting close to the top, I shut off the faucet and step in. It's the perfect temperature. And lo and behold, both my boobs and knees are underwater once I sit down. I pause before grabbing my book and enjoy just being underwater from my neck down.

I close my eyes as my mind begins to drift. It doesn't take long for my thoughts to hone in on Duke Samson. I wonder what he does on Thursday afternoons. Does he have a girlfriend that he's taking out?

If he's only taking her out once a week, she must be pretty damn understanding. Or maybe it's just a booty call.

Either way, why do I care? I'm not sleeping with him. And as much fun as that sounds, I have no intention of it.

But that doesn't mean I can't sit in my bathtub and fantasize about what it would be like to go to bed with Duke.

And I think that's exactly what I'm going to do.

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## *Chapter 9*

### **DUKE**

“**H**ave you still been having the nightmares?” Dr. Tucker asks.

I sit across the coffee table from my therapist. My knee bounces up and down as I glance at the clock.

“Getting right into it today, aren’t we, Doc?” I ask.

She gives a soft laugh. “Duke, I’ve learned that with you, I have to make every moment count.”

She’s probably not wrong. When I got injured, the Navy insisted that I start therapy. For the first few months, Dr. Tucker and I just stared at each other as I sat in silence for the entire hour. I’m not a big talker anyway, but talking about my problems or vulnerabilities? Forget about it.

But with time, I think Dr. Tucker has helped me. I’m still sort of a basket case, but I’m trying to work through it. And I’m certainly better than I used to be.

The doc asks again. “Duke, how are your nightmares?”

“Which ones?” I ask, only partially sarcastically.

“Any of them, but let’s start with the ones reliving the explosion.”

“I still have them, but not as frequently,” I lie. The truth is that I have nightmares every single night, and almost every evening involves ones that are reliving that day.

Dr. Tucker digs deeper. “So, you’re sleeping more than five hours a night.”

I simply nod.

I’m pretty sure her bullshit meter is going off because she starts scribbling something in her notebook.

She then asks, “Are the nightmares ending the same way they typically do?”

“With my entire squad dead at my feet? Yes.”

She twirls her pen between her fingers. “But Duke, you know that’s not how that day ended. You were able to warn everyone and save your squad.”

“Not all of them,” I mumble.

“You can’t blame yourself for Dixon,” she tells me.

“I don’t. I blame the bastards who did it.” That’s only partially true. I do hold blame where it should be, but I also do blame myself. I was his commanding officer. I should have protected him.

Images of Dixon dead in my arms run through my head, and my entire affect changes. My arms cross over my chest as my



knee bobs faster.

Dr. Tucker seems to notice that I'm about done with this particular conversation.

She changes the subject. "So, what else is going on? Did you finish up the Montgomery job?"

"Yeah, I actually started a new job earlier this week."

"Oh?"

I go on to tell her about working at Whitmore house and how it needs some updating and all that. When the doc asks about my new boss, I don't give away much because, knowing my luck, she'll figure out that I'm highly attracted to Avery.

She gives me a look that says she knows there's more to the story, but she doesn't press. My phone vibrates in my pocket, but I pull it out and quickly silence it.

"Sorry, Doc. I forgot to turn it on Do Not Disturb."

"No worries. Everything okay?"

"Just my mother. I'm sure she's calling again to get me to meet her new boyfriend."

"And you don't want to?" Dr. Tucker asks.

"Not even a little bit."

"Do you want to talk about why?"

I shift in my seat. "I just don't see the point. There will be another new one in a month. She swaps boyfriends so often that I just don't have time to get chummy with all of them."

“What if this one is serious?”

“It’s not,” I reply without hesitation.

The rest of our time passes with the doctor asking me to dig deeper into the issues with my mother. I share some, but honestly, I don’t think much of anything will change my relationship with my mom—even therapy.

Too much damage has been done over the years.

When the session is over, I head back to Maple Oaks. When I started going to therapy, I picked a doctor a few towns over. Lord knows I don’t want to advertise the status of my mental health so close to home. The tongues love to wag in our small town.

On my way home, I drive down Peach Street and right past the Whitmore house. I guess now, it’s technically the Mathis house.

As I pass, I wonder what Avery is doing. I wonder if she’s enjoying the newly fixed bathtub.

I hope she is.

Images of her naked and wet run through my mind. I try to push them out before I give myself a boner. It’s already been hard enough to be around her for twelve hours a day while keeping my hands to myself.

I’ve learned to show up right at six. Any earlier than that, and I catch her doing yoga. Sometimes, it’s some kickboxing video, and others, it’s yoga. Seeing her stretching, I constantly feel like I need a cold fucking shower.

I know that it won't help, though. Even taking matters *into my own hand* doesn't help. Maybe if we fucked, it would help me to get my head on straight.

Or maybe once I got a taste of that sweet pussy, I would be even more infatuated.

Either way, there's no way in hell I'm about to find out.

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## *Chapter 10*

### **AVERY**

**T**he following day, I spend my morning answering emails and returning a couple of calls. After lunch, I decide to head outside and do some yardwork.

It's partially because I know I need to pull some weeds to add to the curb appeal of the house.

But it's also because Duke is out there fixing some loose parts of the siding, and I'm enjoying the view. The sight of his biceps glistening in the sunlight is enough to make a girl drench her panties. The sight even makes the obnoxious heat worth it.

I absentmindedly pull weeds out of one of the flowerbeds as I take in the view. I'm so caught up in my own thoughts that I don't realize that I've just dug my trowel into a colony of ants. I don't pay any attention when a few start crawling up my arm.

"Ouch!" I cry when something starts to hurt.

Duke rushes over to me. "Shit. Fire ants." He does his best to flick them off my arm before trying to get the ones now

climbing up my legs.

“Fuck,” I mutter. “These stupid little things bite?”

“Yeah, you have to watch them out here. Are you okay?”

“I think so. It just burns.”

He grabs my arm and flips it over to get a better look. “Shit. You’re breaking out in hives.

I look down and see red spots beginning to appear. “What does that mean?”

“It means you’re having an allergic reaction. And by the looks of it, a pretty bad one.”

“Duh, Avery,” I mutter to myself. “I know what hives are. Sorry, my brain’s not working. I’ve never been allergic to anything.”

“Okay, just calm down. Come on, we need to get you to a doctor.”

“What? Why?” I ask.

“Because this situation may get worse.”

I’m about to argue with him, but when I try to inhale, I realize it’s getting harder to breathe.

“Come on,” he insists. “Time to go.”

“Shouldn’t we call an ambulance or something?”

“Immediate care is only a mile down the road. It’ll be quicker this way. I’ll drive like a bat out of hell.”

He walks me over to his truck and helps me inside. When he joins me in the cab, he keeps his word and floors it. We walk into immediate care just a couple minutes later.

Duke walks with his hands around my shoulders to make sure I'm okay. Although there's absolutely nothing sexual about this, I still get goosebumps at his fingers touching my skin.

The moment we get through the door, the woman behind the welcome desk looks up, and Duke says, "She's having a pretty bad allergic reaction to fire ant bites."

Immediately, she stands and hurries over to me. "Can you breathe?"

"Yes, but it's getting harder."

She says, "Okay, let's get you back to a room."

A couple of people in the waiting area give me dirty looks since I essentially get to skip the line. But I try to just ignore them.

We follow her back to an exam room. On the way inside, I catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror. Good grief. Between the sweat pouring off of me, my now-swollen face, and the hives, I look disgusting. Granted, I don't always look like a beauty queen, but I normally look better than an actual pig.

I take a seat on the table as the thin paper crinkles beneath me. The nurse disappears back out the door.

I look over at Duke, who leans against one wall of the small room. His arms are crossed over his chest while his biceps

practically bust through the arms of his t-shirt.

My eyes move a bit lower to his forearms, where rope-like veins ripple all the way down to his hands. What about that is so sexy? Have I been without sex for so long that I'm now drooling over a man's forearms?

Man, I need to get laid.

But I don't see that happening anytime soon.

My thoughts are interrupted when the nurse comes back in with a very large needle.

When she walks toward me, I say, "Whoa. Whatcha got there?"

"It's epinephrine. It will stop the reaction from getting any worse."

"Don't you have a pill or something?" I plead.

"This is much faster." She gives me a warm smile. "Are you scared of needles, hun?"

"I don't know if *scared* is the right word," I stammer. "I mean, does anyone really *like* needles?"

Much to my surprise, Duke walks over to me. In his gruff voice, he commands, "Squeeze my hand."

"What?"

"Squeeze my hand as hard as you need to. It'll help."

I grab his hand. It feels big and rough but really nice against mine. That electricity is back, and I wonder if Duke feels it too.

*Probably not because he's not insane.*

I close my eyes as the nurse gets the needle ready. My entire body shivers as the cold alcohol swab touches my skin. In anticipation of the pain, I squeeze Duke's hand. I do it even harder when I feel the poke of the sharp metal piercing through. It's over in a couple of seconds, but I don't stop squeezing until the bandage is on my arm.

When I open my eyes again, it takes a moment for me to realize that I'm still holding Duke's hand. Quickly, I let go.

"Sorry," I say. "Did I hurt you?"

I look up into his dark eyes. He replies, "I think I'll be okay."

And then he gives me a quick wink. The man made out of stone actually winked at me.

It's so quick that I'm surprised I catch it, and then it's right back to the serious exterior he wears so well.

The doctor comes in a moment later to check to see how I am.

*I'm fine, thanks to your nurse.*

She tells me, "You're already starting to look some better, but you're going to need to give the medicine some time to work. We will keep you here for observation for a bit, and I'll send you home with some antihistamines and topical cream to help with any itching."

"Okay, thanks," I say.



The doctor looks between Duke and me. “I do recommend that you not be alone tonight. Someone should look after you to make sure you’re alright.”

“Oh... well,” I begin, but Duke starts to speak instead.

“That’s fine. I’ll stay with her.”

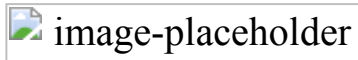
My brows furrow in confusion, but I don’t speak until the doctor leaves the room.

When the door closes behind her, I say, “You don’t have to stay. I mean, I’m sure I’ll be okay.”

Without looking at me, he says, “I’m not leaving you alone. I’ll sleep on the couch, but I’m going to make sure you’re okay.”

I could continue to argue, but the tone in Duke’s voice tells me that there’s really no point.

Looks like we are having a sleepover tonight.



Finally, after a couple of hours in observation, the doctor lets me go. Without saying a word, Duke pulls up to a fast-food restaurant in town. it looks like it's the only one around.

Duke gives a gruff, "Do you like cheeseburgers?"

"Yeah." I nod.

"This place makes the best. Fries?"

"Sure."

"What do you want to drink?"

“Coke, I guess.”

He looks at me like he expects me to say something else.

“What kind?”

“The cola kind?” I reply, confused.

“Sorry. Down here, every soda is just called Coke.”

“Well, that’s dumb,” I say.

He cracks the smallest of smiles. “I guess it can get confusing.”

“Well, I guess just regular Coca-Cola is fine.”

He orders for us, and I reach for my wallet.

“I’ve got it,” Duke says, pulling out his own.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Once again, I could argue, and usually, I would. But I’m tired and hungry and just ready to be home. I figure I can just hand him some cash later on to make up for it.

Duke pays and hands me the bags of food.

Twenty minutes later, we are back at the house and sitting at the kitchen table. I open my cheeseburger and take a bite.

“Mmm. Damn, you’re right. This is really good,” I say.

“Best burger in town,” he replies while taking his own bite.

“Not that there are a lot of options.”

“Thank you for the food. I meant what I said, though, if you need to go, I’ll be fine.”

“The doctor said you need to be looked after. I intend to do that.”

“Is this like a military thing?” I ask.

“I’d like to think of it as a decent human being thing.”  
There’s that hint of a smile again.

We’re both silent for a few minutes while we eat. I try not to dwell on the fact that Duke looks like some sort of sexy linebacker while I look like ten miles of bad road. I find myself staring at him much more often than I should, but he barely ever makes eye-contact with me. When his eyes do happen to find mine, they are cold as ice, yet somehow burn like fire all at the same time. It makes no sense at all, but I want to solve the riddle known as Duke Samson. What’s under that thick exterior of his?

Soon, we finish our food, and I say, “Maybe with you here tonight, I’ll feel safer. I swear this place is haunted.”

He cocks one of his eyebrows. “What makes you think that?”

“Loud noises at night. Banging. Weird knocking sounds.”

“Hm,” is all he says in response.

“Yeah, I have to blare the TV just to be able to get some sleep.”

“Well, if we hear it tonight, I’ll try to figure out what it is.”

Typically, the mere mention of a man offering to come to my rescue would immediately have me raising my feminism

flag and waving it for all to see. But I have to admit that having Duke here makes me feel a little bit better.

A little safer.

I'm not quite sure how to feel about that.

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## *Chapter 11*

### **DUKE**

**I** try to get comfortable on the couch, but I don't seem to be having much luck. It's old and lumpy. Then again, I guess I'm old and lumpy too. I have enough trouble sleeping at my own place. I have no idea how I'm going to get any shut-eye.

I can't blame it all on the uncomfortable couch, though. It's also because I know Avery is just up those stairs. My cock screams for me to go upstairs and get lost between her legs. But I plan on keeping my ass firmly planted right here.

Earlier, when she had her allergic reaction, immediately, I jumped into action. When I was younger, one of my mom's many boyfriends was allergic to peanuts. My mother didn't know and fed him peanut butter cookies. It was a disaster, but it taught me how to react in a situation like that. Since Momma turned into a frantic mess, I was the one who called 911 and followed their instructions until the ambulance arrived.

It was scary as fuck back then, but I guess it came in handy. If I'm being honest, it was scary as fuck now too—even though I was careful not to show that to Avery.

I could tell she felt weird about me staying the night, but I wasn't about to risk leaving her alone. I'd rather sleep on the lumpy couch than be at home worrying about her.

Yes, I'd be worried about a woman that I barely know. That sounds fucking insane.

But something about Avery seems different than any woman I've ever met. She makes me *feel* different than I ever have. I look forward to seeing her when I come over. She's the high point of my day—despite the fact that I barely know anything about her.

I rub my hand over my face and try to clear my head enough to attempt to fall asleep. I focus on the sounds of the crickets outside and am startled when I hear Avery's voice.

"Hey, you still awake?" She asks in a soft voice in case I'm already asleep.

"Yeah, I'm up. You okay?" I ask, sitting up.

"Oh, I'm fine. I just couldn't sleep. These damn bites won't stop itching. I thought maybe you'd like to watch some TV or something."

"Sure. TV sounds great."

She walks further into view, and I see she's wearing some sleep shorts and a tank top.

*Lord, help me.*

Walking to the TV, she says, "Sorry. I don't have anything too fancy."

This is the second time Avery has apologized for not being *fancy*. What kind of pussy guys was she around in Boston?

I reply with, “I don’t mind.”

She gives a small smile. “I hope you like Westerns. That’s about all that I have.”

“Fine with me.”

“Any preference?” She asks, stepping out of the way to show me the collection of old tapes.

“Nope. You pick.”

She chooses one and takes a seat next to me on the couch. I try not to notice how good she smells.

Instead, I ask, “How are you feeling?”

She shrugs her shoulders. “Tired yet wired. It’s making me a little loopy, but I guess I’m okay.”

“Probably the meds.”

The opening credits begin to play, and I try to focus on the movie, but damnit, it’s taking every bit of focus I have to keep my hands to myself. What I really want to do is pull her into my arms and kiss her until I pin her luscious body under my own. Just the thought of it has me shifting uncomfortably in my seat. I grab a throw pillow next to me and set it in my lap and cross my arms over the top of it.

I feel like I’m sixteen again, sitting next to my crush with her hand traveling up my thigh—except now, Avery’s not even touching me, and I’m sporting wood.



To make matters worse, Avery reaches into her pocket and pulls out the tube of ointment the doctor gave her. Holding it up, she asks, “Do you think you can rub this on my back? There’s this one spot I just can’t reach.”

I hesitate for a moment, and she says, “Oh my gosh. Is that weird that I just asked that?”

I can tell she’s about to start rambling, and as cute as it, I decide to save her the trouble. “No, it’s okay. Happy to help.”

I take the tube from her and squirt a little onto my fingers.

Avery turns around and lifts up her shirt.

“Right here,” she says, pointing to the spot that’s itching.

She leans forward to allow me easier access. As she repositions, I catch a glimpse of her lacy underwear.

Looking up to the heavens, I silently pray to give me strength. Every ounce of self-control is tested when my fingers touch her skin.

When she lets out a small moan of relief, I try to think of anything and everything non-sexual.

Drywall.

The cowboy on the TV.

Toothpaste.

Cockroaches.

Okay, maybe don’t think about anything with phallic terms in the name.

Thankfully, a moment later, the ointment is on, and Avery is pulling down her shirt.

“Thank you so much. You’re a life saver,” she says.

“No problem,” I reply, trying to sound as cool as possible while she gets comfortable on the other end of the couch.

As the movie plays, we talk a little about what’s happening on the screen. At one point, Avery gets a fit of the giggles, and I realize just how hard the medicine is hitting her.

Her contagious laugh brings a smile to my own face.

When she finally settles down, she turns her head and looks up at me with those caramel-colored eyes. Her tongue slowly licks her bottom lip, and I resist every urge I have to kiss the spot she just licked.

She starts to speak. “You know, you’re like a cowboy in one of those movies.”

I give a half smile. “Is that right?”

“Mmm-hmm. You’re all stoic and macho—not to mention a huge mystery.”

“What about me is a mystery?” I ask.

“Oh, lots of things. But let’s start with where you go on Thursdays. I mean, I have some theories, but it would be easier if you just told me.”

I run my hand over my chin. “First, let’s hear your theories.”

“Number one, you’re doing some top-secret military shit. Number two, you’re a male gigolo, and you see clients on Thursday evenings. Or number three is far less interesting.”

“Oh?”

“You have a girlfriend, and you go see her.” She looks at me like she’s just wondering if I have a girlfriend.

I angle my body so that I’m facing her. “I hate to break it to you, Avery, but where I go on Thursdays isn’t nearly as exciting as any of those options. And no, I don’t have a girlfriend.”

She thinks about my words for a minute, and without warning, she lunges forward and presses her lips to mine. Between the softness of her lips and how good she smells, my cock starts to stiffen.

As much as I would love to know where this could go, I know it’s wrong. Avery is all hopped up on antihistamines, and she mixed wine with it. I don’t want her to do anything that she may regret in the morning.

Pulling away from her may be the hardest thing I’ve ever done, but I manage to do it.

“We shouldn’t,” I whisper.

Before I can explain the reasons for my actions, Avery’s eyes go wide. “Oh my gosh. I am so sorry. I should not have done that. I just haven’t been laid in a really long time.” She lets out a heavy sigh. “Shit. I don’t know why I told you that either. I’m just going to go to bed.”

“Avery,” I call after her, but she’s already running up the stairs.

“Fuck,” I mumble as I lie back down on the couch. I consider going after her, but it still wouldn’t be right. She doesn’t have a clear mind.

And she’s still my boss.

I know some guys may be okay with sleeping with a girl in her condition, but not me. After seeing how women were treated in some countries I’ve traveled to, and seeing how my mother was treated for years, I have a code I abide by when it comes to women.

I know shutting everything down was the right decision, even if my cock doesn’t see it that way. It’s still standing at attention, hoping it’ll get a happy ending tonight.

Not going to happen.

I hear the TV flip on upstairs, and I hope Avery isn’t upset with me. My thoughts are interrupted when I hear strange noises outside.

*What the fuck is that?*

Avery’s words about the house being haunted pop into my head. Not believing in such things, though, I decide to take a look. I follow the sounds to the back of the house. I walk through the kitchen to the back door. As I open one of the French doors, something on my right catches my eye.

Taking a closer look, I’m startled by another sudden movement.

And then, I see it.

A fucking raccoon.

That's what's been scaring Avery half to death every night.  
Dang little furry bandits.

I shoo him off and head back inside. As I attempt to get comfortable again on the couch, I'm glad that I at least have some good news to tell Avery tomorrow.

That is, if she even wants to talk to me.

And if I'm not fired.

Fuck.

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## *Chapter 12*

### **AVERY**

**H**ow stupid can I possibly be? I tried to kiss my handyman last night. I practically threw myself at him. And he wasn't interested.

Of course, he wasn't. I mean, look at him.

What was I thinking, taking more allergy meds than I was supposed to? You add that to a horny woman, and it's a catalyst for stupid behavior.

I managed to get to sleep last night, but the entire time, I dreamed of the embarrassing encounter.

And today, I've done my best to avoid Duke. I've pretended to be busy with work, staying in my office. But the truth is, I finished work a while ago and have just been playing Candy Crush on my phone.

When I finally run out of lives on the game, I am left to twiddle my thumbs.

This is ridiculous. I am a strong, independent woman who, for the most part, has her shit together. I should not be hiding

in my office.

What I should do is apologize. I hired Duke to work here for the next couple of months. If he walks out on me, I'm going to end up paying a hell of a lot more for this work. I need to make sure everything goes smoothly.

Plus, he's the only one around here that I like talking to.

Really, the only one I *can* talk to.

Taking a deep breath, I stand up and cautiously walk to the door. I slowly poke my head out and listen for where Duke might be. It sounds like he's doing work outside.

I muster all the courage I have and try to act as cool as I can as I make my way to the front door.

I turn to the left and see Duke doing something to the floorboards of the porch. To be honest, I have no idea what he's doing, but he looks good doing it.

"Hi," I say as his eyes meet mine.

"Afternoon, Avery." His voice is still gruff, but his eyes show a sudden warmth.

A large awkwardness hangs between us, and I quite frankly have no idea what to say. Before I know it, I blurt, "Do you want to eat?"

"What?"

*What is wrong with me? Calm down and speak clearly, Avery.*

"I'd like to apologize for my behavior last night."

He stops me. “Really. You don’t have to.”

“For my own peace of mind, yes, I do. I’d like to do that by making you dinner.”

“Dinner?”

“Yeah, that thing where I make a meal that hopefully tastes halfway decent, and we enjoy it together.”

*Sarcasm... party of one...your table is ready.*

When he doesn’t respond, I add, “Please. I’d really like to do this. And I promise I won’t come onto you again.”

He thinks for a moment, and I’m convinced he’s about to turn me down, but he asks, “What time?”

I pull my phone out of my pocket to see what time it is. Apparently, in all of my time on Candy Crush, I never bothered to pay attention to the clock.

“Six o’clock?” I ask it like a question.

Now, it’s Duke’s turn to look at the time. “Alright,” he says sternly. “Do you mind if I cut out a bit early to go home and shower? I have caulk all over me.”

I resist the urge to make a classic “that’s what she said” joke and instead just say, “That sounds fine.”

“Great!” I say, a little too enthusiastically. “Six o’clock then.”

I turn around and head inside and straight for the kitchen to try to figure out what the hell to cook.



After a few minutes of digging around in cabinets and the fridge, I decide that I have enough ingredients for lasagna. Since I still have a bit of time, I head upstairs to take a quick shower and then make myself look presentable. Maybe it's a bad idea to get all cute before I make a huge mess cooking, but that's what aprons are for, right?

I take my time in the shower, hoping the hot water will help to calm my nerves. I'm not entirely sure how this evening will go. All I know is that I need to apologize and make sure Duke doesn't feel any weirdness. I don't need him getting cold feet and running off before this job is finished. Then I'd be entirely fucked.

And not in the good way.

*Come on, Avery. Get your mind out of the gutter.*

I can speak the mantra to myself as much as I want. It doesn't make me any less horny. I make a plan that when I'm alone again tonight, I will take matters into my own hands. Maybe an orgasm will help me to quell the urge, and my vibrator could use the workout.

Or maybe it'll make it worse.

At this point, I'm willing to take that chance.

I don't know what's wrong with me; I don't usually resemble a dog in heat quite this much. It's been quite some time since I've been laid, but I didn't go around kissing random guys back home in Boston.

Then again, I wasn't quite this bored back in Boston.

And there wasn't a guy who looked nearly as good as Duke back in Boston.

My teeth sink into my bottom lip as I run the loofah over my body and think of what Duke Samson would look like all wet in the shower.

*Stop it, Avery.*

I force myself to think about something else as I finish up in the shower. Once I'm done, I take my time drying my hair and then giving it some loose curls with my big curling iron. Looking in the mirror, I'm thankful my hives have mostly disappeared.

I then move on to putting on a little bit of makeup. Now that my face is pretty much back to its normal size, I guess I can make it look a little prettier.

I dance around the bathroom while I get ready and completely lose track of time. When I finally glance at the clock, I realize I should have already started dinner by now. I quickly throw on some clothes and head down to the kitchen.

I guess it's time to make dinner...and eat a big helping of crow.

## *Chapter 13*

### DUKE

I leave my house at 5:52 sharp because I know exactly how long it will take me to get back over to Avery's. I hate being late, but I don't like being early either—seems a little intrusive.

When she came outside, asking me to dinner was the last thing I expected to come out of her mouth. We didn't speak all morning, and I was expecting her to fire me or tell me she hated me or something.

I'm glad she didn't do any of those things. I've grown pretty fond of seeing her every day. In fact, it's the highlight of my entire day.

But I'm not going to say that to her and seem like a fucking weirdo.

When I arrive at the house, I debate on whether or not I should knock. The big door is open, only leaving the screen door closed, and I normally don't when I'm coming to work, but this isn't work. It's dinner.

Why is this such a big deal? Why do I feel nervous?

Taking a deep breath, I knock on the wood of the screen door. Avery appears moments later, looking fine as hell. I can feel my cock telling me how much of an idiot I am for not jumping into bed with her last night.

“Hey,” she greets me with a big smile as she opens the door for me. “Long time no see.”

I catch myself smiling at how goofy she is. I swear I haven’t smiled so much in years. Most people who know me would probably tell you that I’d forgotten how.

I follow her inside the house and try not to notice how great her ass looks in those jeans.

She walks back to the kitchen and gets right back to cooking.

“How can I help?” I ask.

“Oh, I’m just finishing the garlic bread to go into the oven. I got the lasagna in a few minutes ago. Have a seat.”

Without even asking, she walks over to the fridge and gets a beer and hands it to me.

“Thank you,” I say, popping the top. “Are you having something?”

She gives almost an embarrassed smile. “I’m still on the antihistamines. I figure that I should probably stay off the alcohol for the night.”

“Fair enough. I don’t have to drink,” I tell her.

“Oh, please.” She waves me off. “Drink. Indulge for the both of us.”

I take a sip, and she suddenly looks as though she’s startled. “Shit, I should have asked if you liked lasagna. I guess I’m just not used to cooking for anyone else. I should have asked if you are on a diet or something... not that you need to be on a diet, but I mean, look at you, you probably watch what you eat, right?”

She’s adorable when she rambles.

But I stop her anyway before she runs out of breath. “Avery, I love lasagna. And no, I don’t watch what I eat. In fact, normally, my meals consist of a bologna sandwich or something out of a brown takeout bag. Anything that you cook for me will be wonderful.”

Her cheeks turn the lightest shade of pink. “Okay, good.”

She slides the pan of bread into the oven and comes over to join me at the table. Neither one of us seems to know what to say since there seems to be a thick tension between us.

I decide to try to break it. “Oh, I figured out what your ghost is.”

“You heard it too?”

I chuckle. “Well, kind of. It’s not anything haunted. Just a raccoon.”

“A raccoon? A raccoon is making all that noise?”

I nod. “Yeah, they’re sneaky little bastards. I caught one digging through your trash cans. I’ll try to make something to keep them out of there, so you can get some sleep.”

“I appreciate that. I feel so silly that I was freaking out over something as small as a raccoon.”

“It’s understandable. You’re in a new place—in this house all by yourself. Not unusual to freak yourself out.”

