

Being together
just feels natural...

a lake family
novel

Effortless

JENNIFER
VAN WYK

Effortless

A Lake Family Novel

Book 2

Jennifer Van Wyk

Effortless

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Prologue

HADLEY

I can't even be sad to be stuck here for the night. Nothing good waits for me at home so if sleeping in an airport hotel for the night means delaying the inevitable, well, I'm okay with that. More than okay, actually.

After getting checked into my room, I take a quick shower to get the airport smell off me and venture to the hotel restaurant to grab a bite to eat and maybe a glass of wine but what I find is complete chaos. The tables are full of travelers, some of which I recognize from the airport who were more upset than I was that our flight was cancelled because of the blizzard blanketing New York.

There's no hostess standing at the entrance, but it looks like that's possibly because of how busy it is in here.

I'm scanning my options when I spot the guy who was standing at another counter in the terminal after being told that we weren't going to be boarding our flight. There's a reason I recognize him. Our eyes locked for five seconds. I counted. I was spellbound by how incredibly good looking he is. So unlike the men I'm used to. He's sitting alone at a two-seat table and I weigh my options. Go back to my room and starve

or summon up some courage and see if he'll offer me a seat. I pray he's single and not waiting for his girlfriend to join him. Weaving through the tables to get to him, I knock on the table then inwardly roll my eyes at how lame I am. He raises his head and looks at me, recognition flits through his expressive dark eyes and he greets me with a bright white smile.

“Hey! What are you doing here?”

I give him a *duh* look and he chuckles.

“Right. Delayed until tomorrow, too?”

I nod and twist my lips, as if it's some burden. “Yup.”

He looks around the room and pushes the other chair away from the table with his foot. “Want to join me?”

“You don't mind? Sorry but it's swamped in here.”

“Not at all. Wouldn't've asked otherwise.”

“Thank you.”

I take a seat and fold my hands on the table, suddenly a little nervous.

“I just realized we never introduced ourselves,” he says awkwardly. We never even said hello to each other across the crowded terminal of irritated travelers, so introductions weren't an option. “I'm Cash. Tennessee.”

Smiling, I reach my hand over the table and shake his hand, a tingle going through my hand when his hand grips mine. “Hadley. Chicago area.”

A waitress rushes over, clearly flustered. Her hair's a mess and regardless of the bitter temperatures outside, I can tell she's been wiping away sweat.

“I’m so sorry for the wait. Would you like something to drink?”

Cash gestures at me to go first.

“I’ll have a glass of white wine and a water, too, please.”

“Sure thing. Can I see your ID?”

I nod, pulling out my wallet and handing over my ID. I turned twenty-one six months ago so her asking isn’t all that much of a surprise.

She smiles and hands it back.

“I love your name.”

“Thank you,” I say bashfully. “It’s an old family name,” I add, even though it’s not necessary.

“And for you?”

“Miller Lite – bottle if you have it – and a water.”

She winces. “I need to see yours, too.”

“No problem.”

Cash hands her his ID as well and she smiles again before handing it back.

“Okay, y’all have seriously cool names.”

“Mine isn’t an old family name. Just my mom’s imagination, I suppose.”

I laugh and lightly kick him under the table.

“Any appetizers?”

“Uh, I haven’t had a chance to look at a menu yet, but I’m good with just dinner.”

“Same.”

“Crud! I’ll go grab you two menus. I’m so sorry!”

“No worries, just a little busy in here, huh?”

“Definitely.”

She rushes off and returns with our menus a moment later.

Cash and I open our menus and I know instantly what I’m getting so I close the menu.

“Wow. You already know?”

“I’m decisive,” I tell him with a shoulder shrug.

He looks through the menu and I take time to look around the room. Everyone looks exhausted and more than a little annoyed that their travel plans have been delayed. It makes me feel slightly guilty for being happy that I’m here right now rather than on a flight back to Chicago.

Our waitress brings our drinks and asks if we’re ready to order.

“Yup,” Cash says, closing his menu and taking a long pull from his beer.

“What can I get you two?”

He waits for me to order with a point in my direction and I hate that it makes me a little shy. “Can I get the chicken quesadilla that’s on the appetizer menu with extra salsa and sour cream? And a side of the chips and guacamole, please.”

“Great choice. That’s one of my favorites.” She nods and writes it down then shifts her attention to Cash. “And for you?”

“Buffalo chicken sandwich, fries. Ranch dressing on the side, please.”

She takes our menus and smiles brightly even though I can tell she's swamped. "Perfect. I'll get those in straight away. As you can see, it's a little packed in here so it may be a little bit. Our staffing wasn't prepared."

"Thanks," he says, leaning back in his chair and taking in the crowd. He chuckles a bit, shaking his head. "Everyone looks so pissed."

"Right? Like the airline has control of the weather," I say, rolling my eyes.

"I was a little worried the flight would be delayed but honestly didn't expect a cancellation. Otherwise I would have just stayed at my hotel, you know?"

"Yeah, me, too. I'm glad we don't have to sleep on the airport floor, but it'd be nice to have my luggage."

"I carried on so I'm good. I suppose that's the benefit of being a guy. I pack light." He grins and fiddles with the napkin on the table. "So, Chicago, huh?"

I nod and scrunch my nose. "Yeah. Chicagoan born and raised."

"You don't seem happy about that."

"It's not that, it's just a little..." I pause, trying to think of the correct word, "suffocating."

He barks out a laugh and I stare at his strong neck when he tips his head back. "Suffocating?"

"It's complicated."

"Explain how the third largest city in America can feel suffocating."

With a twist of my lips, I contemplate how much I want to tell him. He's a perfect stranger and it's not like I'll ever see him again. I lean forward on my elbows on the table — something my mother would not approve of — crossing my arms. He mimics my position, putting our faces closer as if I'm about to share a deep dark secret. What he probably doesn't realize is that I am. Not so much dark, but it's my secret that no one in my family knows. Or cares to know, anyway.

“It's not so much the city that's suffocating. It's everything else. My family. My friends. Even my job.”

“How so?”

How do I explain this without sounding like a snob? I look down at the table and sip through the straw of my water without lifting it to my lips. Something else my mother would disapprove of. As would sitting here having a meal with a perfect stranger. Especially a male stranger. One I'm attracted to, no less. She'd probably have a stroke.

“Short version? I'm twenty-one years old and I've never made a decision for myself.”

He leans back with a knowing glint in his eyes. “Ahh. Family shit, then?”

I giggle. “Definitely family shit.” I lift my wine to my lips and take a healthy sip. “They... love me. They do. In their way, I guess. It's not that I'm mistreated or anything of the sort. The decisions that are made for me... they're the life changing ones. I don't get a say in the major parts of my life. There are expectations that feel impossible for me to meet. It's exhausting, you know?”

He shakes his head. “Luckily, I don’t. Though, not having *any* expectations of you is hard, too.”

I don’t understand what he means. “Huh?”

“Mine have none of me. They mean well, but it doesn’t matter what I do, they love me anyway. Sometimes I just wish they’d yell at me for screwing up. Instead they cheer me on.”

“That doesn’t seem so bad.”

“It isn’t. But they’re so accepting that I can’t impress them, either.”

Ahh. That I understand. He wants to have a reason for his family to be proud of him. I take another drink of wine, the crisp cool liquid going smoothly down my throat. “So they don’t have goals in mind for you?”

“Not one. I could end up in prison after going on a murder spree and they’d be like ‘oh, son, as long as you’re happy!’”

I giggle and throw my straw wrapper at him. “They would not.”

He dodges the wrapper. “Okay, maybe that’s a little extreme but you get the picture.”

“I do. I wish my family would just want me to be happy, though. I shouldn’t complain because they want what’s best for me. It’s just that they have very specific ideas as to what’s best for me. And my ideas are different from theirs.”

“In every facet, right?”

“Right.”

Our eyes stay glued to each other as he nods, knowingly. Without me telling him, I can tell he knows that every facet includes my romantic life as well.

I'm in New York for a reason. To give myself a break before walking down the aisle to a man I didn't choose for myself. A modern day arranged marriage all to keep up with appearances. To my family, they only think that I'm shopping for the honeymoon. Something I somehow convinced them I was capable of doing alone. I did some shopping like I said, but not for my honeymoon. I also ate whatever I wanted and slept in, went to the movies, caught a show on Broadway, and read a book that wasn't a bestseller, but something *I* wanted to read. And the key there was, I did it all alone. By myself. It was the best four days of my life. Four days in which I have left my engagement ring — that Trotter's mother most likely purchased for him — in a little velvet pouch in an inside zipper pocket of my purse.

"I imagine that would be difficult."

"Sometimes."

"Only sometimes?" he challenges.

I chuckle. "Maybe a little more than sometimes," I admit. "I sound like a brat, I'm sure."

"Why do you say that?"

"Most people would be grateful to, I don't know, have what I have."

"And what is it you have?" he asks.

My response is delayed by our waitress bringing our meals. Our drinks are almost empty so after asking if I want a refill, Cash orders another round for both of us. After she leaves, and I've taken my first bite because it smells far too good to wait, I explain, albeit a bit embarrassed. "I don't want for anything."

He dips a fry in ranch and pops it in his mouth. After he swallows, he adds, “Materially, you mean.”

I pause, the triangle of quesadilla suspended in the air. I set it back down and blink. “Pardon?”

“You don’t want for anything that money can buy. But there are plenty of more important things in life that money has no part of.”

“Right.” He’s absolutely right. Clothes, cars, homes, vacations... I’ve never been denied anything. Anything but the right to make my own choices, that is. Prep school, college at University of Chicago because that’s where my parents graduated from. Where Trotter’s parents graduated from. And where all our grandparents graduated from. Trotter says we’re *U of Chicago royalty* because he’s a pompous ass and thinks he’s better than everyone. My status at the school is why I was able to leave school for a long weekend and miss classes. Ridiculous. And normally I wouldn’t abuse the system but it was either that or check myself in to a mental facility. I couldn’t take another second of Trotter or my family and needed a break.

“Probably makes it a little worse,” he murmurs.

“True,” I concede. He doesn’t know that I’m engaged to a man who gave me the engagement ring with less enthusiasm than one has after being told they have to have a root canal. It was more like ‘hey, we’re supposed to get married, I guess, so...’ and I stared at him blankly as he yanked my hand closer, shoved a five-carat diamond ring on my finger, and then proceeded to get raging drunk. It was so romantic. And that was sarcasm if you weren’t aware.

I don’t know why I said yes. Maybe it was because for as long as I can remember, the plan was always for me to one day

marry Trotter. We were friends, best friends for a while, and it never really bothered me. Until we started dating, as per our parents' timing. Until I saw what my future held and felt my identity blowing away in the wind. Then the ring was on my finger. And I started to have panic attacks regularly, cried myself to sleep at night, and had no one who would listen to me when I explained that I wasn't in love with Trotter and didn't want to marry him. My friends aren't really friends. They're people that are part of "our circle" and are perfectly happy as long as they have a closet full of new designer clothes, have their next vacation to some tropical island scheduled via private jet, and their car is the latest model.

When I finally gained the courage to tell my mom, she simply scoffed and said that love wasn't part of marriage in the real world. That was for people who lived a quiet life. That I would grow to love Trotter and if I didn't, I could take a *side piece* and keep him quiet.

She said those exact words to me, telling me that's what she and my father did and it made life so much easier. Oh, and she reminded me that I would have to use condoms with the *others* so that my babies would be Trotter's. That was a fun conversation. Not that I was surprised to hear that my parents weren't faithful to each other. It was obvious they weren't in love, but hearing her talk so openly about it made me wonder if there really is such thing as love or if it's just something in books and movies.

Maybe I'm naïve to believe in love, but I don't care.

We continue to eat and drink and fortunately he drops the subject of me growing up in one of the wealthiest families in Chicago. Not that he knows anything other than I'm a rich kid, but he seems to get the gist of it, anyway. Rather, we talk

about nothing and everything. He tells me stories from his college life that have me cracking up, stories of growing up in Tennessee in a small town where everyone knows your name and your business. To most people from the city, it sounds boring and dull. To me? It would be a dream come true.

While he's talking, I'm sure I have a glazed-over look to my eyes. Listening to the way his life was and is has me fantasizing about what could be for me. If I stood up to my family and walked away from everything I've ever known.

"What's your name?" he asks out of nowhere.

"Didn't I..."

With a wink and a quick shoulder shrug he says, "Go with it."

I press my lips together and look away, thinking for a second, then saying the first name that comes to my mind. "Sandra."

He grins. "That's what you came up with?"

I shrug and maintain eye contact with the *unbelievably* handsome Cash. My word, I'm not sure what they do to the boys in Tennessee, but raising them gorgeous is definitely something they excel at. The term *good ol' boys* comes to mind. The guys who are great friends, strong, country, and down home. Cash seems this way. The way he listens to the few details I've given him about myself and still seems to understand.

"Does that make me Danny?"

I laugh to cover the flutter that him knowing the cast of *Grease* gives me. "Obviously."

He grins. It's one that has the power to suck me in and never let go. *Danny* is so good looking it almost makes me uncomfortable. Not uncomfortable in a way that I feel unsafe in his presence. No. This is a type of uncomfortable that makes me want to shimmy in my seat to relieve the ache just being around him brings me.

"Don't expect me to sing like Danny."

"But you'll dance?"

"I'm a southern boy, my mama taught all us boys to dance."

Mama. Southern boy. All us boys. His slight twang is so sexy. Maybe it's the wine making me all warm inside. Somehow, though, I doubt it. It's absolutely the sexy man sitting across from me looking at me like *I'm* the meal he wanted to order.

"Tell me about yourself."

"Hmm, really? What do you want to know?"

He shrugs a shoulder. "Whatever you want to tell me."

Nothing is my first reaction. I don't want him to know that because I'm too much of a coward to go against my family's plans for me, I'll be in a loveless marriage starting this summer. I don't want him to get a better understanding of how much money my family really has, because it makes me feel like a spoiled brat when people outside of my circle know.

"Okay, how about I tell you about myself? As I mentioned earlier, I come from a big family and we're all a little crazy. I'm the second oldest of four. Older sister. Two younger brothers. They're still in high school. My sister is only a year older than me. My parents must have needed a bit more time to try for more kids after I entered the world." He chuckles at

himself. “My dad cheated on my mom, they got a divorce, Mom got remarried a few months ago to a great guy. We don’t have much of a relationship with my dad anymore.”

“Wow. That’s...”

He grins. “A lot? Maybe I spilled a little too much. I’m an honest guy, though.”

I take a big swallow of my wine and set the glass down. “Okay, here goes. My parents are still together... though I’m not sure why. I mean, I know why but not really. My dad works a lot so I don’t have much of a relationship with him, either. I’m an only child. A few cousins that I’m close with, but no siblings.”

“Did you ever wish you had a sister or brother?”

“Yeah. All the time. My parents are busy so I was alone a lot.”

I don’t like the look of pity that crosses his face so I quickly change the subject.

“I’m graduating from University of Chicago in a few months.”

His expression clears, and I can tell he knows exactly what I’m doing. “Oh, yeah? What degree?”

One I won’t be able to use. “Counseling psychology.”

“Is that to become a therapist?”

“Yeah.” That would be my dream, but I’ll be told otherwise. Actually, I’ll be married not long after I get my diploma and my time spent in college will all be for naught. “What about you?”

“Just graduated with a business degree from University of Tennessee. Right now I’m working for my stepdad’s company.”

“And that is?”

“A furniture company.”

“Nice. You enjoy it?”

“It’s probably not what I want to do forever, but it’s a good place to work for now.”

I drink the last of my wine, and our waitress comes over, asking if we want another. Three glasses might be more than my limit, but I’m having too much fun to say no. We both say yes and she lets us know she’ll be right back with it.

For the next few minutes, we give each other basic information about ourselves. Our favorite food, color, animal, vacation, movies, shows, music... nothing deep but helps me relax. We learn we have a lot in common, which shouldn’t surprise me but it does. Maybe because my entire life I’ve lied about those answers because I had to play the part. But with *Cash/Danny*, I know I can be myself. When I tell him that *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* is my favorite movie, he doesn’t make fun of me. He starts quoting lines and doing the best Jim Carrey impression I’ve ever seen. My favorite vacation? One that I just went on. Because I did what *I* wanted to do. I wasn’t under a microscope the entire time.

“What were you doing here in New York?”

“Business,” he tells me. “For Stone, that’s my stepdad. I had meetings with a new supplier and then with some prospective buyers. The furniture he builds is primarily custom.” *Cash/Danny* reaches into his pocket and pulls out his

phone, scrolling a bit then turns it to me. “Like this. He does amazing work.”

I gasp, taking the phone from his hand. Our fingers graze one another’s and when our eyes connect, I know he feels the same thing I do. Clearing my throat, I agree with him. “I’ll say. This is incredible. It’s all custom?”

“Most of it, yeah. He has a line of pieces that are more, standard, I guess you could say, but they’re still more unique than what you’d find in a typical furniture store.”

I hand him the phone back and sit back in my seat, taking a sip out of my new glass of wine the waitress delivered. Cash does the same with his beer. Our eyes, though, never stray from keeping contact. I couldn’t tear my gaze away from him if I wanted to. Which I don’t.

“You’re beautiful, you know that?” His words are bold and I love it.

“I do now.”

His head turns to the side a little. “Don’t tell me no one has told you you’re beautiful before.”

“They’ve said it, but never meant it the way you did just now.”