She tucks a curl behind her ear. “You’re awfully understanding. Do you know that? How’d you get to be that way?”

I shrug my shoulders. “I’m an asshole sometimes. I guess I hope for some sort of understanding from other people about that. The whole practice what you preach thing.”

“I don’t think you’re an asshole.”

“That’s very nice of you, but trust me when I say I can be. I have a whole lot of baggage that sometimes brings out the worst in me.”

She looks like she doesn’t quite know what to say. I have no idea why I’m telling her any of this. I barely know this woman. I never tell anybody anything.

Even inside my own head, I sound insane.

But apparently, I can’t stop.

“By the way,” I begin. “You asked where I go on Thursdays. I don’t think I ever told you. I go to therapy.”

“Oh,” she says, and I swear I see something that looks a little like relief on her face.

She thinks for a moment before saying, “Thank you for telling me. I probably shouldn’t have asked. I guess I was doing all sorts of stupid and intrusive things last night.”

“It’s okay,” I tell her.

The time on the oven dings, and she gets up to go over and take out the lasagna and bread.

“No, it’s not. I never should have tried to kiss you. One, you’re doing work for me. It’s beyond inappropriate. And I shouldn’t have assumed that you would even be interested. I’m sure you probably have girls hitting on you all the time.”

*Not as much as you think.*

A realization hits me. “Avery, do you think that I stopped things because I don’t find you attractive?”

Her eyes avoid mine. “I think you don’t have to give me a reason.”

I stand up and start to walk over to where she stands. “I stopped things because you were hopped up on allergy medicine. Trust me when I say that it had absolutely nothing to do with your looks—just the opposite.”

It’s written all over her face that she doesn’t believe me. “Duke, you owe me nothing. You don’t have to lie to me. I know I’m not some supermodel, and I’m okay with that. But I get that it’s not everyone’s cup of tea. Really, I’m fine.”

Look, I may not have wanted to do anything with her last night when she wasn't in her right mind, but I'll be damned if she thinks it's because she's not good-looking.

I step behind her, pretty sure that I will regret my next move. But I'm going to do it, anyway.

Grabbing her by her hips, I turn her around so that she faces me. "I meant what I said. I stopped things last night because I didn't want to take advantage of the situation. But I need you to know that it takes every ounce of willpower I have every single day to not do what I'm about to do."

"Wha—"

I kiss her before she can get the word out.

Fuck it. I don't care if I regret this later.

Right now, it's worth it.



## *Chapter 14*

### **AVERY**

**H**oly shit, Duke kissed me.

Well, he's still kissing me.

And it's not one of those kisses that you could easily forget about. This is the kind of kiss that makes smart girls stupid.

The kind of kiss that makes you drop all your plans and jump on the back of the bad boy's motorcycle.

The kind of kiss that drops your morals and your panties in one fell swoop.

Duke has one hand wrapped around my waist while the other holds the side of my face. His lips softly grab mine, and I get so lost in the moment that I don't want it to end.

When he pulls back to look at me, I feel like my head is spinning. His eyes glance down at my lips. "Now, do you believe that I think you're absolutely fucking gorgeous?"

Not wanting it to stop, I say, "Uhhh, I'm starting to believe you, but I think I might need a little more convincing."

“Oh, yeah?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

He smiles, but this time, this time is different than before. He full-on grins at me, showing me a whole new side of him.

He leans in to kiss me once more, holding my face but now in both of his hands. He starts slowly with his tongue licking the seam of my lips. I part them, granting him access. His tongue swoops in and starts to play with mine. His fingers run through my hair as we make out.

Damn, it's amazing. This may be the bad decision to end all other bad decisions. But I don't care. His kiss makes smart girls stupid, remember? My libido screams louder than any rational thought I have in my head.

My fingers fist in his shirt as I crave more. I do not even realize when he moves me to the right a little bit. Next thing I know, I feel Duke's hands grab both of my ass cheeks before lifting me and setting me on the counter with ease.

He continues kissing me while my legs wrap around his waist. With my ankles hooked around him, I pull him close. I let out a moan as I feel his hard cock pressing into me.

He breaks the kiss to whisper, “Do you believe me now that I think you're sexy as hell?” He grabs my hand and leads it to the front of his pants. I rub him through the denim, causing him to let out a low growl.

His lips find mine again, this time turning frantic—hungry. He wants this just as much as I do.

Our hands run all over each other's bodies like we can't get enough. It's like all the tension between us since we met has formed into one giant flaming ball of lust.

And we are headed straight for a massive explosion.

Just when it's really starting to get hot and heavy, Duke stops. When he pulls back to look at me, I worry that he's about to put the brakes on this whole thing. Instead, he sends shivers down my body with just one word.

“Bedroom.”

Don't have to tell me twice. Duke helps me off the counter and takes my hand in his. As we are walking out of the kitchen, I say, “Wait, what about the lasagna?”

His dark eyes pierce into mine. “Sweetheart, please don't be offended when I say this, but there is something I'd much rather eat than lasagna right now.”

*He's right.*

*Fuck the lasagna.*

I lead him up the stairs as quickly as I can, excited to get this show on the road. The moment we get to the bed, I feel his hands wrap around me from behind. They start at my hips and slowly travel upward until he's teasing my breasts. My head falls back against his chest, and he takes the opportunity to trail kisses along my neck.

He slides one hand across my chest and into the opening of my low-cut shirt. His skin may be rough, but his hands feel amazing against me.

His fingers slowly flick against my nipples, and I let out a loud moan. I have big boobs, making everything extremely sensitive. Combine that with the fact that I haven't been touched in years, and you've got me about to start coming right here.

Just when my head starts spinning, Duke's hands move down my body. He whispers in my ear, "As great as these jeans look on you, I'm excited to see what's underneath."

Slowly, his fingers undo the button on the front and start to slide the denim down my legs. I step out, leaving only my booty-short panties underneath.

"Damn, girl. Look at this ass," he says, rubbing the globes of my backside. "Fucking perfect."

A moment later, he turns me back around so that I'm facing him. Next, he focuses his attention on taking off my shirt and bra. Before I know it, I stand in front of him in nothing more than my underwear. Normally, this is the point where I would start to feel awkward. I'd be trying to cover up my stomach or diving under the blankets on the bed to hide any potential viewing of my body.

Don't get me wrong; I don't hate my body. I embrace the fact that I'm a little more on the fluffy side. But it's always easy to tell when you're with a guy who may not find that on the higher end of the attractive scale. They get that look in their eyes that says they wish I was thinner, but they're going to bang me anyway because it's convenient.

After a while, I got tired of the look.

But the way Duke is looking at me right now is nothing like the ones those other guys gave. This look is one that shows he loves what he sees.

And he's about to prove it to me.

"Lie down," he commands. "Get comfortable."

I do as he says, and he quickly joins me, climbing between my legs.

"Is this okay?" He asks.

"Yes," I whisper.

"You can tell me to stop, and I will. No questions asked."

"Please, no. Don't stop," I plead.

He grabs the top of my panties and pulls them down, exposing me entirely. He tosses them off the side of the bed before lowering his head between my legs. I feel him gazing at my most sensitive area, and I'm grateful I felt the need to do some 'landscaping' down there earlier.

"Oh yeah," he growls. "Fucking perfect."

Before I can even process his words, his tongue circles my clit. I'm already so sensitive I about fly off the bed. But Duke's arms wrapping around my thighs ensure I'm not going anywhere.

I've always loved getting my pussy eaten, but let's be honest—most guys aren't good at it. They give it a couple licks and that's it. Meanwhile, Duke's tongue makes sure to give attention to every inch of my pussy, and he takes note of

what gets the biggest reaction out of me and focuses there. The tip licks the pearl of my clit, and I can barely lie still.

When he speeds up, moving like a vibrator would, I can't take anymore. My entire body starts to squirm as my pussy contracts. He continues to lick entirely through my orgasm. When I'm too sensitive to take anymore, he gives my lady bits one final kiss before standing up to remove his own clothes.

I move a couple of pillows behind my head, propping me up a little.

“Are you okay?” He asks.

“More than okay,” I tell him. “Just wanted to get in a better position to appreciate the view.”

There's that smile again.

I watch him quickly shed his clothing. And his body is even better than I could have imagined. He isn't overly toned, but man, he's solid. His wide chest has the perfect amount of hair—enough to not look like a teenager but not enough to wonder if he is part grizzly bear.

When he takes his boxers off, my mouth drops open at his big cock. I could feel it earlier through his jeans, but it didn't do it justice. I won't say it's the longest in the world, but man, it's thick. The big purple head glistens with a drop of pre-cum that I have the sudden urge to lick off. But he rolls the condom on before I have a chance.

As he walks toward me, his dick pointing to the sky, he says, “I have to tell you, Avery... I'm not very good at the

whole soft and sweet sex. It's never really been my thing."

"That's good," I say. "Because I don't come with soft and sweet."

I'm not quite sure who I am right now, but this confident, sassy woman is like my alter-ego that I've always wanted. Right now, I don't feel awkward or clumsy. Instead, I feel sexy as sin, and I never want this to end. I silently pray that Duke isn't a Two-Pump Chuck.

I expect him to get onto the bed and join me, but I'm taken by surprise when he grabs me by the ankles and yanks me toward the edge of the bed. He positions me so that my ass is just barely hanging off of the mattress.

He takes my legs and moves them so each of my ankles sits on one of his shoulders. He uses three fingers to slide inside me and make sure I'm ready for him. When he teases them against my g-spot, I let out a loud moan.

Duke watches me as I writhe against his fingers. "You are so fucking sexy." He pauses for a moment before asking, "Are you ready for me to fuck you?"

I frantically nod. "Yes, please."

My moan turns into a disappointed one when he removes his fingers. Thankfully, I don't have to wait long, though, before feeling the head of his cock pushing inside.

He's big, but my pussy has no problem opening for him to fit. As he slides inside, every nerve ending in my body sparks

to life. I'd forgotten just how much I missed sex. But Duke is quick to remind me.

He stands still for the briefest of moments before starting to move. I quickly realize he wasn't kidding about the no soft and sweet thing. His movements are fast and rough, but he knows what he's doing with each one. He's hitting all the perfect spots.

My boobs bounce up and down with each thrust, and I take my fingers and pinch my nipples to add to all of the overwhelming sensations.

Duke gets a hungry look in his eyes and leans forward. My legs drop off his shoulders and wrap around his waist. As his large body hovers over mine, his hands come down to pin my arms above my head. Then his mouth lowers to my nipples. His dark eyes find mine before he slips the stiff peak into his mouth.

My back arches as his tongue circles the area. He alternates back and forth between the two of them while the lower half of him still fucks the shit out of me. My head spins from all of the different sensations.

This man may not be all about the soft and sweet, but he sure as shit knows what he's doing. But that's not surprising. A man as good looking as Duke probably has had a lot of practice over the years.

When his mouth finally takes a break, he whispers, "Do you want to come again, beautiful?"



I nod and let out a small moan.

Grazing my nipple with his teeth, he says, “Tell me. Tell me what you want.”

“I want to come again,” I say in a breathy tone.

Releasing my hands, he stands back up and puts my legs where they started. He fucks into me while using the fingers on one hand to rub my clit.

“Holy shit!” I cry as my entire body struggles to sit still.

He must know that I’m getting close. If he doesn’t pick up on it from my writhing movements, he should definitely get the hint by the way my pussy is squeezing him. A tidal wave builds inside me with every thrust.

When the speed of both his cock and his fingers increases, I can’t take anymore. My entire body quivers as my orgasm pushes past the barrier.

I scream out Duke’s name as wave after wave of pleasure wash over me. I look up at him. His jaw is tight, and his eyes never leave mine as he struggles to hold on as long as he can. I can tell he wants to wring every single ounce of pleasure out of me.

But it doesn’t take long for his own dam to break. He lets out what I can only describe as a primal growl.

It’s very “caveman”.

I like it.

After he finishes, he lets my legs down and leans over to kiss me.

“Wow,” he whispers. “That was...”

I cut him off, “Incredible.”

He lets out a soft laugh. “Yeah. Fucking incredible.”

Sliding out of me, he stands up and heads into the bathroom to dispose of the condom. When he’s done, I make my way in there to pee and clean myself up a little.

When I get out, my heart sinks a little as I see Duke sliding back on his underwear and walking over to where his clothes are piled on the floor.

“Oh, you’re leaving?” I ask, trying to hide my disappointment.

“I didn’t know if you wanted me to stay.”

“Do you want to stay?” I ask.

He counters with, “Do you want me to stay?”

We are stuck in a strange stalemate, but not wanting him to leave, I answer with, “I mean, you could stay. You know... to keep an eye on the whole raccoon situation.”

He smiles, picking up on what I’m trying to say. “Oh yeah. Wouldn’t want that situation to get any worse. I think I should definitely stay. Should I sleep on the couch?”

“Well, you could. But I know it will probably hurt your back, and that just wouldn’t be a good thing.”

“So... I should sleep in the bed with you?”

I shrug. “I just don’t think there’s any other solution.”

We both grin at each other and move to get back under the covers. I slide over next to him and lay my head on his chest. Somehow, this feels right. Maybe it’s just that I have been so lonely for such a long time, and it’s been worse ever since I got to Texas.

But it feels different than that. I have no idea what any of this means or where we go from here. But tonight, I don’t want to think about it. Tonight, I just want to lie next to this gorgeous man and forget about everything else.

We fall into a comfortable silence before Duke is the first one to break it. “Full disclosure, Avery, with you lying next to me naked, I can’t guarantee how much sleep we are going to get.”

“Eh, we can sleep when we are dead.”

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## *Chapter 15*

### **DUKE**

**M**y eyes shoot open and frantically look around the room to figure out where I am. I'm not in my bedroom in the trailer. Then, it hits me.

I'm at Avery's.

In her bedroom.

Everything from last night comes flooding back. I kissed her. I probably shouldn't have, but I couldn't listen to her talk about how she assumed I didn't find her attractive. A woman like that should be told a hundred times a day how gorgeous she is.

I just couldn't help myself.

And you know what?

It was fucking perfect. Kissing her was everything I thought it would be and more. And the sex? Amazing.

Perfection.

I've had plenty of sex in my life. Being a military man, I traveled for a good twenty years of my life. That meant never getting close enough to anyone for any type of real relationship. But try telling that to my cock. He doesn't quite understand why being alone was better. So, I had my fair share of no-strings-attached nights. It was mainly to get my dick wet—a means to an end—although I always made sure the woman I was with was fully satisfied.

I never paid for it, but I also never made promises that I didn't intend to keep. I never pretended I was going to stick around and be the man they always dreamed about. Instead, I was the man who'd make them come a few times and then disappear into the night.

My point is that sex has always been fun, but that's all it's been. With Avery, something felt different. Maybe it's because I've been fantasizing about it ever since I met her.

As I'm getting lost in memories of the way I felt inside Avery's sweet pussy, a couple of things hit me. One, Avery isn't in bed with me. Did she have a change of heart in the middle of the night?

And two, I glance at the clock and see the time.

“Seven AM?” I mutter to myself.

I haven't slept past 5 AM in... well, I don't even remember when. Since I was a teenager, maybe? I never get a full night of sleep because of—

The nightmares.

I struggle to think if I had any of the awful dreams last night. But if I did, I don't remember a single one. And they obviously weren't bad enough to wake me up.

I assume that it's because I was so exhausted after the sex, but damn. Is sex with Avery the cure for my nightmares?

Or did I have one and just don't remember? Maybe that's why Avery isn't in bed with me. I could have had a dream and scared her off.

Determined to get some answers, I get out of bed and pull my shirt over my head but don't bother to put my jeans back on just yet. As I make my way down the stairs, the smell of fresh coffee hits my nose.

When I enter the kitchen, music plays softly as Avery bops around. She has on a white t-shirt that does nothing to hide her luscious ass peeking out the bottom or her hard nipples showing through the top.

It only takes her a moment to notice me. "Hey, you," she says with a big smile.

"Good morning, beautiful."

"I'm making omelets. Hope you're hungry."

"Starved."

"What do you like in your omelet?" She asks while cracking some eggs into a bowl.

"Whatever you've got. I'm not picky."

I take a seat over at the table, and she brings me a cup of coffee.

I tell her, “You don’t have to take care of me, you know? After last night, I should be taking care of you.”

“I got you a cup of coffee. I didn’t do all that much,” she giggles. “But speaking of last night, do you think we should talk about what happened?”

I have no idea where this is heading, so I take a sip of coffee and make sure the ball is in her court. “Of course. Where do you think we should go from here?”

But Avery isn’t going to make it that easy on me. “You first.”

I take another sip of coffee while I try to decide what I want to say. I still don’t have it quite planned out, but I walk over to her. She takes a break from whisking the eggs and turns around to face me.

Scooting the bowl over, I pick her up and set her on the counter. She smiles at me. “You know, last time you did this, we ended up forgetting about a whole lasagna.”

I shrug. “Worth it.”

The sexy smile that settles on her lips makes me lose my train of thought. Instead, my mind shifts to picturing fucking her right here on this counter.

But we should probably talk about some things first. Pushing a strand of hair behind her ear, I say, “Avery, I have

no idea what this is. And I can tell you right now that I probably won't be good in any type of relationship."

Her face falls a bit, and I realize that this is probably coming out completely wrong. I continue, "I have no clue what I'm doing. And I know that you being here isn't a permanent thing. I have no idea where that leaves us, but I do know that after last night, it's pretty obvious that if I continue to work for you, we may not be able to keep our hands off each other. At least that was my take on it."

She smiles and nods. "Agreed."

"I'll be honest with you, Avery. This is probably the most words I've spoken in months. I don't tell people things; I don't share things about myself. Not even my mother knows I'm in therapy, but I told you. For some strange reason, I'm comfortable telling you things. And this morning was the first time I've slept in past 5 AM in quite some time."

I leave out the nightmares part and instead just say, "But I have done a whole lot of talking, and I should probably let you speak and tell me what you're thinking."

She licks her bottom lip as she thinks for a moment. "This may be a horrible idea, but I'm with you. I don't know that we can be around each other so much and behave. Well, after last night, I don't know that we'd *want* to. Maybe we keep doing what we've been doing during the day since we both still have work to do. But maybe the evenings can be reserved for us... and any other activities we may want to pursue."



“I think that sounds perfect,” I tell her. I gently grab either side of her face and pull her in for a kiss. When I pull back, I say, “Guess I better get to work then, huh?”

Placing her hands on my chest, she whispers, “What’s your hurry? You’re already late. Might as well get a little bit later.”

She leans up to kiss me, but this time, it’s not sweet. She’s going for gold as her tongue slips into my mouth.

Have I mentioned how fucking sexy she is?

Immediately, my cock pitches a tent in my underwear, anxious to get inside Avery again. But before we go any further, I have to put a stop to it.

“Sweetheart, as much as I would like to fuck you right here and now, I’m going to have to go grab some more condoms before we can continue this.”

She lets out a disappointed moan. “Okay.” Her eyes travel down to the bulge in my boxers. “What are you going to do about that?”

“Pretend it’s not there and hope to hell it goes away,” I say.

Her sexy smirk returns. “Maybe I can help with that.”

Before I can ask what she’s talking about, she slides off of the countertop and sinks to her knees. Her hands grab the waistband of my boxers and slowly drag them down my legs.

“Avery, you don’t have—”

Before I can finish the thought, her tongue circles the head of my dick. A low moan rumbles deep in my chest.

Okay, this woman might be the epitome of perfection.

While her big eyes stare up at me, her jaw opens wide enough to take me into her mouth and down her throat. She teases me, going at a slow pace and dragging her tongue along the bottom of my shaft.

It takes everything in me to keep my cool and not start fucking her face. I'm enjoying the show way too much for that. I run my fingers through her hair but am careful to let her keep setting the pace.

I watch every move she makes, taking mental snapshots and hoping to remember this moment.

I never want to forget this image.

The primal side of me wants to yank her up, bend her over, and fuck her until she comes more times than she can count. But with no condoms, I know that's not the best idea. So, I'm going to enjoy her sucking my cock and make sure to make it up to her later.

Over and over again.

## Chapter 16

### AVERY

*O* kay, who am I?

Before last night, I hadn't had sex in I don't know how long, and this morning, I'm giving my handyman head in the kitchen before he goes home to change clothes.

I've always considered myself a fairly sexual person. Even when I'm single, I enjoy making myself feel good. And when I'm with someone, I love making them feel good.

The problem is that most of the men I've been with haven't always been too keen on returning the favor.

Until Duke.

It's amazing what a man making a woman feel sexy can do for her self-esteem—and her sex drive.

As I take a shower and get dressed for the day, I hear a nagging voice in my head telling me that this whole thing is a bad idea. Duke is my handyman. I'm paying him to do work for me. From experience, I know that work life and personal life don't always mix too well. Plus, it's not like I will be in

Texas permanently. I have a whole life back in Boston that I fully intend on getting back to once this project is done.

But there's another voice in my head—an even louder one—that tells me to just let loose and have some fun because I know that when I get back to Boston, I'll probably be lonelier than ever. I might as well enjoy this time while I can.

And Duke makes me feel things that I haven't felt in way too long.

Sexy.

Beautiful.

Valued.

Just to name a few.

I don't know that I'm ready to give that up.

After an hour of the ping-pong match inside my head between my *voice of reason* and my *voice of fun*, Duke shows back up.

The smile he gives me makes me have no doubt as to which voice will win out. I decide that some fun is exactly what I need.

But as he and I agreed, work still needs to get done. So, he gets to work on doing some carpentry work outside while I head into my office and try to keep my head out of the clouds. Soon enough, I get lost in going through some illustrations for a children's book we are looking to publish. Not only do I make sure all the pictures match up with the text, but I also

make sure everything is kid friendly. Last thing my tiny company needs is a lawsuit for something being inappropriate.

I get lost in what I'm doing for a while until there's a soft knock on the door.

"Yeah?" I call.

Duke pokes his head in. "Do you have a minute? I wanted to show you some samples for the kitchen when you have the time."

"Oh, of course. I'm just finishing up here."

He walks over to where I sit and looks out the window. I make some stupid comment about the weather, and he just sort of grunts.

As he's walking away, he looks over my shoulder at the illustration on the screen. He points to one of the plants on the corner of the page.

"That flower looks like a penis."

"What?" I ask, zooming in. Sure enough, the *innocent* flower looks like a giant, curved piece of man meat. "Well, son of a bitch," I mutter under my breath. "That's not going to work."

As I get up to follow Duke into the kitchen, I ask, "How the hell did you see that when you only looked at it for a second?"

He shrugs. "I'm a guy. Anything remotely sexual stands out. If it would have looked like a vagina, I probably would have seen it even sooner."

That gets a giggle out of me. “I may have to have you check all the illustrations that come across my desk. We could give you an official title. Maybe penis peeper? Vagina voyeur? No, that one just makes you super creepy.”

“And penis peeper doesn’t?” He asks with a smile.

“We’ll workshop the name. But look, my budget is all tapped out for the work you’re doing on the house, so I’m going to have to pay you in sexual favors instead,” I tease.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

Duke may be quiet 99% of the time, but when he’s not, he’s able to keep up with me—which is beyond surprising.

He walks over to the kitchen cabinets and holds up a couple of knobs that I assume he got the last time he went to the hardware store.

“Alright, we need to make a decision on hardware for the cabinets as well as what type of finish you want.”

Honestly, I have no clue what I want. I don’t have the first idea of what would make a house more appealing to a potential buyer. I couldn’t even tell you what the knobs on the cabinets in my own apartment look like.

When Duke sees the blank look on my face, he asks, “Avery, are you still with me?”

“Kind of,” I answer, crossing my arms over my chest. “What would you do?”

“Huh?” One of his eyebrows cocks upward.

“If this was your house, and you were going to sell it—or live in it, I guess—what would you do?”

He thinks for a moment before saying, “I’d probably paint the cabinets white to brighten up the room and use simple hardware. Nothing too ornate.”

“Alright, that sounds good.”

He leans toward me. “Sweetheart, you understand that this is *your* house, right? These things should probably be your decisions.”

“Technically, yes, it’s mine. But I need to know what would appeal to someone else if I’m going to rent it out.”

The look in his dark eyes says that he wants to say something else on the matter, but he must decide not to because he just says, “Okay, white cabinets it is. I will get started on getting everything sanded tomorrow.”

“Perfect.”

“Oh, with me sanding and painting, it’s going to be a bit of a mess in here. You may not want to cook in here for a couple of days.”

“Oh,” I stammer. “Okay.”

I’m not opposed to eating out or getting takeout except that I have no idea where anything is around here. I should probably venture to other places aside from the local Walmart and figure out what options there are.

As if Duke can see my internal worry, he moves closer to me and sets his hands on my waist. “How about tomorrow night you let me take you out?”

“You want to take me out?” I ask. “Like a date?”

He lets out a deep chuckle. “Yes, Avery. Like a date. I figure you have cooked for me a few times now, and it’s about time I return the favor. I’m a shitty cook, though, but I can take you out.”

“To be fair, I’ve cooked for you a few times, but we haven’t really gotten to eat it,” I correct with a small smile.

“Can I help it that you look too damn sexy to focus on food?” His hands move from my hips down to my ass. I wrap my arms around his neck and stand on my tiptoes as he grabs a handful.

“How do you do that?” I ask.

“How do I do what?”

“Make me feel so sexy with just saying a few words.”

He shrugs and shoots me a playful smile. “I don’t talk a lot. When I do, I better make damn sure I say the right thing. And making sure you know how gorgeous you are seems like the best use of my words.”

“Lord, you’re smooth. Anyone ever told you that?”

“Not as often as you may think.”

I highly doubt that, but I’m not about to argue with him. I’d rather move on to other, more pleasant things.



Looking up at him, I ask, “So, how much more work do you have to get done today?”

His eyes glance upward as though he’s mulling it over.

“I think that depends on what my boss thinks. She’s a real hard-ass, you know.”

“Hmm,” I say. “Well, I say *fuck the boss.*”

Without warning, he picks me up and slings me over his shoulder. “Gladly.”

I giggle and squeal as he carries me toward the stairs. I figure he’ll set me back on my feet before heading up, but he carries me the whole way.

“Am I heavy?” I ask.

“Nope.”

“You sure?”

“Yep,” he replies, this time with a smack to my ass.

We get into the bedroom, and he gently tosses me on the bed. I look up at him and tease, “Hey, aren’t I supposed to be your boss?”

As he grabs the collar of his t-shirt and pulls it over his head, he replies, “Not in here, you’re not.”

*What about that turns me on so much?*

Crawling over me, his eyes trail up and down my body.

“What?” I ask, nervously.

“I just can’t get enough of you. You’re so fucking gorgeous.”

An unexpected wave of emotion hits me because I’ve never been with anyone who went out of their way to make me feel beautiful the way that Duke does. I’ve been with guys for much longer than I’ve even known Duke, and they didn’t make me feel half as good as he does.

Not wanting to get all in my feelings, I wrap my arms around Duke’s neck and pull him down for a kiss.

As our tongues start to dance, I reach down and unbutton his jeans. My hand slips under the waistband of his boxers and grabs his hard cock.

A low moan vibrates in the back of his throat as my fingers squeeze the base.

“Avery, I’m trying to give you some foreplay here, but you’re making it extremely hard.”

With another squeeze, I say, “Yeah, I can feel that.”

He laughs, and I add, “Why don’t we skip the foreplay, and you fuck the shit out of me instead?”

He cocks one eyebrow at me. “You’re just a little surprise, aren’t you?”

“You have no idea.” I smile. “Now, fuck me.”

That’s all it takes for Duke to let go of any shred of self-control he was holding onto. He yanks every piece of clothing

off me before kicking his jeans off. In a flash, he grabs a condom and rolls it on.

I expect him to get on top, but he doesn't. Instead, he commands, "Flip over. Get on your hands and knees with your ass up in the air."

Because I love doggy-style, I excitedly do as he says. I pay no attention to the fact that my boobs are hanging awkwardly or that my stomach rolls are showing. All I can think about is how good it will feel when Duke slides inside. I'm practically vibrating with excitement, but he intends to make me wait a little longer. I feel his fingers spread my pussy lips as his thumb toys with my clit. My entire body jumps at the sensation. When he touches the most sensitive point, I squirm all over the place.

He uses one of his large hands to hold my hip in place while he continues to tease.

"Please," I whine.

"Please, what?"

"Please, fuck me."

"Well, since you asked so nicely..." With that, he slams into me in one smooth thrust. And whoa, it feels amazing. Getting fucked from behind has always been a favorite of mine, but it hits differently when the guy is big enough to stretch you out and hit all the right spots.

"Ohhh," I moan.

Duke spreads my thighs a little further apart, opening me even wider. With every thrust, he makes contact with my clit. My fingers grip the sheets as my head spins. I'm unable to think about anything besides how amazing it feels.

I barely even comprehend what's happening when Duke pulls me up so that my back is against his chest. He still slides in and out of me. One of his hands reaches between my legs to rub my clit while the other wraps around my neck. He doesn't squeeze, but just the thought of it being here is sexy as hell. I'm a fiercely independent woman in almost every aspect of my life. It's sexy as hell to have someone take the reins in the bedroom.

Our bodies rub against each other as my head swims with all the sensations. His hips keep the same tempo as his fingers speed up. My thighs start to clench as my pussy twitches around him.

The pressure builds within me as heat spreads throughout my limbs. The orgasm hits me like lightning as my entire body turns to jelly. Duke holds me up as he keeps fucking me. I'm basically a rag doll who's high on pure pleasure.

With my clit too sensitive to take anymore, Duke moves that hand to play with my nipples.

I have no idea how long it is before he finds his release, but I know that I come twice more. When we're done, I barely even notice when Duke goes to throw away the condom.

All I notice is him crawling back into bed and taking me into his arms. Within moments, I'm fast asleep.

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## Chapter 17

### DUKE

I wake up smelling a delicious coconut scent. It doesn't take me long to realize what it is.

*Avery.*

My eyes open to see a mess of blonde hair fanned all over my chest. Her naked body lays against mine, and I try to keep my dick from springing to life.

I have no idea what time it is, but it's still dark out, so I don't think it's morning. One thing I do know is that I slept once again with no nightmares.

I reach down and run my fingers through her hair. I don't know what it is about this woman, but I can't seem to get enough. There's something so uniquely wonderful about her.

In almost every single moment of my life, I am extremely tense. I'm always on edge—always on guard. Being in the military for so long does that to a man. All the awful things that I've seen throughout my career weigh on me every second, even when I sleep.

But when I'm around Avery, things are different. She puts me at ease and quiets my soul. That's something that should be valued and treasured.

I want to pull her closer and hold her tighter, but I don't want to wake her. She looks so comfortable.

It doesn't take long, though, for her to start stirring. She makes the cutest little noises as she starts to wake up.

Slowly sitting up, she turns to look at me. "Hi," she says in a sleepy voice.

"Hey, beautiful."

She wipes the corner of her mouth. "Sorry. I'm pretty sure I drooled on you."

"Don't worry about it."

"What time is it?"

"No idea," I tell her, looking around for a clock, knowing there's not one.

She rolls off me and glances at her phone on the nightstand. "Ten o'clock."

"I guess we just took a nap," I laugh. "We probably shouldn't have fallen asleep for so long."

"That's what happens when you fuck me to sleep." She smiles at me while pushing her hair out of her eyes.

I'm tempted to fuck her again right here and now if it gets that sexy little smirk to appear again. But I change my mind when I hear Avery's stomach growl.

“Hungry?” I ask.

“Guess so,” she replies, looking a little embarrassed.

Not wanting her to feel uncomfortable, I say, “Me too. You want to go down and raid the kitchen?”

“Absolutely.” She jumps out of bed, and my eyes stay fixed on her round, perfect ass.

I join her and slide my boxers back on. Avery walks over to a drawer and pulls out a ratty old t-shirt. She slips it on over her head. As sexy as she still looks, I make a mental note to bring over a few of my t-shirts for her to wear.

She’d look even sexier in one of those.

We walk downstairs to the kitchen, and Avery starts going through the fridge and cabinets.

She closes the refrigerator door enough to glance around it at me. “Are you staying the night?”

Her question takes me by surprise. “Do you want me to?”

“That depends.”

“On?”

“On if you’re going to judge me for eating a bunch of junk food in bed, or if you’re going to join me.”

I can’t remember the last time I ate in bed, but honestly, that’s just because I don’t spend a lot of time in bed in general. But whatever Avery wants, I’m happy to oblige.

“Oh, I would never judge. Let’s do it.”



The big smile she gets on her face can only be compared to a kid on Christmas morning. I would do anything she asked me to if it got me that look.

We spend the next twenty minutes making an entire tray of snack food. And by tray, I mean a cookie baking sheet because it's the biggest thing we could find. We have everything from pizza rolls to popcorn to snack cakes.

When we are back in bed, we dig in. After Avery burns the shit out of her tongue on a hot pizza roll, she says, "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"What did you know about my dad?"

I think for a moment, wishing I could give her some answers to the questions I'm sure she has, but I don't think I'll be much help.

Taking a deep breath, I reply, "Honestly, not a lot. I knew he lived here because the house was always the talk of the town. But as far as I knew, he always lived here alone."

Her face falls with disappointment, so I add, "But keep in mind, Avery, I was barely here at all for twenty years. I didn't keep up on the happenings around town. And before that, I was a kid getting into all sorts of trouble. I may not be the best person to ask about all of this."

"Yeah, I guess," she says in a quiet voice.

"What does your mom say about all of this?" I ask.

“She died a couple of years ago.”

*Man, I'm doing a hell of a job trying to make her feel better.*

“Shit, Avery, I'm sorry.”

She shakes her head a little. “It's fine. Well, it's not fine, but you know what I mean. We weren't exactly close when she was alive. She had a drinking problem and didn't like it when I would point it out.”

“And she never told you anything about your dad?”

“She told me that he left when I was a baby. That was it. Every time I would try to ask anything else, she would avoid the question and flip it back on me. To her, me asking showed that I was ungrateful to her for raising me on her own.”

Sounds like her mom had something to hide. But I don't say that. Although Avery may not be *close* with her mother, that's still her mom. I don't want to overstep any boundaries here.

Instead, I ask, “What makes you think that what she told you wasn't true?”

She raises an eyebrow at me. “Besides the fact that he gave me a house?”

“He could have done that after feeling guilty for leaving you and your mom.”

She points her finger at me. “That was what I thought too when Clyde Abernathy showed up to tell me all of this. But then I get here, and I see a picture downstairs of my dad

holding me when I was at least a few years old. That doesn't fit with the story that she told me at all."

I wish I could say something that could make it all better, but I've got nothing. Maybe it's a good time for a change of subject.

"Tell me about your life in Boston," I prompt.

"What do you want to know?"

"Whatever you want to tell me."

She thinks for a minute while chewing on a piece of popcorn. "I don't know that there's much to tell. I'm a bit of a workaholic. When I first started the publishing business, it took up every ounce of time that I had. I ate, slept, and breathed it — always at the office. After it became a bit more self-sustaining, I had no scrap of a social life left."

"No friends?"

She shakes her head. "Not really. I sometimes would go have a drink with people from work, but that's about it."

I seem to just keep asking stuff that gives her a sad look on her face. A few minutes ago, she looked like a kid on Christmas, and somehow, I've turned her into looking like one who lost her puppy.

I want to offer some words of comfort, but I'm not exactly the warm and fuzzy type. I suck at trying to make people feel better.

Clearly.

I may not be good at the sweet stuff, but I know for sure there is something that I'm good at. So, when we're done eating, I move the tray of food onto the floor and join Avery back on the bed. Time to get her naked and get a smile back on that gorgeous face.

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## *Chapter 18*

### **AVERY**

“**A**very, you ready to go?” Duke calls from downstairs.  
”Yeah, be right there!”

I do a little twirl in the mirror. To go to dinner with Duke, I picked a yellow sundress with little pink flowers on it. I look a little more plump than I would like, but it’s wicked hot outside, and wearing jeans makes me sweat like a hooker in church.

So, a sundress it is.

Duke went home to change clothes—after a long day of working in the kitchen. I’m sure he still looks fine as hell, though. He always does. Even in the sweltering heat, he looks like he belongs on the cover of a romance novel. I look like a literal pig baking in the sun.

And as I come downstairs, I see that I’m absolutely right. Holy cow, he cleans up nice. His dark blue jeans hug his body just right, and his black button-up collared shirt is tucked in while his sleeves are rolled up.

How does he always look so good?

His eyes fall on me as I get to the bottom half of the stairs.

“Damn, woman, look at you.”

When I hit the floor, he grabs my hand and spins me around.

“Too much?” I ask.

“Hell, no. I think it’s just enough. If we had a way to eat here, I would keep you home and all to myself.”

“We’ve got all night,” I say with a smile.

Pulling me toward him, he presses a soft kiss to my lips. Duke may not think he’s a gentle man, but I am glad I get to see glimpses of that side of him every once in a while.

When his lips leave mine, he asks, “Are you ready to go?”

I nod, and he ushers me out the door. He helps me step up into his truck, and I’m positive I flash him a glimpse of my ass as I awkwardly get in.

“Sweetheart, are you wearing a thong?”

“Yes. Didn’t want panty lines through the dress.”

His head falls back, and he lets out a low moan. “Woman, you are really testing my self-control.”

When he gets in, I say, “You know, if I hadn’t just flashed you, you never would have known.”

He scoffs. “Oh, I would’ve known.”

“Oh, yeah, how’s that?”

“I think you underestimate the amount of time I spend staring at your ass.”

That gets a big laugh out of me. “And you would automatically just know that I was wearing a thong? No panty lines could mean I wasn’t wearing any panties at all.”

His eyes flick over to me. “You keep putting images like that in my head, and I will pull this truck over and rip any panties that you’re wearing clean off your body.”

“I don’t know if you’re trying to threaten me, but you suck at it.”

My sexy banter with Duke brings out my sexy confidence once again. That sultry, wild child living inside me is dying to make an appearance. I feel like I have a fiery alter ego within me. She has a level of confidence that I typically do not possess.

What should I call her? It has to be something sexy.

*Scarlet.*

Is Scarlet still a sexy name?

It is now.

And Scarlet is about to make an appearance.

Feeling completely empowered, I lift my butt off the seat just enough to slide the thong off and down my legs. Once it’s off, I toss it at Duke.

“Is that better?” I ask.

He sighs and picks up the panties, twirling them around his finger. His eyes flick to me. “You’re going to pay for that later.”

“Can’t wait for that.”

He holds onto my panties. “What are you going to do with those?”

“Not sure. But I sure as hell am not giving them back to you for the rest of the night.”

I start giggling. “Fair enough. So, where are we going?”

“Well, Maple Oaks doesn’t have a whole lot of options, so I thought we’d head a couple towns over. Then I’ll let you pick once you see what’s there.”

On the drive, I ask, “So, how did you become so good at all the handyman stuff? Did the Navy teach you all that?”

He chuckles and rubs his hands over his jaw. “No, the Navy taught me a lot of things. Doing odd and end construction wasn’t one of them. I learned a lot when I was young. It was just my mom and us three boys. Since I was the oldest, I was the closest thing to a man of the house. I learned a lot just by trial and error.”

I listen intently since it’s not often that Duke opens up. It’s nice hearing him talk about his family since I typically seem to be the one talking.

Deciding to push my luck, I say, “Tell me about your brothers.”



He thinks for a moment, and I wonder if he's about to shut down. But finally, he says, "Devon is the middle child. He's a good guy but stuck up his girlfriend's ass—which wouldn't be an issue except she treats him like shit. And Tanner is the baby. He's one of those guys everybody loves. Pretty much the exact opposite of me."

"You're not well-liked? Mr. Abernathy seemed to sing your praises."

"Let's just say I got into a lot of trouble when I was younger, and Clyde helped me get out of it. He's a good guy."

I get the sense that there's one hell of a story there, but he doesn't seem to want to elaborate.

So, I decide to let it go and turn the conversation. "How about your mom? What's she like?"

His body language completely changes, tensing at the mere mention of his mother.

How can I tell? Because I used to have the same reaction when people would bring up my mom.

I want to try to offer some words of comradery or something, but Duke says, "Okay, here we are. We've got a steakhouse, Mexican, Italian. What are you in the mood for?"

"Oh, uhm," I stammer. "What's your favorite?"

"Probably the steakhouse, but I'm really not picky."

"Steakhouse sounds good to me."

The remainder of the drive is short, but a little awkward. I feel like maybe I put a damper on the evening. We were having so much fun, and I feel like it's ruined.

When we park, I decide to diffuse the tension. Before we get out of the truck, I lean toward him. Grabbing him by the collar, I pull him to me until our lips touch. He instantly relaxes against me. It only takes a moment for the kiss to turn passionate. That tongue of his is enough to drive a woman wild.

Before we end up banging right here in the truck, I pull back. "Are you ready to head inside?"

His eyes dart down to the bulge in his pants. "Well, now we have to wait a minute."

A small smile of satisfaction forms on my lips. The fact that I can have that kind of reaction on a man like Duke makes me giddy.

A few minutes later, we are seated at a corner table of the restaurant. It's not like one of those fancy-pants steakhouses like all the elite go to back in Boston.

No, this is a tried-and-true steakhouse, complete with the loud country music and peanut shells on the floor.

As I look around at the animal heads hanging on the walls, Duke says, "Told you I wasn't a fancy guy."

There's that wink again.

"I like that about you," I say. "It's nice to not be with someone who doesn't have a stick up his ass."

He sets his menu down. “Okay, Avery, I have to ask—what kind of guys have you dated?”

“That’s a loaded question with an extremely long answer.”

“I’ve got time.”

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## Chapter 19

### DUKE

*D*on't think about the fact that Avery isn't wearing any panties. Just focus on what she's saying.

This is going to be a long meal.

“So, tell me all about that dating life of yours, Darlin’,” I say to Avery as we dig into the basket of rolls that our waitress just left.

Her eyes roll slightly as she says, “Well, to be honest, there hasn't been much of one for quite some time. But when there was, it was a lot of guys who were just... I don't know.”

I set my hand on top of hers. “Talk to me.”

There's a sadness in her eyes that kills me a little.

“In high school and college, I was always the fat friend.”

When I start to interject, she stops me. “Look, I'm not being down on myself. It's the truth. My friends were all thin, and I was the only one with any type of pudge. The guys who ended up getting stuck with me would assume that I was a *sure*

*thing.*” Looking a little embarrassed, she adds, “It’s not like they were wrong. Normally, they would gaslight me into thinking that I should be lucky that someone wanted to take me to bed, so I would just go along with it. I’ve always loved sex, but when you’re doing it with guys who feel like they’re doing you a favor, they tend to be pretty damn selfish.”

She takes a sip of water before continuing. “After college, I had a couple of longer relationships, but it was always with guys who wanted me to be something I wasn’t. They all wanted me to be a model and wanted me to sit still and look pretty, and well, I’m just not that kind of girl.”

“So, I’m learning,” I say with a smile.

“For a long time, I tried to hide my awkwardness and quirks, but after a while, it was just exhausting. I figured anyone who wanted to be with me would like those things instead of trying to change them. And if they couldn’t do that, then, I’d be better happier alone, anyway.”

Sighing, I say, “Men are pigs.”

One side of her mouth pulls up into a crooked grin. “Not all of them. Look, I don’t want some sort of pity party. It’s not like I have never been with a guy who was good to me or who didn’t take care of me in the bedroom. It’s not like that. True, most of them were ass hats, but not all of them. There was always just something missing—like a piece didn’t quite fit.”

She takes another drink and says, “But enough about me and my non-existent love life. Tell me about yours.”

“Not much to tell,” I reply while popping a peanut in my mouth.

“Oh, come on.” She gestures up and down at me. “Someone who looks like that certainly has something to tell.”

“I told you, Avery, I don’t have much of a love life. I’ve been with my fair share of women, but it’s never been anything serious.”

Her eyes widen. “Never? You’ve never had anything more than a romp in the sack?”

“I had a girlfriend in high school, but we all know how *serious* those things really are. I broke it off when I joined the Navy. After that, I was never in one place long enough to settle down with anyone.”

“Do you get lonely?” She asks.

“Sweetheart, I was in the military for twenty years. I was constantly around a group of men, never getting a moment alone. Any time by myself I would get on leave, I would enjoy to the fullest. The quiet doesn’t bother me.”

“Makes sense,” she says. “What do you do with your time when you aren’t being a handyman extraordinaire?”

“I sometimes do work on my own place, and I like to read.” I say the last words a little more quietly.

“You read? What do you read?” She looks shocked.

“Anything, really. But I enjoy mysteries most.”

“You tell me that I’m a surprise, but buddy, you shock me a little more each day.”

“I have to keep you on your toes,” I tease.

She gently tosses her hair over her shoulder, and I can’t help but just stare at her. I can’t get over how gorgeous she is. Half of me wants to go to all of those guys who told her she wasn’t good enough and punch them in the face. The other half of me wants to brag that she’s mine now.

*Mine?*

I wouldn’t go that far.

Although I’m not opposed to the idea. I actually like it.

Looking at her, I ask, “Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?”

Her cheeks blush a little as she licks her lips. “I think that you covered that when you were admiring my ass earlier.”

“Well, sweetheart, as much as I love your sexy ass, I need to let you know that the rest of you looks absolutely gorgeous.”

She smiles. “You clean up pretty good too, Tex.”

“And for what it’s worth, I think all of those other guys were idiots. I don’t think you should change a thing.”

“Thank you. I learned a while ago that changing who I am isn’t going to do anybody any good.”

A moment later, our food shows up, and we dig in.

Randomly, Avery asks, “Where do you live?”

“Huh?”

“Where do you live when you’re not with me?”

“I have a small trailer over off First Street. It’s pretty small, but it works for just me. It’s on a decent chunk of land, so I have some space to move around.”

“You should get a dog or something,” she says between bites.

“I can barely take care of myself,” I joke. “Do you have any animals back in Boston?”

She sighs and rolls her eyes. “No, my building is pet-free. Otherwise, I’d definitely have a dog.”

“No cat?”

“Here’s the thing. If I have one cat, I’d end up with ten, and I don’t know that I’m ready to be a crazy cat lady yet. I’m crazy enough without a feline following.”

A deep laugh erupts from my chest. This woman is something else. I’ve never met anyone quite like her.

When we fall silent for a few moments, I say, “Hey, I was just thinking about our talk last night—about your dad.”

Looking a little worried, she says, “Oh?”

“Yeah, I may not have much information on him, but I’m betting someone in town does. Maybe we can ask some questions and see if we can get you some answers.”

Her face lights up. “Really? Do you think we can get people to talk?”



“No idea. I’m not exactly the town teddy bear, but it’s worth a try.”

She thinks for a moment, as if she’s trying to decide if she wants to ask something else. I guess she decides to shoot her shot.

“You said you got in trouble a lot when you were younger. What happened?”

I’m not sure that I’m ready to answer that question. Honestly, I don’t know that I’ll ever be ready. She will probably think less of me. And I don’t know if I could stand that.

I respond with, “Just stupid teenage shit. But people in small towns love to hold grudges. You know how it goes.”

She smiles. “Well, I don’t, but I’ll take your word for it.”

Internally, I let out a sigh of relief that she doesn’t press me any further.

When there’s another silence, Avery leans forward and says, “You still thinking about me with no panties?”

I let out a deep breath. “Well, I am now.”

She playfully bites her bottom lip. “Good.” She pauses for a moment. “Do you want to get out of here and go do something fun?”

“What do you have in mind?”

“No idea. What’s there to do around here?”

I think for a minute, trying to figure something out. It's not like I'm exactly having fun all the time. Coming up short, I pull out my phone and Google some ideas.

Finally, I settle on one. Avery and I do a dance over who's going to pay the bill, but ultimately, I win. She may be my employer at the moment, but I'll be damned if I'm going to let her pay while we're on a date.

We leave the restaurant and head toward the fun that Avery requested. Thankfully, it's a short drive because she bugs me the entire time about where we're going.

She gets almost giddy when we pull into the parking lot.

"Putt-putt?" She grins.

"Do you like mini-golf?"

"I love it. I'll love it even more when I kick your ass."

"Oh, is that right?" I look at her and her overflowing confidence. "Do you want to bet?"

"Definitely."

"What should we bet?" I ask.

Her face scrunches up. "Sexual favors. What else is there?"

I'm tempted to tell her that we don't need to make a bet for me to do absolutely anything and everything to her sexy body, but I'll let her have her fun.

"Okay, deal."

Five minutes later, we have our putters, balls, and scorecard. My first shot, I hit a hole-in-one. Avery's jaw drops.

“Sir?” She says. “Something you need to tell me?”

“Lucky shot.”

She steps up to take her own shot. It takes her five hits to knock it in. My lips curl up on one side, realizing I’ve probably got this in the bag.

But Avery has a secret weapon that I seem to have forgotten about. She bends over to pick up the ball, and I get a flash of her bare ass. Any bit of focus that I just had goes flying right out the window.

Immediately, I glance around to make sure no one is nearby to sneak a peek. Thankfully, no one is, but I don’t know that I want to take that risk for seventeen more holes.

The look Avery shoots me tells me she knows *exactly* what she’s doing.

But she’s not stopping at just bending over to pick up the ball. When I go to make my next shot, she does it again. This time, she acts like she’s messing with her shoes, but she’s not fooling anyone.

“Avery,” I warn.

“Are you having trouble concentrating?” she asks with innocent doe eyes.

Son of a bitch, this is going to be the longest game of putt-putt in my entire life.

## *Chapter 20*

### **AVERY**

**S**carlet has made her appearance once again. And she is getting more and more brazen.

I love it.

And by the bulge in his pants, I'd say Duke loves it too.

I must not notice when people start to walk up to one of the holes near us. As I bend over, Duke steps right behind me to shield anybody from seeing.

I feel his hand touch my hip. "Sweetheart, I don't consider myself a jealous man, but I'll be damned if I let anyone see that perfect ass of yours.

My master plan worked, though, because Duke is now completely sucking at the game at hand. I may be a dirty player, but I intend to win the game.

Apparently, Duke has other plans.

I bend over once again. This time, shaking my ass just enough to rub against the front of his jeans.

Mr. Stoic must reach his breaking point because he practically growls, “Alright, we’re done.”

“We still have more holes,” I say.

Duke picks up both of our balls and tosses them into one of the tiny ponds on the course. “Game’s over.”

“Oh no. Our balls are wet.” Realizing what I said, I let out a loud cackle. “Do you like it when your balls are wet?”

Despite his best efforts to be serious, Duke cracks a smile while leading me back to the truck.

“Why are we walking so fast?” I joke.

“Sweetheart, I’d toss you over my shoulder if I wasn’t worried about your ass hanging out.”

When we’re back on the road, I waste no time in reaching over and teasing Duke through his jeans.

“Avery, are you trying to drive me crazy?”

I swear he drives faster on the way back to the house, but that’s fine with me. I’ve been practically panting this entire date. Duke gives me that elusive heartbeat in my lower region.

When we get back to the house, he barely has the truck parked before he jumps out and runs to open my door.

Horny as hell, yet still chivalrous.

He gently holds my hand until we’re inside. Then, there’s no gentle about it.

The second the door closes behind us, something inside Duke goes absolutely feral. He braces his hand above me,

pinning me between him and the door.

“Spread your legs,” he commands.

Without hesitation, I do what he says. His fingers start at my knee and trail up my leg. My chest heaves in anticipation, knowing where this is heading.

When his fingers spread my pussy lips, he whispers in my ear, “Damn, Beautiful. Feel how wet this pussy is. Does teasing me turn you on?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?” He asks, softly tapping against my clit. “I think you loved making me drool over this pussy all night long.”

At this point, all I can do is nod.

With that, he slips two fingers inside me. I let out a moan as he begins to move. And when he does the infamous *come here* motion against my g-spot, I have to grab onto his shoulders to stay upright. He slides in a third finger, and I almost come unglued.

I get lost in the moment and just focus on how good it feels. But Duke intends to keep his promise about teasing me. Just when I’m about to come, he pulls out his fingers.

“Noooooo,” I whine.

“Sweetheart, we are just getting started.” He raises his hand to his mouth and licks my juices off his fingertips.

Feeling emboldened by Scarlet inside me, I grab his hand. Pulling it toward me, I take a taste of my own.

Through a clenched jaw, he asks, “Do you know how fucking sexy you are?”

“Show me.”

In a flash, he has grabbed a condom from his pocket and rolled it on. He shimmies down his jeans just enough to pull out his cock.

I’m shocked when he lifts me off my feet and wraps my legs around his waist. Holding me up against the door, he slides into me. Never have I had a man be able to hold me up and fuck me. It seemed like this was something only meant for the skinnier half of the female population.

But here we are.

Duke shatters all of my preconceived notions yet again.

His fingers dig into my hips while he kisses me. I’m positive that I’ll have bruises tomorrow, but right now, the pleasure outweighs any pain.

Duke fucks into me hard and fast, and as amazing as it is, I start giggling.

He cocks an eyebrow to look at me. “What?”

With a tiny snort, I reply, “The doorknob is going up my ass.”

His hard facade breaks.

With a crooked smile, he says, “Let’s go upstairs.”

He slowly sets me down on the floor, and I practically sprint to the bedroom. Duke is right on my heels, though.

Before I hit the bed, Duke says, “Lose the dress.”

I pull the sundress over my head and toss it on the floor so all that’s left on my body is my bra. But he doesn’t intend for me to keep that on either. Those fingers of his quickly undo the clasps and let it fall off my shoulders.

“Lay down,” he tells me.

The moment I’m flat on my back, Duke is between my legs, and his tongue is giving all its attention to my clit. There’s no build-up leading to the main event this time. He’s eating my pussy like his life depends on it.

When he sucks it between his teeth and flicks his tongue against it, my legs start shaking. I prepare myself for one hell of an orgasm, but when I get right to the edge, Duke stops.

I look down at him, wondering why the fuck he stopped. The smirk on his face tells me that this is payback for all of my teasing earlier.

With intense eyes, he looks back at me. “Do you still like your teasing?” He asks.

“Well, not right now,” I whine.

“Are you going to keep doing it?”

“Probably,” I answer honestly.

“Good girl,” he says with a light slap to my pussy. “Because I fucking love it.”

“Then why are you teasing me?” I moan.



“Because I fucking love that, too.” He leans in to kiss the spot he just smacked. “How do you want me to make this pussy come?”

At this point, I really don’t give a fuck, but I mean, he’s already down there.

“With your tongue,” I reply.

That’s all it takes for him to get back to work. And holy shit, it feels amazing. I struggle to sit still as Duke devours me. It doesn’t take long before I’m teetering on the edge of an orgasm once again. Not wanting him to stop, I decide not to announce that I’m close—as if he can’t tell by the way I’m twitching and moaning.

Thankfully, Duke doesn’t stop. He takes note of what I like and doesn’t move away from that. Soon enough, my entire body quakes as heat spreads through me like wildfire. My thighs clench around Duke’s head as I lose any sense of composure.

When I’m too sensitive to take anymore, Duke stands up to take his clothes off.

“Buckle up, Sweetheart. We’re just getting started.”

## *Chapter 21*

### DUKE

**A**very and I have been doing this thing—whatever it is—for about a week now. Our date a few days ago made me even more crazy about her. She has such an energy about her that I can't seem to get enough of. We've spent every night together, and I still have yet to have a nightmare.