Beneath the table, his foot brushes against mine. I lean forward and slide my hand across the table. His fingers touch mine, linking our pinkies together.

Trying to flirt with him without being obvious is taking a lot of my energy. I take a sip of my wine and he winks and that’s when I basically die inside, my lady bits clenching.

While finishing our drinks, we continue to talk. With every word out of his mouth, the weight of what’s at home for me

feels heavier and heavier.

He's a *good* guy.

A family guy.

Someone who I can tell has your back without question.

The way he speaks of his family, his life back in Tennessee, it's what I have dreamed of my entire life.

Small town life seems so... easy. I'm sure living in a small town isn't perfect, but living in a city where I feel shackled to a life I don't want isn't easy, either. Maybe it's just Cash's small-town life. With his supportive and loving family and roots that have grown deep.

Our waitress drops off the bill and he grabs it before I have the chance.

"You don't have..."

"Shut it. Let me be the gentleman because honestly, looking at you right now and having this time together is giving me a lot of ungentlemanly thoughts."

My cheeks heat but I don't look away from him. I couldn't even if I wanted to. I'm entranced. By Cash. "Thank you." My voice is barely a whisper and my breath catches when his tongue snakes out and licks his lower lip.

"My pleasure."

Pleasure. Why does that one word sound so erotic coming from his mouth?

As we walk to the elevator, our hands brush together and when we step into the elevator, pushing the buttons for our floors, a twinge of disappointment hits me. I don't want the night to end.

And then...

He turns to me, his hand slipping under my hair and around my neck.

My hands land on his trim waist.

My breath catches in my throat at the look in his dark eyes.

Has anyone ever looked at me the way Cash looks at me?

The answer is no.

“Please,” I whisper, praying that he knows what I’m begging for.

Before I know what’s happening, his mouth descends and at the first contact, I feel more alive than I thought possible. A kiss has never made me feel more like myself. I’ve never felt the touch of a man’s calloused hand and I’m desperate for it. Not from just any man, though. From Cash. This kind and funny and ridiculously sexy man who embodies all the qualities in a person I’ve been missing in my life. When the elevator doors open to my floor, I don’t hesitate, I tug him behind me and throw all thoughts of my future away.

I deserve this one night.

And I won’t feel guilty because this one night might be the only time in my entire life that I’m putting myself first. That I’m taking what I want and not acting like some puppet on a string.

For one night, I want to forget.

Chapter One

CASH

My little brother is about to propose to the woman of his dreams and he's not the least bit nervous. Mainly because he knows what the answer will be but also because he's certain of the fact that Naomi is perfect for him. He's loved her for so long I can't even remember a time he didn't love her. Even when she was married to some tool and he had to watch from the sidelines.

For as attractive as us Lake children are, and that's not me being cocky or full of myself, it's just a fact and one that people tell us on the daily, we sure do seem to have a hard time finding love – or, at least the kind of love that lasts. And that's why seeing Brock so damn happy makes the rest of us so damn happy.

I'm the second oldest of four kids. My older sister, Corbin Rae, who we call Cor, might be the happiest because Naomi is also my sister's best friend. Then comes Boone, who has the best thing in the world. My nephew Cody. Boone's a single dad and a great one, at that. He might not have been ready to become a dad at the age of eighteen but he's not only managed but been the best dad Cody could have asked for.

We're hiding in the kitchen of the diner where Brock's about to propose. To some, it might not seem romantic, but it is to them. The diner means something to Brock and Naomi.

"What happens if she says no because she's going to wait for me to be older?" Cody asks with a smirk.

I give him a noogie and he swats my hand away. "You're a stinker, you know that?"

"Just statin' facts. You know all the girls want this." He points at himself and gives me a cheesy grin.

I bust up laughing. Cody's only twelve and doesn't lack self-confidence. At all. It's both hilarious and somewhat annoying because he has so little fear of what he can accomplish and do on his own.

"She won't say no," I affirm his earlier question. He might have played it off with a joke, but I know my nephew. He's truly wondering what would happen if she did. Brock would be devastated, that's what. But I know the love Naomi has for my brother matches the love he has for her. There's not a snowball's chance in hell she'll say no to his proposal.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure, buddy." I tuck him in for a hug and we inch closer. All of us wanting to see what's happening but not be seen. We're like a herd of elephants back here so I have no idea how Naomi hasn't noticed us. Subtle is not in the Lake family DNA.

"Good. That would suck."

"Yes, it would. But no worries. Auntie Naomi will officially be your auntie, and not just because she's a friend of the family."

He grins up at me and then we hear it. The start of his proposal.

“...You’re my other half. My best friend. The woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife? Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” Naomi whispers, but since we’re all paying close attention we can hear it. We have to look like a bunch of idiots, crouching down behind the large window that orders are handed through. Like a group of meerkats poking our heads up over the counter. We’re all too nosy to care how we look, though. A sob escapes her throat and this time it’s louder when she says, “Yes, Brock. I’ll marry you.”

Brock slides the ring onto her finger and tugs her out of the booth, crushing her in a kiss that has me covering Cody’s eyes. We all fight to get through the door at the same time, shooting confetti guns and playing “When a Man Loves a Woman” by Percy Sledge through the portable speaker Cody’s carrying.

“She said yes!” Brock hollers unnecessarily.

We let my mom hug them first, because no one would consider getting in the way of Leah Lake-Montgomery in this situation. The ladies are crying and Cody looks confused as to why they’re crying in a happy situation.

“Happy tears, buddy. Women cry when they’re sad *and* when they’re happy.”

His little face screws up. “Women are weird.”

“Yup,” I agree.

We continue to celebrate, even with some champagne I smuggled into the diner that’s a dry establishment. I used my Cash Lake charm on Dorothy, the long-time owner, and she

agreed. Considering she's a huge romantic, and loves Brock and Naomi, it didn't take much convincing.

"Wow! It's a party in here!" I hear a slightly familiar voice say from behind me. But the voice comes from a woman I knew a lifetime ago so it couldn't be her. It's a voice I never expected to hear again but one I've thought of time and time again. When I turn around, the face I also never expected to see again is looking around the room, eyes bright and smile wide. Until her eyes connect with mine. Her smile dies instantly and she looks like she's seen a ghost. I have no doubt my expression is the same.

"Hadley?" My voice is hoarse and filled with shock. Shock. That's putting seeing Hadley here in this tiny diner in Red Oak, Tennessee, my hometown, mildly. "What... what are you doing here?"

"Cash?" Hadley replies. Her voice, though, is something I can only call... nervous. Why is she nervous? I'm bouncing between excited to see her and confused as to why she's standing in the diner in Red Oak. What is she doing here? The last time I saw her she was boarding a plane in New York City to go home to Chicago.

We stare at each other, both of us blinking repeatedly.

"I'm Dorothy's great niece," Hadley explains, though it still doesn't make sense to me. I understand that she's her niece, but how is it that she's *here*.

"I knew it!" Naomi shouts. "You were our waitress one time. Remember, Leah?" she says, turning to Mom whose face is full of confusion. Mom nods but doesn't pull her gaze away from me. She can read me like a book and right now that's making me a little itchy. She knows Hadley means *something* to me; she just doesn't know what. Well, that makes two of us.

Sure, we spent the best night of my life together, but that was years ago.

“Cash, honey? Do you know Hadley already?”

I clear my throat which feels like it’s full of rocks. “Yeah, Mom. We’ve... uh... met.”

“Mom! I brought in the cups!” Someone else has entered the party and this time, I feel like my world is rocked.

Hadley spins around on her toes and rushes to where the girl is standing. “Okay, honey, thanks. Just...”

“What’s going on here? Is it a birthday party?”

“Are you Brooklyn?” Cody asks and she nods. “That’s the girl I said was hot, right, Dad? When we were eating pizza and I was telling y’all about the threesome fight?”

“The what?” my stepfather Stone asks, amused and oblivious to my inner turmoil.

“Never mind,” Boone mutters. “Yeah, Cody, that’s the same girl. But let’s keep our voice down, shall we? I have a feeling Uncle Cash is about to come to some sort of epiphany.”

“This is your daughter?” I ask Hadley, trying to make sense of the situation.

Hadley nods once, her eyes jetting over to her daughter quickly before returning to mine. “Yes.”

I look at Brooklyn. A conversation I had with my brother several months ago coming to mind.

“Can I tell you who I thought that Brooklyn girl reminded me of?”

“Of course.”

“Hadley.”

Brock seems to think it over, trying to remember who I could be talking about. “Hadley... the one you had a fling with like fifteen years ago?”

“That’d be the one. I’m surprised you remembered her name.”

“You’ve mentioned her a time or twelve,” he teases but I don’t smile. I feel like I’ve just looked straight into the eyes of someone I let walk out of my life and have regretted it every single day since.

“Something about Brooklyn. I don’t know. She just seemed familiar to me. Maybe it was her coloring or something.”

But it was more than her coloring.

My gaze shifts back and forth between her and Hadley, my brain slowly catching on to what’s happening. The similarities between Hadley and Brooklyn is uncanny but I see something else in Brooklyn. Or, someone else. My mom. My stomach is in a knot and I feel like it’s possible I’ll throw up right here on the floor of the diner where my brother just proposed to his girlfriend.

“Think we have some stuff to talk about, don’t you?”

Hadley also looks like she could throw up which means I have reason to be feeling the way I’m feeling. At least, I think I do. Maybe I’m way off the mark here. It’s not like dark hair and eyes is especially unique.

Naomi whispers, “Uh, I think I’m missing something.”

“Cash, I...”

“We need to talk, Hadley,” I interrupt her, my voice a little harsher than I intended but there’s clearly a lot I’ve missed

over the past fifteen years. Gone are the feelings of excitement over seeing her, now they're replaced by anxiety and a bit of anger. Anger that I may not even be justified to feeling which is why I need to get this cleared up immediately.

She sighs heavily and looks over at Brooklyn. "Yeah, I think we do."

"Can someone please explain to me what's happening here?" Mom demands.

"Later, Mom."

"I'm not sure what's happening, but why don't you two use the office?" Dorothy suggests. "Brooklyn's okay here with me."

I stomp that way without seeing if Hadley's following.

The second I get into the office, I spin around and cross my arms over my chest, immediately assaulted by how beautiful Hadley is, even when she's doing her best not to look at me. She was beautiful fifteen years ago and nothing's changed. Except, maybe, she's gotten even more beautiful.

Hadley quietly shuts the door behind her then turns to face me, keeping her eyes downcast.

"I'm going to ask you a question and I want an honest answer. I don't care how you think I'll react because you don't know me well enough to know that. What you'll realize is that no matter what your answer is, I won't be an asshole about it. So please, God, be honest with me. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

"Hadley, is Brooklyn my daughter?"

Hadley lifts her tear-filled eyes to me and bites her lip.

“Is she? Is Brooklyn my daughter, Hadley?” I demand to know. Scratch that. I deserve to know.

“No,” comes her whispered response.

Why am I disappointed? I should be happy that I hadn't been deprived of knowing my own daughter her entire life but instead, I feel like I was just punched in the gut.

“She's not?” I whisper back, disbelieving. But she... she looks like my mother, right?

“I know. I know. I wish...” She pauses, her eyes closing and head shaking back and forth. “When I got back to Chicago, things were a mess. A bigger mess than they were before. I kept thinking of you and wishing I was back in New York in that hotel room where things were just... good and easy. Mom and Dad knew something was up with me and then things happened so fast.”

“What does that mean?”

She's quiet for a few moments before she tells me, “When we met in New York, I was engaged to someone else.”

“Engaged?” I shout. “You said you were *promised* but that it didn't really mean anything because it was just family shit. You told me you weren't going to actually marry him because you didn't love him.”

“It sounds terrible. I'm sorry I lied. When I told you that -”

“After we had sex, I'd like to remind you.”

“Yeah, that was shitty of me but I couldn't... okay, would you relax?” she demands when she notices how wound up I am. Hands balled into fists and my feet planted wide. “I need to explain everything but I can't if you're going to act like a damn caged tiger in here.”

“Sorry, it’s just a shock to see you and I honestly thought Brooklyn was mine which is oddly disappointing to find out she isn’t. I also hate that I just found out that the only time you and I were together was when you were *cheating* on your fiancé.”

“Cash, listen to me, if you believe nothing else I say, please know that it wasn’t cheating. The engagement? It was all our parents’ doing. He didn’t want it just as much as I didn’t. We weren’t in love.”

“So how on earth do you explain being engaged to him? And why didn’t you wear a ring or tell me?”

Hadley fidgets with her hands. “To explain that, I need to go to the beginning.”

I gesture with her to get on with it and take a seat in one of the chairs. “Go ahead. I’m listening.”

She moves the other chair so she’s facing me and takes a seat. “My family, I told you a bit about my past. The truth of it is, I come from old money.”

I knew she had family money but figured it was normal wealthy not... “Old money?”

“The kind where I’m expected to marry someone with the same status.”

“So this engagement...?”

“Was to a guy named Trotter. Our families had been friends since before we were born. It was always the plan. Trotter and I would marry. When he proposed, he barely choked out the words. Then he got drunk and slept with someone else, which I found out about later. Like I said, he didn’t want to marry me either.”

“Your parents expected you to marry someone just because they had the same type of money?”

“Sure did. That’s what they did. What their grandparents did. Aunt Dorothy was the only one in our family who broke away and went down her own path. She was disowned for it,” she scoffs with an eye roll. “I never knew she existed until a year ago. That’s a story for another time, but when I found out, I reached out to her and she gave me the courage to do the same.”

I turn my head and breathe out a heavy sigh. “That night, we shared a lot. And I don’t mean in words. Why couldn’t you have been honest with me?”

“Because I was living a fantasy. It was the one time in my life that I allowed myself to do that.”

“So that’s all I was? A fantasy?”

“No!” she shouts, reaching out to me then pulling her arm back like she’s afraid to touch me. “Not at all. That night was perfect. In every way. I should have explained everything and been more upfront but to be perfectly honest, I didn’t think we’d ever see each other again.”

I give her a look then glance around. “How’d that turn out for ya?”

“Kind of shot myself in the foot there, huh? Anyway, back to the story. The entire flight home I cried. I couldn’t stop thinking about you and our night together and wished like hell that we’d exchanged information. By the time I landed in Chicago, I’d made the decision that I wasn’t going to marry Trotter. I was going to break things off and find myself. Possibly come find you in the process. But when I went to my

mother about not wanting to marry Trotter, she told me things.”

“Like what?”

“There were stipulations in my trust fund, for one. I know how that sounds, that I was more worried about money than making the right choices for myself, but it wasn’t only that. She was pretty good about reminding me of where I stood in the family. If I didn’t marry Trotter, it wasn’t only me who would suffer, but she and my dad as well. She made it sound like I would be ruining our family. And maybe she’s right. There’s a lot of history between my family and Trotter’s. History that’s about more than finances. I don’t know. I was young. Stupid.”

“I’m confused,” I admit. This seems ridiculous to me. Marrying someone you don’t love just to please your parents is something I can’t fathom. Probably because mine would never do such a thing.

“I know. And I was, too. It’s just that the entire thing is too much to explain in a quick meeting in my aunt’s office.”

“So you were going to find yourself, and maybe me, but you were afraid because they would cut you off? All because of money?”

“That’s not the only reason. When I got home from New York, I found out I wasn’t the only one who spent time with someone else while I was gone. Trotter was... *active*.”

“And?”

“And, what?”

“And then what? Trotter and you weren’t in love and he did the same thing you did. Had their little fantasy come to life,” I add with a little too much snark in my voice.

“Stop, okay? It was a fantasy, yes, but it was more than that. I promise you. That night meant more to me than you could ever know. You were the first person who actually saw me. Didn’t see my money or background. You saw me. And still wanted me.”

And then it hits me. Brooklyn.

“Her name.”

A tear slips down Hadley’s face. “It was my way of keeping you near me, I guess. It went way against family tradition but I won that small battle. I know we didn’t meet in Brooklyn but it’s not like I could name her airport bar,” she adds with a little laugh.

As much as hearing that she named Brooklyn after our time together means to me, it still confuses me. We spent one night together. Sure, I still think about it. Probably too often, but it was still just the one night.

“Okay, so you got back, told your family you didn’t want to get married to Trotter – which is a stupid fucking name, by the way – and then what?”

She smirks at my remark about Trotter’s name. “Trotter’s gay. His active lifestyle? It was his way of exploring something that had been simmering beneath the surface all his life. You wouldn’t understand what that would be like in families like ours. Unacceptable is putting it mildly.”

“So not only do they demand who you marry, they control who you love? They sound delightful.” She scrunches up her nose and nods. “How’d you find out about Trotter? Did he tell you?”

“I caught him with another man. I went to his house after I got home because despite the fact that I wasn’t *in* love with

him, he was still one of my best friends. I knew I could be honest with him about our time together and explain that we had to somehow get out of marrying each other. Anyway, I let myself in and, well, he had a guest. Two, actually.” She laughs.

My eyebrows shoot to my hairline. “I take it that was a shock.”

“Definitely. But, not really. Not once I thought about it a little bit. There were always signs. We had a good talk then. An actual talk where we laid it all out to each other. I told him what happened in New York and he told me he loved me but could never love me the way a husband should love a wife. Neither of us wanted to get married to each other but we also didn’t know how to get out of it.”

“This is so strange, you realize that, right?”