I'm not sure if I'm getting better mentally or if Avery is some sort of magical cure. Either way, I'm counting my lucky stars. Maybe today I'll bring it up to Dr. Tucker in therapy.

Or maybe not.

There's something I like about keeping Avery and myself in our own little world.

This morning, I'm finishing painting the cabinets before I head to my appointment later on. Avery's been in her office all morning on the phone with her lawyer, going over contracts for a new author.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I wonder who the hell is calling me. When I pull it out, I see that it's my mother. I

have no interest in talking to her, but I've ignored her calls for days now. I probably should make sure it's nothing important.

"Hello?" I answer.

Sounding shocked that I actually picked up, she cries, "Hey there, son!"

"Hi," is all I give in return.

"How are you doing?"

"Fine. I'm working, Momma. Did you need something?"

"Well, yeah." She hesitates for a minute. "Duke, I'm getting married."

She says it as though I should be shocked.

Nope.

Not even a little bit.

This isn't her first rodeo with a man asking her to marry him, and I'm sure it won't be the last. More than a few times, she's actually made it down the aisle, and a few times more than that, it ended before it ever got to that point. So, no, my mother getting engaged is no big shock to me.

"Okay," I reply.

"Is that all you're going to say?"

"I would say congratulations, but I think when it comes to you, the word has lost all meaning."

She lets out a heavy sigh, and I can tell she's trying not to argue with me. Personally, I don't care. We can argue all day

long.

Composing herself, she says, “I’d like you to come meet him.”

“Why?” I ask in all seriousness.

“Well, I’d like for my oldest boy to walk me down the aisle, and I think it’d be awkward if you guys didn’t meet until the day of the wedding.”

“I’ll pass on both,” I tell her.

“Duke, why are you so against this? Your brothers are happy for me.”

“You know why.”

She hesitates a moment before saying, “You know that was a long time ago. Are we ever going to be able to move on?”

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly. “But I have to get back to work.”

I hang up before she has a chance to say anything else. I turn around and am startled to see Avery standing there.

“Everything okay?” She asks.

“Yeah. Fine.”

Walking further into the kitchen, she says, “You don’t seem fine.”

When I don’t say anything, she asks, “Was that your mom?”

I nod.

Getting annoyed with my silence, she says, “Okay, Duke, you’re going to have to give me more here.”

“She’s getting married.”

Avery gives a huge smile. “That’s great.” But when she sees the look on my face, she changes her tune. “It’s not great?”

“She wants me to go meet the guy.”

“What’s wrong with that? He will be your stepfather, right?”

Just the mention of that word gives me a sick feeling in my gut. “I’m not going.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“While I appreciate the offer, Avery, I’m not bringing you anywhere near my mother.”

The look she gives me shows I’ve offended her, so I add, “Look, my mother tends to ruin everything she gets her hooks into. I don’t intend to let that happen with you.”

“Duke, I’m a big girl. I don’t think you should avoid her because of me.”

“It’s not because of you,” I tell her.

She leans on the counter, and I try not to get distracted by how great her tits look. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I consider it for the briefest of moments, but it all comes back to not wanting her to find out about my past and think less of me. I can’t risk that.

Sternly, I respond, “No.”

“Duke,” Avery begins.

But I cut her off before she can get any further. “This conversation is over.”

She stands up straight, her entire demeanor shifting. “I don’t know why you’re being so weird. I’m just trying to help.”

“Avery, I’m so fucked up that there are some things you just can’t help with. Maybe it’s best you don’t even ask about them.”

She walks over to me until we’re standing toe-to-toe. I look down into her eyes. There’s a fire burning behind them, telling me she’s ready to batten down the hatches and go to war. But instead, she just turns and walks away.

As she leaves, all I get is, “fine.”

*Great. Someone special finally comes along, and I’m already on my way to fucking it up.*

But telling her some of the shit I’ve done would probably lead to the same outcome.

I go back to work for the next few hours, trying to keep busy as best I can. Avery stays in her office without even coming out for snacks, so I know she’s pissed.

Not wanting to make things any worse, when it’s time for me to head to therapy, I simply poke my head in.

Avery doesn’t bother to look up from her computer. She just gives a curt, “Alright.”

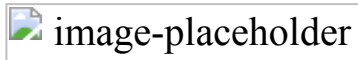
Knowing she'll still probably be pissed at me later, I decide to add, "I'll probably just stay at my place tonight."

That gets her to glance at me. But she stays strong and just nods.

*What the fuck am I doing?* My heart urges me to walk inside—to tell her everything and just come clean and bare my soul.

But my head stops me.

So, I don't do any of that. I just turn and walk out of the room.



“Alright, spill it,” Dr. Tucker says, setting down her notebook on the table next to her.

“Spill what?” I ask, a bit crankier than normal.

“Why you’re so irritable today?”

“I’m not,” I snap.

“You are actually. I thought you not having nightmares would be a relief, yet you seem even more tense than usual. Have the dreams come back?”



“No.”

“Does this have anything to do with your new boss that you’re sweet on?”

*Did I tell her about my feelings for Avery last time without even knowing it? No way.*

“How—” I begin.

The doc cuts me off. “Duke, it’s my job to examine human behavior. It doesn’t take a genius to figure it out. Why don’t you tell me more about her?”

I think for a moment, unsure of whether or not I should divulge the secret we’ve been keeping so well.

But before I know it, it’s all coming out like word vomit. “Avery is unlike any woman I’ve ever met. As crazy as it sounds, I think she’s the reason my nightmares have stopped. When I sleep next to her, I sleep like a baby. She’s strong and feisty. She makes me laugh, and she does this cute little thing where she rambles—kind of like I am now,” I chuckle.

Dr. Tucker smiles. “She sounds great. I don’t understand why you’re so grumpy.”

“My mother called today.”

“Oh,” she replies, very well-aware of my issues with my mom.

“And Avery started asking questions. Questions that I wasn’t ready to answer.”

“Why not? Are you worried she’ll think less of you?”

I pause for a moment. “Maybe.”

She reaches forward and shuts off the tiny tape recorder she uses for all of our sessions. Then she takes off her glasses and looks at me.

“Duke, for just a moment, I’m not going to talk to you as your therapist. I’m going to talk to you as a friend... and as someone who has been married for over thirty years.”

“Alright.”

“If you don’t want to confide in Avery, fine, but just know that the relationship may not progress any further if you don’t. And if it does, it may not do so in a healthy way. Part of being with someone is accepting their flaws. I want you to think about if Avery came to you with the same type of story—something bad that she did in her childhood. Would it make you think any less of her?”

Letting out a loud sigh, I say, “No. But it’s not just my childhood. Look at all the things I had to do with the SEALs. My career accomplishments read like a horror story.”

“Things you were ordered to do. Things that were ultimately for the greater good. What if Avery was a cop? Would you judge her for shooting someone who was shooting at her?”

“Alright, Doc, your logic is starting to get really annoying.”

“I’m sorry, but if you like this girl, maybe you should start knocking down some of those walls that you’ve built so high.”

Quietly, I ask, “What if she doesn’t like what she finds in the rubble of those walls?”

“Then, she’s not the one for you.”

“So, you think I should just go over there and tell her everything?”

“Duke, I can’t make that decision for you. But I do think you should take the night and sleep on it. Maybe tomorrow will give you a little bit of clarity.”

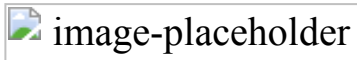
She looks at me for a moment longer before turning back on the tape recorder, as though this little side conversation never happened.

Soon enough, our session is over, and I’m walking into my trailer. Somehow, it now seems more empty than it ever has before. Maybe it’s just me.

Or maybe I miss Avery like crazy, even though I haven’t been away from her all that long.

Maybe I’m just a total fucking idiot.

Yeah. Pretty sure that’s the one.



*Heat smacks me dead in the face. I take a deep breath, but the air is so thick it's almost stagnant. It's inescapable. The gear we're all wearing doesn't help matters.*

*We've been ordered to clear a building since we got word that the target we're looking for could potentially be inside.*

*I signal to my team to keep moving forward down the quiet street. Typically, quiet would be a good thing, but when it's the middle of the day in the town square, quiet is scary.*

*Quiet means danger.*

*We walk further, but I give the signal to stop when a woman appears out of one of the buildings. She's crying. The Southern gentleman in me feels the urge to check and see if she's okay. But I've been in a war zone long enough to know that nothing is ever what it seems.*

*Unfortunately, Dixon missed my signal and continues toward the woman.*

*I call his name, but he continues on.*

*A knot forms in my gut, somehow knowing this isn't going to end well. I slowly take a few cautious steps toward him while silently instructing everyone else to stay back.*

*My heart thumps in my chest as my eyes dart from Dixon to the woman.*

*"Dixon!" I call. "Stand down!"*

*But he keeps walking toward the woman as if being pulled by some invisible force.*

*As we both get closer, I notice something under the woman's jacket.*

*Holy shit.*

*It's a bomb.*

*She's a suicide bomber.*

*My feet take off at a full-blown sprint in an attempt to grab Dixon and pull him out of there.*

*"Bomb!" I yell.*

*Dixon turns at the sound of my voice.*

*But the moment he turns to face me, it's not Dixon.*

*It's Avery.*

*What the fuck?*

*My legs move as fast as possible. I reach out my hand for her, but just as soon as I'm about to grab her...*

*Boom.*

I sit straight up in bed, drenched in sweat as my chest heaves. My heart feels like it may explode out of my chest.

Not only am I having nightmares without Avery next to me, but now she's playing a starring role in them?

I try to gain my composure, but I just can't seem to calm down. I know it was just a dream, and I know that Avery is fine, but there's a nagging voice inside my head trying to convince me that something is wrong.

"What am I doing?" I say out loud to the empty trailer. "You finally find a girl worth having and you push her away, you dumb son-of-a-bitch."

Honestly, I don't know what's wrong with me. All Avery wanted to do earlier was be there for me, and I was a total dick to her. And now, I'm sitting alone once again—having the nightmares once again.

Fuck this.

I fly out of bed, ready to try to fix my mistakes and hoping to God it isn't too late.

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## Chapter 22

### AVERY

*Who the hell does he think he is?*

Those are the words I keep muttering to myself as I sit in my bathtub long enough for my fingers to get all pruny. I've been in a mood ever since Duke left today. I considered calling or texting him and giving him a piece of my mind, but that would probably just make me more frustrated.

Besides, I don't see Duke being a great communicator over text messages. And knowing me, I'd misread his tone and blow things way out of proportion.

I don't know what I said earlier to set him off, but he completely shut down on me. Everything was going so well, and then something just made him turn cold. It was like suddenly I was a stranger.

As I sit and think more and more, though, are Duke and I really much more than strangers? Lord knows it's like he's a stranger to me. It's like I'm the one doing all the talking and sharing. Sure, our bodies are getting to know each other pretty



well, but I still know next to nothing about him. I've shared things about my life—my family. But he's just been a closed book.

I start going over all the things that I actually know about Duke.

One, he was a Navy SEAL. But I have no idea what a Navy SEAL actually does. Isn't that classified or something? Maybe I'll give him a little bit of a pass on that one merely due to the whole national security thing.

Two, he has two brothers. Both of them are younger. I think he said their names were Devon and Tanner? One is hung up on his bitchy girlfriend, and the other is... I don't remember.

Three, he has a mother whom apparently, Duke doesn't like for some unknown reason.

Four, he has a trailer somewhere in town. He told me the street name, but that means next to nothing to me.

Five, he's good at fixing things, hence the handyman job.

And that's about where my knowledge ends. I mean, I know he's great in the sack, but I'm sure a lot of other women have learned that along the way.

What if Duke is really a serial killer or something? Could definitely be a possibility.

*Okay, maybe I've seen a few too many true crime documentaries. I can see the headline for this one:*

*Handyman Homicide.*

Geez, I sound ridiculous.

I don't know what I'm getting so worked up over. So, what if Duke doesn't want to tell me all of his deep, dark secrets? In a couple months from now, none of this will even matter.

Even as I think the words, I feel that they aren't true. Something about what Duke and I share seems special. But with how he acted this afternoon, I'm starting to think that maybe he doesn't feel the same way.

Finally, I decide to cease my pity party and get out of the bathtub. I throw on a tank top and shorts before heading downstairs to fix some tea before bed.

As I wait for the water to warm up, I open a package of cheese crackers and start munching on them. I turn on some music on my phone to drown out the deafening silence around me. As soon as I turn it on, though, I immediately pause it because I hear a noise outside.

Feeling more numb instead of scared, I decide to go investigate. As I walk out the back door, I see the furry bandit that Duke was talking about. Much to my surprise, the fat little thing stops rooting through the trash to look at me.

He jumps off of the can and scurries over so he's just a few feet away. I worry for a moment that he will attack, but he just stands there. We have this weird staring contest for I'm not sure how long before I toss him a couple of crackers that I have. They land a few inches to his right, and he walks right over to take them.

Let me tell you that I know next to nothing about raccoons. But I know that they're cute and furry, and that's right up my alley. I'm convinced that my death will happen when I'm trying to do something like pet a wild tiger or snuggle a bear.

Fascinated by my new furry friend, I sit outside for I don't know how long just watching him and feeding him crackers. It's not exactly how I thought I'd be spending my night, but it's better than nothing, I guess.

"Do you have a name, little guy?" I ask, as if the animal is going to answer me. "What should I call you? Fred? No. Pete? No. Hank." When I say the last one, he lifts his head to look at me. "Hank it is."

Finally, I run out of crackers, so Hank moves on with his night, and I head back inside. Bored and with nothing else to do, I decide to head upstairs for the night. Just as soon as my head hits the pillow, though, a knock on the front door jolts me awake.

"Who the fuck?" I mutter to myself.

As I get out of bed, I hear the door swing open. I freeze as my heart thumps, but then, I hear Duke.

"Avery! Avery, you home?"

Before I even have the chance to answer, I hear him running up the stairs, taking them two at a time. He reaches my bedroom door, and I take a good look at him. This isn't the normal stoic and put-together Duke that I'm used to.

Now, he looks like an absolute mess.

“Avery, thank goodness you’re here.” He drops to his knees and wraps his arms around my waist.

“Duke?” I ask, looking down at him. “Are you okay?”

“No,” he answers, holding onto me even tighter. “I’m so sorry I was an ass to you earlier. I shouldn’t have treated you like that.”

I run my hands through his short hair. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.”

He’s starting to freak me out a little, so I say, “Hey, why don’t we go over and sit on the bed and talk?” It takes him a moment, but he gets up and leads me over there. When we are comfortable, I say, “Alright, Duke, what’s going on?”

“Avery, I’m going to pull a *you* and ramble for a minute, but I just need you to listen until I’m done, okay?”

“Alright,” I agree.

“When I was a kid, I never knew my dad. My brothers and I are products of a bunch of one-night stands gone wrong. My mother held onto the fact that one day, she may find love, so she got serious with every guy who paid her a little bit of attention. Some were okay, but most were jerks, and one of them was worse than all the rest. He made a hobby out of using her as a punching bag. One day, I skipped one of my classes and decided to go home. I don’t know what made me do it, but I just had a feeling. When I got there, things were the worst I’d ever seen them. I pulled him off my mom, and we came to blows. I swung on him—hard. On the way down, he

cracked his head on the coffee table.” He pauses for a moment before whispering, “I killed him.”

I want to say something—to offer some words of comfort, but I told him I wouldn’t interrupt. Instead, I lay my hand on his thigh to let him know that I’m listening and not going anywhere.

“When it happened, my mom blamed me. She actually told me it was my fault. All I remember is her screaming at me that I should have been at school. Why did I have to come home? I’m sure it was something that she did out of grief in the heat of the moment, but I’ll never forget it. Over the years, she’s apologized more times than I can count, but she kept doing the same things. She kept getting with every guy who would have her, and they all tried to play daddy. She always put them above us.”

He falls silent again for a moment before his eyes find mine. “That’s why people in town don’t like me. They’re scared. There was always talk about whether or not what I did was actually an accident. I got tired of dealing with the bullshit in the town and the bullshit with my mom, so the day I turned 18, I enlisted in the Navy.”

“Thank you for telling me,” I whisper.

“Does it make you want to run?” The way he looks at me shows how scared he really is of my answer.

I grab each side of his face and bring him toward me for a kiss. “Not at all. I’m not going anywhere.”

His arms wrap around my waist as he pulls me into his lap. He holds me so tight, like he never wants to let me go.

“Avery, I’ve seen things—and done things—in my life that I’m not proud of. Things that keep me up at night with some of the worst nightmares one can imagine. I’ve had them every single night since I got out of the Navy—until the first night I spent with you.”

“What?”

“Somehow, sleeping next to you calms my tortured soul. Avery, I don’t know that I will ever be able to explain to you some of the things that I’ve seen—or the things that I’ve done—but you have no idea how much you just being here helps me. You’re my angel without even trying.”

This big, strong man looks at me with tears in his eyes. I can’t fathom the things that he has gone through in his life, but I can’t help but feel the overwhelming need to help him through it.

I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him close for a hug. I feel him choke out a sob against my shoulder as he melts into me. Right now, in this moment, nothing else matters. It makes no difference that I have a whole other life back in Boston. It doesn’t matter that this man and I haven’t known each other all that long. All that matters is that he knows I’m here for him.

We are here for each other.

We are quiet for a few moments before Duke finally says, “I’m sorry I just showed up like this. I probably shouldn’t have just barged in.”

“It’s alright,” I tell him. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Really?” He seems surprised.

I shrug my shoulders. “Yeah. I guess I kind of missed you.”

“Do you want me to stay?” I can hear the slight nervousness in his voice.

“I’d like that.”

He lets out a relieved sigh. “Thank God. I don’t know if I could have left if you said no.”

“Come on. Let’s snuggle up and get comfortable.”

He stands up and takes off his boots, jeans, and t-shirt. As usual, I’m in awe of his large, sexy body. Typically, I’d be ready to jump his bones at this point, but right now, I don’t think it’s what either of us need.

He gets into bed, and I slide next to him, getting comfortable in the crook of his arm and laying my head on his chest. His fingers start to rake gently through my hair, and instantly, I’m at ease.

My fingers lightly drag across his chest and stomach. When I get near his heart, I stop, feeling what seems to be a scar.

“What’s this?” I ask, surprised I haven’t noticed it before.

“The reason I left the SEALS.”

I consider asking him about it, but he's already opened up so much tonight, I'm not sure that I want to push my limit.

As if he can feel my sudden apprehension, Duke says, "I'll tell you the story sometime."

"Okay," I say, squeezing him just a little tighter.

It doesn't take long before I feel Duke's breathing even out, and I figure he's fallen asleep. I'm not far behind, but there's one thought that keeps plaguing me that I'm finding harder and harder to push to the back of my mind.

How the hell am I going to leave Duke after this house is finished?

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## *Chapter 23*

### **DUKE**

**T**he next morning, I wake up with a mess of Avery's hair in my face. As I snuggle up behind her, her body contours perfectly to mine. I inhale deeply, the fruity scent of her hair filling my nostrils.

I can't believe my fear of opening up almost made me lose all of this. Thank God Avery let me back in the door.

And I think sleeping next to her without a single nightmare says a whole hell of a lot. I'm not taking the chance of letting her go again.

I don't care if I have to follow her all the way to Boston. I'll follow her to the ends of the Earth if I have to.

Maybe that makes me sound crazy. I can just hear the guys I was in the SEALS with calling me a pussy.

But you know what?

I don't give a fuck.

If being a pussy gets me Avery, it's completely worth it.

I feel her move against me, and I try to ignore her ass rubbing against my cock. As much as I'd love to slide inside her right now, I just want to hold her a little while longer.

Feeling her body rise and fall against mine, I must fall back asleep for a little while because next thing I know, Avery has turned around and is nuzzling into my neck.

"Good morning, Angel," I say to her.

"Morning, baby," she replies with a sleepy mumble.

We stay cuddled up for who knows how long until I finally ask, "Are you ready to get up for the day?"

She gives me a long groan before saying, "Can't we just stay here all day?"

"Well, we could, but I had some other plans if you're interested."

"What did you have in mind?"

"If my boss is okay with playing hooky for the day, I thought maybe we could start with getting some breakfast. Maybe while we're in town, we can see if we can dig up any information about your mysterious father."

She pokes her head up. "Really?"

"Uh-huh." I pause for a moment to take a deep breath. "And if you still want to, I'd like to take you to meet my mother."

Her eyes go wide. "Are you serious?"

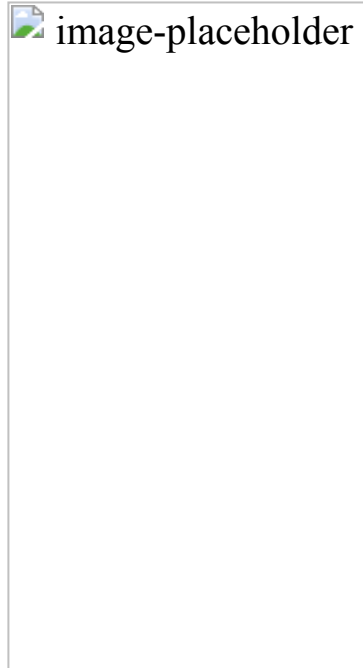
"Yes."

"Whoa. What changed?"

“Let’s just say I decided to pull my head out of my ass.”

She gives me a cute little wiggle before jumping out of bed to get ready.

My God, she’s adorable.



Half an hour later, we are driving down the streets of Maple Oaks, heading to get some breakfast. I hold Avery’s hand as we pass by all the small shops in the town square.

Randomly, Avery asks, “Have you ever thought about moving out of Maple Oaks?”

I chuckle. “It’s really that bad, huh?”

“No!” She exclaims as she realizes she may have offended me. “I just meant that you’ve probably seen a lot of different places being in the military.”

“Well, Avery, I wasn’t exactly doing missions in the Bahamas.”

She lets out an awkward laugh. “Duh, Avery. Man, I’m just going to stop talking.”

My hand squeezes hers. “Hey, I’m just giving you a hard time. To answer your question, until recently, I’ve never really thought of moving out of Maple Oaks. It’s always been a good home base for me.”

She doesn’t miss a beat. “Until recently?”

I look over at her. Her dark blonde waves look like they’re glowing in the morning sunlight. “Yeah, lately, I’ve been thinking that maybe getting out of town wouldn’t be so bad. I hear Boston is lovely in the Spring.”

Her lips pull up into a wide smile as she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. I want to make her smile like that every single day for the rest of my life.

I pull into the parking lot of the town diner and park the truck. I get out and walk over to open Avery’s door. By the time I get over there, though, she’s already stepped out.

I sigh. “Angel, I know you’re not from here, but down here, in the South, we tend to try to hold the doors for our women.”

“Why?” She asks, confused.

“It’s chivalrous.”

“Sorry. I haven’t seen a lot of that in my dating life.”

“Well, you better get used to it.” I tell her. “Keep that sexy ass of yours in the seat until I come open your door.”

She gives me a small salute. “Yes, sir.”

I lean in to whisper. “Call me sir again, and I’ll give you a reason to when I fuck you.”

She turns to me, her tongue running over her bottom lip. “Yes, sir.”

With that, she turns and starts to walk toward the diner.

*I’m going to make her pay for that later.*

I take a couple of quick steps to catch up with her and then take her hand in mine.

We walk inside, and the hostess greets us with a warm smile before leading us to a booth in front of one of the large windows.

“Whoa,” Avery says, looking at the massive menu.

“Yeah, when you’re one of the few restaurants in town, you have to have a lot of options. But don’t worry, it’s all good.”

A couple minutes later, we hear a loud, “Well, would you look what the cat dragged in!”

Without having to look, I know exactly who it is.

“Hey, Louisa,” I greet as the older woman appears at the table next to us. She leans down to wrap her arms around my shoulders.

“How are you doing, kiddo?”

“Can’t complain.” I gesture to Avery. “Louisa, I’d like you to meet my girl, Avery.”

Louisa looks at me with wide eyes for a moment before reaching to shake Avery’s hand. “Lovely to meet you, Darlin’. You must be something special if you have him calling you his girl.”

I worry how Avery will respond, but she just smiles and says, “Well, I think he’s pretty special, too.”

Lord, Avery gives me a warm fuzzy feeling that I didn’t think I was capable of having. She’s incredible.

I look at Louisa, who is grinning from ear to ear. She sets her hand on my shoulder. “Oh, don’t I know it?! Avery, are you from around here?”

“Boston, actually,” she replies.

I chime in with, “Avery here inherited the old Whitmore house.”

“Inherited it, huh? Were you related to Samuel?”

Avery pauses for a brief moment before saying, “Yeah, he’s my dad.”

Louisa’s eyes go wide once again. “Wow! I had no idea.”

Avery laughs. “Yeah, me either.”

Louisa turns to me, seeking more information. “Don’t look at me. I don’t know anything either.”

The woman’s lips press into a thin line. “Well, honestly, that doesn’t surprise me.”

Immediately, Avery asks, “Why do you say that?”

Louisa leans in a little bit as though she doesn’t want anyone to overhear. “To be honest, honey, your daddy was always a little bit of a mystery. I really don’t know anything about him.”

A pang of disappointment hits me because I was hopeful that Louisa would have some type of information about this guy. She usually knows everything about everyone. If she doesn’t know anything, I don’t have a lot of hope for anyone else knowing much.

But I don’t want to tell Avery that and make her sad. So, I just say, “Well, thanks, Louisa. Can you ask around and maybe see if anyone else knows anything?”

“Of course, Darlin’. Now, what will you guys have?”

She walks away, and Avery tries to hide her sadness, but Avery happens to be one of those people who wears every emotion on her face.

I reach across the table and grab her hand. “Hey, we will figure it out. Maybe my mom will know something.”

She gives me a weak smile. “Yeah, maybe.”

“We’ll figure it out. I promise.”

And damnit, I’ve never meant anything more in my entire life.

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## *Chapter 24*

### **AVERY**

**D**uke and I are trapped in our own little moment at the diner, but something has my spidey senses tingling. My eyes slowly gaze from one side of the diner to the other. It seems that every time I make eye-contact with anyone else who is in here, it's like they've been staring at me and immediately look away.

“Hey, Duke?”

“Yes, Angel?”

“Any idea why everyone is staring at us?”

Duke follows my lead and looks around the room. “They’re looking at you, sweetheart.”

“Why?”

“One, you’re gorgeous.”

That gets an eye roll out of me, but he continues. “Not to mention you’re new in town. You haven’t come into town much since you’ve been here. And I’m sure they’re equally

shocked to see me in here with a woman. I don't usually have company."

"Have you dated women in town?" I ask.

"I told you I don't really do the whole relationship thing."

"What is it that we're doing?"

With a wink and a crooked smile, he says, "You're special."

"For you saying no one in town really likes you, Louisa seems to be a fan," I say.

Another waitress walks over to give us our drinks. After we're alone again, Duke takes a deep breath before answering. "Louisa lived next door to us when I was younger. Whenever I'd be having it out with whatever guy my mom let move in, Louisa would let me come over and hang out at her house until things would settle down. She was always a good sounding board. And when the whole town turned against me, thinking I was a dangerous murderer, Louisa was one of the few ones who never wavered. She even gave me a job washing dishes here and got me in touch with Clyde Abernathy, who acted as my lawyer when I was questioned by police."

"Does she own this place?"

He nods. "Yeah. She has for thirty years or something like that. A few years ago, a bad storm hit the town and about tore this place to the studs. When I was on leave, I helped her rebuild and even loaned her the money until the insurance company paid out."

Every time Duke pulls back the curtain and lets me glimpse just a little bit more of him, I never cease to be amazed. This man might appear to be nothing more than a big, brooding handyman, but underneath, he has a heart of gold. It makes me like him more and more with each passing day.

Maybe it should scare me that I'm falling so hard and so fast for a guy that I haven't known all that long. Not to mention the fact that he lives halfway across the country from me. Hell, this whole thing feels like some unrealistic Hallmark movie.