She nods sadly. “It is. But it’s always how I grew up so to me it wasn’t completely strange, I guess. Our parents cared about only a few things in life. Money and image being their top two. My parents, well, ours, actually, had closeted open marriages. My mom told me all about it in one of the worst conversations in the history of the world. He proposed the same to me. Marry each other and take lovers on the side. Those were his exact words.”

I clear my throat. “How romantic. And yet you still said yes.”

She gives me a look as if she still can’t believe it either.

“Okay, so your parents threatened to cut you off and your fiancé told you he wanted to marry you to keep up appearances but that he was going to sleep with other people while you were married. None of this made you think that

maybe your family wasn't the most supportive and marrying him wasn't going to be a good decision?"

"That's why it makes me sound superficial and awful. That night we met, you talked about your family and how supportive they were. I never had that. I was desperate for that."

"So you agreed to marry him anyway?"

Hadley nods sadly and I bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from saying something that I'll never be able to take back.

"And where does Brooklyn come into the mix? You're sure she's not mine?"

Chapter Two

HADLEY

It might make me a terrible person to admit this, but for so long I'd wished Cash was her father. He's the type of man I *wanted* to have by my side while raising a child.

"She's Trotter's. I got my period two days after getting back from New York."

"But... the timing?" he asks.

"I got pregnant the following month. Our wedding got moved up. Mom knew I was about to bolt and Trotter was on board with it because he was all about the money. He was used to a certain lifestyle that he wasn't willing to give up and I felt stuck. I had no one to turn to. If I left the family, I'd have nothing. Nowhere and no one to turn to. My friends were all friends of the family and my parents would have gotten involved. I was too sheltered to know how to do anything on my own. Maybe it was immature of me, but I also felt guilty into the marriage. When you're young and your parents tell you that you'll ruin everything if you don't *obey*, it's not like you feel you have many options. So I obeyed. I married Trotter. We got pregnant on our wedding night."

His eyes are wide and he keeps shaking his head in disbelief.

“Wow. So you married for money.”

“Basically, yes.” There’s no point in denying it. “I was young, scared, and completely alone. Like I said, I had no one to turn to or get advice from. I didn’t follow my own heart because my entire life I’d been told one thing and my heart was driving me in a different direction. I didn’t trust myself.”

“What drove you to leave?”

“My parents; they had even higher expectations of Brooklyn than they did me.”

Cash’s jaw clenches so tightly I’m afraid he’s going to chip a tooth.

“I didn’t want that for her. Neither did Trotter.”

“Does she know why you left?”

“Yeah, she does. I vowed to always be more honest and open with my daughter than my parents were. I made sure to set her up for success rather than failure like my parents did me. She understood that we came from money and in our home, the home Trotter and I built for her, it was full of love. She knew love. Brooklyn has never felt pressured to be someone she’s not for Trotter or me. That was my stipulation with him. We knew we’d have children and I told him if I was going to go through with the sham of a marriage, our kids would never go through what we did. She understands what a parent/child relationship should look like because she lives it. But she saw it differently from her grandparents. When she got old enough to start asking questions, Trotter and I knew that something had to change. She knows that Trotter is gay and that our marriage was pretty much arranged. She also knows

that despite that, her father and I love each other in our own way.” I smile at that. For all his faults, Trotter is full of love. For Brooklyn. For me. He might have been okay with the marriage because he wanted the money and freedom that money brought him, but he is still a good man. I can’t fault him for not wanting to leave the lifestyle he knew his entire life. But, he learned over time that money isn’t the key to happiness. Hindsight is always twenty/twenty, I guess. “That was only part of the reason why we got a divorce. Trotter saw that while I was happy because of Brooklyn, the rest of it was making me a shell of the person I am now. He wouldn’t allow for our fake marriage, his words, to continue. He was tired of living under their thumb, too. Apparently the money he thought would keep him happy didn’t make him happy after all. I’d like to think it was because he cares that deeply for me, but I know it’s because he met someone he didn’t want to keep on the side any longer.

“Unfortunately, we weren’t the ones who told her about the divorce. My mother was. When we told our parents we had filed for divorce, everyone lost their minds. It just wasn’t done in our circle. Brooklyn was supposed to be at her friend’s house but we didn’t see the text that they were bringing her home to grab something. She walked in as Mom was yelling and wondering why it would matter now. That we should just continue on with how things were.”

I give him my best re-telling of the night Brooklyn found out and watch as his eyes grow darker and angrier as I continue.

“I don’t understand why you’re acting so childish. Why you’d disrespect us this way. Do you know all that we’ve done for you? Your ten thousand square foot home? Cars? Clothes? Vacations? That’s all possible because we allow it to be

possible. Marriage isn't about love. That's just a fairy tale we're supposed to believe but we're smarter than that. Neither of you have seemed to be bothered about this before. Hell, have you even spent a night together since your wedding night? You didn't care about being in love then, so why does it matter now? This marriage between you two is about more than these frivolous feelings of yours. You think you can leave here and find love and comfort? You won't. I promise you. It's not possible. Love doesn't exist in the real world. Life is about status and if you think otherwise, then you're childish. Money is what makes the world go round, not love. You knew this when you walked down the aisle, Hadley, and if you do this, you're no longer welcome here. You're no longer a part of this family."

"Are you serious?"

"I mean, that's not word for word, obviously, but yes, that's how it went down. Brooklyn heard it all. And my mother didn't care. She simply looked at Brooklyn and told her it was time for her to know the truth and understand what it meant to be in the family.

"That was my last straw. I walked away from my family and their financial security. I'm old enough I can still access my trust fund even with the divorce, but I won't. I'd rather eat my own foot than utilize any money from my family."

My parents thought they won because I walked away with nothing but the clothes on our backs, my car, and the money I had in my checking and savings accounts. They were wrong.

They might think that life revolves around money.

They're wrong about that, too.

“Wow. I have no idea how to respond to this,” Cash replies. “Are you okay now?” he asks.

“I am now. Life was hard at first, yes. There was the divorce and making the decision to move away from Chicago. When I found Aunt Dorothy, a little voice in the back of my head kept saying *Tennessee, Tennessee, Tennessee...* as if something deeper was calling me here rather than a long lost relative. Anyway, that’s beside the point.” I wave my hand, realizing I said more than I intended. “I’m good. I’m happier than I’ve been in a long time. Trotter is committed to visiting Brooklyn as often as he can because neither of us want her going to Chicago, where he still lives.”

“You lived for fifteen years in a marriage based on lies?”

I scrunch up my nose. “Well, when you put it like that...”

Cash blows out a breath and leans back in his seat. “She’s really not mine?” he asks again.

He looks a little disappointed about that. I would think he’d be relieved to know that he didn’t meet his daughter for the first time today. I remember how important family is to him, though, and wonder if that’s why. Maybe he wants a family of his own and was excited about the thought of having a daughter. “She’s definitely Trotter’s. We did a paternity test even though it had been a few months since I’d been with you. We just wanted to be sure. Plus there was the testing to make sure we were both clean. And even on the honeymoon, it was basically that one time so it’s a miracle she was even born. Lord knows after we had her it didn’t happen much because as I mentioned, he’s gay and while I can’t say for sure because I’m straight, I would think one who is attracted to men wouldn’t find much enjoyment having sex with a female. Which is clearly too much information but I’m nervous and

now my mouth has diarrhea.” I feel my face heat and I drop my head and cover my face with my hands. “Oh my gosh, I’ll shut up now.”

He barks out a laugh, and I look up at him to see he’s smiling and shaking his head. “So she’s not mine. Got it.”

“Right. I’m sorry for the overshare. Seeing you after all these years sent my brain a little,” I flail my hands around my head to emphasize my point, “whirr, you know? It’s just going round and round. I just...” I smile wide and pat my palms against his chest, feeling lighter than I have in years. “Gah, Cash. You’re here. Like. Here. How is this even possible?”

“Well, I live here, so...” he teases.

“I know, I know. But out of all the places? It’s just a little wild to me. I never expected this.”

How I went from telling Cash about Brooklyn to gushing over seeing him again is confusing even me. I’m sure he feels like I just did a one-eighty right in front of him.

With my change in subject, he seems to relax. “Come here, you.” He wraps me in his arms and I breathe in his scent. My cheek rests against his chest for a moment before we both pull away. When I look up at him I have to swallow down the lump in my throat and wipe away a tear that decided to make an appearance. Followed by a few more.

He watches me closely, his eyes soft as he wipes away a tear with the pad of his thumb. “Well, welcome to Red Oak, Sandra. I hope it’s less dramatic than your time in Chicago.”

A bubble of laughter bursts out of me, along with a stream of tears. He remembers. It makes me wonder if he remembers everything about that night like I can. Like I’ve relived in my dreams.

“Thanks, Danny, I hope so, too,” I eventually say around my crying and laughter, wiping my eyes. It’s such an odd combination and one I haven’t had in such a long time.

Cash stuffs his hands in his pockets and leans against the edge of his desk. “We caught up quite a bit just now,” he raises his eyebrows and I roll my eyes in return, “but I’d like to take you for a cup of coffee or dinner sometime. Maybe show you some of the places Dorothy wouldn’t think to show you. I’ll give you my number and just reach out when you’re ready.”

I know my smile is watery but I can’t find it in me to stop crying right now. I’m emotional. Between the move here and seeing Cash again for the first time in fifteen years, I can’t seem to gather my wits.

“I’d like that.”

“Me, too.”

Chapter Three

CASH

“You okay?” Mom asks me the second I walk out of Dorothy’s office. I wouldn’t put it past her to have been listening with a glass up to the door the entire time.

“All good, Ma.”

She gives me the mom look that always made me crumble and confess all my sins growing up and I know this conversation is far from over.

“She okay?”

I smile down at her, loving that she cares enough to ask about a complete stranger.

“Yeah. But I think we need to get the family out of here so she’s not bombarded when she leaves the office.”

She nods once and turns on her heel. I notice all the confetti is cleaned up off the floor and I’m grateful they took the time to do that while Hadley and I were talking. There’s no reason for us to make a mess and leave it for Dorothy to take care of later.

“All right, everyone! Time to go. Let Dorothy close up and we can continue this celebration at the house,” Mom announces.

Without question, I know everyone will follow Mom’s lead. My siblings look at me closely but I shake my head. Today isn’t about me and my past. It’s about celebrating my brother’s new engagement to the woman he’s loved his entire life.

“Good?” Brock asks, a hand on my shoulder giving me a light squeeze. I nod once, knowing that he’ll understand I’ll explain later.

Stone is watching me closely and I can’t help but feel a twinge of sadness for Hadley. She never had this. A group of overbearing love junkies who care to the point of too much about her at times. I can’t imagine what it was like for her to have family care so little about her. From what she says, they cared about money and status and if it meant their child would live in misery, they were okay with that. I just... that’s not okay. And while I feel like my family might be sometimes a little too involved, I wouldn’t trade them for the world or ask them to change. Because their involvement comes from a place of love and they genuinely care.

Whatever Stone sees in my expression seems to appease him enough to shuttle our herd out the door. With a quick nod letting me know that he understands but we’ll absolutely be talking about it later, he says in an authoritative voice, “Alright, everyone, our place. Food. Drinks. We’ve got some celebrating to do and Dorothy is sick of our ugly mugs.”

“I said no such thing,” Dorothy protests before adding, “but I do need to close up.”

My sister Corbin links her arm through mine and says, “I’m riding with you.”

I almost groan because I know that means she’ll be grilling me the entire ride to Mom and Stone’s house.

“I’m not even a little surprised,” I tease.

As soon as we’re buckled in and I put my truck in drive, Corbin turns to me with an expression she inherited from our mother.

“You’re not going to let it go, are you?”

“Not a chance in hell.”

I scrub a hand over my stubbled cheek and lean back in my seat, one hand on the steering wheel. “Hadley and I met fifteen years ago in a hotel lobby after our flights from New York were cancelled because of a snow storm. We spent the night together. It was a good night. A night I’ve thought about many times over the years. Her family isn’t like ours. Basically the opposite, actually. She’s here in Tennessee because she needed to get out of the toxic environment she and her daughter were in. She was married, now she’s not. Her ex-husband is still involved in Brooklyn’s life and it sounds like he’s a decent guy.”

“Is Brooklyn yours?” she asks bluntly, like only a sister can.

“Nope.”

She seems taken aback by my answer, sitting quietly for a few seconds. “Really?”

“They did a paternity test. Besides, the timing is off. Close, but off.”

“She kind of looks like Mom.”

I glance over at Corbin to see her watching me. “Similar features, but it’s not like they’re unique features.”

“Are you okay?”

“Not sure yet,” I tell her honestly.

Corbin reaches across the console and grips my forearm, giving me a quick squeeze before releasing it.

“Thank you for telling me.”

I nod, still staring out the windshield.

Tonight went in a direction I didn’t expect. Sure, I knew Naomi would say yes to Brock’s proposal but seeing Hadley again? Never in a million years would I have guessed it.

I don’t allow myself much time to dwell on it, though. We have celebrating to do for Brock and Naomi.

Inside Mom and Stone’s house, though, everyone seems to have a different plan.

After everyone bombards me with questions that I’m not in the mood to answer, Stone pulls me out to the chairs on their back deck. He pops the top off a couple beers, handing one to me and motions for me to sit down.

“Your mom was asked to be on a Granny basketball league.”

I choke on the beer I was just drinking, the frothy liquid dribbling down my chin and down onto my shirt.

“Warn a guy next time, will ya?”

Stone chuckles. “How’s one supposed to warn someone about something like this?”

I cough a few times and swallow down another glug of beer, hoping it’ll calm my throat a bit.

“Granny basketball’s a thing?”

“Apparently. She couldn’t decide if she was offended or flattered because she’s the youngest one on the team and they said they needed her.”

“So is it okay if we all start calling her Granny?”

“If you want her to wash your mouth out with soap you can,” he adds with a laugh.

I start laughing. Hard. Because Leah Lake-Montgomery might be a lot of wonderful things but athletic is not one of them. Soon Stone and I are laughing so hard we’re wiping tears from running down our faces and unable to catch our breath.

“How’s that gonna go for her? She’ll dribble down the court but the ball bounces off her foot, she trips and face-plants? Or when they get into position to tip off, the women pee their pants when they jump? Mom might be in good shape, but I can’t picture her playing an entire basketball game, either.”

“That’s exactly how it’ll go. At time-outs, the women will probably all need pee breaks and then they’ll get distracted by showing each other pictures of their family, exchanging recipes, or talking about where they plan to vacation next. Maybe what book they’re reading or making plans to meet for coffee.”

“I have so many questions but really hope I get to watch this go down.”

“You think she won’t expect y’all to be in the fans cheering her on? She’ll probably make everyone wear matching t-shirts and wear foam fingers.”

Shaking my head and chuckling at the accuracy of that statement, I can't help but agree. "You're absolutely right about that." I can hear it now. She'll go on and on about how many times she was cheering for us in the stands and now it's our turn. She's not wrong about that, either. If she joins a team of grandmas playing basketball, I'll be there not just because it'll be entertaining but because she's always been there for us.

"When I met your mom, I knew there was something more between us. It wasn't right then. We were both married to other people and even having those thoughts about another woman wasn't right of me. So I didn't let them continue. Because a man who's any man at all won't entertain the thought of other women while they're married to another. I would never have let anything inappropriate go down between your mother and me, and she wouldn't have either, though I don't think she felt the same way I did when we first met. My first wife and I didn't have a marriage filled with the love a marriage deserves from the start. We were together for the sake of Malina and I don't regret a single day. We didn't have a bad marriage; we didn't fight or scream at each other. We just weren't meant to be. When we divorced I didn't plan to pursue your mother, but then life happened, as you know. We were now both single and I couldn't ignore how I felt.

"But I knew it would take time because your mom wasn't ready. I was okay with that because I was willing to wait for her. She was and always will be my person so being her friend until she was ready for more was enough for me. I don't know the details between you and Hadley or about Hadley's past and it's truly none of my business unless Hadley wants to share that down the road. I'll only say this and I want you to listen to the words I'm about to say because they come from a father who loves you whether you came from my blood or not."

I swallow hard and lick my lips, giving Stone my full attention. He might not be my biological dad and I may not have met him until I was about to graduate high school, but he's been like a father to me since. He's the best man I know.

“You look at Hadley the way I look at your mom. The way your mom, thank fuck, looks at me in return. And I saw it in the five seconds I spent around y'all in the same room. She walked through that door and I swear I saw you release a breath as if you've been waiting for her to return to your life for however long she's been out of it. Now, you also looked like you were confused and a little angry at first but when you walked back out of that office I saw nothing but peace in your eyes. I don't know if she's your person or not but if she is, and if what brought her here to Red Oak is extreme, take your time and have patience. If she's worth it, it'll be easy to give her that time she needs.”

“I met her fifteen years ago when I was on a trip for you in New York. The one where the flight was delayed due to a blizzard blanketing the entire Northeast.”

He nods as if he can recall the exact time I'm talking about. “And you haven't stopped thinking about her since?”

“I mean, it's not like I've obsessed over her or anything but she's been in the back of my mind, yeah. I don't know if she's my person like you and Mom are for each other, though.”

Stone cocks his head to the side and raises his eyebrows.

“Okay, fine, maybe she is. But seriously we spent twelve hours together years ago. That's it.”

“And?”

I blow out a breath and drain the last of my beer, setting the empty bottle on the ground. “And I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

“Isn’t everything?”