But it's not.

It's my life.

And right now, I'm actually pretty damn happy about it.

I guess I've been quiet for far too long because Duke says, "Why don't you tell me what's going on in that big, beautiful brain of yours?"

"Just thinking about how you constantly surprise me."

"Is that a good or bad thing?"

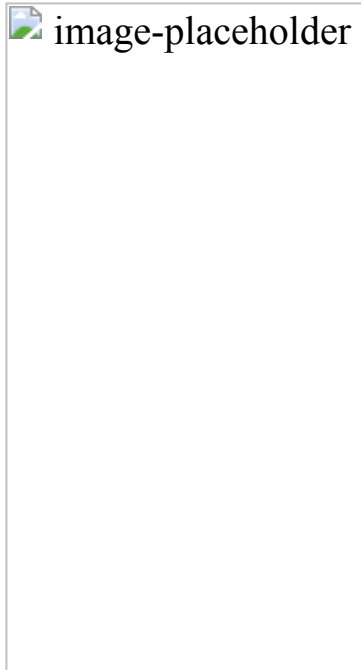
I smile to reassure him. "Oh, it's definitely a good thing. Makes me like you even more."

For a man who looks so stoic all the time, his face absolutely lights up with that.

A few minutes later, our food shows up, and we dig in. I got the breakfast platter, which is way bigger than I expected. By

the time I finish the eggs, bacon, sausage, toast, and hash browns, I feel like I could explode.

But our day is just beginning.



On our way to Duke's mom's house, I can't help but notice how fidgety he is as he drives. The man can't sit still, and his poor nails are bitten down to practically nothing.

"Are you okay?" I ask, already half knowing the answer.

“Look, Avery,” he begins, taking a deep breath. “I’m sure you can guess from all that I’ve told you that I don’t typically go visit my mother. I will make an appearance during holidays, but I mainly do that for my brothers. It’s not that I hate my mom, but since she had me fairly young, she’s always been more of a sister rather than a motherly figure.”

“How do your brothers feel about her?” I ask, wanting to know as much as I can before walking into his mom’s house.

“Tanner and Devon got a slightly different version of her. By the time they were born, she at least somewhat had her shit together. She still wasn’t winning any mother of the year awards, but she had a bit more of a motherly touch with them.”

I just nod, waiting for him to open up more at his own pace.

“The point I’m trying to make is that I don’t share a whole lot of intimate details about my life with my mother, so I guarantee you she’s going to try to get some information out of you. Just do me a favor, and don’t tell her anything.”

That gets a laugh out of me. Not like a chuckle, but a full-blown belly laugh.

Duke narrows his eyes as at me. “What in Heaven’s name is so funny?”

“Duke, it’s not like you’re exactly an open book with me. What do you think I’m going to tell her? Your deepest, darkest secrets? It’s not like I know them. You don’t have to worry about me spilling the beans about anything.”

He smiles back at me. “You know more than most.”

Him saying that makes me feel more special than I can probably put into words. But knowing how hard this is about to be for him, I decide to try to lighten the mood a little.

“So, Duke, when are we going to get to the real juicy stuff? Like when are you going to admit that you like long walks on the beach and a nice bubble bath after a long day?”

He looks over at me with one eyebrow raised. “As for a beach, I’ve never been. But as for a bubble bath, if it was with you, I’d take one every damn day for the rest of my life. Anything that lets me see you naked I’m down for.”

I giggle. “You don’t need an excuse to see me naked. You can just ask.”

With all the seriousness he can muster, he turns to me and asks, “Can I see you naked?”

Deciding to call his bluff, I start to pull my shirt over my head.

“Avery,” he warns.

My hands stop with my shirt still clutched in my fingers. “What? You asked to see me naked.”

“Yes, but if you take that top off, and I see those delicious tits of yours, I will have no choice but to pull this truck over to the side of the road and fuck you. And Darlin’, this is a small town. Best believe someone will be watching us.”

Why does the thought of that turn me on?

“Let ‘em watch,” I say.

“Christ, Avery,” he responds through gritted teeth. “Put your shirt down. Tonight, I promise to take off all of your clothes and worship your body all fucking night.”

“You better,” I tease.

A couple of minutes later, we are pulling up to a cute little house with a huge oak tree out front.

“So, this is where the famous Duke Samson grew up, huh?” I ask, taking it all in.

“Not exactly. My mom ended up moving out of my childhood home a while ago. It had too many memories. Plus, I think that she hated us living next to Louisa.”

“Oh?”

“To be honest, I think she was jealous of the relationship that Louisa and I had. It bothered her that I thought of someone else as a mother figure when I thought of my own mom as more of a sister.”

Hearing Duke talk more and more about his mom makes me realize that he and I both led some fucked-up childhoods. I’m glad both of us came out on the other side as decent human beings.

Since I know he’s already stressed out, I decide to listen to Duke and wait in the car until he comes around to open my door. Chivalry may be presumed dead, but it is sure alive and well within Duke Samson.

When we get to the porch, the front door looks open, but the screen is shut. Duke loudly knocks on the wooden part.

It takes a moment, but a woman with bright red hair appears and walks toward us. When she takes a moment to realize who is standing there, she stops dead in her tracks as her mouth falls open.

I take a good look at her as she finally starts to walk toward us again. Duke must take after his dad because he looks nothing like this woman. She has brassy red hair that hangs in springy curls that she tries to contain with a clip. Her eyes are a pale blue color in contrast to Duke's dark ones.

I wonder how old she is. I know Duke said she had him young, but this woman has definitely aged well. Aside from a few tiny wrinkles around her eyes that form as she smiles at us, she doesn't show any signs of aging.

"Well, hey there, Sugar!" She squeals as she opens the screen door for us.

Before Duke can say a word, she wraps him in a hug. As uncomfortable as he may be, he still manages to hug her back.

"Hi, Momma."

"I didn't think you were going to be able to make it."

"Yeah, plans changed," he mumbles. "Mom, I'd like you to meet my girlfriend, Avery."

This time, when her eyes go wide, I worry they may pop right out of her head. She turns to me and smiles. "Hi, Avery. It's lovely to meet you, Darlin'. I'm Tammy."



“Nice to meet you,” I say as she pulls me in for a hug.

Huggers always catch me off guard. I’m typically a fairly pleasant person, but the thought of wrapping my arms around someone I don’t know whatsoever just freaks me out. But for Duke’s sake, I just try to go with the flow. I let out a small groan because she’s squeezing the life out of me.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she exclaims, letting me go. “I’m just so excited that you guys are here! Well, let’s not stand in the doorway. Come on in.”

As we walk through the small hallway into the house, I take note of the photos on the wall. There are pictures of Duke and two other little boys who I’m assuming are his brothers. Duke stands out because he’s the only one with dark hair. I can’t help but notice that there are almost no photos of Duke when he was really young. In all of the professional ones, he looks a bit older, and his brothers are the small ones. There are remarkably more pictures of his brothers than there are of him—which I think is insane because clearly, Duke is the cutest.

I stop at one and whisper to Duke, “You had freckles?”

He leans in close. “I still do. They’re just covered up by the beard now.”

When we get to the kitchen, an older man with silver hair stands at the sink washing dishes.

“Who was it, Hun?” He asks Tammy.

“Rob, you’re never going to believe this. Look who’s here!” When the man turns around, she says, “This is my son, Duke.”

The man looks surprised, but not nearly as surprised as Tammy was. He reaches over to the counter and grabs a dish towel to dry his hands on.

Walking over to us, he holds out his hand for Duke to shake. “Heard a lot about you, Duke. Your momma is sure proud of you.”

Tammy practically beams. Despite all of the shit that has gone down between her and Duke over the years, I can see that she really does love him.

“Your brothers are coming over in a little while.” Tammy tells him.

“I don’t know how long we’ll stay,” Duke replies. “I promised Avery we would do some stuff today.”

Tammy’s face falls a little, but she tries to hide it. At this point, I’m sure she is happy with whatever she can get.

“Come on. Let’s go sit down and catch up.”

She leads us into the living room where Duke and I take a seat on one couch, and Tammy and Rob have a seat in the two recliner chairs.

Tammy starts off the conversation with, “So, how did you two lovebirds meet?”

Duke clears his throat before answering. “I’m doing some work on Avery’s house.”

“Oh,” his mom says.

This whole thing is so terribly awkward, and I have no idea why I speak my next words. “Yeah, when he says it like that, it sounds like some bad porno.”

The moment the words leave my mouth, I instantly regret them. If I wasn’t the queen of putting my foot in my mouth before, I sure as shit am wearing the crown now.

Everyone gives me mortified looks until Tammy busts out laughing. With that, everyone else starts to laugh too. It seems like my mouth with no filter has inadvertently broken the ice of this extremely awkward situation.

Wiping tears out of her eyes, Tammy says, “I like her, Duke. You need to keep this one around.”

Over the next couple of hours, we all make some pleasant small talk. Tammy attempts to get to know me a little better, and I’m careful to not let slip too much information that’s too personal. And Duke asks some questions about Rob. It seems that his mom’s fiance owned a pretty successful car rental company before selling it and retiring. He seems nice enough, but it will be interesting to see how Duke really feels about him.

At one point, Tammy says, “Oh, I forgot I made some fresh lemonade this morning.”

Duke cuts her off, “Fresh?”

“Mm-hmm,” she nods.

“By fresh, you mean...?”

“I mean lemons, water, and sugar.”

When Duke still looks confused, she adds, “No, I don’t make the powdered stuff anymore. Your momma has gone domestic.”

With a smile, she asks if I will come with her to the kitchen so I can help her carry the glasses back. I’m a little weary of being alone with her, but I agree anyway.

When we are in the kitchen, she gets out four glasses and fills them with ice before pouring lemonade into each. As she does all of this, she begins to speak.

“I didn’t mean to corner you in here or anything. I just wanted to talk to you for a minute.”

*Oh lord, here we go.*

Immediately, my defenses go up as I prepare myself to tell my boyfriend’s mother exactly where she can take her intrusion and shove it.

But she surprises me when she says, “I’m sure Duke has told you about the rocky relationship that he and I have had.”

“Uhhh,” is all I can get out before she continues.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to try to defend myself or turn you against him. I realize I haven’t always been the perfect mother. A good man and a whole lot of therapy has helped me to realize my mistakes. Duke’s brothers are a whole lot quicker to let me try to make amends, but I know it will be a lot harder with Duke. His wounds are probably the deepest.”

I still don’t quite like where this is heading. “Tammy, I have to ask—what is it that you want from me? Are you wanting

me to try to get Duke to forgive you or something?”

“No, Darlin’. My son will forgive me only when and if he’s ready. I’m sorry. This is probably coming out all wrong.” She thinks for a moment to choose her next words. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen my son look at anyone the way he looks at you. I’ve seen him smile more today than I think I’ve seen him smile in the past ten years. I know I’m a big factor in why he hasn’t, but it doesn’t make it any easier. Please just try to keep that smile on his face. I’m no expert on love even if I’ve been in it about a million times—or at least I thought I was. All I ask of you is that you’re there for him. Duke is a man with armor around his heart as thick as steel. Just don’t give up on him.”

I could take this time to tell her how Duke is in therapy to deal with his issues or that I’ve already proven that I’ll be here for him, even when he’s a stubborn asshole.

But I don’t say any of that. I will keep my word and keep things between Duke and me exactly that... between him and I.

All I say is, “I’ll be there for him. No matter what.”

In the moment, it may appear that I’m just saying it to get this woman off my back, but in all actuality, I’ve never meant anything more.

## Chapter 25

### DUKE

**M**y eyes keep darting to the kitchen, wondering what on Earth my mother is saying to Avery. I shouldn't have let my girl walk into the lion's den. What was I thinking?

Rob sits across from me. As much as I wanted to hate this man, I'm having trouble finding something to put my finger on that I dislike. The guys that my mom has previously dated have always had some sort of glaring red flag, or flags, which made it easy for me to want them gone. Most of the time, it all boiled down to how they treated my mother or my brothers and I.

But Rob seems to actually care about my mom. Maybe he's just putting on a good act in front of me.

An awkward silence hangs between us, as neither of us quite knows what to say.

*Hurry up, and come back, Avery.*

Rob starts talking. It's been so quiet that his voice almost startles me.

“It makes your momma happy that you’re here.”

I’m not entirely sure how to respond to that. I could be a dick and tell him not to get used to it.

Instead, I just give a weird nod and pray that he doesn’t keep talking. But the lord must not be listening because Rob goes on.

“She’s awfully proud of you, even if she doesn’t always show it.”

*Here we go.*

I don’t need anyone apologizing for my mother’s actions. As good as I’m sure Rob’s intentions are, he doesn’t need to stick his nose in where it doesn’t belong.

I’m about to tell this to him, but Mom and Avery come walking in, each of them holding two glasses of lemonade.

Avery hands me one before sitting down next to me. She must sense my anxiety because she sets her hand on my thigh and leans over to kiss my cheek.

As she moves back, she whispers, “I love you.”

Or at least I think she does. Did I hear her right? I’m certain that I did, but her face goes right back to as it was before.

The three of them around me start making small talk, but until I get a definitive answer of what Avery just said, there’s no way I can pay attention to what’s being said.

I pull my phone from my pocket and open a blank text message. I type out some words on the screen and turn it so

that Avery can read what it says.

*Meet me in the bathroom in two minutes.*

She looks a little confused, but I stand up before she can ask any questions.

“Excuse me,” I say. “I have to go make a phone call.”

I walk out of the living room and head down the hallway, ducking into the guest bedroom. Time seems to trek by ridiculously slowly as I wait for Avery.

Just when I think maybe she didn't hear me or she's not coming, I hear footsteps heading down the hall. Confident that it's her, I quickly open the door, grab her arm, and pull her inside.

“Geez, Duke. Are you okay?” She asks hastily.

With her between me and the door, I brace one hand above her head and lean in close.

“Angel, I need to know what you said to me downstairs.”

A glint of mischief glistens in her eyes. “Ohhh. That.” She draws out each word.

“Yeah. That. Did you really think you were going to say something like that, and we weren't going to have a conversation about it?”

She leans back until her butt is resting against the door. “What do you want me to say? I meant it, if that's what you're wondering.”



I get closer until my lips barely graze her ear. “I want you to say it again.”

With the sexiest little smile, she says, “I love you, Duke.”

She barely gets out my name before my mouth covers hers in a deep kiss. I feel her body melt into mine as her arms wrap around my neck.

When my lips let go of hers, I say, “I don’t know where that came from.”

“I’ve been thinking it for a while, but—”

I cut her off. “Let me stop you there. I don’t give a shit where it came from. I’m just glad you said it.” I run my thumb across her bottom lip. “I love you too.”

“Yeah?” She grins.

“And later on, when we’re alone, I intend to show you just how much.”

Her eyes playfully scan the room. “Looks like we are alone right now.”

I take her arms and pin them over her head. “Looks like we are.” I take one finger and trace from her mouth down her neck and between her breasts and then stop at the button of her jeans. “But what I have planned for you can’t be done in this bedroom. Well, it *could*, but it would be way too long... and loud.”

“Are you trying to get me all hot and bothered?”

“Just giving you something to look forward to.”

The sexual tension between us is so thick you could cut it with a knife. I want nothing more than to rip off all her clothes and fuck her right here and now.

But I meant what I said. I plan on doing filthy things to her—things I don't want to do in my mother's house.

Looking down at Avery, I ask, "Are you about ready to get out of here?"

She quickly nods. "Yes, please."

I tell her I'll go out first and make an excuse to leave. She agrees to wait a minute before following me.

When I get back to the living room, I say, "We're going to have to get going. I'm having a shipment of building materials delivered to the house that I need to sign for."

"Oh," my mom says. "Well, alright then."

I'm surprised she doesn't give me any attitude, but I'm thankful she doesn't. Avery reappears just as Mom and Rob stand to tell us goodbye.

Seeing her reminds me of the main reason why we came here.

"Mom, I wanted to ask you something?"

"Yeah, Darlin'."

"Do you remember anything about Avery's dad, Samuel?"

She looks taken aback by my question.

When she doesn't immediately respond, I add, "Avery didn't know him. He left her the house with absolutely no

explanation. We're having a hard time finding out any information about him."

She thinks for a moment. "That doesn't surprise me. I didn't really know him. I don't think anyone really did. Truth be told, he was never even really home. I think he traveled a lot for work."

Avery asks, "Do you know what he did for work?"

Mom shakes her head. "No, honey, I'm sorry I don't. I always thought maybe it was some kind of military job or something. You should ask his dad."

Avery and I both give a confused, "Huh?" before I ask, "Isn't he dead? He left the house to Samuel when he died, didn't he?"

"Oh, no, Darlin'. Samuel bought the house from the bank about thirty years ago. It fell into disarray since he was gone so much, but he lived there for years. Samuel's dad, Harold, moved in with him for a while when he was down on his luck, but not long after, Samuel put him in an assisted living facility. As far as I know, he's still there. I think it's somewhere here in the area."

"Holy shit," I whisper under my breath. "I had no idea."

"I wish I could help more, Darlin'. Samuel was just a big ol' mystery."

"No, Momma," I tell her. "That actually helps a lot."

We say our goodbyes, and Avery and I make our way to the truck. When we're inside and on our way back to her house, I

look over at her. She nervously gnaws on her fingernails. Usually, when you look at Avery, she's a pillar of strength. The woman exudes confidence. This is the first time I've really seen her look like she carries the weight of the world on her shoulders.

"Talk to me, Angel," I say.

"Do you ever feel like you are having an identity crisis? Like everything you thought you knew about yourself turned out to be profoundly untrue?"

"Yeah," I answer honestly. "Every time I pulled the trigger and took a life."

She looks over at me. "Yeah, I guess that would do it."

"Do you want to go back into town and maybe see if we can get some more information about your grandpa?"

"Grandpa," she repeats the word. "I've never had one of those before."

"So, should we try to do some digging and find out where he is?"

"Not tonight." She looks over at me. "Tonight, I want you to keep your promise of getting me naked and doing every dirty thing you can think of. Make me forget everything else for a while."

"I can do that, Angel."

## *Chapter 26*

### **AVERY**

**S**ilently, I take Duke by the hand and lead him up the stairs to the bedroom. As much fun as it always is to fuck wherever we see fit, I think this occasion calls for a bed.

Earlier, when I told Duke that I loved him, I didn't say it just as some sort of comfort to him. I didn't say it on a whim. I said it because I see all that he's gone through in his life, and now, I see him as an amazing man who came out on the other side better than before.

I said it because he makes me feel happy in a way that I wasn't sure was possible, and I hope I can make him happy in the same way.

But most of all, I said it because I meant it. And hearing him say it back meant the world to me.

When we get inside, Duke turns me around to look at him. "Have I told you how crazy I am about you today?"

I pretend to think about it for a minute. "Hmm. Nope. Not today."

“You’re fucking amazing.”

I whisper, “Prove it.”

Without me having to say another word, he pulls my body against his and presses his lips to mine. His tongue slips in and dances with mine. Every flick of his tongue sends heat straight to my core.

Duke’s fingers grab the hem of my shirt and pull it over my head before making quick work of my bra. When it falls off my shoulders, he sinks to his knees in front of me.

Taking a breast in each hand, he says in a low tone, “God, I fucking love these.”

He sucks my nipple into his mouth while his fingers pinch the other. I grip onto his shoulders to try to remain upright as my clit throbs in my panties. I can barely sit still.

In our short time together, Duke and I have had a decent amount of sex. Normally, it’s hard and fast with a whole hell of a lot of passion. And while I don’t think this is going to be any different, something about it *feels* different. Something between us has shifted and become so much more than just a good fuck.

The way Duke’s hands run across my skin shows me how much he cares. The pads of his fingers may be rough, but when he moves them over my body, they feel like silk.

He leads me over to the bed and tells me to get comfortable. I watch as he removes his own clothing. My bottom lip pokes

out in a pout when I see he's leaving his boxers on to climb into bed with me.

“Uh, Sir? What do you think you're doing?” I ask. “This is a no clothing zone.”

“Well, you see, Angel; I know the second that I take these boxers off, you are going to go straight for it like a moth to a flame.”

“What's wrong with that?” I ask. “Don't you like it when I give the little guy some attention?”

His eyebrow cocks up. “Little?”

“Well, not *little*. But you're a big guy. I guess it's small compared to the rest of you—”

“Avery, stop talking.”

Lord, I know how to ruin a mood.

He speaks so that I don't have to. “I absolutely love it when you touch my cock—in every single way. When you do it, I can't concentrate worth shit. And right now, I want to focus all of my attention on making you feel amazing.”

Well, I guess I can't argue with that logic. He lies next to me on the bed, taking one hand and traveling from my knee up my thigh. His lips lightly kiss the side of my neck before he whispers in my ear, “Show me how you touch yourself.”

I look into those deep eyes of his, but don't say anything for a moment.

He asks, “Are you going to tell me you don't do that?”

Scarlet decides to show up on the scene with, “No, I was going to tell you that I usually do that with a vibrator.”

“Well, then, use that.”

Quickly, I get up and walk over to the top drawer of the dresser. I thought that this thing would get quite the workout while I was here, but it turns out I haven’t touched it once.

I take the small wand with me as I return to my position on the bed. I open my legs wide so that I can find the perfect spot. Duke’s eyes stay glued to me as I click the vibrator on and slowly touch it to my clit. An involuntary moan escapes my lips as vibrations touch my most sensitive spot.

Duke whispers, “You are so fucking sexy.”

And as he watches me, I *feel* sexy.

As I keep the wand pressed against me but move it around in small circles, Duke’s mouth takes hold of one of my nipples. Between the sensation of his tongue and the pleasure from the wand, my clit throbs with the need to come.

My moans get louder, and my legs start to twitch with the buildup. This isn’t going to take long.

As I edge closer, Duke moves down my body until he’s between my thighs. His hand covers mine, so both our fingers are wrapped around the toy.

“Is this how you like it, Angel?” He asks.

All I can give in response is a loud moan.

“Do you want to come?”



Now, I manage to find my words. “Oh, God, yes.”

With one of his hands still on the wand, he takes the other one and slides two fingers inside me. My back arches off the bed as he rubs against that wonderful spot. It feels so intense that my body twitches and writhes uncontrollably.

Duke’s hand grips a little tighter around mine, and he applies a bit more pressure with the toy as he adds a third finger. The pleasure completely overtakes me as I get lost in my orgasm. My pussy pulses for what feels like forever as I soak Duke’s hand.

When I start to come down off of the incredible high, he turns off the toy and leans in to give a light kiss to my clit. I’m so sensitive that I practically buck off the bed.

“Such a pretty pussy,” he growls.

He stands up long enough to take off his boxers and to grab a condom. When he climbs back on top of me, immediately his lips find mine. He slips his tongue in my mouth at the same moment his cock slides in.

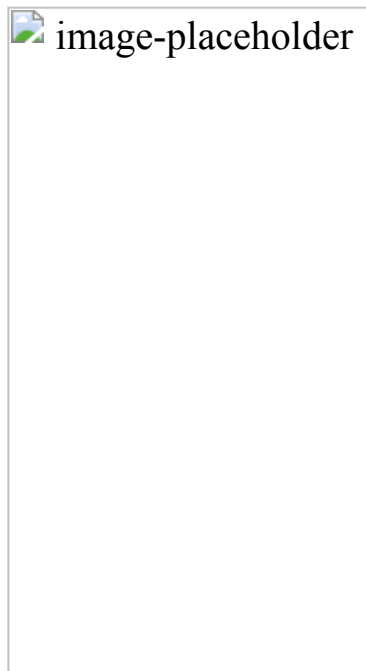
As he starts to move, we seem to get completely lost in the moment. The world around us disappears as our bodies move in perfect harmony. The sound of our moans fills the silence of the quiet room. I’m not usually overly impressed by the “making love” aspect of sex, but the connection we are sharing right now is something that I’ve never experienced before. And since I’m still riding high from my orgasm, it feels incredible.

Duke's lips move from my lips all the way down my neck and back again. At one point, he stops and looks at me, those dark eyes of his piercing right through me.

"I love you," he tells me.

"I love you too, Duke."

And as crazy as it may sound, I mean it with every fiber of my being.



After our marathon sexy session, Duke heads downstairs to get us some water. I'm lying in bed in a state of post-orgasmic bliss, two minutes away from falling asleep, when I hear a startled Duke scream for me from downstairs. This man was a Navy Seal. I imagine it takes quite a bit to get him rattled.

Quickly, I jump out of bed and throw on Duke's t-shirt, which is sitting on the catch-all chair. When I get downstairs, I see him standing at the back door.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"I need you to explain something to me." When he steps out of the way of the door, I see a ball of black and gray fluff through the glass. "Why is there a raccoon knocking at the back door?"

"Oh, that's just Hank."

"Hank? You named him?" He asks, confused.

"Well, yeah. What am I supposed to call him? *The raccoon?* That could get confusing."

"Avery, how would that get confusing? How many raccoons do you know?"

"Why are you like this?"

"What—? You — But—" Not being able to finish a thought, he finally settles on, "Why is he here?"

"I've been giving him snacks."

That gets a huge reaction out of Duke. "You've been *feeding* him? Why do you think the raccoon needs snacks?"

“Well, Duke, I don’t know that anyone *needs* snacks, but they’re always nice to have. He was diving in the trash cans.”

“Yeah, that’s what they do. And it’s even harder to get them out of the trash cans when you feed them.”

Not listening to a word that he’s saying, I walk over to the cabinet and grab a Vanilla Wafer. I head to the back door and crack the door open just enough for Hank to grab it out of my hand and run away.

Duke stands there open-mouthed, not able to believe what just happened. Reaching up on my tiptoes, I kiss his bottom lip.

Before I can walk away, he grabs me and wraps his arms around my waist.

Looking down at me, he says, “You’re something else. Do you know that?”

“Would you want me any other way?”

“Well, as much as I wish you wouldn’t feed the wildlife, no, I wouldn’t want you any other way. Now, take that sexy ass of yours back upstairs, and I’ll bring us some snacks of our own.”

“I’m going to look up something up in the office real quick, but I’ll be up in a minute.” As I’m walking away, I add, “And Honey, I *am* the snack.”

“Fuck yes, you are,” he calls after me. “And in a little while, I’m coming back for seconds.”

Before I head back upstairs, I detour to my office and sit down at my computer. Earlier at Duke's mom's, I got some information that gave me a whole new glimpse of information into my father. But I still don't know much. I still have more questions than answers.

Why does no one in town seem to know anything about him?

Why was he always gone?

What did he do for a living?

Why was I led to believe he left when I was born, yet I see photos of when I was a toddler?

A million questions, but next to no answers. But I am still going to try to get some any way that I can.

I don't know why it hasn't occurred to me before to do a simple Google search on the man. I mean, it's easy to hide from a lot of things in life, but the internet isn't one of them.

I pull up my homepage and type in: Samuel Whitmore.

There are thousands of results, but as I scroll through, none of them seems to be what I'm looking for.

*Samuel Whitmore from New York.*

*Samuel Whitmore, the doctor.*

*Samuel Whitmore dies in a fire in 1800.*

"Okay, this isn't working," I mumble to myself.

Going back to the search bar, I change it to:

Samuel Whitmore, Maple Oaks, TX

I hit enter and get the message.

No results were found. Try using fewer keywords.

How can there be no record of someone? Surely, there would be some kind of paper trail. People have bank accounts and tax records.

Deciding to try one more thing, I type:

Harold Whitmore, Maple Oaks, TX.

Once again, nothing.

Not able to give up, I continue to try different keyword variations to see what pops up, but none of it is helpful. I must lose track of time because a little while later, Duke pokes his head in.

“Hey, you okay?” He asks.

“Yeah, just hitting more dead ends,” I say, pushing my laptop closed and walking toward him.