I scoff. “Why is that? When does life become easy?”

“The easy parts of life aren’t as rewarding in the end.”

Lacing my fingers together behind my head, I look up at the night sky. “I suppose that’s true.”

We sit in silence, listening to the chaos in the house but relishing in the quiet outdoors for a few more minutes before I hear the sliding door open all the way.

“Everything okay out here?” Mom asks.

Stone stretches an arm out to her and tugs her until she lands on his lap. “Everything’s great.” He kisses her cheek and she smiles down at him.

In all the years my parents were married, I don’t recall her smiling like she does with Stone. I also don’t remember them being unhappy, necessarily. They weren’t overly affectionate with one another but they also didn’t fight or argue, much like Stone said about his previous marriage.

“Did you and Dad stay together all those years just because of us kids?” I ask the question that just came to me.

Mom doesn’t flinch or react as if that question was rude or out of line. “In the end, I would say yes. We loved each other in the beginning but over time, things between us shifted. I won’t put all the blame on your father even though he’s the one who asked for the divorce. The fault in our marriage wasn’t one-sided. To answer your question, that was never our intention but it drifted that way on its own, I believe.”

“And you were okay with that?”

“For me, I didn’t know any different. I hadn’t seen what kind of love was waiting for me. And yes, at the time I was okay with that. I look back now and have no regrets aside from you kids not having the best version of your dad now.”

“Yeah,” I respond because I don’t know what else to say.

“Is this about Hadley?”

I look at her out of the corner of my eye and see her trying to look innocent. “Mom,” I warn.

“Just asking. That question came out of nowhere.”

Stone’s rubbing his hand up and down Mom’s back giving me a sly grin. “It was just a question.”

To that she rolls her eyes. “The same can be said for me asking if it was about Hadley.”

“She got ya there.”

I sigh heavily and stand from my chair then point to my mom. “I’ll put in an order for some adult diapers for when you start playing Granny basketball. I’m sure they’ll be needed since you can’t run or jump without peeing your pants.”

She swats at me as I jut past her. “You little...”

“Nice words only, Mom!” I shout back as I make my way back into the house, helping myself to a heaping plate of baked ziti and some garlic bread. Corbin gives me a smile as I take a seat at the table where everyone is gathered playing cards, Boone gives me a single nod, and the newly engaged lovebirds break away from whispering to each other to acknowledge my existence.

“What are we playing?” I ask and Boone smiles wide, dealing me into a game of Gin Rummy.

As much as I hate to admit it, though, even my family and all their chatter and rambunctious competitive play doesn't help my mind from straying to Hadley.

And wondering if she'll use my phone number I gave her earlier this evening.

Chapter Four

HADLEY

I've been staring at my phone for the better part of two weeks now, trying to decide if I have enough courage to text or call Cash and take him up on his offer for coffee.

When we got home after that night at the diner, Brooklyn had more than just a few questions for me. Many of which I wasn't prepared to answer. That night I called Trotter and gave him the run-down of what happened and he encouraged me to follow my heart.

Easy for him to say when he's basically all hearts and rainbows with Logan. The jerks. I'm so happy for them and completely jealous at the same time.

He's texted me daily to see if I had coffee with Cash yet. Or attempted to reach out to him. I can feel the disappointment through the phone screen when I once again tell him no. I imagine him shaking his head and telling on me to Logan. Luckily, Logan is happy to remind Trotter that he lived for many years not following his heart and he should give me a little bit of a break.

Trotter's excuse is one full of common sense. That he understands what it's like to actually follow your heart and go after true love after denying yourself for too many years.

The entire thing is incredibly annoying.

It's not as if I was the one who was hiding my sexuality for over thirty years. Trotter's situation and mine are entirely different.

Right?

My phone chimes with a text and I about come out of my skin, tossing my phone in the air only for it to land on the mattress next to me.

***Trotter:** You're in bed thinking of me, aren't you?*

***Me:** OMG*

***Trotter:** Tell me I'm right. I know I am. I could feel it.*

***Me:** It's not like we're twins and have that twin thing that they have where they can feel each other's pain and know each other's thoughts.*

***Trotter:** That's not a denial. Admit I'm right.*

***Me:** I'll admit that you're incredibly annoying and I don't know how I lived for fifteen years with you.*

***Trotter:** You lived with me for fifteen years because despite not being twins and actually in love, we understand each other better than most people. So yeah, I'm your twin. Congratulations. You're one lucky daughter of a bitch.*

I burst out laughing at his turn of phrase. Nothing could be further from the truth there. My mother really is a piece of work.

Me: *Fine. I was thinking about you AND Logan, so bring your head down from the clouds.*

Trotter: *If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times. A threesome between you, me, and Logan will never happen so stop thinking of the two of us all the time. Geesh. **eye roll emoji***

Me: *I just threw up in my mouth.*

Trotter: *Whatever. You know you want to.*

Me: *Stop right now or I'll seriously throw up.*

Trotter: *Fine. Let's talk about something else, then. How about your very own McDreamy?*

Me: *Pass.*

Trotter: *Oh, look, I just handed the baton back to you with no take-backs. It's your turn, coo-ca-choo.*

Me: *I must have been an idiot to have lived with you for fifteen years. You're like a freakin' five-year-old yet.*

Trotter: *Your insults don't hurt me.*

Me: *Whatever. I'll do it tomorrow. Pinky swear or whatever.*

Trotter: *Call me crazy, but I'm having a hard time trusting that you'll do it since you've gone back on this promise daily for the past week.*

Me: *I just need time.*

Trotter: *I understand that. And I just want you to be happy. And to find what I found with Logan.*

Me: *I know. But who's to say I'll find it with Cash? Come on, Trotter. We were together one night fifteen years ago. It's not like we're soulmates or long-lost lovers or anything.*

Trotter: *Valid point. But do me a favor?*

Me: *No promises.*

Trotter: *This is an easy one. Find your happiness. For years you gave me what I needed because you're a selfless goddess who gave up everything so I could have what I thought I needed. It's your turn, honey.*

I read his text over twice and tears spring to my eyes. I've never truly considered all that I lost when I agreed to marry Trotter. Maybe I wasn't so much as selfless as I was pathetic because I didn't have the courage to stand my ground and follow my own heart and desires.

I was a puppet and my parents held the strings. For a while, Trotter held them, too. But we've moved past that. Growing up the way we did, it's hard to see any other way of life for ourselves. That's why when Trotter admitted he wanted to get married simply because he couldn't see a life for himself without the money that came with it, I understood.

Our parents raised us to think that money was the root of all happiness. That money was the only constant in life and love was, as my mother put it, a fairy tale.

Trotter: *If I haven't told you today, thank you being you. And for being an awesome mom to Brooklyn and for not judging me or treating me differently when I told you I was gay.*

He tells me this constantly. He claims I saved him because I allowed him to have a safe place to be himself and he wouldn't have had that if we hadn't gotten married.

Me: *You don't have to keep thanking me. You would have done the same for me if it was the other way around. And you definitely don't have to thank me for being an awesome mom,*

which thanks for the compliment, to Brooklyn. She makes it easy.

When I was younger, I wouldn't have believed that statement to be true. Now, though, I do. I know he would turn the world sideways to help me and be there for me. Maybe it's because he experienced me being there for him first or maybe it's because he's matured. It could be a combination of both. Either way, I know he would move mountains for me now.

***Me:** Besides, if I hadn't married you, we wouldn't have Brooklyn. I have no regrets.*

***Trotter:** As long as you find yours, I won't have any either. Love you, honey.*

***Me:** I love you, too.*

***Trotter:** Now make me the promise while I have you feeling all the good things for me.*

I roll my eyes even though he obviously can't see me.

***Trotter:** Don't roll your eyes, just promise. Or I'll call you and I know how much you hate to talk on the phone but feel too guilty to actually ignore the call. And if that doesn't work, Logan's ready to call you, too.*

***Me:** You two are obnoxious.*

***Trotter:** We are. That's why you love us.*

***Me:** Fine. I'll find my happiness. Just don't be disappointed if it's not with Cash.*

***Trotter:** We already know he's good in the sack so there's definitely happiness to be found with him.*

***Me:** TROTTER!*

Trotter:** *cackles*****

Trotter: *Back to being a serious adult, I talked to Brooklyn last night and it sounds like she's a wee bit stressed about starting in a new school. You getting any of that from her?*

Me: *A little but she promises it's not anything she can't handle. I think it's not so much stress as much as nerves. She doesn't know what to expect from a small public high school.*

Trotter: *Can't be worse than the snobs she used to go to school with. Or we did.*

Me: *Preaching to the choir.*

Me: *She'll be great. She's already met some people because of the diner and when she worked at the pizza place last spring while I was homeschooling her. As long as people aren't total dicks to her, I think it'll go well.*

Trotter: *I still think Red Oak is better for her than here but if she changes her mind, I'm a phone call away, obviously.*

Me: *We both know that. You're coming here in two weekends, right?*

Trotter: *Absolutely. I miss my girls horribly. Logan thinks we need to relocate because I've been a whiny bitch, according to him.*

Laughing, I can just imagine how Trotter's acting and Logan's response. Logan is a tell it like it is, no-nonsense kind of guy and Trotter's the opposite. He wouldn't jump into a confrontation if his life depended on it.

Me: *We would love that, though I think Red Oak might be a little small for you.*

Trotter: *Ha hahahahaha, you're so cute that you think I'd be able to thrive like I'm meant to there. We'd move close but not to Red Oak. Nashville maybe.*

Me: That'd fit you much better. I can picture you walking down Broadway in a pair of cowboy boots.

*Trotter: I think I'd like watching other guys walking down Broadway more. **smirk emoji***

Me: Watch it, I'll tell Logan on you.

Trotter: As if he doesn't know already.

Trotter: Miss you, sugar bug. (Did that sound southern enough for you? Would I fit in?)

*Me: **laughing emoji** Absolutely.*

I drop my phone back down to the mattress with a smile on my face. When I walked down the aisle to marry Trotter, I was at my lowest. I couldn't have imagined how much our friendship would continue to grow over the years. I was so bitter and angry at him, when in reality it's not as if I was handcuffed and held at gunpoint to marry him. I made my choice and when I finally recognized that, I allowed myself to be happy in the situation we were in.

It wasn't until he started seeing Logan and decided it was time for him to come out that I started seeing a different sort of future for myself. Like I told Trotter, I don't regret marrying him or the life we lived. Having Brooklyn is never something I could regret. But, I sometimes wish I'd made a different choice. Put myself first for once. Stood up to my parents and had the courage to see that a life without money is just as full as a life with an excess of money.

Getting out of bed, I go to the bathroom to wash my face and get ready for bed. Once my skin is clean of all the makeup, I apply my serums and creams and moisturizers, brush my teeth, and apply some lip balm. When I was in Chicago, everything I used on my face was top of the line, so

expensive it was practically sinful. Three- and four-hundred-dollar eye creams, serums that promised to make me look like a teenager at the low cost of six hundred dollars, makeup that made my skin look flawless but cost as much as a trip to the grocery store for a family of four.

When I moved to Red Oak, I left all that behind. The expensive *everything*. Clothes, makeup, shoes, handbags. My keys and wallet fit just as nicely in my Target handbag than it did in my luxury bag. My makeup still looks great at just a fraction of the price from a big box makeup store. And shockingly enough, I don't miss the clothes or shoes one bit.

I found myself here.

I can *be* myself here.

No pressure to perform at all times or look the part. I can be exactly who I am and not a single person judges me for it or looks down their noses at me. It's liberating and glorious.

And I'm not the only one who changed in Red Oak.

Brooklyn, even though she might have first day of school jitters, is thriving here. She's smiling more often, seems more relaxed and content, and is finally able to be a teenager.

I stop in the kitchen for a glass of water and peek my head in to check on Brooklyn before going to bed. Our cat, Kevin, pushes his side against me and meows so I pick him up and scratch under his ear.

"I'm going to bed."

She looks up from her phone and smiles. "Okay, Mom. Night, love you."

"I love you, too. You going to sleep soon?"

She nods, glancing back at her phone and typing away a moment before giving me attention again. “Yeah.”

“Who ya talking to?”

Her eyes crinkle when she smiles up at me. “You wouldn’t believe me.”

“Try me.” I chuckle.

“That kid from the diner? Cody? The people who got engaged, he’s the guy’s nephew.”

I try to look as calm as possible, meanwhile my heart is racing. Living in Red Oak, it’s impossible not to hear the Lake family name or even see one of them out and about. I’ve done my best to avoid actually having a conversation with any of them until I talk with Cash, but it’s pretty hard to do. Kevin jumps out of my arms, somehow sensing my sudden unease. From the floor, he glares at me and meows his displeasure.

“Isn’t he pretty young?”

“Yeah.” She laughs. “He’s hilarious, though. He actually asked for my number when I was at the diner one night working and promised not to spam me. I figured no harm would come from it and if he got annoying I’d just block him. But he basically just sends me funny memes and gifs or things he finds funny on Instagram. Sometimes we play games through Game Pigeon, too. Like paintball or 8-ball.”

“Sounds innocent enough.”

She gives me a look. “Duh, Mom. He’s like twelve, I think. Of course it’s innocent.”

I hold up my hands in surrender. “Sorry, just making sure.”

“Don’t worry, Mom. I know not to lead a twelve-year-old kid along.”

“Thatta girl. Love you. Get some sleep. We need to be at the diner at ten so Dorothy can take care of a few things and when she gets back we’ll head out to grab the rest of your school stuff.”

Her cute little nose wrinkles. “School stuff. Yay,” she says with absolutely zero enthusiasm.

“At least you don’t have to wear a uniform anymore.”

That makes her eyes light up. “That is nice, I’ll admit.”

“Your dad said you sounded stressed about starting school.”

She rolls her dark eyes. “He always thinks I’m stressed. He’s overreacting, as usual. I made the mistake of telling him I was a little worried about getting lost in a new building and since I’ve already taken one of the sophomore classes, I was a little nervous about taking the junior level course but that’s all. Nothing I can’t handle, I promise.”

“The Biology course, you mean?”

“Yeah. I hate science, you know. It’s just not my thing but Dad assured me that he thinks I’ll enjoy Biology.”

“I’m sure you will.”

“Yeah, so, anyway, that’s all it was about. Don’t worry, Mom. You made it very clear that I needed to be honest with you and I’m happy here. Cody’s not the only one I know in town, which is good since he’s in eighth grade,” she adds with a snicker. “I have friends my own age and I’ll meet people in the grade above me because of the biology class.”

“I know that, but maybe make sure your dad knows for sure, too.”

She sighs heavily and nods. “I will. Have a good sleep,” she tells me, effectively dismissing me from her room.

“You, too.” I walk over and kiss the top of her head before making my way to my own bedroom. Kevin trots after me, following along to my bedroom so he can be a pest while I try to sleep.

Our home is much more modest than our home in Chicago. Our three-bedroom, two-bathroom ranch-style house is perfect for us. We have enough room for when Trotter and Logan come to visit that they can stay with us rather than at a hotel and that was our main goal when looking for a house.

Best part about our home? It’s mine. And my parents don’t have a single penny invested in it. Technically, anyway. While I had *some* money from one of my trust funds, the bulk of it has been transferred to Brooklyn. I took enough so she and I could start a new life and that was it.

Once in bed, I set my glass of water and phone on the nightstand and plug the phone into the charger. Having slept in my own bed for years, it never takes me long to get comfortable but tonight I’m restless. Trotter’s texts continue to plague me, his comments about finding happiness cycling through my mind over and over again.

It’s not as if I’m unhappy. I have a daughter who isn’t completely terrifying, which is a bonus since most teenagers are. I love our new home and having Dorothy in our lives. My relationship with Trotter is better than it’s ever been and because he’s Brooklyn’s father, that’s something I’m incredibly grateful for.

Like everyone, I have bad days along with the good days but even my bad days aren’t enough to bring me down. I’m finally living a life I chose for myself rather than blindly

following my parents' plans for me and for me, that equals happiness.

"Patty melt and fries," I say to the customer, placing the plate in front of her. "And cobb salad for you."

"Looks great. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Is there anything else I can get for either of you?"

"I think we're good."

I smile in their direction and move to the next table, take their order, and bring it to the kitchen before checking on a few other customers. The lunch rush is surprisingly busy for such a small town. However, considering there are only a handful of options I guess it shouldn't be such a surprise.

What I am surprised about, though, is how much I love working in the diner. I love serving the customers and seeing them happy, baking pies, and chatting with everyone in town. At the end of the day when my body is tired, it feels good to know that it's because I've worked hard and helped people. And best of all, the smile I'm wearing is genuine. It feels good to smile.

I'm carrying a tray of drinks to one of my tables when that smile I'm wearing drops when I see who just walked into the diner.

I wasn't expecting this today.

I needed more time.

Though, I'm not sure I'd have ever been ready.

Chapter Five

HADLEY

My mother's eyes narrow on me and her lips curl up in a snide smirk when she sees me. In her mind, I have no doubt, she thinks she won because I'm waitressing. Something that she sees far beneath her. While Mom's eyes are locked on me, my father is analyzing the diner with a critical eye. When his gaze lands on me, he offers a faint smile and single nod.

Dad has always been more laid back and while he shares my mother's thoughts on marriage, he's more open-minded and understanding. When I told them Trotter and I were getting a divorce and I was moving away with Brooklyn, it wasn't him who threw a fit. It was my mom. He never spoke up, but a part of me always felt like he had a twinge of pride in me finally making a life for myself. Maybe I'm just being hopeful, though.

Funny how that desire to make your parents proud never goes away no matter how old you get.

I regain my composure and bring the drinks to the table, let them know I'll be back shortly to take their order, and rush to the kitchen where I know Brooklyn is.

She's filling a drink order for one of her tables and turns to me with a smile that, like mine earlier, was genuine until she sees the look on my face.

“What’s wrong?”

“Grandma and Grandpa are here.”

Her eyes dart toward the diner and my heart breaks when I see the unease and fear in her face.

“What?”

I nod. “I know. I’m not sure why, but I would like you to stay back here. I don’t know what they want and I don’t want you in the fray if they’re here to cause problems.”

“Mom...”

“Honey, please. Just until I know more. I’ll take the drinks to your table.”

“Okay,” she responds with a little tremble to her voice.

Seeing her reaction fuels my anger. They treated her so kindly while they thought they had her under their thumb. As soon as they realized they didn’t have control over her, or rather, my mom realized it, Brooklyn was on the receiving end of their ugly.

I notice our cook is watching us closely, looking around as if he will need to intervene on our behalf. I give him a half smile and assure him everything is okay.

“Love you,” I say to Brooklyn before taking the tray of drinks out to the customers.

After delivering the drinks, I take a few orders and rush them back to the kitchen and dart back out to the dining room.

My parents are still standing just inside the door and rather than giving them the type of attention they're wanting, I offer them a table.

"That'd be great," my dad replies.

My mom's eyes widen but she dutifully follows my dad to a table.

And as if my day couldn't get worse, just then the Lake boys come walking in.

All three, along with Cody, smile at me but it's Cash who seems to sense my unease.

"Have a seat, boys, and I'll be right with you."

"Is Brooklyn here?" Cody asks.

I notice my parents watching our interaction and don't answer Cody.

Cash looks between my parents and me and considering they're dressed the way they're dressed, I think he figures out who they are. I look a lot like my mother and most people who come to the diner for lunch aren't dressed in a three-piece suit (my dad) and a Versace dress and stilettos. Though, I'm pretty sure Cash wouldn't know that she's wearing nearly ten thousand dollars' worth between her clothes, shoes, and handbag.

Cash leans over and whispers something to Cody and he looks around the diner in confusion.

Grabbing a couple menus, I bring them to my parents' table along with an iced tea for my dad and a water with two lemons for my mom, knowing what they'll want to drink without asking.

“I’ll be right back to take your orders,” I tell them, not giving them a moment to say anything else and I rush over to Cash’s table.

“How’s it going?” I ask.

“You alright?” Cash asks in return.

“Fine,” I reply, giving him a faint smile and subtle head shake. “What can I get ya?”

They place their orders for drinks and since they know what they want to eat, I take that order as well.

Before heading back to the kitchen to put their orders in, I cash out four tables and check on the others.

When I step into the kitchen, our cook, Franky, raises his eyebrows in my direction before looking at Brooklyn who’s sitting on a stool with her arms around her stomach.

I spin on my heel and dart back to Cash’s table, crouching low next to Cody’s side. “Can I steal ya away for a minute?”

He looks to his dad and back to me. “Huh?”

“I need your help with something.”

“What is it? I only know how to make grilled cheese and I usually burn it so I don’t think I’ll be much help.”

A laugh bubbles out of my throat and I hear Boone, Cody’s dad, whisper, “Go, son.”

Cody shrugs and follows me to the kitchen.

“So this is where the magic happens, huh?” he says, stance wide and hands on his hips.

My smile is genuine again and I chuckle. “That it is.” In a quiet voice I add, “Listen, Brooklyn could use your brand of funny for a bit. I promise I’ll explain everything later if you

can promise not to ask questions for the time being and just be her friend.”

It's then he notices Brooklyn looks like she's about to throw up in the corner of the kitchen and without delay he moves to her side. “Can we go to the office?” he asks.

“Absolutely. Hang out. Tell Franky what you want to eat and he'll bring it to you.”

“Double cheeseburger with just pickles, Franky. Extra fries. And I think I need a big piece of pie, too. You want anything, Brooky?”

Brooky. That's kind of cute.

She shakes her head but Franky says, “How about I make you a burger, too?”

Brooklyn shrugs and Cody grabs her hand, tugging her along to the office. “Come on. Let's get into some mischief in your mom's office.”

That gets us a tiny smile from her and I know Cody will help take her mind off the fact her grandparents, who never treated her in a loving, cozy, grandparent sort of way, are likely waiting to see her as well.

When I return to the dining room, I stop dead in my tracks again when I see the Lake boys are ushering customers out. Cashing out customers and putting food in to-go containers for those who haven't finished their meals.

It's not exactly ideal for business but I can't be mad about it either.

Cash catches my eye and moves to me, leaning in close. “Your parents?” he asks in a low murmur.

I nod slowly, noticing they're watching our interaction closely.

"Figured as much. No one that stuffy comes in here and I could tell they're making you uncomfortable. Want us to get them out of here?"

"That's okay. Were the customers mad you kicked them out?"

He offers me a sexy grin. "We used our charm and explained there's a family emergency and we needed to clear the place out. I'm sure there will be rumors spread of Dorothy having a heart attack or somethin' but figured the family emergency excuse wasn't a total lie so we'll deal with the blow back later."

I blow out a breath and watch as the last of the customers leave, a few of them offering me sympathetic smiles.

"Thank you."

His hand drifts down my arm and he gives my hand a squeeze. "We're not leaving. We'll go in the back if you want, but we're not going anywhere. Got that? Don't know why they're here but by the look on your face and the way you've been running around here like a chicken with its head cut off, I assume it was a surprise and not a pleasant one. So we're staying put in case you need us."

"That's not nece..."

"It is. Cody with Brooklyn?" he asks in a whisper.

I nod.

"Good. Go sit. Need a drink? Shot of tequila, maybe?" he teases with a smile.

"Maybe the bottle?"

“Later. Go. Deal with that.”

I swallow hard and blow out a breath before walking to my parents’ table and taking a seat. Out of the corner of my eye I notice Cash and his brothers take a seat at the far table. They’re not completely out of earshot but they’re not so close they can listen in easily to what I’m sure is going to be an uncomfortable conversation.

“That your boyfriend?” Mom asks with a sneer, staring down Cash. No hello or I missed you or how’s it going.

“No.”

“Sure seems that way,” she says, still looking at Cash and his brothers. I’m sure to her they look like nobodies in their jeans, dusty boots, and t-shirts.

“He’s a friend who sees that I’m uncomfortable because my parents who I haven’t spoken to in months just showed up here out of the blue and look intent on causing problems. He’s here because he’s a good guy and wants to make sure I’m okay.”

“You look well,” my father tells me, not bothering to comment on Cash or his brothers.

“Thank you.” I don’t ask them how they found me. They have resources and it wouldn’t take a genius to know that I would escape to Dorothy. The family hasn’t been in contact with her, but that doesn’t mean they haven’t kept track of where she is.

“Don’t lie to her, Robert. Have you had a proper facial or manicure lately? I hate to imagine what you look like under your clothes since you haven’t had a personal trainer or your chef helping. And by the looks of your hair you haven’t had a blow out for months. Your pores tell me you haven’t been

eating well and your nails are horrendous. You've let yourself go, Hadley."

I hear someone stand up and look to see it's Cash. How embarrassing. He had to have heard everything Mom just said to me about my appearance. I give him a head shake and he stares down my parents before taking a seat again.

"Thanks, Mom. It's good to see you, too. I'm actually doing well, by the way."

She rolls her eyes. "Your appearance tells me otherwise."

"Celeste," my dad admonishes.

Mom glares at Dad before narrowing her eyes on me.

"Not to come off sounding rude, but why are you here? And, not that it's any of your business, but I saw my new doctor two weeks ago and a dermatologist last month. According to them, I'm healthier now than I have been in a while. Happiness looks good on me, if I do say so myself."

"We came to talk some sense into you," Mom says, ignoring my statement about happiness. "This has gone on long enough. Trotter's shacking up with someone his parents don't approve of and quite frankly neither do we. Everyone is talking about it. We spoke to the dean at Brooklyn's school and they'll welcome her back no questions asked. That's unheard of but you know our family has a lot of pull there having donated so much over the years. Not to mention we're alumni."

"So Trotter and I decided to live our own lives and rather than support us, you decide to ambush me and remind me I'm a disappointment?"

"This," Mom gestures around the diner, "is not how we raised you."

“I know. And that’s why I’m happier here than I’ve been in my entire life.”

My dad flinches and looks at the table, fiddling with his napkin.

“What you expected of me,” I continue on, “is not how parents should be. You didn’t care about me. You never once asked what I wanted out of life. Maybe that never bothered either of you. Maybe you were both perfectly fine living by someone else’s rules and requirements because you had money in the bank and that’s all that mattered. But there’s more to life than money. My entire life I had more than I could ever want. But it was all material. I never had what I *needed*.”

“You had everything you needed,” Mom argues, as if she didn’t hear anything I just said.

“I needed love,” I whisper, willing my tears to stay at bay. “I needed to know that my parents loved and cared for me no matter what. I only found support when I was doing what you wanted. If I bucked the system, you were quick to remind me of my place. I was an accessory and that’s it. I needed to be parented by *you*, not nannies. I didn’t *need* vacations and expensive clothes and boarding school. I needed you to *love me*. That’s all.”

My dad licks his lips and stares at me. “We do love you.”

I shake my head. “No. You love me when I’m obedient and falling in line. Where in our family’s history does it say that we can’t have a life outside of money?”

“Are we still discussing this?” Mom snaps. “How can you be so naïve? I’ve told you how many times love is a fairy tale. Your father and I have made it work and neither of us complain or bitch about it like this. I can’t believe you.”

“And how can you be so callous? What is wrong with you?” I ask loudly. “Sure, money makes certain parts of life easier. I won’t deny that. But there is so much more to life.”

“Example?”

“Mom, weren’t you listening? Love. Relationships. Friendships based on mutual respect and common interests and laughter. Laughter! Have you ever spent time with one of your friends and just laughed? Or are all your relationships surface level? Do you know anything about them?” I take a breath and run my teeth over my bottom lip. “Do you realize that not once have either of you asked how I was doing? And I don’t mean today. I mean *ever*. That seems ridiculous to say out loud, I know, but it’s a fact. You never asked about school or my friends or what my interests were. You assumed who I was because of who you wanted me to be. What you never cared to know, or understand, is that I don’t enjoy going to galas or volunteering for things that help no one but the already wealthy rather than those who are in need or redecorating my home for the eighth time just because of some new trend. You assumed that I wanted to fill my days with shopping and spa treatments and going to lunch at the club or playing golf, which I hate more than anything.”

“You make us sound so ostentatious. We aren’t narcissists.”

“If the shoe fits,” I reply with a shoulder shrug.

Mom’s jaw drops in offense but Dad looks... ashamed?

He loosens his tie and takes a drink of his iced tea before setting the glass back down on the table and clearing his throat.

“I suppose, you might have a point. We were raised...”

“Oh my gosh, if you say that’s how you were raised so you don’t know any better I will freak out. There are no excuses, Dad. I was raised the same and if you ask Brooklyn she’d tell you the only times she felt the way I did growing up is when she was around you and Trotter’s parents. We chose differently for her so don’t give me that bullshit of not being able to break a generational sin.”

“Generational sin? What the hell, Hadley! We gave you the world!”

Dad quietly says, “No, Celeste, we didn’t. We gave her exactly what we wanted to give her. She’s right. She showed us time and time again what she needed from us and we didn’t give her that.”

Mom scoffs. “Childish. That’s what it is. And Trotter? Running around pretending to be in love with a man just to embarrass the family?!”

“Pretend?” I ask, my eyes wide. “He’s not pretending anything, Mom. He and Logan are in love and that has nothing to do with you or anyone else. He followed his heart, why can’t any of you accept that? Who is he hurting?”

“Us. He’s hurting all of us!”

“Celeste,” my dad says in a hard voice. “Enough.”

“Robert...”

“I said enough!” he says angrily. “You know damn good and well Trotter isn’t harming a soul and isn’t an embarrassment to anyone, including his parents. They might have been shocked and surprised at first, but they’ve come to adore Logan. I daresay they’re proud of Trotter for finally being himself. Our daughter is being honest with us right now.

I think both of us can respect her enough to actually listen, don't you?"

In a completely uncharacteristic move, my mom sits back in her chair, frowning. Mom doesn't frown. It will cause wrinkles. It's also why she rarely smiles. Or has any expression on her face.

I lean my elbows on the table, which Mom glares at me for, and I tell them, "It's not that I'm ungrateful for the opportunities I had growing up. But those opportunities are also why I missed out on so much of what a child needs to grow and thrive. Maybe it's because, like you said, you were raised by nannies and to believe there isn't much more to life than the almighty dollar and what it can give you. But I'm here to tell you there is so much more out there."

"This isn't how it was supposed to go," Mom says.

"And how did you expect today to go? That you'd walk in here and whisk me away?"

Dad looks a little sheepish so I know I'm right.

"Listen, I might not be living the life you chose for me but I am living the life I chose for myself. I'm not doing drugs or murdering people. I'm not a bank robber or committing any other crimes. I'm a good person. Trotter's a good person. Your granddaughter is a *good* person. She works hard, is making genuine friends, is well-loved by her dad and me, and is thriving as a happy and healthy fifteen-year-old."

"Honey," Mom says, a term of endearment I've never heard from her when addressing me unless in public, "she's missing out on so much, though."

"What is it you think she's missing out on?"

When neither Mom nor Dad say anything, I know their only answer would be materialistic.

The door jingles to announce someone coming in and I wince when I see it's Aunt Dorothy.

Her face hardens immediately when she takes the three of us in.

“Can't say that I'm surprised to see you two here.”

“Aunt Dorothy. Looking well,” Dad says, standing up to greet her.

“Robert. You trying to convince Hadley to leave this dump and come back to you to live a life of misery?”

I press my lips together and hear Cash and his brothers chuckle.

My mom sighs heavily. “Always the charmer, Dorothy.”

Aunt Dorothy smiles wide. “Aren't I, though? And imagine, I got it all from being away from the succubus that is the family.”

I choke on a laugh. “Uhh, Dorothy, I don't think that's the word you intended to use.”

“Sure it is,” she says with a firm nod.

“A demon entity in folklore in female form that seduces men through sexual activity in their dreams,” one of Cash's brother's says, holding his phone in front of him. “I paraphrased. Pardon the interruption folks. Carry on.”

She makes an eek face, stretching out her lips. “Oh, dear. No, that's not what I meant.” She thinks for a moment and adds, “Though, I suppose it could apply somehow.”

“I think we got a little off topic,” Dad murmurs. “Hadley, you were right that we were hoping you’d come home. I can’t say that I’m pleased to see that you’re planning to stay here. Brooklyn’s education is important to us and we know she’ll get the best of the best back home.”

“Now see here, we done got good educated out here in the sticks, ain’t that right, brothers? Coupla us even went on to those big universities where they teach ya even better,” the other Lake brother says with a grin.

I cover my mouth with my hand, trying not to laugh. I know his joke will go right over my parents’ heads and when I see their wide and quite frankly, a bit frightened, expressions, I know I’m right.

“He’s joking. I swear, we all had excellent education here,” Cash promises.

“Who even *are* you?”

“Friends of Hadley’s,” Cash declares, giving me a grin.

“I’m Boone.” Boone, apparently, the one who made the comment about education, raises his hand. “I got my girl knocked up when we were in high school then she ran off so I raised him.”

Mom gasps. Valid.

“Stop being a smart ass,” Cash growls. “I mean, it’s true that he’s a single dad and his girlfriend got pregnant in high school and ran off but yeah, that’s not really Red Oak’s fault. Name’s Cash. This one’s Brock. Hadley was here the night he got engaged.”

“You got engaged... *here?*” Mom asks, appalled as she looks around.

“Damn right, I did. First place I realized I was in love with Naomi so it was the perfect place. Plus, Hadley’s pies are the best. No offense, Dorothy. Your pies are great, too. But Hadley’s pies are mouthwatering.”

Boone snickers and Cash lightly punches him in the shoulder.

“Hadley’s... pies?” Dad wonders. “You bake pie?”

“She learned from the best,” Dorothy tells him proudly.

“Can I have a slice? It’s been twenty years since I’ve had pie.”

Boone can’t even control his laughter at this point, nor does he try to hide it.

I roll my eyes.

My parents will never understand the innuendo.

But when I look at my dad and see his eyes dancing, I wonder if he’s a little less stuffy than I thought he was.

“You can have a slice if you promise you’ll have a little more understanding and compassion for your daughter. This bullshit has gone on long enough,” Dorothy declares.

I’ve never heard her swear before and by the look on the boys’ faces, neither have they.

I’m waiting for my mom to say something to Dad about eating sugar but she doesn’t.

“Is Brooklyn here?” Mom wonders.

“She is,” I admit. “But I’m not sure she wants to see either of you. Last time you hurt her and she’s not eager for a repeat.”

For the first time in my life, I see my parents speechless.

Chapter Six

CASH

The night Hadley and I met, she told me a little about her family.

The night we reconnected, which is a term I'm using very loosely here considering she hasn't reached out to me since I gave her my number, she told me more.

But nothing could have prepared me for what I just witnessed.