“I didn’t mean to rush you.”

“You’re not. I’m finished.”

He smiles. “Good. Because I have a surprise for you.”

When I get to him, he takes me by the hand and leads me upstairs. I figure my surprise is in the bedroom, but surprisingly, he leads me past and right into the bathroom. As the door creaks open, I can see the entire bathroom bathed in candlelight.

I look around the bathroom in pure awe, and my mouth drops even further when I see the bathtub that is filled almost to the brim with water and bubbles and a bottle of wine and a glass sitting beside it.

“You did this?” I ask.

He nods. “I had to track down every single candle in the house, but I figured you could use a little relaxation.”

My voice cracks as I say, “This is really sweet. Thank you.”

Maybe I sound like a huge baby, but I’ve never had anyone do something so nice for me—no matter how small it may seem.

He leads me over to the tub and pulls my t-shirt off over my head. I step into the water, which is the perfect temperature, while Duke pours me a glass of wine.

“Do you need anything else?” He asks after I get comfortable.

“I don’t think so. Thank you, Baby. This is wonderful.”

“You’re welcome.” He leans down to kiss the top of my head before heading toward the door.

“Are you going somewhere?”

“Figured I’d give you some alone time so you can relax.”

“But I’ll be lonely,” I whine. “Do you want to come in here with me?”

“Eh, baths aren’t really my thing. But I’ll stay in here and keep you company if you want.”

He closes the toilet seat and sits down.

“Not really a bath guy, huh?” I ask. “I may just have to entice you to get in here with me so that we can change that.”

“Oh, Angel, you will never hear me complaining about that.” We are both silent for a moment before he asks, “What were you doing down on the computer?”

“Oh, get this. I did a search for Samuel Whitmore in the area, and nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing. Nada. Zip. Zilch. And nothing for Harold Whitmore either.”

“How’s that even possible?”

I sigh. “No idea. The mystery around my father deepens even more.”

“We’ll figure it out, Angel.”

As much as I want to believe those words, I’m beginning to have my doubts. Maybe I’m not meant to know, and I should just let it go. But I know myself better than that. There’s no way I’m going to be able to let it go.

Deciding to try to convince Duke to get in the tub with me, I bring my top half out so that my boobs poke out of the water. My soapy hands run all over them, and Duke’s eyes are locked on to everything that I’m doing.

“Avery,” he begins.



But I don't let him finish. "This bathtub is so big. Don't you want to come in here and join me?"

"The bathtub isn't *that* big, Angel. Do you really think we will both fit?"

"Oh, I'll make sure of it—even if I have to sit on top of you."

Reluctantly, he stands up and starts to take off his boxers that he put on after our sexy time earlier. I knew my plan would work.

I turn my body so that my back is on the edge by the faucet. Duke slowly climbs in, careful not to slosh any water out on the floor. When he gets comfortable, I put my legs over his and lean back.

Duke's eyes slowly move up and down my body as a small smile spreads across his lips.

"What are you smiling at?" I ask.

He rubs his hand over his beard. "Just thinking that I have the best view in the world."

"You're just smooth as butter, aren't you?" I can't help but smile.

He picks up one of my feet and kneads it with his fingers. My head falls back on the side of the tub as I just relax and enjoy.

This moment seems so perfect, so I don't know why I decide to bring up my next question.

“Hey, Duke, where do you see this going when the house is done? I know that I have a life back in Boston, and you have your life here. How do you see this whole thing playing out?”

I brace myself for some half-ass answer about us figuring it out when the time comes or some other bullshit like that.

But that’s not what I get at all.

Instead, he says, “Avery, you know how I call you Angel?”

I nod.

“I don’t say that just because I think it sounds cute. Before you walked into my life, I was in an extremely dark place. I was having nightmares every single night. I woke up every day with no real purpose. And then, you came along. This shining light. I’ve done a whole lot of awful things in my life, sweetheart, but I consider you to be one of the few good ones. If you think for one second, I’m going to give that up just because this house is finished, you’re nuts.”

“But—” I try to interrupt, but Duke doesn’t let me.

“No, Avery. No buts. I’m not giving you up without one hell of a fight. You want to move back to Boston? Okay, I’m there. I’d follow you anywhere you wanted to go, Angel.”

I pick at my nail beds nervously because I’ve never had anyone say such sweet things to me before.

“What’s wrong?” He asks. “Did I freak you out?”

Not wanting him to think that I didn’t absolutely love everything he just said, I lunge forward, practically jumping

on top of him and wrapping my arms around his neck. Water splashes out of the tub all over the floor, but right now, I don't care.

Straddling Duke, with my arms still locked around his neck, I say, "No, you didn't freak me out. I'm just still in constant shock that this whole thing is really happening to me. Epic love stories like this don't tend to happen to girls like me."

"Girls like you?"

"Girls who guys don't tend to fawn over. Girls who live their own lives and are happy with those lives, but they're not really anything special either. I guess I'm still just surprised that this whole thing is really happening. I'm scared that you are going to suddenly realize that this whole thing has been some huge mistake, and you're going to just leave.

He holds me tighter.

"I agree that the whole thing seems crazy. But I can guarantee you that it *is* really happening. And I'm not going anywhere."

## *Chapter 27*

### DUKE

**T**he next couple of days, I try to get a decent chunk of work done on the house. I figure we can't just stay in bed and fuck each other all day, every day.

No matter how much I may want to.

Avery has had a couple of slow days at work, so she's kept me company around the house—even getting her hands dirty in the process. Today, she's decided she hates all the wall colors in the house and wants to paint everything, claiming that there is 'no color in this damn house'.

So, we went to the hardware store and picked out several new colors and all of the supplies she wanted. As she's gotten everything set up, I've offered to help her about half a dozen times, but she insists she can paint some walls.

She keeps telling me, "You have other projects," and "I'm fine."

Honestly, at this point, I think she's trying to keep herself entertained. The mystery around her father just seems to keep

growing, and it's starting to affect her spirit. She says she doesn't care, but it's clear that it's bothering her. Hell, it's bothering me, and it's not my father.

So, if she wants to paint some walls, I'm sure as shit not going to stop her.

Now, I'm rehangng some cabinets while she blares 80s music and sings along while she paints the living room. I keep sneaking in to catch glimpses of her because she's painting in nothing more than a tank top and cute little underwear. I can't get enough of that sexy ass of hers. I think it should be a rule that she doesn't wear pants for anything anymore. Well, anything *at home*. Because I'm certainly not going to let anyone else get to see it.

The day passes in a blur. Every time I go to check on Avery, she has a few more flecks of paint all over her, making her even more adorable. Once I get the final set of cabinets hung back up, I figure we will probably be winding down for the evening. We can both get clean before I get her dirty all over again.

But I hear her calling me from the living room. "Uhhh, Duke. Can you come here?"

The tone in her voice makes me put some haste in my step as I make my way to her. When I come in, she's peeking her head out the window, careful to hide the rest of her body.

"Someone's here," she whispers.

"Who?"

“Well, Duke, if I knew that, I wouldn’t have called you.”

“Okay, Miss Sarcastic, let me take a look.” I glance out the window and mumble, “Oh, shit.”

“Who is it? The cops? The mob?”

My forehead scrunches up as I look at her. “Where do you think we are? You’ve been in Boston way too long.”

“Well, who is it?”

“My brothers.”

“What?! Duke, I don’t have pants on!”

“You go put pants on, and I’ll try to get them out of here.”

She crawls out of the room in an attempt to hide herself from the large picture windows. “How did they know where you were?”

“I think this is an excellent time to point out that you were the one who thought it was a great idea to go see my mother.”

When there’s no chance she could be seen through the window, she jumps up and starts to run up the stairs, tripping on one of them on her way.

“I’m okay,” she calls, popping right back up.

*Good lord.*

I head out the front door and meet my brothers before they can hit the porch.

“What the hell are you two jugheads doing here?” I ask.

“Momma told us you got yourself a pretty new girlfriend, and we didn’t believe her,” Devon says.

The younger of the two, Tanner, says, “Figured we had to come see for ourselves.”

I ask, “So, you just come by unannounced?”

Tanner smiles. “We knew if we called, you’d say no. Weren’t you the one who taught us that sometimes it’s better to ask for forgiveness than permission?”

I sigh. “Should have known that one would bite me in the ass.”

Devon looks up at the house. “So, where is she? Or did you pay some girl to pretend to be your girlfriend in front of Momma?”

Tanner adds, “Is your *real* girlfriend more of the blow-up variety?”

“No, fuckers,” I growl. “She’s inside.”

Devon draws out a long, “Suuuuuuuuure.”

Just when I’m about to pummel them both into the ground, the front door opens, and Avery walks out onto the porch. The three of us turn to look at her. She still has some flecks of paint all over her tank top, but she got the ones off her face. She took her hair down and put on a pair of jean shorts.

“Hey, boys,” she says, walking down the stairs and coming toward us. When she reaches me, she stops and puts her arm around my waist. “I’m Avery.”

Since my brothers appear to be too stunned to speak, I say, “Avery, this is Devon, and this is Tanner.”

She smiles. “Nice to meet you. I’ve heard good things.”

That gets a loud cackle out of Tanner. “Oh, she’s pretty, Duke, but she’s a liar.”

I say, “Well, they just wanted to stop by to prove your existence, but they really must be going.”

Her hand playfully smacks my chest. “Oh, stop. You boys want to come inside? I’ve got beer, and I’ll order us a couple of pizzas.”

Both of their faces light up as they thank her, and we head inside. Avery leads the way, and I can see Tanner staring at her ass as she walks. I give a quick slap to the back of his head and shoot him a look that tells him to knock it the fuck off.

He leans in close so that no one else can hear him. “Sorry, man, she’s got a nice ass.”

“Yeah, I know,” I tell him. “And it’s *mine*.”

When we are inside, Avery sets four beers down on the table and says, “Sorry about the mess. Renovations don’t exactly make for a clean house.”

Devon says, “No worries. My place isn’t going through a single renovation, and it probably looks worse than this place.”

She asks us all what we like on our pizza and then pulls out her phone to do a search for what’s close.

“Just call Moe’s,” Tanner says.



“Moe’s?” She asks.

“Avery is from Boston,” I inform them. “She hasn’t gotten to taste the fine Italian cuisine known as Moe’s.”

Both of my brothers gasp, and Tanner cries, “Well, we will just have to fix that! I’ll go call and order real quick.”

While he’s gone, Avery says, “Okay, what’s the deal with Moe’s? Is there something special about it?”

I shake my head. “Not really. It’s good; don’t get me wrong, but it’s not life-changing or anything. It’s just the only place in town.”

Devon adds, “But people around here seem to love it—for whatever reason. A few times, new pizza joints tried to open up around town, but they never lasted. Moe’s chased them out every time.”

Her eyes go wide. “Whoa, drama in Maple Oaks.”

Devon says, “Oh, there’s plenty of drama around here. You just have to know where to look.”

I’m about to make mention of the fact that we have had our own dose of drama concerning Avery’s father, but I don’t. I’m not sure how much of that she wants revealed. Plus, my brothers are already here unannounced. I don’t think I need to make this night even more stressful.

Tanner walks back in. “Pies should be here shortly.” He sits back down and says, “So, Avery, what the hell are you doing with an asshole like our brother?”

She smiles and pushes her hair behind her ear. “He’s not an asshole to me.”

Devon leans in. “Are you telling me that the tin man actually has a heart under all that armor?”

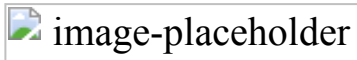
She matches his energy and leans forward. “I’ll never tell his secrets.”

She takes a drink of her beer and makes a disgusted face. She sets it down on the table and pushes it over to me. “Sorry, guys. I tried, but beer just tastes like horse piss.”

We all watch as she stands up, walks to the fridge, pulls out a half-empty bottle of wine, pulls the cork out with her teeth, and starts drinking right out of the bottle.

My brothers can’t seem to take her eyes off her. Devon mumbles, “That may be the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.”

I snap, “She’s mine. Get your own.”



An hour later, I'm not quite sure how we've gotten to this point. The four of us sit around Avery's table, each of us with a decent collection of empty bottles in front of us along with plates of pizza crust. And we are all in the middle of the most intense game of Texas Hold'em of our lives.

We're just playing with some loose change, but the way we are all treating it, you'd think that we were playing for millions.

My brothers must be feeling confident because, one after the other, they push all of their change into the middle of the table.

It's my turn. I flip the corner of my cards to look at them. I have the makings for a full house. Typically, on a hand that good, I would go all in. But when I look at Avery and see the glint in her eye, I know that she's got something good.

Something *really* good.

After thinking about it for far too long, I announce, "I fold."

Both of my brothers throw their hands up and mutter something about me being a pussy. But I'm a man who knows when my goose is cooked and isn't afraid to admit it.

Devon has four of a kind, and Tanner has two pairs. Both of them are admirable, but I know neither one of them is going to win.

Finally, the time comes for Avery to show her cards. Before she flips them over, she glances at them one more time.

"Damn," she whispers to herself.

My brothers both snicker, thinking that Devon is about to win big, but I know better. Before he can reach in and take the money out of the middle of the table, Avery says, "It must suck that you both got whooped by a girl." She flips her cards over, showing she has a royal flush.

Devon and Tanner both hoot and holler about the scene that just played out in front of them. Avery does a cute little dance in her seat.

Tanner says, “Duke, I don’t know where you found this one, but I need to find me one.”

I tell him, “Good luck, man. I think she’s one of a kind.”

Tanner pulls out his phone and looks at the time. “Shit, it’s getting late. Dev, are you ready to get out of here? We will let these two get to getting naked.”

“Ew,” Tanner says. “That’s a mental image I didn’t need. Well, I didn’t need the image of Duke, but an image of naked Avery is always welcome.”

I turn to Avery. “I have to apologize for my brothers. Clearly, they aren’t around women enough to know how to behave.”

“They’re fine,” Avery giggles.

“You’re one to talk,” Devon says. “Up until today, we thought you would die alone.”

“Time to go,” I reply sarcastically.

We all stand up and get all of our empty bottles and paper plates thrown away before I walk my brothers to the door. Before we head outside, they each give Avery a hug and tell her how nice it was to meet her.

She stays inside while I walk them to their truck. Devon says, “Shit, I forgot my wallet. I need to run back inside.”

When Tanner and I are alone, he says, “So, I hear you went to see Mom.”

I nod. “Avery convinced me it might not be the worst idea in the world.”

“I know you have your issues with her. Hell, we all do, but yours are by far the worst. So, I know why you haven’t come around much, but we miss you, man.”

“You know where I am, Tanner. Just because I have issues with our mother doesn’t mean I’m not here for you guys if you need me.” I say the words, but I realize that I may not always be around for my brothers as much as I should. In an attempt to alienate our mother, I’ve done the same to them.

Realizing this, I say, “I promise to make more of an effort to come around more—whether Momma is there or not.”

He gives me a big smile. Tanner was always quite a bit younger than me growing up, so we were never all that close. I always cared about him, but I was always so deep in my own shit that I didn’t really have a lot of time for him. And then I turned 18 and immediately left for the Navy, which meant I was around even less.

He says, “Avery seems really great.”

“She is. Way better than I deserve; that’s for damn sure.”

He points his finger at me. “Don’t fuck it up.”

“You better believe I’m trying like hell not to.”

At that moment, Devon comes back outside and heads toward us. We all say our goodbyes—a couple of weird one-armed hugs and some shit-talking — and then they are gone.

When I walk back inside, Avery is finishing cleaning up the kitchen.

“Angel, just leave it. I’ll do it in the morning.”

“It’s alright. I’m almost done.”

As she’s wiping the counters, I walk behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist and kissing her neck. “I’m sorry my brothers just showed up like that.”

She laughs. “It was fun.”

“I just never meant to put you on the spot.”

She puts her rag down and turns around to look at me. “Duke, I never had siblings. I’ve never known what that relationship was like. I never had people who would just show up randomly to see what’s up, but I wish that I did. It would have been nice to have siblings to do that. Heck, it would have been nice if my mom did that. You will never hear me complain about your family stopping by because I can appreciate how special it is.”

My forehead leans forward, pressing against hers. “You really are perfect. Do you know that?”

She smiles. “Eh, I have my moments.”

I lean down and give her a quick kiss before she says, “My only regret is that I wish I would have gotten to shower before they got here because I feel gross.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Want to go upstairs with me and take a shower?”

“If I ever answer *no* to that question, please have my head examined.”

Five minutes later, we are both naked and getting ready to step in under the warm water. I let Avery get in first before I follow behind her.

I watch her tilt her head back under the spray of the water, and I take the opportunity to run my fingers through it. When it's wet, I turn her around so she faces away from me. I squirt some of her good-smelling shampoo into my hand and begin to lather it into her hair. I take my time massaging her scalp—and trying to ignore the sensual noises that she's making. I'm trying to be sweet to her after everything she's done for me tonight.

But my cock has a mind of his own and starts to harden. I try to turn my body to the side, so it's not obvious. But I guess I don't do a great job at it because I feel Avery's hand reach behind her and wrap her hand around the base of it.

Do you know how hard it is (no pun intended) to try to wash your girlfriend's hair while she strokes your dick?

It takes every single ounce of concentration I have to finish the task at hand. I try not to rush, since this moment is supposed to be entirely about Avery.

But of course, she wants to make me feel just as good because she's the sweetest girl in the world. Even when I turn her around to rinse her hair, she continues touching me.



She completely takes me by surprise when she sinks to her knees in front of me.

“Avery,” I say in barely more than a whisper as I watch her bring my cock to her waiting mouth.

I should stop her since this moment is supposed to be entirely focused on relaxing her, but as a guy, I think I’m physically incapable of saying no to a woman who wants to put my penis in her mouth. I’m not sure my mouth could even form the words—especially not with Avery.

As her warm mouth wraps around the head, I let out a low groan. As she takes it further down, her tongue swirls around. I have no idea how she’s doing it, but she feels like she’s licking the whole thing all at once.

“Fuck, Angel,” I say, looking down at her. The sight of Avery with my cock in her mouth and those gorgeous eyes looking up at me is almost enough to make me blow my load.

But this feels too amazing for it to be over that quick.

Avery stops long enough to say, “Your turn to show me how you like it.”

“Avery, you’re sucking my dick. Just don’t use your teeth, and I’ll be happy.”

She takes my hand and puts it on the back of her head as she continues to suck.

*Lord, this woman is going to be the death of me.*

I keep my hand there but continue to let her set the pace. As she continues to move, she tries to take me further and further down her throat.

I can't take my eyes off of her as she drives me insane. Just when I think it can't possibly get any better, she releases me with a loud pop and says, "Fuck my mouth."

My own mouth drops open, thinking that there is no way I heard her correctly, but when I look at her again, she says, "You heard me."

Once again, I probably shouldn't let my baser instincts take over, but I'm not about to pass up this opportunity.

Careful not to hurt her, I use both hands to grab her by the hair.

"Open your mouth, Angel."

She does as I ask and parts her lips as wide as she can as I slide into her mouth. I start off easy and slow, not pushing too far. But as she moans, vibrating against my cock, my self-control starts to slip away.

My eyes notice her hand slip between her legs and start to rub herself.

Motherfucker.

Could she possibly get any sexier?

I increase the pace and push her head a little further onto me. I worry if I've gone too far, but she just moans louder, letting me know she's okay.

“Are you ready to try to take it all, Gorgeous?”

She eagerly nods.

“Relax that throat for me.”

I give her a second before I push as far as I can. It takes a moment, but I feel her completely relax and breathe through her nose as I fill her throat.

“Good girl,” I tell her.

Judging by the way her fingers start rubbing her clit faster, I can tell she likes a little bit of praise.

“Fuuuuuuck,” I moan.

My legs feel like they could turn to jelly at any moment and fall out from under me, but I’m determined to stay upright and enjoy this perfect moment.

Her throat feels so tight around me that it doesn’t take long for me to come right to the brink.

Not wanting to surprise her, I say, “Shit, Avery, I’m going to come.”

She doesn’t stop, though. She keeps going, and I start shooting my load down her throat. She moans as she swallows every last drop.

When I’m too sensitive for her to keep sucking, I pull her to her feet and kiss her. Her hand still continues to play between her legs, but I stop her.

“Let’s finish in here, and then, I’m going to make this pretty pussy come all night long.”

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## *Chapter 28*

### **AVERY**

“So, how are the house projects going?”

The question comes from Sue, my second-in-command at work. We are on our weekly chat, touching base on everything that we need to go over to keep things moving.

“Pretty good,” I tell her. “Duke is doing a good job of getting everything done.”

“How’s that whole thing going?” She asks.

On our last call, I tried to play it off that nothing was going on, but Sue saw right through me. According to her, “It’s painfully obvious when I’m getting laid.”

“Things are good,” I reply. “Really good, actually.”

“Are you bringing a sexy boy back to Boston with you when you come?”

“I have no idea,” I say, entirely honest. “I haven’t thought about it much.” That part is a lie.

I think about it all the time. After Duke and my conversation in the bathtub the other night, I feel confident that he and I will be okay, no matter where we are. Trouble is that I just don't know where I want that to be.

I love Boston. I've always been happy there, but then, I come here, and something about it is starting to click for me.

As if she can read my mind, Sue says, "You're not thinking about staying there, are you?"

My shoulders shrug. "Maybe. Maybe the small-town life is growing on me a little."

"Oh, lord. You're letting that sexy boy get into that big head of yours."

"It's not my head that he's gotten into."

"Well, that and your pants," she quips.

"Sue, I meant my heart."

That makes us both burst out laughing. Back home, Sue is probably the closest thing to a friend that I have. But I'm her boss, so I'm not sure if that really counts.

We talk a little bit more before we get off the call. Deciding I need another cup of coffee, I walk into the kitchen but realize the pot is empty.

I look at the clock and have a whole debate with myself as to whether or not four PM is too late to make another pot of coffee.

Who am I kidding? It's never too late.

So, I get the pot going and impatiently wait for it to finish. I've got the house to myself since Duke had therapy, and he said he had to run a couple errands for more construction materials for the house.

I should probably do some more painting in the living room, but I'm not feeling it tonight. I decide to go sit outside and watch the sunset instead.

*What is this town doing to me?*

Duke finished work on one side of the porch and put the swing back up, so I take a seat and get comfortable. It's still warm, but the setting sun has cooled the day off quite a bit.

Man, if this is only Spring in Texas, I'm probably going to die of heat stroke come Summer.

With thoughts like that, I think it's becoming more and more obvious that staying here is a real possibility. I know Duke said he would come to Boston with me, but honestly, what's keeping me there? An apartment that I spend way too much on every month? No friends or family?

I have my business, but I've been doing just fine with running it from down here. If I need to go back for anything, that's what they invented airplanes for. And who knows? Maybe I could even move the business down here someday.

I know it seems like an awful lot that I'm starting to plan a life around a man that I haven't known all that long, but something about Duke seems solid and stable. And yeah, maybe this whole thing will blow up in my face.

But I don't think so. I think I've finally found the man that can make me happy for the rest of our lives.

I sip my coffee and reflect on what my life has become. If you'd have told me a month ago that I would be swinging on a front porch, thinking about the man I hope to spend my life with, I'd tell you that you were insane. But here I am.

And damnit, if I'm not happy about it.

My mind thinks back to last night when Duke's brother, Devon, ran back inside. He told Duke he forgot his wallet, but he really just wanted a minute alone with me.

In that minute, he looked me dead in the eye and thanked me. "Thank you for bringing my brother back from the edge. Since he joined the Navy, I haven't seen a glimpse of the brother that I used to — until he met you. Thank you for bringing my brother back to me."

I don't know if I'll ever be able to truly comprehend the trauma that was inflicted on Duke while he was in the service. Even if he tells me everything (which I'm not sure he ever will), I know that I will never be able to understand completely. But I'm glad that me being here for him is a light at the end of a seemingly endless dark tunnel. I think at the end of the day, he is that for me too. Although I haven't gone through the same things he has, and I wouldn't presume to act like they're the same, Duke pulled me out of my rut. And for that, I will be forever thankful to him.

Just as I'm about to finish my cup of coffee, I see Duke's truck coming down the street. As he pulls into the driveway, I



find myself involuntarily smiling like a damn fool. Man, this guy has a pretty good hold on me.

Little do I know that my smile is about to widen a whole lot more when I see what he's got with him as he gets out of the truck.

It's a dog.

I jump out of my seat and run toward him. "What's going on?!" I ask with wide eyes and a high-pitched voice.

"Well, I found this little guy at the pound and figured he needed a good home."

My eyes fill with tears as I look down at the tan, floppy-eared puppy looking back at me.

"Are you okay?" Duke asks as he sets the dog in my arms.

Immediately, the dog tucks his head into my neck and gets comfortable. I nod at Duke and start to cry harder. "He's just so perfect."

"Before we take him inside, do you want to walk him around and let him sniff? See if he has to pee? I'll grab the stuff I got for him."

I seriously don't want to let him go, but I know I should try to see if he needs to potty before I take him into the house.

Duke hands me a leash to hook onto the puppy's collar. I set him down and spend the next ten minutes walking around the yard with him as he sniffs every inch and picks the perfect spot to pee. I'd wager he's at least a couple months old

because he isn't a 'little' puppy, but the way he trips over his own little feet tells me he can't be that old.

I lead the little guy inside the house where Duke is getting his food and water bowls set up. Picking up the pup and holding him in one arm, I walk over and hug Duke with the other.

“What’s that for?” Duke asks with a smile.

“Seriously? You brought home a puppy. Just wait until you see what I have planned for you later. Hint: it’s much more than a hug.”

He leans down to kiss me. “Can’t wait.”

“But I have to ask—why?”

“I thought you could use something to make you smile. And maybe it will keep you from adopting any further nocturnal wild animals.”

Looking down at the dog, I say, “Well, he’s awfully cute.”

“I thought you’d like him. He was rescued from a puppy mill.”

“Aww,” I squeal, squeezing the dog a little tighter. “How old is he?”

“They said they think about fifteen weeks, but they aren’t exactly sure. But he is house trained, so we shouldn’t have to worry about that too much.” He scratches the puppy behind the ear. “What do you think we should name him?”

I think for a minute. “Arthur.”

His face scrunches up. “You want to name our dog Arthur?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“You pick oddball names for everything. Do you know that?”

“Coming from the man whose name is Duke?” I tease.

“Fair enough. But can we please not do Arthur?”

“George?”

He sighs. “Fine. George.”

I hold the puppy up so that we are nose to nose. “Hi, George.”

I sit down on the floor and start to play with George. Now that he’s getting a little more comfortable, his playful side is showing through.

Duke startles us both when he exclaims, “Oh! I have news!”

George climbs onto my lap, thinking Duke is mad about something.

Feeling bad he scared the dog, Duke sits down next to us and gently takes George into his own lap. “I’m sorry, little buddy. I’m not mad at you.”

“What’s your news?” I ask him.

“Oh, Louisa called me earlier to check in, and I asked her about your grandpa. She said that last she heard, he was at Cherry Hill Assisted Living a couple towns over.”

My eyes about bug out of my head. “What?!”

He nods. “She said when we asked about Samuel, she didn’t even think about it because his father didn’t live with him all that long, and she had no idea if he was still alive. I guess she did some asking around, and that’s what she found out.” He pauses for a moment before asking, “Do you want to go see him?”

I’ve been waiting forever to get even the tiniest scrap of information, but now that I have the opportunity to find out more, I’m terrified. What if what he has to say is something that I don’t want to hear? What if this man wants nothing to do with me like my father wanted nothing to do with me?

“Uhm, yeah,” I say. “We can go do that one day.”

Duke sets George down on the ground and scoots closer to me. The moment his hand rests on my leg, a wave of emotion hits me, and I start tearing up. He pulls me into his arms and holds me as the dam breaks, and I start to cry once again.