Her mom is not just a piece of work. She's a *piece of fucking work*. I thought I got a shitty dad because he cheated on my mom and then ghosted the entire family after calling his grandson a bastard. Or maybe we ghosted him because he was a total dick and called Cody a bastard.

But at least Mom is an absolute rock star. She has always had our backs, no matter what path we chose.

From what I heard, it sounds like her dad has a smidge of compassion and humanity. Unlike her mom who lives and breathes for appearances and money.

I don't understand how parents could be so callous and heartless. I have a very hard time believing her attitude comes

from simply having money.

Her dad is the first to speak after Hadley informs them Brooklyn likely doesn't want to see them.

"We'll behave."

"Forgive me if I don't jump at the chance to believe you."

"You can't keep our granddaughter from us," her mom snaps.

"I can and I will. I protect her from things and people who don't bring joy to her life and until you can prove otherwise, you don't have access to her."

Pride swells in my chest hearing her stand up to her parents on her daughter's behalf. She spoke earlier about how she lacked courage to leave the lifestyle she grew up with. But I don't think it was a lack of courage at all. If anything, she chose the hard path.

"How did it come to this?" Her dad wonders quietly.

Hadley shrugs and looks as perplexed as I feel. "I don't know, Dad. I guess when you and Mom decided to choose money over your own daughter? Maybe neither of you saw it that way because you were okay with your lifestyle."

While her dad seems to be mulling over everything the three of them just talked about, her mom doesn't seem to have opened her mind much.

"Your grandparents and I argued endlessly over this exact same thing," Dorothy tells Robert. "They never wanted to listen or understand that I wanted something different out of life. Maybe it's hard for you to see because you're all so closed-minded but look around you for once. See that there's a whole world out there. A world full of all different ways of

life. Life is too damn short to live it unhappy. Your daughter, your own flesh and blood, was *unhappy*. You refused to see that. If you don't want to lose her and your only grandchild for good, I suggest you both pull the stick out of your asses and really listen to what she's telling you."

My brothers cough to hold back their laughter but my eyes stay focused on Hadley. While Dorothy was speaking, her smile grew bigger and bigger.

Robert's mouth twitches. "Pull the stick out of our asses?"

Dorothy crosses her arms over her chest. "That's right."

His face sobers and he turns to Hadley. "I'm sorry we didn't listen. I just worry."

Worry? That's such bullshit. If he worried about her he would have paid attention and realized she wasn't like them and not forced her to be someone she's not.

Hadley's eyebrows rise and I wonder if she's thinking the same thing I am.

"You don't need to worry, Dad. I'm doing better than ever. I love working at the diner and the home Brooklyn and I have. I'm happy here. It's where I belong."

"You belong at home," her mom argues.

"This is home," Hadley argues right back.

I glance at Brock and he gives me a knowing look.

He knows Hadley has been the girl I put on a pedestal, right or wrong, for all these years. Everyone I met or dated, I compared to Hadley. I couldn't get her out of my head no matter how hard I tried. Hadley and I clicked that snowy night in a New York hotel. One night. That's all it took for her to

become so embedded in my mind that I couldn't move on from her.

And now she thinks of Red Oak as home, meaning she's not going anywhere.

“But...”

“Celeste, I think she's made herself clear. And given us a lot to think about.”

“This is ridiculous. I thought you knew better than this, Hadley, but you're just as childish as you've ever been. You said you needed to leave Chicago to find yourself. Well, if this is you finding yourself, I think you need to keep looking.”

Celeste gives Robert a shrewd look, scoffs, and walks out the diner door. Hadley watches her leave with mouth agape and hurt in her eyes. I don't blame her. Celeste is nasty.

Robert moves in, reaching out to Hadley. “Can I give you a hug?”

“Of course, Dad.”

I watch as a visible sigh is expelled from his chest. She stands and the two embrace in an emotional hug. Robert's eyes are rimmed with red when he steps back, wiping at his face.

“Sorry.”

Hadley's crying, too, and she laughs through her own tears. “It's okay, Dad. It's been a while since we've hugged.”

“Too long, darling. Too long. I'm sorry doesn't cut it but I promise to do better. I'll talk to your mother. She'll come around. And tell Brooklyn hello for us, please. I want to do better by her as well. Today we came here to remind you of what we thought was best for you but you were the one teaching me. Thank you for that. You're not wrong. I've spent

my entire life with blinders on. I grew up in a household that was not a home at all. In turn, I gave the same to you. For that, I'm sorry."

"You did what you thought was best," Hadley replies.

"Don't do that. Don't let me off the hook here. I knew better and didn't change. You're wiser and braver than I have ever been."

"Dad..."

"It's okay, darling. I'm glad we came, even if it was an ambush on you. And for that I apologize as well. I'd like the chance to have a relationship with you when you're ready. I won't push and in the meantime I'll work on myself."

I want to suggest therapy because it helped our family after my parents' divorce. There's no shame in seeing a therapist but I'm not sure Robert would be open to that. I'm sure Celeste wouldn't be. I also don't feel like it's my place to say anything. I stayed in the dining room because I didn't want Hadley to feel alone as she talked to her parents, but that doesn't mean they're asking for my advice from a complete stranger.

"I'll talk to you soon," he promises. "And I'll talk to your mother, too. She's not thinking clearly. She loves you, you know."

Hadley nods, as if she's not sure how else to respond. I'm not sure what he said about Celeste loving Hadley is true or not. If she does love her, she sure has a shitty way of showing it. Maybe he's trying to convince himself of that as well.

After a very brief hug with Dorothy, he walks out of the diner with a glance in my direction. The door closes behind him and everyone is silent until Boone says, "Damn."

Brock snorts in response and Hadley, after a moment, bursts into hysterical laughter. Dorothy takes a seat, covering her mouth with her hand, giggling away right along with Hadley.

“Your folks seem super nice,” Boone says. “Your mom especially. Bless her heart, she’s a real peach, huh?”

That makes Hadley laugh even harder. The rest of us laughing right along with her. The situation isn’t even funny but I guess we’re all so confused by what just happened.

Cody and Brooklyn come out of the office, Brooklyn looking around at everyone laughing, not having a clue why we’re laughing. Cody starts laughing, too, asking everyone what’s so funny, not wanting to be left out of the joke.

That makes Hadley laugh even harder.

After a bit, the laughter dies down and it’s clear Brooklyn and Hadley need some privacy so they can talk.

“We’re gonna head out,” I tell Hadley, my brothers already out the door with Cody following behind them still demanding to know what was so funny.

She moves toward me and reaches out her hand, squeezing mine in hers before letting it go.

“Thank you. For being here. You didn’t have to stay but it kept me calm. I knew they wouldn’t do anything crazy, but it felt good to know someone had my back.”

“Always. You gonna be okay now?”

“Yes. Brooklyn and I have some errands to run so we’ll have some windshield time together where I can explain everything. Then we’ll get some Chinese and veg out at home

and watch some movies while eating our weight in Ben & Jerry's."

"The cure for everything?"

She smiles widely. "Obviously. Can't go wrong with some Chocolate Therapy or Chunky Monkey, can you?"

"I suppose not," I murmur.

"Thanks, again. I'm sure you're starving since you didn't get anything to eat with all my drama."

I shrug a shoulder not wanting to admit that I am, in fact, incredibly hungry. I was when we got here because I skipped breakfast. "It's okay. We'll just raid Corbin's stash when we get back to the office."

"How about I have Franky make something up for you guys and I'll drop it off? Just tell me where you all work and Brooklyn and I can stop on our way out of town."

"That's not necessary."

"Don't fight me on this. Bringing lunch over is the least I can do after you three stayed to make sure I was okay. So just tell me, what do you want?"

What do I want? That's a loaded question.

I can think of a hundred things I want that don't involve food right now but they all involve her.

"Keep it easy. Burgers and fries. And we all work together. Lake Electrical. It's our business."

"Wow. You work together? I thought you worked for your stepdad?"

A part of me wants to fist pump that she remembers what I did for a living when we met. If she remembers something

little like that, maybe there are other things that were unforgettable, too. “Yup. We started the business together a few years back. I loved working for Stone but this is a better fit for me.”

“We can do that. I’ll pack up some slices of pie, too.”

“Peach,” I respond quickly.

She laughs. “I take it that’s your favorite?”

“Good guess.”

“Thanks again.”

“Thank me by giving me your number so I don’t get ghosted for weeks again. I’ll send you the address to our office after you give me your number,” I tell her, handing over my phone.

She narrows her eyes. “Sneaky man,” she mumbles, adding her contact into my phone.

I grin shamelessly. “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.”

With a sexy eye roll, she hands my phone back.

“See ya soon, Hadley.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.”

As soon as I climb in the passenger seat of Brock’s pickup, Cody leans forward from the back seat and says, “You get her digits yet? I was watching and I saw you hand your phone to her. So? Did ya? Did ya?”

“Boy...”

“Just sayin’, I’ve had Brooklyn’s number for two weeks so I obviously have more game than you do.”

My stupid brothers laugh and heckle me the entire way to our mom's to drop off Cody and it continues all the way to our office. They're still giving me shit as we walk through the door and say hello to Corbin. She's used to all of us razzing each other so she doesn't ask what it's about.

I walk to my office with the excuse of getting to work but really it's so I can watch out my window for Hadley. I should have told her she didn't need to bring food to us. It's not as if we don't have snacks here but I didn't want to give up the chance to see her again.

Plans for a job we're starting next week are spread out before me but I'm only pretending to look at them. Instead, I'm watching the window and my phone, hoping Hadley might let me know when she's on her way.

As luck would have it, though, my plan to watch for Hadley is interrupted when Eric, one of my project managers, knocks on my open door before walking into my office.

"How was lunch?" Eric asks.

"Long story," I tell him.

"Okaaaay? That's interesting." His eyes move to the window and he says, "Wait. Isn't that the new girl at the diner? Wonder what she's doing here."

I spring from my chair so fast it rolls back and slams into the other side of my desk.

Eric's eyes are wide as he looks between me and the window and I watch as realization sets in. "Take it that's a long story, too?" he asks with a chuckle.

"Uh... I'll be right back."

"I'll be waiting," he tells me.

I hustle out of the office and skid around the corner just as Brooklyn and Hadley are walking through the front door. Corbin watches me with a ‘what the hell is wrong with you’ look on her face.

“I’m hungry,” I answer her non-question.

She rolls her eyes and snorts. “When aren’t you hungry?” In my family, it’s not a secret that I like to eat. A lot. Snacks. Meals. More snacks. If there’s food, it’s not safe from me so I knew my excuse wouldn’t raise too many questions.

Corbin shifts her attention to Hadley who set all the takeout containers on the counter. “He convinced you to deliver his food now? How am I not surprised? I swear the guy will be on his death bed asking for Mom’s carbonara.”

My mouth waters just thinking of my favorite meal. “Damn it, Cor, why did you have to bring it up? Now I’m going to have to call Mom to make it for me.”

“Oh my gosh,” she groans, “you’re such a baby! Make it yourself.”

“It’s not the same. She makes it with love.”

Corbin blinks at me before getting back to work, dismissing me completely.

I shift my attention to Hadley to say hello and thank her for bringing us a late lunch just as Brock and Boone come up behind me, Boone rubbing his hands together. “I’m just here for Hadley’s pie.”

I shoot him a dirty look that he ignores.

“You all really like pie, huh?” Brooklyn says.

“They like anything. Literally. They’re like human garbage disposals,” Corbin announces as she’s typing away on her

computer.

“We’re growing boys!” Brock argues.

“Whatever. You’re boys, but far from grown up.”

Her point is proved as Brock shoves Boone out of the way, trying to steal two foam containers that hold the slices of pie.

“Not a chance.” Boone shoves him right back and cracks open the container he’s cradling against his chest, shoving a piece of pie in his mouth like it’s a slice of pizza.

“I promise we sometimes have manners.”

“Rarely,” Brock says around a mouthful of his burger. “Damn, that’s good. Thanks, ladies!” he hollers, food in his hands as he walks back to his office.

“Corbin, I’m not taking any calls until I finish eating.”

“I’m not your receptionist!” she yells at Boone.

“Right, but I’ve always wanted to say that.”

Hadley starts giggling and I shake my head at my brothers. They’re so obnoxious.

Corbin’s phone buzzes and I hear Boone’s voice over the intercom, “Hold my calls, please.”

“Shove it, Boone!” Corbin smarts back.

Seriously. They’re *so* obnoxious.

“I apologize for basically every word that comes out of their mouths at any given time. They’re not okay.”

Hadley smiles and damn if it doesn’t almost take my breath away. “They’re fine. I didn’t realize families could have fun together like this. I can’t believe you all work together.”

“I deserve an award, right?” Corbin says.

I walk behind her and grab the award that she made for herself last year, placing it on the counter for Hadley to see.

Corbin looks proud of herself, not embarrassed at all for giving herself an award.

Hadley barks out a laugh and lifts it up, reading the award aloud, “Number one in dealing with her brothers’ shenanigans and putting up with them daily.”

“She made it for herself.”

“Hey, I’d been hinting at deserving an award for years and no one listened so I made it myself.”

Brooklyn’s been quiet, taking everything in. “I’m starting to understand why Cody’s the way he is.”

“He’s our mini-me.”

“No kidding,” she agrees, shaking her head.

“Okay, well, this has been fun and educational to say the least. Enjoy your lunch. Brooklyn and I are heading out to grab the rest of her school stuff.”

“Oh, have fun! Are you going to Gatlinburg?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Go to Big Daddy’s for pizza. It’s phenomenal. Our friend Paisley introduced Naomi and me to it when we were there and honestly, their pizza is life changing.”

“And you say I’m the one who lives for food?”

“I’m a growing woman, damn it!”

“Seriously. It’s like grown-up Cody’s but they’re not really grown up.”

“I’d take offense to that but I can’t deny it because we aren’t all that grown up. Life is more fun this way.”

“Let’s head out before you’re corrupted into believing you don’t have to be mature at some point in your life,” Hadley teases, pushing Brooklyn toward the door.

Before they walk through it, I call out Hadley’s name.

“Yeah?”

“Use my number, yeah?”

Her cheeks heat. It’s subtle, but I notice.

She bites her bottom lip and whispers, “I will.”

“Good. Thanks for lunch. Drive safely, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Chapter Seven

HADLEY

“Are you going to call him?” Brooklyn asks after we’ve been driving for a solid *one* minute.

“Who, honey?” I feign innocence.

“Cash, duh. He likes you. I can tell. He looks at you with the gooey eyes.”

“Gooey eyes? What does that mean?”

“You know.” She leans over the console and makes her eyes go all soft and bats her eyelashes. “Like that.”

“Well, that just looked creepy,” I joke, pushing her back into her seat.

“You know it’s true.”

“How about we talk about Grandma and Grandpa?”

“That’s a more fun topic? Geesh. What happened with you two?”

“Nothing happened.”

She turns down the radio and shifts in her seat, keeping the seat belt secured tight but faces me.

“I’ll tell you one day, but not today.”

She rolls her eyes and huffs, holding up her pinky. “Okay, fine. Pinky swear you’ll tell me after you explain the whole wicked witch of Chicago and her monkey?”

“That’s not nice to say about your grandparents.”

“Maybe not but it’s the truth. They’re not grandparent-y at all.”

“That’s true but they love you.”

“In their way, you mean?”

I sigh. “I suppose so. Short version or long version?”

“Short. I don’t want it to ruin my music time.”

I take a deep breath and launch in. “They wanted us to move back to Chicago. Grandma said some not nice things, unsurprisingly. Grandpa seemed a little surprised by things I said. Grandma stormed out. Aunt Dorothy stood up for us. Grandpa said he wants to work on himself and realizes that while their focus is money and status with love and family being down the long list of things that are important to them, love and family is at the top of mine.”

“They went back to Chicago, though? They’re not staying around here, are they?” She voices her main worry.

“I didn’t ask,” I admit. “But I can’t imagine they’re staying.”

“She doesn’t get it, does she?”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“Why? Who hurt her so badly that she’s afraid to love people?”

“I don’t know. She’s never really opened up to me, as you can imagine.”

Brooklyn twists forward again before looking out her window. “Thank you,” she whispers.

“For what, honey?”

“For not being that way. For making sure Dad isn’t that way either.”

Tears spring to my eyes and I blink them away, reaching over and giving her hand a squeeze. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“I know. And thank you for that.”

“Grandpa wants to work on himself.”

Her cute little nose scrunches up. “What does that mean?”

“Exactly how it sounds, I suppose. He must have heard what I said and recognized that life is about more than what they’ve made of it.”

“Well, good. Hopefully Grandma can do the same.”

I nod. I hope so, too. I don’t see us having the type of relationship with each other that I just witnessed from Cash’s family, but I would like us to have more than what we have now.

“Okay. Enough of that. Let’s talk about Cash,” Brooklyn says, practically bouncing in her seat.

I groan. “Really?”

“Yes, really! Mom, he likes you! I can tell. Cody says it, too.”

I groan again. “Cody? You talked about us?”

“Mom. You stuck us in the office for *hours*,” she exaggerates. “Of course we talked. And he said that Cash totally likes you and his dad told him there’s history between you two but he didn’t know what it was. He also said that his dad told Cash that if you wouldn’t call him then he needed to man up and go to the diner to see you so that means he’s been wanting to talk to you *forever*. Why haven’t you called him? You had his number? Since when? And what kind of history do you two have? *How* do you have history because we haven’t lived in Red Oak that long and I’m basically with you 24/7 so I don’t know when you could have even found the time to have history with someone.”

“Take a breath, Brooklyn. You just asked a mountain of questions all at once.”

“Sorry,” she says sheepishly. “But, Mom, Cash is like a *catch*. Everyone in town knows that.”

“How do *you* know that?”

“Cody.”

I snort out a laugh. “He told you his uncle’s a catch?”

She shrugs. “Yeah, but I believe him because Cash is super good looking for an old guy.”

“Old? He’s one year older than me, you little turd.”

She giggles. “Like I said. Old.”

“No new jeans for you,” I joke.

“Also I totally want pizza so whatever place that lady told us to go to we need to find. I could really use some life-changing pizza. I don’t miss Chicago but I definitely miss Chicago pizza, you know?”

I widen my eyes. “Right?!” I exclaim. “But I thought we were picking up Chinese?”

“We still can. I’m hungry so maybe we can get pizza for a snack and bring Chinese home with us?”

“Man, I miss having a metabolism like yours.”

She flips her hair. “I know. It’s a wonderful thing being a teenager with a lot of energy and maybe self-diagnosed ADHD thanks to TikTok.”

I start laughing. “Well, I have it thanks to TikTok, too. But really I think I just have a lot on my mind and I’m getting older and find it hard to focus on just one thing.”

“Isn’t that like, exactly what ADHD is?”

I shrug. “I’m pretty sure there’s more to it than that.”

“Gotcha. So we have a plan. Pizza, shopping, Chinese, then pick up some ice cream for movie night?”

“My favorite kind of way to spend a night.”

“I bet you’d also like to spend a night with Cash,” she jokes then realizes what she said. “Ack! Not like that. I meant like a date. You should date him. But don’t introduce him to Dad. Dad would definitely hit on him even if Logan was around.”

Now that makes me laugh. Trotter would have a hard time keeping his eyes off Cash. Though, who could blame him? With his dark eyes, scruff on his chin, and unruly dark hair that always looks like he’s been running his hands through it? Combine that with his muscular build and he looks like a guy who should be on the cover of a magazine, not walking around in a small town. But maybe that’s why he’s even more attractive than should be legal?

“You’re a nut, you know that, right?”

“One of the things you love most about me.”

“Just one.”

Pizza.

Shopping.

Chinese food.

Ice cream.

A night binge watching *Outer Banks* for the third time with my daughter while wearing face masks.

There is no better way to spend a day.

Teenagers aren’t always the easiest to parent, but days like today make up for the moodiness and drama that comes with these years.

“It was a good day,” Brooklyn tells me over the sink as she’s washing off her face mask.

“Yes, it was.”

“I’m going to bed, okay?”

“Me, too.”

After brushing her teeth, she kisses me on the cheek.
“Love you, Mom. Call Cash.”

“You won’t drop it, will you?”

“Nope. Dad found his happy with Logan. Time for you to find yours.”

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you two have been talking about me.”

“Not about this.”

I look at her closely to see if she’s lying but her usual tells aren’t showing.

“It’s late, honey.”

“Something tells me he won’t mind.”

“It’s twelve-thirty in the morning,” I clarify.

“Something tells me he won’t mind,” she repeats.

“I’ll think about it.”

She picks Kevin up and bats me with his paw. “You do that. I get him tonight. You’ve been hogging him lately and it’s my turn for cuddles.”

Kevin looks at me and meows as she carries him away, waving his little paw like he’s telling me goodbye.

I finish getting ready for bed and stare at myself in the mirror, blowing out a breath.

“This is crazy,” I whisper. “You can’t call him at this hour.”

I swear I hear both Trotter and Brooklyn’s voices telling me to just go for it.

Placing a hand on my stomach, I give myself a little pep talk in the mirror. “It’s just a phone call. If he doesn’t answer, that’s okay because it’s after midnight and it’s rude to call this late anyway. But if he answers and wants to talk, that’s a good sign. Just call him. He asked you to.”

In my bedroom, I get comfortable in bed and grab my phone from the nightstand, steady my shaky hands, and pull

up Cash's number.

Before I hit call, I think better of it and send a quick text.

Me: Hi there. It's Hadley.

Cash's reply comes about thirty seconds after it delivers. The text changes to Read and I see three little bubbles pop up.

Cash: You okay?

Me: Yes, why?

Cash: Well, it's after midnight.

Me: Sorry. I wince then add: Is it too late?

Cash: Not at all. Just surprised to see your text. Especially at this hour.

Me: Yeah, sorry about that. I wasn't really thinking. But in my defense, you did tell me to use your number.

Cash: Happy you finally did, no matter what time it is. How was shopping and Chinese and Ben & Jerry's?

Me: Amazing. We got pizza from that place your sister recommended, too.

Cash: Girls after my own heart. A night full of food.

I rub my lips together, trying not to smile too big.

Me: It was a good day.

Cash: Glad to hear it. Was worried about you after... you know.

Me: I've dealt with that my entire life so nothing to be worried about.

Cash: Doesn't make it right. In fact, that's even worse.

Me: I know. But I don't feel like talking about them anymore.

Cash: Fair enough.

Cash: What do you want to talk about?

Uhh... I don't know. I'm frozen. Staring at my phone, I debate what to say. I honestly have no idea what I want to talk about with Cash.

Cash: Want me to start?

Me: That'd be great actually.

Cash: Tell me about shopping.

I blow out a breath, finding so much relief in his subject choice. We text back and forth for about thirty minutes, the conversation shifting from my afternoon and evening with Brooklyn to his work and how the rest of his day went after we left his office.

Cash: Hate to cut this short because I feel like I just won something since you finally reached out, but I have an early day tomorrow and should probably hit the sack.

I don't conjure up the image of him in bed that's been stuck in my head for almost sixteen years now. Otherwise I'd never get to sleep tonight.

Me: Thanks for chatting with me.

Cash: Anytime. I mean that.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I ask if he'd like to meet up soon.

Cash: Does it make me sound desperate if I ask if tomorrow is too soon?

I giggle like a fourteen-year-old girl chatting with her crush.

Me: Did it make me look desperate to text you at midnight?

Cash: I take it that you're free tomorrow?

Me: That works for me. I'll be at the diner during the day but I'm free in the evening.

Me: Wait. Like tonight since it's after midnight or tomorrow, tomorrow?

Cash: Which one is better for you?

Me: Honestly, either. But maybe tonight?

Cash: Perfect. If that changes, let me know. Send me your address and I'll pick you up. 6 work?

Me: (me) wondering if it's safe to give a guy I barely know my address.

Cash: (me) thinking we know each other a lot better than barely.

Me: So you're saying you won't turn into a stalker if I give you my address?

Cash: No stalker tendencies here.

I type out my address and watch the three bubbles pop up. When his text comes through, my jaw drops.

Cash: You live in my backyard, basically. A couple houses down.

Me: No way.

Cash: #smalltownlife lol

Me: I'd say so. That's crazy.

Cash: Knew someone had moved in, didn't realize my new neighbor was smoking hot.

Me: Smoking hot, huh? I bet you say that to all the neighbors.

Cash: SMOKING hot. And for the record, no I don't. Well, there's Miss Essie. But she's 97.

Me: You've aged well, too.

Pressing my lips together, I know that'll get to him. Aging well is putting it mildly, but I wanted to push a few buttons. Try my hand at flirting a bit, if I even know how to.

Cash: Oof. You wound me.

Me: Haha

Cash: See you tomorrow, Hadley. I'll do my best not to look old and feeble.

Me: Good luck!

Cash: Ha ha ha. You're hilarious.

I place my phone on my nightstand and plug it in and fall asleep with excitement in my veins.

Chapter Eight

CASH

“You’re annoying today,” Brock tells me with a scowl. “And stop whistling.”

“Maybe you’re the annoying one.”

“Oh, good come back. Seriously. Stop whistling!” he growls when I continue to whistle the tune that’s been in my head since I woke up this morning.

“Sorry.”

“No, you’re not. You’re smiling. You’ve been smiling all day.”

“I’m not allowed to smile?”

“Boone!” he shouts. “Get your ass in here! You, too, Corbin!”

Within seconds my siblings are in the conference room with us, a pastry in Boone’s hand.

“Where’d you get that from?”

“Break room. Someone dropped off a big box of ‘em.”

“Why am I the last to know?” I demand.

“Probably because we didn’t want them all gone before we had the chance to eat one,” Boone admits.

They see my back as I make my way to the break room to steal a few snacks.

I grab a paper plate out of the cupboard and fill it with a couple pastries from what I know is Lola’s bakery, which might be the only bakery in town, but that doesn’t mean it’s not hands down one of, if not the, best in three counties.

I walk back to the conference room, chewing on a cream puff covered in chocolate ganache. Taking a seat, I sigh in happiness. I would never, and I mean ever, tell my mother, but these cream puffs are in a tie with her carbonara. My last meal? Mom’s carbonara with cream puffs and chocolate ganache for dessert. I’d die a happy man.

“You’re still happy,” Brock accuses.

“Of course I am. I have this,” I tell him, holding up my pastry. “And the rest of these to enjoy next.”

“Not what I meant and you know it. Spill. Or Corbin’s taking your snacks away.”

“Rude,” I mumble, licking my fingers before wiping them off with a napkin. “I can’t be happy or in a good mood without being interrogated?”

“Stop deflecting,” Boone says. “This is about Hadley, isn’t it?”

I know my face gives everything away because I can feel how big my smile is.

“It’s about Hadley,” Corbin confirms. “Look at his face. He can’t even hide it.”

“He looks like he’s constipated,” Boone adds, laughing. “Why are you making that face? Don’t do that around Hadley. She’ll be a runner for sure.”

I roll my eyes and try my best to wipe the smile off my face. I’m able to relax it, but not lose it completely.

“Fine. Don’t get all weird on me and act like your usual selves, but yeah, it’s about Hadley. She and I are getting together tonight.”

“A date?”

“I didn’t specify.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Last night she texted me out of nowhere and she asked if I still wanted to get together some time. I suggested tonight. I’m picking her up at six.”

“She asked you?” Brock says, not hiding the humor in his voice.

Corbin lightly punches his shoulder. “What’s that supposed to mean? Women are capable of asking out guys. We’re also capable of changing tires, voting, buying our own cars and homes, mowing the lawn...”

“Hey now, don’t get too crazy.”

She scoffs. “What is the deal with men and their lawn?”

“It’s in our DNA.”

Brock replies, “Also, just to say, we’re very aware that you’re more than capable of doing anything we can do. We’re not idiots. My point was that he’s been wanting to *spend time* with Hadley since he saw her at the diner that night Brock

proposed but he's been a wuss and hasn't done anything about it."

"Giving her the time she needed and letting her come to me instead of pushing her was being a wuss?"

The boys are quiet, which is incredibly strange, but Corbin replies with, "And that's exactly what our mama taught us, right? To have patience and kindness?"

"You're getting more and more like her," Boone comments.

"I'll take that as a compliment. Back to Hadley."

"There's not much to tell yet. We're getting together tonight and no, it's not a date. Not until she's ready for that. I don't know how to pursue this with her while also giving her the space she needs. Her past isn't like ours. You heard her parents. They're not the "have cookies on the counter waiting for you after school" type or even "attend every event your kids are a part of" type. They're the let others raise your children and swoop in only when it's convenient or makes them look good type. And we know that the family comes with me so this," I gesture to all of us, "might be a little overwhelming."

"But wanted," Boone adds.

I take a deep breath and look at the plate in front of me on the table. "Right. I need to go slow," I murmur.

"Slow is good," Corbin reminds me gently. "It doesn't mean you're going backward. Forward slowly is perfectly fine."

"Yup."

“Slow is good. Stalling completely, not so good,” Boone reminds me.

“I’m not stalling and now that she’s reached out first, I’m taking it as a sign that she’s at least ready to talk and continue to get to know each other. Saying that, y’all need to relax about it because it’ll only freak her out more if you go all Lake on her and feel the need to know every detail.”

“We would do no such thing,” Brock argues.

“Uh huh. I’m saying this as a member of the Lake family who feels the need to know every detail of my family’s lives so this isn’t me pointing fingers. This is who we are. It’s messed up, sure, but it is what it is. I just need y’all to fight your instincts to become involved.”

Corbin scrunches up her nose at me. “Can we tell Mom?”

“Not yet, no. That’ll make it worse.”

She huffs and sits back in her seat, crossing her arms over her chest. “Fine. But don’t come at me when she finds out you’re seeing the one who got away and never told her.”

I point at Corbin and stand from my chair, taking my plate of goodness with me. “This. This right here is exactly what I meant. The one who got away? Really?”

“Well, isn’t she?”

“I’m going back to my office now.”

“We aren’t done discussing the bid!” Brock shouts at my back.

“Yeah, we are.”

Once in my office, I close the door behind me and take a seat at my desk, bringing my computer back to life and focus

on work. Well, doing my best to focus on work.

Corbin's mention of the one who got away continues to cycle through my head. I don't know if that's true or not, but I do know that I've thought about her more times over the years than I probably should have.

Around four o'clock, I decide to reach out to Hadley. Something I've been dying to do all day but haven't yet. I don't want to come off as too eager, but I want her to know I'm looking forward to tonight.

Me: How's your day been?

Her response is immediate, which makes me smile.

Hadley: Pretty good! Yours?

Me: Better by the minute.

Hadley: Oh, yeah? Why's that?

Me: It's almost 6

Hadley: Oh, do you have something special happening then? ;)

Me: Just getting together with my smoking hot neighbor. She's got this long dark hair and these gorgeous blue eyes and a smile that takes my breath away.

I hold my breath, wondering if I pushed it too far after just preaching to my family about needing to take it slow.

Three little bubbles pop up and disappear three times before her text comes through.

Hadley: My my, what a lucky gal. Such flattering words. Quite the charmer, aren't you?

Me: You ain't seen nothing yet. See you soon.

Hadley: Can't wait.

Can't wait.

She can't wait.

Why did my heart just start beating harder at those two simple words?

The one who got away.

Maybe she is. All I know is that I've never felt this excited about a date that's actually a non-date before. Or a date, for that matter. She's more than what I just told her she is. More than beauty on the outside and that's what I'm looking forward to most. Getting reacquainted with the girl who caught my attention all those years ago in a way that I never stopped thinking of her.

A part of me wonders if I've hyped her up in my head too much and it'll be hard for her to live up to my expectations but a bigger part of me thinks that's not going to happen.

I hear a light knock on the door and Brock's head pokes in.

"Can I come in?"

"Sure." I click save on what I'm working on and twist in my chair to face him. "What's up?"

"Just wanted to say, I had more patience than I thought possible when it came to Naomi and it was worth it. Every bit of it. I get it, you don't want to rush but I also understand racing to catch up on all the time you missed now that she's here again. When Naomi got divorced, I felt like I finally had my chance but when was it too soon, you know? If Hadley's reached out to you, it's a good sign that she's ready. Maybe not for a relationship, but she's heading in that direction. My opinion, anyway. And I promise we won't be our normal nosy

selves or try our best not to. But I gotta say that I haven't seen you smile as much in the past ten years or more than you have today. Not with any other woman you dated. Not even Simone, who you came close to proposing to and thank fuck you didn't because she was a cheating manipulating ass."

"You just had to bring up Simone's name, didn't you?"

"Only to remind you of how much better is out there. And when she's ready, and you're ready, if this thing tonight extends to more nights and time together, the family will want to officially meet her and if I have to have a talk with them before we do that, I will."

The corner of my mouth ticks up because I can just see how that conversation with, specifically my mother, would go. She's an amazing mother and loves us like crazy, but she also has a hard time not involving herself in our lives.

"Thank you. Means a lot to me."

"Take it from me, someone who sat on the sidelines for too many years loving someone because I missed my chance by not having the courage to go for it, when the right woman comes into your life, don't let her slip away. The good ones? They're precious and deserve the world. Just don't let some other guy be the one to give it to her."

I nod my head, swallowing hard. "Message received."

"Good. Have fun tonight. Know what you're doing yet?"

I chuckle. "Not really. I've been too busy with work to have time to give it much thought. But for tonight, I think we'll keep it simple. Take a drive and show her around Red Oak, grab some dinner. Nothing fancy. If it goes well and there's a repeat, I'll do something more unique."

"I like that plan."

“Glad to have your approval.”

He grins and gives me a thumbs up, like a dork, and walks back through my office door.

Usually I work for a while after five but tonight I’m shutting down my computer and turning off the lights in my office at five o’clock on the dot, quickly saying my goodbyes to everyone in the office and heading for home. I stop along the way to wash my truck and fill it up with fuel and take a quick shower once I’m home. A quick look out my patio door tells me Hadley’s home, since I can see the back of her house from mine.

Which is crazy. How I didn’t know she was the one who moved into that house is surprising, but summer is a busy time for us at work so it’s not like I’ve been around home all that much.

Dressed in a pair of khaki shorts and a white button down with the sleeves rolled up, I shove my wallet and phone into my front pocket along with a pack of gum, grab a couple bottles of water from the fridge and place them in the cupholders in my truck.

At five ‘til six, I hop in my truck and make the short drive over to Hadley’s house, park in the driveway, and march up the steps onto her porch.

Her porch is decorated for fall even though it’s still August. A tell sign that says “Welcome Fall” leans against the door frame, a display of a hay bale, pumpkins, and mums is arranged nicely, a wreath made of fall colors hangs from the entry door, and there’s a welcome mat in front of the door. It looks homey and inviting. After my quick inspection of her outside décor, I ring the doorbell, and wait.