As if he already knows my concerns with this whole thing, he says, “Alright, Angel. We can wait a little while. You tell me when you’re ready.”

He holds me in silence for a few minutes until George gets both of our attention when he walks into the kitchen, carrying a pair of my underwear in his mouth.

“Where did he even get those?” Duke asks.

“Are you kidding? You’ve taken my panties off in almost every single room in this house and just tossed them somewhere.”

Quickly, I get up and go grab the underwear from him.  
“Sorry, George. Those are mine.”

We spend the rest of our evening getting to know our new puppy and trying to wear him out so that he’ll sleep through the night.

When he’s finally starting to wind down, we head upstairs to get ready for bed. Duke bought a dog bed for George, but the moment we get him in there, he gets right back up and comes over to start pawing at our bed. We try to ignore his little whines, but he’s just too much.

“Duuuuuuke,” I say.

“He doesn’t need on the bed,” Duke replies sternly.

But when I snuggle up next to him and start peppering his face with kisses, it doesn’t take long for his resolve to fade away.

“Fine. But he sleeps at the foot of the bed.”

Leaning over, I help George up and help him get comfortable down by our feet. Immediately, the pup curls up into a ball and starts to drift to sleep.

Once he’s situated, I get back to kissing Duke. But this time, it’s much more sensual than before.

“Are you trying to seduce me, Angel?” He asks with a smirk.

“Do I really have to try?”

“Nope,” he replies while swiftly moving to get on top of me.

We start to make out and shed our clothing, but just as soon as we really start to get into it, Duke stops and looks at me.

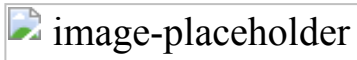
“What’s wrong?” I ask, breathlessly.

“The dog is licking my ass cheek.”

I start laughing so hard, tears roll down my face, and I let out a loud snort.

Smiling down at me, Duke says, “I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself.”

Still giggling, I say, “Maybe we put the dog on the ground until we’re done.”



The following day, Duke does some work in the basement while I work on painting as well as chasing the dog around, trying to keep him out of trouble. That's practically a full-time job in itself because George is into absolutely everything.

I've always loved dogs, but I've never actually had one. When I was a kid, my mom refused to let us have any pets whatsoever because she 'didn't want any extra mouths to feed'.

So, even though running after a puppy is a ton of work, I'm enjoying every moment of it—especially when George slows down enough to collapse in my arms and fall asleep.

I take him into the living room and sit on the couch so that I can be comfy while he naps, and maybe I'll find the motivation to put him down and get some more painting done.

But when I flip on the TV and turn on the Western that was in the VCR, I slowly feel my eyes getting just as heavy as the pup's.

When I'm just about to sleep, I hear Duke walk in. "Hey, Angel."

I turn around and look at him with sleepy eyes. "What's up?"

"Shit, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"You're good. I was just dozing. What's going on?"

"I have something you need to see."

Worried that Duke is about to tell me there's something awfully wrong with the house, I get up to follow him. He leads me all the way to the basement.

This is my first time coming down here. To be honest, I had no idea this house even had a basement until Duke mentioned it a few days ago.

He leads me down the creaky stairs to the dim concrete room. There are a few random boxes around, but we walk past all of them over to a big safe in the corner.



Duke looks from the solid black case to me. “Do you have any idea what’s in there?”

“Not a clue.”

“Any idea what the combination might be?”

“Nope.”

“I didn’t think so. But that’s not why I called you down here.”

“Okay?” I ask. “The creepy safe isn’t enough?”

“You haven’t seen creepy yet.”

He takes a couple of steps to the right and grabs an old box labeled ANTIQUE DOLLS.

“Duke, please don’t open that and reveal some sort of creepy Chucky or Annabelle situation. I will freak the fuck out.”

“It’s not what you think.” He whips the top off of the box.

I’m almost too scared to look inside, but slowly, I take a peek. It isn’t full of devil-possessed dolls, though. It looks like a collection of papers and photos.

Duke stops me before I can touch anything. “How about we go upstairs and look through this? You’re going to want to sit down.”

There is a pit in my stomach that grows by the second.

“Duke, you’re freaking me out.”

“Come on, Angel.” He grabs the box and leads me back up the stairs.

We walk into the kitchen, and he sets the box on the table. Without a word, Duke opens a bottle of wine and pours me a glass.

“Isn’t it a bit early?” I ask.

As he sets it in front of me, he says, “You’re going to need it.”

Okay, enough suspense. I pull the top off of the box once more and start picking up the items inside. My mouth involuntarily drops open at what I find.

*What the fuck?*

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## Chapter 29

### AVERY

**H**ave you ever felt like your entire life has been a lie?  
Like no one around you has been honest with you?

That's exactly how I feel right now. I feel like my world is coming crashing down on me a little more with every single thing I grab out of this box.

As I bring out the final piece out of the box, I set it amongst the others on the table. Stepping back to get the full picture, I find it hard to breathe.

Laid out in front of me is documentation of my entire life.

Not my father's life.

*My* life.

There are pictures of my father in the room with my mother when I was born. He was holding me and hugging my mom. In one photo, they were even kissing.

Flash forward, and there are photos of the three of us when I was learning how to walk and celebrating my first birthday.

This is a far cry away from the portrait of my father that my mother painted. He isn't the man who immediately disappeared when I was born.

Eventually, my father fades from the photos, but I still remain in them. And where the early pictures were close and intimate, they turn into ones that are clearly taken from afar.

My eyes flick from images of me playing soccer as a kid to me winning first place in the 8th grade science fair. There are pictures of both my high school and college graduations.

Scattered among the photos are assorted informational pieces. There's a newspaper article accompanying the science fair photo as well as a local article discussing my publishing business when it opened.

There's even a wristband from the hospital when I was born.

I don't understand. I don't understand any of this. Frustrated, I chug the glass of wine sitting on the table and hand it to Duke to refill. Neither one of us has said a word since I started going through the box. Well, I have muttered about a hundred curse words, but we haven't spoken to *each other*.

At this point, I don't think he knows what to say. And quite frankly, I don't either. This whole thing is completely overwhelming.

The only thing that I haven't looked at yet is a thick manila envelope. I've been avoiding it, but I figure I may as well rip the bandage off and get it over with.

I take another drink of liquid courage before opening it up. I reach inside and bring out a stack of papers.

Deciding I should probably sit down for this, I have a seat at the table and start to go through everything. The bulk of it seems to be letters. I read through a couple of them, and they are from my dad addressed to my mother.

The first one reads:

*Maria,*

*You haven't returned a single one of my letters, but I can't stop trying. I'm so sorry I can't be there for you and Avery. You know why it has to be this way. I promise to make it up to you both one day. I'll never stop loving either one of you.*

*-Sam*

The next says:

*Maria,*

*I can't wait for things to be settled. I bought a house that I know you will love, and I pray for the day that you and Avery come to stay in it. Please tell her I love her, and I can't wait to see her again.*

*-Sam*

Most of the letters from him read the same way. There is one actually addressed to me.

My hands shake as I open the folded piece of paper.

*My dear Avery,*

*I'm so sorry I haven't been there for you as a father should be. I wish I could explain it to you, but I can't. Not yet, anyway. I promise to one day. Please just know that I'm always here for you, even if it may not seem like it.*

*Please don't give up on me.*

*Love,*

*Dad*

Tears well up in my eyes as I read over it. Why have I never seen this before now?

As I look further through the envelope, though, I get my answer. It's not another letter *to* my mother, but instead, it's one *from* my mother.

*Samuel,*

*I've put up with getting your letters for years, but I won't stand for you sending them to our daughter. You opted to leave us, and no matter how much you may have thought it was the right thing, I can't agree with you.*

*For her own sake, I have never told Avery anything about you or your situation. She thinks that you left when she was a baby, and we haven't heard from you since.*

*Here are all your letters back. Don't bother reaching out again. Your letters will never get to her.*

*Deal with what you need to deal with, but we won't be waiting here when you get done.*

*-Maria.*

The tears that were forming before now flow freely. Anger wells up in my gut at my mother. How could she not tell me about any of this? How could she be so selfish?

Duke asks, “What do they say?”

Barely able to speak, I hand him the stack and let him go through them. He quickly flips through and then sets them back on the table.

“Avery, sweetheart, I don’t know what to say.”

“I don’t know either. I feel like at this point, I have no idea if anything that my mother ever told me was true. And I have no idea what my father could have been hiding that would have made him leave.”

He takes my hand in his. “Angel, can I say something that you may not want to hear?”

“Go for it. Today has been full of a lot of things that I don’t want to hear.”

“I know it’s scary, but maybe we need to go see your grandpa. Maybe he will have some answers to all of these questions that you have.”

I know he’s right. It’s really the only way to keep this train moving forward.

I sit there running through everything in my mind and trying to process all of it. I feel like I’m staring off into a trance until I feel a tiny furry puppy rubbing against my legs.

I look down and see George, who is now trying to jump up in my lap. I grab him and wrap my arms around him. He tucks his head in my neck and lets me cry against him.

Not wanting Duke to feel like I'm ignoring him, I pick up the dog, and both of us sit down in Duke's lap. He encompasses us in a big hug.

"I love you," I tell him through the tears.

"I love you too, Angel."

"Thank you for going through all of this with me."

"You're welcome, but you don't have to thank me for that. I'm here for you, no matter what."

"We can go see my grandpa," I whisper. "But not tonight. Tonight, I just want to lie in bed with you and our dog and forget about the rest of the world."

"Whatever you want, Angel."



## *Chapter 30*

### **DUKE**

**I**t's been two days since I found that box in Avery's basement. I almost wish I hadn't found it at all.

Avery has been dealing with things the best way that she can. We are still doing work around the house and still all over each other, but she seems distracted. I know the whole thing is remarkably hard on her, though, so I don't hold any of it against her.

The night that she went through everything, after she went to sleep, I snuck downstairs and put everything back in the box so that she wouldn't have to stare at it. And she hasn't touched it since.

I made the suggestion that we go see her grandfather to try to get some more answers, but she hasn't brought that up either. Honestly, she hasn't brought up much of it at all. I think part of her processing all of this is a tiny bit of avoidance.

I don't blame her. This is a lot of shit to deal with.

I'm not entirely sure how to help except to be here for her. I'm glad I got George because he definitely seems to be helping. Getting that dog was probably the smartest thing that I've done.

After working on replacing a piece of wood around one of the outside windows, I come inside to wash my hands. To my surprise, Avery is already standing at the sink, rinsing off George's paws.

She looks up at me while holding a puppy paw under the running water. "He decided it would be cute to step in paint."

"How many paw prints did he leave around the house before you noticed?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

That gets a deep laugh out of me.

When she's finished with him, she steps out of the way so that I can get to the sink.

"I do want to talk to you about something else, though," she says.

"I'm all ears, Angel."

"I think I'm ready to go see my grandfather."

"Really?" I ask. "Are you sure?"

She timidly nods. "Yeah. Maybe tomorrow?"

"Of course, Avery. Anything you want."

A sense of relief washes over me that maybe she's starting to process this whole thing. I don't want her ever to get stuck

in the dark place that I was in for so long. No one needs to be there.

After I dry my hands, I grab her by either side of the face and kiss her. “You’re so beautiful.”

“I’m covered in paint,” she refutes.

“I don’t give a shit. Still beautiful.”

She looks up at me, giving me a small smile. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“Do you want kids?”

The question completely catches me off guard. “Uhhhh,” I begin.

Avery stops me. “Okay, let me start over. You and I have said we love each other, and we have pretty much decided that we want to be together.”

She looks at me for confirmation of what she just said, so I give a confident, “Right.”

“We just haven’t had a lot of these big conversations. Kids. Marriage. Money. Like, am I going to find out that you secretly have a weird foot fetish? Or what if I have fifty grand in credit card debt?”

Already knowing the answer (because I know Avery), I ask, “Do you?”

“Well, no, but I do have a healthy addiction to online shopping when the occasion calls for it. My point is that I

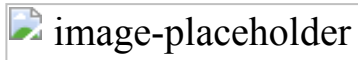
think we need to talk about this stuff.”

She’s gotten herself so flustered that her cheeks are all pink.

“Okay, Angel. Calm down. How about I go get us some dinner, bring it back, and we can talk about whatever you want to talk about?”

She wraps me in a hug so tight I can barely breathe. “You’re the best. Do you know that?”

I love that even with all the darkness that has lived inside of me all these years, this woman still manages to see a glimpse of light. She may tell me I’m the best, but I know she’s the one who truly takes that title.



Half an hour later, I'm back home with a sack full of BBQ with all the fixin's. I set our miniature feast out on the table, and after we've each fixed our plates, I say, "Okay, Angel. Ask me your questions."

She wastes no time. "Do you want to get married?"

"Do you?"

"Duke," she sighs. "You can't answer a question with a question."

"Well, my answer heavily depends on your answer."

That gets me an eye roll. “Fine, we will come back to that one. Do you want kids?”

“Avery, I’m going to stop you right there. To be perfectly honest with you, I’ve never thought about marriage or kids before. Not ever having much of a relationship, I didn’t think it was necessary to dwell on those things. And until you came along, I didn’t think that I even wanted a commitment. But then, you stepped into my life and made me second guess all of that. You came in and made it so that I want that more than anything else. As long as I have you, I don’t care about the rest.”

She looks at me. “You don’t care if you have kids or get married?”

“I want to make you happy. If those things make you happy, I’m on board.”

“And that’s it?”

“That’s it, Angel. As long as I have you, I’m a happy man. We can have a big, flashy wedding if you want. Or we can go down to the courthouse. Or we don’t have to do anything at all. You want to have ten kids? Okay. You don’t want any kids? That’s fine, too.”

“There’s no way you can be that *go with the flow*.”

“Oh, but Angel, I am. Listen, I never even dreamed that kids or marriage would be a possibility for me. I wrote those two things off a hell of a long time ago. If they happen now, I’ll love it. If they don’t, I’ll be okay. My new main goal in life is

keeping you happy, and I'll do that in whatever means are necessary.”

She still looks unsure of my words, so putting down my fork, I ask, “Avery, what’s this all about? This all came out of the blue. Why don’t you tell me what’s going on?”

She picks at the macaroni and cheese on her plate. “I don’t want you to resent me.”

“Why on Earth would you think I would resent you?”

“Because I’m not exactly a spring chicken. I mean, I’m past the 35-year-old mark. After that, it gets a whole heck of a lot harder to have kids. I don’t want you waking up one day and thinking that you should have gotten with someone whose ovaries aren’t all crusty and dried up.”

I can’t help but laugh at the way she described that. “Angel, I don’t care about any of that. Like I said, as long as I have you, I don’t care. I’m not going to resent you for something that I’m not even sure I ever wanted in the first place. But you still haven’t told me where this whole thing is coming from.”

She looks down, avoiding my eyes. “After reading that letter from my mom to my dad, it’s clear that she resented him for something. I’m still not quite sure what, but I just wonder if that whole thing is what caused her to start drinking—what caused her to have so much animosity toward me? Before he left, it looked like we were one happy family. Afterwards, she turned into a monster. I just don’t want us to ever get to that point where we resent each other for anything.”

“Not going to happen.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I know for a fact that every day for the rest of my life, I’m going to count my lucky stars that I’m with you. And I’m going to work so hard to make you happy that you will never have to resent me.”

That gets a bigger smile out of her, and she eats a little more of her food. “While we are getting all open and honest, I’m going to press my luck here. Will you tell me about when you were shot?”

“Shot?”

Her eyes travel down to my chest where my scar lies.

“It’s not a bullet wound,” I tell her.

“Oh.”

Not wanting her to feel like I have secrets, I decide to open up. “Avery, this is really hard for me to talk about, so I’m sorry if it comes out cold or distant. I don’t mean it to.”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. I shouldn’t have pushed.”

“It’s alright. I want to.” Taking a deep breath, I try to prepare myself. I spend the next few minutes telling her about the explosion that took out one of my men and ended my military career. “A piece of shrapnel hit some of the tissue around my heart. A millimeter or two over, and I would have



been dead. It didn't kill me, but it was bad enough to where they told me I couldn't serve anymore."

By the end of it, she has tears in her big eyes. She gets up from the table and comes to sit in my lap. With her arms wrapped around my neck, I hold her close, feeling her lightly cry against me.

"I'm so sorry that happened to you," she whispers. "Is that why you go see your therapist?"

I nod. "Avery, I've killed a lot of people in my time. More than I ever care to admit to you. Although I hated it every single time, I never regretted them because I told myself in some strange way, I was making the world a better place. But then, I felt immense guilt for a death that I didn't even cause. I'm sure in some strange, twisted way, that bomber thought that they were doing the right thing too. It just made me see things differently and fell into a pretty deep depression, not knowing how to handle all of it. Dr. Tucker has helped me a lot. But you helped more."

She pulls back to look at me with her tear-stained cheeks and red eyes. Without a word, she presses her soft lips against mine. We sit there making out like a couple of teenagers for a few minutes until she breaks the kiss and looks at me.

"Sorry. I just really wanted to kiss you."

Running my fingers through her hair, I reply, "Angel, you better never stop."

## *Chapter 31*

### **AVERY**

**T**he following day, Duke and I are on the way to meet my long-lost grandpa. I'm not sure exactly how this is going to go. My mind hopes for the best, but the pit in my stomach is clearly prepared for the worst.

I reach over and grab Duke's hand. This man has been there for me in such an immense way throughout this whole thing. He's been patient, loving, and so kind. And our conversation last night put any worry or doubt about him and me to rest.

Squeezing his hand, I say, "Hey, I love you."

He glances over at me and smiles. "I love you too, Angel."

"Thank you for helping me deal with all of this. I know you didn't ask for it."

He raises my hand and kisses the back of it. "You don't have to thank me. I would do anything for you."

When I fall silent, he asks, "You doing okay?"

"Yeah. Just worried that this isn't going to go well."

“No matter what happens, we will get through it.”

Deciding to try to lighten the mood a little, I opt to change the subject. I look in the backseat and see a giant metal toolbox with a lock on it under the seat.

“What’s in the box?” I ask. “Your ex-girlfriend?”

He laughs. “Nothing quite so creepy.”

“What is it?”

“Honestly?” He looks at me. “Guns.”

“You have guns?” I ask. I don’t know why I seem shocked. He was in the military. What did I expect?

“Angel, this is Texas. Everybody has guns.”

“Have you had to use them?” I ask, not sure if I truly want to know the answer.

“Not in the way that you’re asking, I’m sure. I take them to the range and shoot them every so often and then clean them just to make sure I keep them well maintained.”

“Do you just have them for protection or....” I let my thought trail off.

“Yes. When I was in the SEALs, I pissed off a hell of a lot of people. In the service, I never quit looking over my shoulder, wondering if someone would come around looking for some kind of revenge. It’s hard to get out of that mindset even when I got out of the military.”

“Makes sense,” I mumble. “Will you teach me how to shoot?”

“Why do you want to learn?” He asks.

“What if I need to protect myself? Like, what if someone broke in?”

“Angel, if anyone breaks in, you wouldn’t need a gun. I would protect you from anyone and anything.”

Geez, I tried to lighten the mood, but somehow, I’ve made the air in this truck feel even thicker.

Thankfully, we pull into the assisted living facility a few minutes later. Time to go from one awkward situation to another. Duke opens my door for me and holds my hand as we walk inside. My stomach is so upset I feel like I could throw up at any moment.

Once inside, I walk to the front desk.

“Hi there,” the receptionist says in a chipper tone. “How can I help you today?”

“Hi,” I say. “We are here to see Harold Whitmore.”

“There’s no one here by that name.”

My stomach drops. “Are you sure?”

*Maybe we have the wrong place. Or maybe we are too late. We don’t even have confirmation if he’s still alive.*

The woman gives me a sympathetic nod.

“Well, thank you anyway.”

I start to turn away, but Duke says, “We might have the wrong last name. Do you have anyone named Harold here?”

The woman looks hesitant to give any sort of information, so Duke keeps going. “See, my girlfriend here is his granddaughter. They’ve never met, but a couple weeks ago, he wrote her a letter. Trouble was that the last name on the letter was all messed up because it got wet. But we were able to track the address back to here. She just wants to finally meet her grandpa.”

His sweet story seems to have an effect on her because she gives a warm smile and says, “We have Harold Avery.”

My mouth drops open, but Duke says, “That’s who we are looking for.”

As the woman starts to lead us down one of the long hallways, I look over at Duke and mouth the words, *what the hell?*

The woman stops at one of the doors and gently knocks. Poking her head in, she says, “Harold, you have a couple of visitors.”

I can’t hear what he says, but the woman steps out of the way to let us enter.

I swallow the giant lump in my throat before heading inside.

A tall old man sits in his recliner chair. He has white hair on the sides and is bald on top with big bifocal glasses.

“Hi,” I say. “I know you don’t know me, but my name is—”

“Avery,” the old man says, slowly standing up and getting out of his chair. He walks toward me, pausing a moment before giving me a hug. “I know exactly who you are.”

Completely in shock, I hug him back. *Is this really happening?*

When he lets me go, I say, “This is my boyfriend, Duke.”

Harold holds out his hand for Duke to shake before saying, “Well, come on, let’s sit down.”

Duke and I sit on the loveseat together while Harold gets situated back in his chair.

“I have to be honest,” he says. “I didn’t know if I would ever get the pleasure of meeting you.”

“I didn’t even know if you knew about me,” I tell him.

“Of course I knew about you.”

I sit there, completely unsure of what to say. My mind races, but I have no idea where to start.

Harold says, “You must have a million questions. Maybe I can fill in some of the blanks for you.”

“Anything you can tell me I’d be grateful for.”

“Samuel, your dad, had some sort of high-level, top secret military grade job. I couldn’t tell you what exactly he did other than it had to do with secret intelligence. He never wanted people to be able to come looking for him, so he went by a different name than what he was given—going by Samuel Whitmore instead of Samuel Avery.

“One day, he met your momma, and they fell in love and soon after, found out that you were coming into the world. He was the happiest I’d ever seen him. He took a desk job and

decided to settle down with the two of you. Trouble was that his past caught up with him. Someone he had found out some shady information about sent people to the house for some revenge. They beat him and your momma up pretty bad until he finally was able to take them down. Unfortunately, he had no idea who sent the goons, and he knew the two of you wouldn't be safe until he figured it out.

“He went back to work and sent you and your momma off to Lord knows where. He spent his whole life trying to figure out who was behind it all, but he never did.”

“And that's why he never reached out?” I ask.

“He tried once. Wrote you a letter.”

I nod. “I actually just found the letter. My mom never gave it to me.”

“I don't think your mom ever forgave him for sending you both away. I don't blame her. She was in love and had the perfect little family, and then, suddenly, she was a single mom. And I'm not defending what my son did. I told him time and time again that I thought he should come get you guys and bring you home, but he told me he couldn't risk anything happening to you two. He did always keep tabs on you, though. And he sent your momma a check every week. He even gave you the name Avery—his true last name that he didn't use anymore. I know it's not the same as being there for you, but I just want you to have all the facts.”

“I appreciate that,” I say in barely more than a whisper.

Duke sets his hand on my thigh, trying to let me know that he's here for me. I'm so glad that he is because I don't know if I could have done all this by myself.

Clearing my throat, I say, "I guess I'm glad to know that it wasn't that he didn't want me or something."

"I wish someone could have told you that a hell of a lot sooner. I tried to track you down once I knew you were an adult, but I had no idea where you were. Your dad wouldn't even tell me your last name. I hope now, though, you and I can have some sort of relationship."

I smile as big as my mouth will allow. "I'd like that."

I'm looking forward to getting to know my grandfather better, but it looks like that isn't going to happen today.

A nurse pokes her head into the door and says, "Harold, are you ready to go to physical therapy?"

"No," he replies playfully. "But I guess I have to, huh?"

He stands up and gives me one more hug. "I hope to see you soon, Darlin'. I've always wanted to know my granddaughter."

"We will come back to visit soon, I promise."

He follows the nurse out of the room. The moment the door shuts behind him, I start to cry. Duke jumps up and comes over to hug me.

"Sshhh. I've got you, Angel."

At this point, I don't even know why I'm crying, aside from all of this is beyond overwhelming. Another piece of the

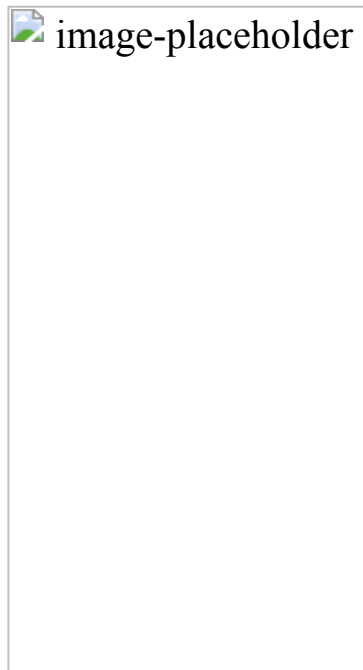


puzzle has been added, but it doesn't make it any easier to adapt to any of this.

More than anything, I'm exhausted. The past couple of weeks have taken such a toll on me that I feel like I could sleep for the next month and still be tired.

"Can... we... go...home?" I ask, a sob in between each word.

"Whatever you want, Angel."



My eyes flick open when I feel a tiny tongue licking my face. George is clearly trying to get my attention. When I look at him, he immediately lays down and rolls over to show me his belly.

“Hey, buddy,” I say, starting to give him scratches.

I reach over and grab my phone to see what time it is. After we got done seeing my newfound grandpa, I came home and crawled into bed to nap.

“Holy shit,” I mutter as I look at the phone. “I slept for eighteen hours.”

Well, no wonder my stomach is growling. Not quite ready to stop snuggling my puppy, though, I decide to lie here a little longer.

After my eighteen-hour nap, everything doesn't seem quite as dramatic as it did yesterday. Sure, maybe my life is quite a bit more messy than I originally thought, but I remember growing up and wishing that I had some sort of intricate backstory—other than having a drunk for a mom. I guess I got that now.

Daughter of a secret agent who sent her away to protect her.

Definitely more intriguing.

I've spent so much time and energy worrying about this when, at the end of the day, I have so much to be grateful for. I have a whole new life to enjoy. I inherited this gorgeous house, which I can either rent out, or if I really wanted to, I could live in. (I'm starting to lean more toward the latter). I

have a business that I can run from halfway across the country. I have a wonderful man who has been here for me through this entire emotional roller coaster and never wavered once. We have a cute dog.

Sure, I found out that I come from a bit of a fucked up situation, but who doesn't? I'm done wallowing in it. And I'm tired of letting the mystery of it all consume me. It's time to move on and live my life.

And I know exactly the best place to start.

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## Chapter 32

### DUKE

“Hello?” The voice on the other side of the phone answers.

“Hey, Boyd. It’s Duke Samson.”

“Samson! Holy shit! Talk about a blast from the past.”

Boyd used to be one of my best intelligence guys when I was in the SEALs. If I ever needed information about anyone, I went to him. Wanting to distance myself from the service, I haven’t reached out since I left. I honestly never thought I would have to reach out again.

*Or at least I hoped I wouldn’t have to.*

But hearing all about Avery’s dad and about how he was worried for Avery and her mom has me concerned. It doesn’t sound like the issue was ever resolved, and I don’t like the thought that there could be someone out there wanting to hurt the woman I love. So, I thought a call to Boyd was necessary.

He says, “Nice to hear from you, bud.”

“I wish I could say that it’s just a social call.”

He laughs. “Come on, Duke. I know better than to think you would call just to say hi. What’s up?”

“I need you to run a name for me.”

“What’s the name?”

“Samuel Avery. Alias is listed as Samuel Whitmore. I think he was some sort of secret ops, but I don’t know much more than that.”

“Alright. Can you tell me what I’m looking for?”

“Let’s just say he uncovered something he shouldn’t have, and someone came looking. I want to make sure no one else comes looking now.”

“Gotcha.” Thankfully, I don’t have to say much for Boyd to get my meaning. “It’ll take me a bit. Special ops takes some digging.”

“Just let me know when you find something. Thanks, Boyd.”

When I hang up, I about jump out of my skin, hearing Avery say, “Hey, baby. What are you doing?”

“Just trying to make sure none of this becomes a bigger problem. And maybe we can get a little more information about your dad.”

She walks in and sits on my lap. “Do me a favor.”

“Anything.”

“Let’s just let it go. As curious as I am, I don’t want to be the cat in that scenario. I’d rather just let it go—for now, anyway.”

“What changed?” I ask.

“Well, after my long slumber, I have decided that I’m ready to just move forward. There’s too much good to wallow in the bad.”

I can’t help but let out a soft laugh.

“What?” She asks, looking a little worried.

“It took me years and a whole hell of a lot of therapy to figure that out for myself. You figured it out after a really long nap.”

“For years, I’ve waited for my life to start—the part of my life that I’m truly excited about. Here it is. I’m done waiting.”

“You’re amazing,” I tell her before giving her a quick kiss.

“First order of business,” she says, looking into my eyes. “I don’t think it’s right that George’s parents are technically living under two different roofs.”

“Oh, is that right?”

“Yep. I know you’re basically living here anyway, but I figure maybe we could make it official.”

She looks a little uncomfortable as she waits for my answer. Yes, I have my own place, but it’s always just been a place to lay my head. Now, I’m much happier laying my head next to Avery’s, no matter where that may be.

“I would love to move in here with you, Angel.”

There’s that smile that I love so much. And in one swift movement, she pulls her t-shirt over her head. Lord help me, she’s not wearing anything underneath.

“What are you doing, beautiful?” I ask as she starts kissing my neck.

“Making up for lost time,” she says in between kisses. “I slept for way too long.”

I feel her start to grind against me, and it takes no time at all for my cock to harden in my jeans. Quickly, she stands up and unzips my pants and pulls it out and strokes it a few times before moving to lower herself onto it.

“Do you want me to go grab a condom?”

She shakes her head. “No. I want to feel you.”

Maybe it’s impulsive, but I want nothing more than to fuck her without a condom. I inhale a sharp breath as I feel my dick slide inside. It’s fucking perfect.

She starts to ride me right here on the couch. My hands can’t decide if they want to play with her nipples or grab a handful of her luscious ass. I decide to do one of each. She lets out a loud moan as I suck one of her nipples into my mouth and flick my tongue against it.

She bounces up and down on my cock, and it feels incredible, but I can tell she’s not close to coming. It doesn’t feel as good for her. Time to change that.

“Flip around,” I tell her.

She looks a little confused but does as I ask. She gets up and turns around so that her back is to me. She straddles me backwards and sinks back down until I’m buried to the hilt inside her.

Laying one hand on her shoulder, I lean her back until her back presses against my chest. Then, I use it to start toying with her nipples while the other hand goes between her legs and rubs her clit.

“Ohhhh, fuck,” she moans.

She continues to ride me as I do as much as I can to make her feel good. Her moans quickly get louder as her pussy gets wetter.

“That’s my girl,” I tell her. “I want to feel that pussy come.”

It doesn’t take long before I feel her start to clench around me. I know she’s close, so I rub a little faster. That’s all it takes for her entire body to start quaking with her orgasm.

“Duke!” She yells as her pussy starts to come. She tightens around me so much that it pulls my own release out. I wanted this whole thing to last longer, but fuck, it feels too damn good. I just can’t help myself.

When we are both still, she reaches her hand back and holds my head. “I love you,” she says, breathlessly.

“I love you more.”

“Do you love me enough to feed me? I’m starving.”



“Of course. Let’s get dressed and get you fed.”

“Can’t we eat naked?” she asks.

“Even better.”

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## *Chapter 33*

### **AVERY**

**I**t's been a week since I asked Duke to move in with me, and ever since, it's been absolute bliss. We wake up in each other's arms before getting ready for the day. We spend time working around the house, and I do work stuff if I need to. We eat dinner, play with the dog, and finally, fall into bed where we have sex until we fall asleep.

It's perfect. Every day, we get to know each other a little bit more, and everything that I learn makes me love him even more. I'm crazy about him, and I can't seem to get enough.

This is the first time I've been alone all week since he has therapy, and then, he was going to stop by his mom's. The last part shocked me to no end. But I guess she called and said she had something for him.

I finally finished painting the living room and have moved onto the hallway. I'm listening to a podcast on my phone until I hear George start barking. Duke is coming home a little earlier than I expected.

When I walk to the front door, I see a man in a dark suit walking around the front yard.

Opening the door just a little, I call, "Can I help you?"

He turns around and gives me a slight smile. "Hi, there. I'm looking for Samuel Avery."

This man using my father's real name takes me back a little. "Why are you looking for him?"

"He and I used to work together a long time ago. I remember him saying he lived here, and I just wanted to stop by and see him."

A sense of confusion hits me because I can't imagine my very secretive father telling anyone where he lived.

"Samuel actually passed away," I tell him, hoping he will go away.

Unfortunately for me, he takes a few steps closer to the porch. "Well, I'm so sorry to hear that. How did you know him?"

"I didn't. I just bought the house," I lie.

"Really?" He asks, moving closer. "Because you look just like him. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were his daughter."

Dread washes over me as I realize this guy is more foe than friend. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I try to type out a message to Duke without making it obvious.

"So, are you his daughter?" He asks.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I answer, “Yes.”

“Do you know if your father left anything behind? Maybe some paperwork somewhere?”

“No, nothing.”

“Mind if I come in and take a look?”

“I do actually,” I tell him. “I’m waiting for my husband to get out of the shower, and then we are going out to dinner.”

“Husband, huh?” He asks, looking around. “Doesn’t look like there’s anyone else here.”

“There is. Like I said, he’s in the shower.” I try to speak confidently, but I can tell that the man doesn’t believe me.

“What did you say your name was?”

His eyes go dark. “I didn’t.” He walks toward the door. I fumble with the lock, but before I can flip it closed on the screen, the man busts through the door.

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask. “My dad’s dead. I don’t know what more you want.”

“Your dad did a whole lot of digging on me back in the day. I tried to handle the problem, but clearly, it didn’t stick. Now, I need to know exactly what he knew and who he told.”

He stalks toward me, and my heart races. I pray that Duke gets my message, but I know if he’s in therapy, he won’t look at his phone until he’s done.

“You can search the house,” I tell him. “But you won’t find anything.”

“See, now, there is another problem. I can’t leave witnesses.”

*Oh, God.*

As he gets closer, George comes out of nowhere and sinks his teeth into the man’s leg. The guy lets out a loud scream and pries George off of him before kicking him, sending the dog sliding across the wood floor.

Not wanting him to go after the dog any more than he already has, I run into the kitchen to try to keep the attention on myself. It works like a charm, and he follows me. Trying to think on my feet, I reach into the silverware drawer and pull out a knife. As the man runs up behind me, I sink the knife into his thigh.

He cries in pain, but it doesn’t seem to affect him for long. I try to run out of the room, but he grabs me by the hair and pulls me backward so hard that I fall to the ground. With his leg bleeding all over the place, he climbs on top of me, holding my arms above my head.

“Get off me!” I scream.

“Do you know how much of a pain in the ass your stubborn father was? He made my life a living hell. I only wish he was alive to see what I’m about to do to his daughter.”

“If you’re going to kill me, just do it,” I taunt.

*Why the fuck would I say that?*

“See, I have to make this whole thing look like a whole different type of crime. I’m thinking a rape homicide will do

the trick.”

Even if it’s a feeble attempt, I have to try to get away. It’s my only chance.

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## *Chapter 34*

### DUKE

“**H**ey, Momma,” I call as I walk into her house. “You home?”

“Hey, Darlin’!” She greets, emerging from the hallway. “How’s it going?”

“Pretty good. Just dropping by on my way home.”

“Where’s home at these days?” She asks, raising her eyebrows.

“Avery and I are living together now. She asked me to move in.”

She cheeses so big I’m surprised her cheeks don’t hurt. “I know my opinion doesn’t rate high on your list of ones that matter, but I just want to say that I really like her. I wish you two all the best.”

“Thank you.”

“That actually brings me to why I called you over here.”

“Oh?”

She nods. "I promise I won't keep you long."

I follow her into the kitchen, where she grabs a tiny black box off the counter and hands it to me.

"What's this?"

"Look, I don't know if you ever plan on getting married, but if you do, I wanted you to have it." When I open the box, she adds, "It was your grandmother's."

A tiny opal ring sits in the black crease of the box. "It's beautiful," I say. "But why give it to me?"

"Call it a peace offering." She lets out a heavy sigh. "Duke, I've made so many mistakes as a mother, but I've made the most as *your* mother. And I don't think I've ever told you I was sorry. Well, I don't know that I've ever said sorry and truly meant it. As much as I hate to admit it, back then, I was popping so many pills that I didn't know which way was up. And that's not an excuse, but it's me admitting that I had a problem. It took me a long time to realize how that must have made you feel. I'm really sorry, Duke."

I look down at the ring, trying to pick the words that I want. "I've been waiting a long time to hear you say that," I tell her. "I'm not sure that it makes everything better, though."

"Never thought it would, Darlin'. But I just needed to say it. It was time."

I take the ring out of the box and hold it between my finger and thumb. Thoughts of Avery wearing this ring and calling



herself my wife flash through my mind. I can't believe how happy the thought of that makes me.

Thinking about Avery also makes me come to another realization. "Mom, over the past couple of weeks, I have watched Avery's life completely get turned upside down. She figured out that people she's loved have been lying to her for her entire life. But you know what? She still manages to put on a happy face. She still manages to find the good in everything. I think I need to take a page out of her playbook."

I look back at my mom, who now has tears in her eyes.

"Mom, I haven't even gotten to the good part yet. Why are you crying?"

Her lip quivers. "I think this is the most I've heard you speak in the past ten years."

"Yeah, I get it. I don't talk a lot." I chuckle. "But anyway, I think it's about time that you and I bury the hatchet—or try to. I know it'll take time, but maybe we can give it a shot."

She goes to give me a hug but stops herself. "Sorry," she says, knowing I haven't wanted to hug her in years.

I walk toward her and wrap my arms around her. I feel her cry on my shoulder.

Through all the shit that I went through with this woman in my childhood, I can see that the woman in front of me isn't the same one I grew up with. I wish I could have grown up with this woman.

As we break the hug, my phone starts vibrating in my pocket. I see that it's Boyd calling me. I haven't heard from him since our original talk. I tried to respect Avery's wishes about not finding out anything more, but I should probably tell Boyd that so he doesn't waste any more time.

"Give me a minute, Mom." Answering the phone, I say, "Hey, Boyd."

"Hey, Samson. I've done some digging on your guy."

"Yeah, about that. You don't have to keep looking if you haven't found anything. I didn't mean to bug you with this."

He cuts me off before I can get further. "Duke, listen to me."

"Shit, man. What's up?"

"When I did the search for your guy, it triggered some sort of alarm in the system."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"It means that while I was looking, someone else was watching me. They found all the same information that I found."

"Were you able to figure out who was watching?"

"Looks like it was some guy working in intelligence. Name is Thomas Lawrence. I'm not sure why he's looking, but he backdoored in behind me and saw all the same information that I got."

It starts to click in my head that maybe this is the same guy who Samuel was trying to track down when he was alive. Fuck. The search I asked Boyd to do must have showed Thomas who was tracking him.

“Thanks, Boyd.”

“Do you know what any of it means?”

“I have a pretty good idea.”

“Let me know what else you need from me.”

I thank him once again and hang up the phone.

“Is everything okay?” My mom asks.

“I’m not sure. Do you ever just have a bad feeling that you can’t quite shake?”

“Of course. Maybe you need to try to get to the root of it before it gets worse.”

My phone vibrates again, this time with a text message from Avery.

Scary guy here. Trying to get in. Get home.

“Motherfucker,” I whisper. “Mom, I have to go.”

Before she has the chance to say anything, I run out the front door and jump into my truck. Dust flies behind my tires as I skid out of her driveway.

I drive as fast as I can, trying to call Avery along the way, but there’s no answer.

*Son of a bitch!*

I feel like my whole world hangs in the balance. The ten-minute drive that should go faster since I'm breaking the sound barrier still feels like it's taking forever. This guy is clearly some type of special ops, so I don't want to spook him.

I pray to God that he hasn't made his way inside the house yet. Hopefully, Avery locked him out, and I can get home and beat the shit out of him before calling the cops for trespassing.

But as I approach the house, I don't see him outside. All I see is a car in the driveway.

Not wanting him to see me, I park in the side yard, far enough away to where I won't draw any attention to myself. Before I head inside, I quickly unlock the gun safe under the backseat and open it up. I grab my holster with my pistol inside and hook it onto my belt and then take my shotgun too, for good measure.

I go into stealth mode and sneak around the truck before heading toward the front. Peeking in the front window, I don't see either Avery or Thomas. As quietly as I can, I turn the handle on the front door and head inside.

*I'm coming, Angel.*

## Chapter 35

### AVERY

“Get off of me!” I scream, trying to push this man off of me with every fiber of my being. He’s not a huge man, but damn, he’s strong.

People always say that when you’re about to die, you see your life flash before your eyes. You see all of the most wonderful moments before you take your final breath. But right now, all I can see is white, hot rage.

How dare this guy! How dare he come in and try to ruin my happiness when I decided to leave all the negativity behind.

In fact...

How dare everybody.

How dare my father for *keeping us from all of this*. Turned out really great, Pops.

How dare my mother for lying to me my whole life.

And how dare the universe for not letting me have one glimmering speck of happiness.

Yes, rage is all I can see right now. I channel it and try to push this guy off of me as hard as I can. I make a valiant effort, but he pulls a dirty move and slams my head against the wood floor.

*Fuck!*

The room spins around me as I try to regain my composure. I refuse to go down without a fight. And maybe if I piss him off enough, he will just off me without raping me in the process.

Man, I wish I was going to be around when Duke gets ahold of this guy because make no mistake, Duke won't let him get away. He will find this man and rip him limb from limb. I'm sure of it.

Just the thought of him makes my eyes well up with tears. I wish I could tell him I loved him one last time.

*No, Avery. No tears. Don't let this man see even a hint of weakness.*

I lift my head, still somewhat combative. Deciding to put an end to that, the man's fist connects with my jaw. Pain radiates through my entire face as my head falls backward once again.

It's in this moment that I feel him starting to undo the clasp on my overalls. I always thought these things were ugly as hell, and I'd only wear them to paint in, but now, I'm thankful for them. At least taking them off will make him work for it.

I can feel blood dripping from my head onto the floor, and I know that this can't be good. Deciding to try a different tactic,

I start screaming as loud as I can. Like bloody murder screaming, hoping to God that someone will hear me.

The man puts his hand over my mouth, and I immediately bite him. That gets me another swift punch to the face, this one to my eye.

Right as I open my mouth to scream again, I hear George barking. I look up just in time to see Duke storm into the room. Duke always kind of looks angry, but this is different. This looks like pure, unfiltered rage.

As he lifts the man off of me, he throws him back down on the ground, getting on top of him and using his face as a punching bag. With every swing of Duke's fist, the man's face looks more and more mangled.

When the man stills, Duke rushes over to me, sitting on the floor and looking me over. "Fuck, Avery. What did that son of a bitch do to you?"

"I'm okay," I manage to get out in a whisper. "Do I really look that bad?"

"No, Angel." He says with tears in his eyes. "You still look beautiful."

"Liar," I say.

The man starts moving around, and both of us look over. He quickly sits up and reaches to grab a pistol that is holstered on his ankle. Duke says to me, "Avery, baby, I need you to close your eyes."

I do as he asks, and I jump as I hear the shot of a gun. And jump again when I hear the body hit the floor.

After we are sure that the guy is dead, Duke pulls out his phone and punches in a number. When someone on the other end answers, he says, “Yeah, Boyd, I’m going to need a clean-up crew. And a doc. Send me everyone you got. That son of a bitch, Lawson, came to my house and attacked my girl.” After a moment, he says, “Thanks, man.”

When he hangs up, he looks back at me. “The cavalry is on their way.”

“You’re all the cavalry I need, Sarge.”

He holds my face without moving me too much. When my eyes meet his, I see the tears now streaming down his cheeks. “Angel, I’m so sorry. I should have been here.”

“Duke, don’t do that. None of this is your fault. And you showed up when I needed you.” I reach up and pat his cheek. My eyes start to get heavy, and the urge to sleep suddenly overwhelms me.

“Avery, Angel, I need you to stay awake for me. You can’t go to sleep. You probably have a concussion. It shouldn’t take long for people to get here.”

Knowing he’s probably right, I open my eyes and struggle to keep them open.

He takes my hand in his. “Avery, I have to confess something.”



Joking, I ask, “Do you have another girlfriend or something? Because this would be a super shitty time to tell me. I mean, read the room, man.”

He laughs. “No. No other girlfriends. But I did lie to you when you asked me if I wanted to get married. Although I will still do whatever it is that you want, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to marry you. I would love to call you my wife.”

“I’d like that too.” I smile, fighting back my own tears. “But I’m going to need you to ask me again when I’m not bleeding all over the floor, okay?”

Moments later, a couple of paramedics come in through the front door. Duke calls for them that we are in the kitchen.

I hear George bark, and I grab Duke by the shirt. “I need you to go check on the dog. George tried to save me and bit the son of a bitch, and he kicked him pretty hard.”

“I don’t want to leave you.”

“Please,” I beg. “They have to look me over, anyway.”

The moment he’s gone, I feel my eyes start to get heavy once again. The paramedic apparently has started an IV and is giving me some pain medicine. I didn’t even feel him do it. That can’t be a good sign, right?

I fight the good fight, but soon enough, my eyes grow too heavy, and I can’t stay awake any longer.

## *Chapter 36*

### **DUKE**

“Duke, really, I’m fine,” Avery insists. “I don’t need you to do all of this.”

“The doctor said you should rest. I’m sorry, Angel, but I’m going to listen to the expert on this matter,” I tell her in a stern tone. I know she will still argue, but I’m not budging.

“I can come down in the living room at least.”

“Nope. The bed is more comfortable.”

Before I brought her home, I made sure that the room was nice and comfortable for her. I even went out and bought a DVD player with all kinds of new movies for her to watch. Being laid up is torture enough without having to watch old Western VCR tapes over and over.

George comes tapping into the room and stands on the side of the bed. Thankfully, the pup just had some bruising. While I stayed in the hospital with Avery for a couple of days, my mom took him to the vet and then watched him until we came home.

Without hesitation, I lift him up and lay him next to Avery.

“Okay,” she says. “You’re *really* trying to go over the top. You never like this dog getting up here—especially laying on your pillow.”

“He makes you feel better. That’s all that matters.”

“Duke, sit down,” she says, patting the edge of the mattress.

“I will in a minute. I was going to go get you some water and a snack.”

“Duke! Sit!” She practically screams.

Even though I don’t want to, I do as she says.

Her fingernails lightly graze the back of my hand as she begins to speak. “Duke, baby, are you doing all of this because you feel bad? Because you know none of this is your fault.”

She keeps telling me that, but it doesn’t help to squash the guilt that I’m feeling. It breaks my heart every time I look at her face that is all scratched and bruised. “If I would have gotten there just a couple minutes sooner, you wouldn’t be hurt.”

“And if you would’ve gotten there later, I’d be dead. I’m thankful as hell that you showed up when you did.”

Choking back my emotion, I say, “It doesn’t feel like enough.”

“Duke, I’m here. I’m alive. It’s way more than enough.” She rubs her thumb along the side of my face. “The bruises will fade, and I will be back to normal.”

I lean down and press a gentle kiss to her lips, careful not to hurt her. “How is it that you are so calm about this whole thing? You went through something so traumatic, and you seem to be fine.”

“Duke, it was so scary. I thought I was going to die, but you know what somehow made it a little easier?”

“What’s that, Angel?”

A smile pulls up on her lips. “Because I knew that no matter what happened to me, you were going to kick that guy’s ass.”

Holding her hand, I say, “I did a little more than that.”

“I’m glad you did. Now, we don’t have to live like my father did. We don’t have to go through our lives always looking over our shoulders. It’s over. By the way, I never asked what happened after I passed out. Did your top-secret military guys show up and handle everything?”

I laugh. “Something like that. My intelligence guy, Boyd, sent some people out to take care of everything. Once he was able to tap into some of your father’s research, all the pieces started to come together. They were able to link this Thomas guy to a bunch of shady shit back in the day. I also had him send a couple people out to help... clean up the mess.”

“I appreciate that. I wouldn’t have wanted to come home and see all of that.”

“Angel, I never would have let that happen. If they hadn’t sent someone, I would have done it myself. I could

understand, though, if even now, you didn't want to stay here. Bad memories can taint a place."

She looks around the bedroom, taking it all in before she starts to talk. "You know, when I first got down here, I thought that this house made me feel so out of my element. I wanted to fix it up, rent it out, and be done with it. I was so excited to get back to my life in Boston. But as I've lived here, I realize that this place actually feels more like home than anywhere else ever has. Sure, it still needs a whole hell of a lot of work, but I can see myself here. And I can see myself here with you."

"As much as I love to hear that, Angel, I don't want you staying here just for me. I told you I'd follow you anywhere you want to go, and I mean it. I'll come to Boston if that's what you want."

"This isn't just about you, baby. Trust me, there are some things about this small town that will take some getting used to. I'm not too keen on the fact that I have to drive to a whole other town just to go to a Walmart. But staying here in the house that my dad hoped one day my mom and I could come home to means a lot to me."

I still can't get over how incredible Avery is. Her cool head and big heart never cease to amaze me. "Okay, Angel, if you want to stay, we will stay. But if you change your mind, that's okay, too."

"I love you," she says with a small smile. "I don't think I say that enough. And I don't think I ever thanked you for saving my life."

“Angel, that is one thing you will never have to thank me for. I would do it a million times over.”

Her eyes start to grow heavy, and I can tell that the pain medicine is starting to take hold again. It makes her so tired, but I know that’s good. Sleep is the best thing for her right now.

I, on the other hand, have barely slept at all. I’m too busy watching over her and worrying.

I get up to go downstairs and get a couple of small things done, but she grabs my arm.

“Can you stay with me? Please?”

“Of course.” I get comfortable next to her and grab my book off the bedside table. With her resting so much, I’ve made it through two books in just as many days.

I get lost in the pages, and soon enough, Avery starts lightly snoring next to me. She’s probably sleeping hard enough that she wouldn’t notice if I got up to get some stuff done. But there’s no way I’m not going to be right next to her when she wakes up.

After everything that has happened, I don’t know that I’ll ever stop worrying about her. Seeing that son-of-a-bitch on top of her about to do unspeakable things brought out my most basic instinct.

The instinct to protect the one that I love.

Although I hadn’t been that scared in my entire life, my military training kicked in, and I got the job done. I just hate

that Avery had to see that side of me. I never imagined I'd shoot someone in front of the woman of my dreams.

But she's safe.

That's what matters.

That's *all* that matters.

And now, I will spend the rest of our lives making sure that she is okay and loved beyond her wildest dreams.

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## Chapter 37

### AVERY

**T**wo weeks.

It's been two weeks since Duke and I have had sex.

And I'm *dying*.

The bruising around my face has faded, and I'm feeling great. Problem is that Duke thinks that I'm going to break. He's treating me like a porcelain doll. I appreciate the sentiment, but right now, I'd rather be fucked like a rag doll.

Tomorrow, we head to Boston to start packing up my apartment to have it all shipped down here, but I'd really like to let out some of this sexual frustration before then.

Deciding to try to entice him, I ordered some sexy lingerie online. It got delivered today, so it's showtime.

I anxiously wait for him to get home from therapy. When I hear his truck tires hit the driveway, I stand in the foyer. My see-through lingerie leaves very little to the imagination, and I hope he wastes no time in ripping it from my body.



But the last thing in the world that I am expecting is Duke to walk through the front door with company. When his brother, Devon, walks in behind him, immediately, my hands attempt to cover up everything that's showing. But I don't have nearly enough hands for that.

"Avery?" Duke asks, trying to figure out what is going on.

"Well, hellooooooo, Avery," Devon says with a huge smile on his face.

Duke's eyes bounce back and forth between his brother and me. Realization sets in, and he says, "Devon, time to go. We will hang that mirror later."

"But—" Before he can say another word, Duke shoves him out the door and locks it behind him.

Duke looks at me. "Well, my brother got a good show."

Rolling my eyes, I say, "Glad someone liked it." I stomp off to the kitchen and start wiping off counters.

Duke enters behind me. "Hey, Angel. You want to tell me what's going on?"

Frustrated, I start flailing my arms around. "Do you know that we haven't had sex since everything happened?" Before he can answer, I keep going. "Two weeks! Before this whole thing happened, we couldn't keep our hands off each other. We were fucking like a couple of bunnies. Now, nothing. Nada. Zip. I mean, I guess I got all busted up, and now I'm not attractive to you anymore."

A wave of emotion chokes me up, so I stop talking and focus my attention back on cleaning the counters.

I feel him walk up behind me.

“Avery, put the towel down.”

Still irritated, I throw it to the side. His hands wrap around me, and he gives me a soft kiss on my shoulder.

“I remember a month ago, you and I having a similar conversation to this in this same kitchen. You questioned whether or not I found you attractive. Do you remember what I did that night?”

I nod, remembering the first time he took me to bed.

“Angel, my opinion hasn’t changed. I still think you’re the most gorgeous woman in the world. Now, even more so, since I know how strong you are. I haven’t been pawing you like a dog because I wanted you to heal. I didn’t want to do anything to hurt you even more. But if you think I haven’t spent every moment staring at this sexy body and picturing what I want to do to you, you’re wrong.”

“Really?” I turn around to look at him.

He nods. “Do you know how hard it is to watch you walk around here in my t-shirt on with nothing underneath? I’ve jerked off in the shower more times than I care to admit.”

“Duke, I’m all healed. You aren’t going to hurt me, and I miss you.”

“I’ve missed you too, Angel.” He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear before leaning in to kiss me.

His body presses against mine, and as my hands start exploring his body, I feel something hard in his pocket.

Teasing, I ask, “Is that a rock in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?”

Before he can answer, I reach inside and pull it out. It’s a tiny black felt box.

“Duke?” My eyes go up to him.

“To be fair, you weren’t supposed to see that yet.”

“When was I supposed to see it?”

“When I figured out the perfect way to ask you.”

I gently pry open the top of the box and see the ring inside. It’s beautiful.

When I’m speechless, Duke says, “It was my grandmother’s. Momma wanted me to have it. But listen to me, I don’t want you to feel pressured on anything. I know it’s still hasn’t been that long—”

I cut him off. “Yes.”

“What?”

“Yes!”

“Avery, you didn’t even let me ask the question. I was working on a whole speech.”

“Duke, you could look at me and say nothing more than *want to go to the courthouse?* And I would still say yes.”

He takes the ring out of the box and slides it on my finger. It fits perfectly.

“Damn, you look good with that thing on,” he says.

“How good?”

He smiles. “Like the most beautiful woman in the whole world.”

“Why don’t you show me?”

Without any argument, he picks me up off my feet and carries me over to the table. Setting me down gently, he tells me to lie back.

“No bedroom?” I ask.

He gets on his knees and spreads my thighs, he says, “We’ll get there. But first, I want a snack.”

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## *Acknowledgments*

After writing seven books set in the town of Grady, I was so worried about writing something new. But the character of Duke practically wrote himself, and Avery...well, Avery started out as much more of a hard-ass, but as I started writing, I realized that she needed to be quirky and fun. And the rambling Avery Mathis was born.

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-Steph

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