And wait.

And wait a little longer.

I ring the doorbell again and wince, feeling rude for doing so but there's still no answer.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I double check I didn't miss a text from Hadley but there's nothing since her last text telling me she couldn't wait to get together.

I knock. Ring the doorbell once more.

Nothing.

“What the hell?” I mumble to myself.

Am I being ghosted?

Did something happen?

Is she in a ditch somewhere and hurt?

What about Brooklyn? Is she okay?

Questions run through my head, none of them that have good answers.

I shoot off a text to Hadley, asking if she's okay and letting her know I stopped by her house but there was no answer to my text either.

Now feeling concerned, I do the first thing that comes to mind.

Drive to the diner and see if she's there.

The diner is dark, though. Which is odd because it's normally open until ten.

I park, get out, and see if there's a message on the door as to why it's closed but the only sign is turned to CLOSED with no explanation.

“Okay, what the hell?” I growl.

Back in my truck, I think for a second before hitting dial and hope I’m not overstepping.

“Yo.”

“Ryker. It’s Cash.”

Ryker, my closest friend from childhood, chuckles. “Saw it on the caller ID, man. What’s up?”

“Question for ya and if you can’t answer, I totally get it, but I’m gonna ask anyway.”

“Shoot.”

“Know why the diner’s closed?”

“You’re calling me to ask why the diner is closed? You that desperate for a cheeseburger?” he asks, laughing.

“It’s not that. I was, uh,” I rub the back of my neck, “I had a sort of date tonight with Dorothy’s niece and she’s not at home and hasn’t answered my texts. Stopped at the diner to see if she was there but it’s dark.”

“You’re calling me because you were ghosted and want me to find out why?”

“Shut up, asshole. I don’t think I was ghosted. Two hours ago we were texting and she told me she was excited about tonight. Now she’s nowhere to be found and Dorothy never closes the diner down without explanation.”

“I’m a cop, not a detective,” he reminds me.

“And you’re a cop in a small town who might have heard something come through on the radio.”

“And if I heard something come through, I wouldn’t be allowed to just tell someone that.”

I huff in frustration. “Yeah, I know. It was worth a shot, though.”

He’s quiet for a moment before, “You had a date tonight? With Hadley?”

“You know Hadley?” I ask, not able to keep the defensive tone out of my voice.

“Only from the diner,” he explains. “Go in there a lot. Saw there was a new girl working, Dorothy introduced us.”

“Oh. Right.”

“You know I’m not eager to jump into anything like that again. Crashing and burning wasn’t fun the last time, neither was the divorce, and I don’t need to bring anyone around Luna.”

Luna’s Ryker’s daughter only a year younger than Cody. She became his entire world and when his wife Amber left him. Not that she wasn’t the light of his life before that, but when he and Amber got a divorce, he fully invested himself in fatherhood.

“Yeah. I get it.”

“You think Hadley’s in trouble? Or Dorothy?”

My stomach sours at the thought. “Not sure but something isn’t sitting right with me.”

“Check Dorothy’s house. If they’re not there, head home and I’ll see what I can find out.”

I blow out a breath, wishing there were more options but knowing there isn’t much I can do.

“Let me know,” I respond.

“Will do. And, Cash?”

“Yeah?”

“This is the one you met in New York, right?”

“How’d you...”

“Small town,” he murmurs. “Shit spreads around here. Besides, Corbin told me.”

I bark out a laugh. “Of course she did.”

“Not her fault. Saw her getting groceries, we were just chatting and I said something about picking up food from the diner before heading home and it spilled out of her.”

“Sounds about right.”

“We’ll figure it out. Try not to worry. She probably just lost track of time and is at home kicking herself right now.”

Possible, but she would have texted. And the way he said what he said tells me he thinks the same but said that to try and make me feel better.

“Talk soon.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Ryker. I know it’s out of line to ask because of privacy reasons and all that, so I appreciate anything you can give me.”

“You got it.”

We hang up and I drive by Dorothy’s house where I’ve done electrical work several times and see no one home there either after knocking and ringing her doorbell.

I make another stop at Hadley’s to see if she’s there but no luck.

With no other options, I go home and pace.

Back and forth until I'm afraid the wood floor will need refinishing.

When my phone rings an hour later, I jump out of my skin and fumble it around, almost dropping it on the floor.

"Ryker. What's the word?"

"Nothing. No one has seen or heard from either of them. I did a drive by a few places I know Dorothy frequents, checked the hospital to see if her car was there, and came up empty."

"Shit."

"Maybe they went to Gatlinburg to eat or something."

"Maybe."

"I'll keep an eye and ear out. Keep you updated."

"Thanks."

"Welcome."

I toss my phone on the couch and rake my hands through my hair. I have a bad feeling in my gut. It's possible she changed her mind about getting together and rather than telling me that, she did exactly what Ryker suggested. Went somewhere out of town to eat dinner or whatever else. But I don't think so.

Hours later, I still haven't heard anything from Hadley.

I wake up the next morning after a restless night of sleep, still a bundle of nerves after not hearing anything from her or Ryker.

Shooting off a quick text to her, I pray she answers this one.

Me: Missed you last night. Concerned about you. If you changed your mind, that's fine and I won't bug you anymore,

but if you could just reply to let me know whether or not you're okay, that'd be appreciated.

As expected, my text goes unanswered.

Chapter Nine

HADLEY

The text from Trotter comes through only an hour before Cash is set to be at my house.

Trotter: 9-1-1

Trotter: Need you to get to Nashville. Call me when you're on the road and I'll explain. Your parents' plane is at the Gatlinburg airport and it's waiting for you.

Trotter and I never abuse the 9-1-1 text so I knew the second I saw it that it was a true emergency. Without thinking, I drive to the diner to pick up Brooklyn and Dorothy insisted on coming along.

On the way to the airport, I call Trotter.

“Babe,” he answers.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s your mom.”

“Is she okay?”

“She, uh...”

“She *what?*”

I look in the rearview mirror at Brooklyn who's watching me closely then over at Dorothy.

"Trotter."

"Okay, this is... well, this is kind of wild and I wasn't supposed to tell you but your mom's in jail."

"What?!" I shout and slam on the brakes. A car behind me honks then swerves around me, throwing a finger my way.

"She kind of lost it. By the way, you didn't tell me you had a special little visit from them."

"Sorry, it was... unpleasant."

"I'll bet," he mutters. "Anyway, your mom and dad headed to Nashville from Red Oak. Guess things got a little wild. And now she's locked up."

"Why do I have to go to Nashville then?"

"Because you need to bail her out."

"Where's Dad?"

"He's, well, let's just say when I mentioned things got a little wild, that was a very big understatement."

Still driving, I shake my head, rather confused.

"I don't understand."

"He's in jail, too. Well, the drunk tank, but still jail."

I'm stunned silent. I just... this can't be true. "My parents are both in jail. In Nashville. Because they spent a night partying too hard?"

"What?!" Brooklyn whisper shouts from the back seat.

Dorothy starts giggling, slapping her knee. "Oh, this is going to be good," she mutters quietly.

“That’s the broad version. There’s more to the story but I think you’ll want to hear it from them.”

“How’d they even get to Nashville if the plane is still in Gatlinburg?”

“Their driver.”

Ahh. Makes sense. I don’t even remember the last time I saw my mom or dad behind the wheel of a vehicle. They’ve had drivers and pilots and probably train conductors on their payroll since before I was born.

“I kind of want them to sit there for a while.”

“Part of me agrees but they already spent one night in jail. Thinking we’ll have to have your mom committed after this. Probably not a good idea to add fuel to the fire.”

“How’d you find out?”

“Dad. Robert called his lawyer, thinking he’d fly home from his freaking vacation in Austria to get him out but he helped him realize that it would be quicker to get shit taken care of if you posted bail. Don’t know how Dad found out from the there but basically, it’s all on you, darling. Have fun!”

“I can’t believe this.” I laugh. “My parents. Mr. and Mrs. Straight Lace are in the clink.”

“I bet the other inmates are getting an earful.”

“Man, I bet so. They’re probably pooling their money together to post bail for her so they don’t have to listen to her anymore.”

“No doubt. You have a safe flight and text me. Maybe take a video of her behind bars. Your dad, too. Because this is the shit I live for.”

“Want to talk to Brooklyn before you ring off?”

“Brooklyn’s with you?” he exclaims. “Oh my gosh, Hadley! She’s going to be traumatized!”

“Well, I didn’t know what was going on and figured that someone was hurt so she should be with me! How was I supposed to know it was just because my parents got their drink on in Nashville?”

“Shit. I should have told you more sooner, huh?”

“Meh. It’s fine. She would have found out anyway.”

“Put my girl on.”

I hand the phone back to Brooklyn and look over to Dorothy who has a Cheshire cat grin on her face. She’s practically rubbing her hands together in glee, anticipating what’s to come.

“You don’t need to look so happy about my parents being locked up.”

“Oh, yes I do. After what they pulled yesterday? They deserve a good wake-up call. I just wish I could have been there to see your mom cuffed and stuffed into the back of the police car. I wonder if they have a dash cam or body cam we can watch? I bet it’ll be on the news. ‘Chicago woman goes ballistic, wondering why the police don’t know who she is because *everyone* knows who she is, tells them she’ll sue the entire department and city of Nashville...’”

“That’s one long headline.”

“Well, obviously it would need paraphrased, but I bet that’s exactly how it went down.”

I nod, looking in my rearview mirror to see Brooklyn smiling and laughing quietly at something her dad just said.

I'm so happy he fathers her so well. He stumbled at first, but then again we both did. What new parents don't? And he struggled to realize there was more to life than money, but Brooklyn played a major role in that. He didn't want her growing up thinking that what's in your bank account defines you. Or that it equals love.

"We're here," I tell Brooklyn, pulling into the small airport.

"Okay, Mom. Dad, I've got to go. We're at the airport... okay, yeah, I will... uh huh... working on it, I'll explain more later... okay, yeah, I'll text you when we land. Love you... bye."

She hands my phone back to me and I drop it in my purse that I placed between the door and me. "Dad said to tell you there will be a car waiting for us at the airport."

I reply, "Okay, honey."

Fifteen minutes later, we've boarded my parents' private plane and are taxiing down the runway. Brooklyn and I have flown on this plane more than we have commercial planes so it's nothing new to either of us. Dorothy, however, hasn't been in a private plane before. She's looking around, her eyes wide.

"Beginning to think I made a mistake dismissing all that money. This is pretty amazing."

I chuckle. "It does have its perks."

"I'll say. I feel so fancy."

Brooklyn laughs and shakes her head. "I agree. It has its perks. But Red Oak beats it any day."

I wink at her knowing she means it not just about Red Oak, but our new life in general.

It isn't until the plane is lifting off the ground that I remember exactly what I was doing before Trotter's text came.

Cash.

In my panic to get to the airport because I thought someone was dying or had been in an accident, I forgot to text or call him to tell him what's going on. And I can't do anything about it now because we're about to be in the air.

Damn it. I was really looking forward to spending some time with Cash, learning what he's been up to since we first met almost sixteen years ago.

I think about how I'll explain that I got a text and forgot all about him and our plans. Maybe I can blame Trotter. Technically, it was a mis-use of the 9-1-1 text because this isn't a life-or-death situation, though my mother might argue that. Rather, my mother *will* argue that. She'll be fit to be tied to say the least.

So will my dad, but he'll be far more understanding than she will be.

What Dorothy said earlier about suing the city and police department isn't far off. She'll fail, obviously, but she'll try her damndest to pass the blame onto everyone else and make them suffer for her mistake.

I watch out the window as we speed through the air to get to Nashville, where I have to bail my parents out of jail, and hysterical laughter bursts out of me.

Dorothy gives me a knowing look and grins. Brooklyn looks at me like I've lost my mind.

"You okay over there?"

“Just dandy,” I say, wiping the tears from my eyes. “I can’t believe this, though.”

“Do you think Grandma will be wearing an orange jumpsuit? Or one of those striped black and white ones like in the old movies?”

That image does absolutely nothing to help my laughter calm down.

“Oh gosh, I really hope so.”

She smiles. “Me, too.”

“What were they up to?” Dorothy wonders.

“No idea. I assumed they went back to Chicago after they left Red Oak. Their little detour must have been spare of the moment since the plane was still in Gatlinburg.”

The rest of the short flight to Nashville is fairly quiet and it isn’t until we touch down that Brooklyn says to me, “Mom?”

“Hmm?”

“Weren’t you supposed to go out with Cash tonight?”

“I was, yes. And I forgot to tell him we had an emergency and I needed to leave town.”

She pulls an eek face and says, “Better text him when you can.”

“I will,” I promise.

Unfortunately, the minute we get off the plane, we’re surrounded by chaos.

The car Trotter said would be waiting is having some sort of engine trouble because the hood is up and there are three men staring down at the engine with a perplexed look on their faces.

“Sorry, ma’am. Not sure what’s going on and none of us are mechanical so we’re going to have to have it towed somewhere.”

“That’s not a problem. I can call an Uber.”

“We can have another car here in fifteen minutes.”

“No need,” I assure them.

I open up the Uber app on my phone and choose our vehicle, step into the small airport and use their restroom, and wait for the car to pull up.

“Ten minutes,” I tell Brooklyn when she asks me how much longer.

“Can I have some money, please? I’m super thirsty and there’s a vending and snack machine over there.”

“Sure thing,” I tell her, handing her my wallet. “Grab me a Diet Coke, will ya?”

“Yup. Dorothy, do you want anything?”

“Maybe a Sprite. I’m a little queasy after the flight.”

Dorothy takes a seat, her coloring pale.

“Do you need something to eat?” Brooklyn asks, sitting next to her and placing a hand on her arm.

“Just some Sprite for now. I think I need some sugar to get my pep back up.”

Brooklyn rushes to the machine and grabs her a Sprite, returning with her drink before going back for a drink for us. I open the bottle and hand it to Dorothy, helping her take a sip. Brooklyn hands me my Diet Coke and a package of cheese and crackers. The kind with the fake kind of powdery cheese between two crackers.

“I know these aren’t the best but maybe you need some calories, too?” Brooklyn asks, ripping open the package and handing one of the little squares to Dorothy.

“Thank you, sweetheart.” She munches away and takes another sip of Sprite while I rub her back and watch her closely.

“Is it helping any?”

Dorothy takes another sip but the color doesn’t seem to be coming back to her skin.

If anything, she’s looking a little worse. I watch as she presses a hand to her chest, wincing in pain.

“Dorothy?”

“Something’s not right,” she says in barely a whisper. “I don’t feel...” She gasps for breath. “I don’t feel so good.”

“Would you like me to help you to the restroom? Do you feel like you’re going to throw up?”

She nods weakly and I help her stand and walk to the restroom. We barely get to a stall in time before she vomits up what little is in her stomach.

Leaning against the sink to wash up, she stumbles a bit and I catch her.

“Whoa.”

“Something’s not right, Hadley.”

Her breathing is ragged and skin clammy when I grip her hand. My heart sinks when I tell her, “I think we need to get to a hospital.”

“No. I’ll be okay. Just need to sit for a bit.”

“Dorothy, don’t fight me on this. Please.”

When another round of nausea hits her, causing her to throw up in the sink, I decide enough's enough. "We're going to the hospital. Do you need an ambulance? Want me to see if the airport has anyone on staff who can help us?"

She opens her mouth to speak but ends up throwing up again.

Maybe someone here can help but I want her in a hospital as soon as possible. "Brooklyn, call 9-1-1. Tell them we're at the private airport and we need an ambulance. I think Dorothy's having a heart attack. Tell them to hurry."

"Oh my gosh, okay, okay." Without delay, Brooklyn calls for an ambulance and I help Dorothy to the floor, scooting her close to the wall so she has a place to lean.

Jumping up, I wet a paper towel and blot it on her forehead and place another behind her neck.

"I don't know what to do," I whisper. "Tell me what you need."

"You're doing it," she says quietly.

"Ambulance is on its way!" Brooklyn says urgently, panic evident in her voice and on her face. "Do I need to tell anyone else? Like, does an airport this size have one of those things that have the paddles? Do they have emergency staff? Is it too soon for that? What do I do?"

Ignoring her plethora of questions, I ask her, "How long did they say the ambulance is out?"

She's still on the phone with emergency response so she asks them.

"Five minutes!" she shouts, even though she's standing right next to us. "She says they'll be here soon and I'm

supposed to remain calm.”

I smile at her, hoping to project some of that calmness her way. I might not feel it, but I’m a mom and I know how to handle situations better than her at only fifteen. “Did you hear that, Aunt Dorothy? Five minutes. Just hang on and someone will be here to help you.”

She nods, closing her eyes.

Five minutes feels more like thirty and when I hear the sound of sirens blaring it’s like music to my ears.

“They’re here. Help is coming, just hang with me,” I urge Dorothy then turn to Brooklyn who still looks worried out of her mind. “Greet them, will you? Show them back here.”

She nods rapidly and spins on her heel, running to the door.

Dorothy makes a move to get up but I place a hand on her shoulder. “They’ll come to you. Just wait for them.”

“I can walk.”

I give her a stern look. “It’ll make me feel better if you just stay put, okay?”

“Fine,” she concedes, her body far from relaxed as she winces in pain again.

Moments later, EMTs are running into the restroom, armed with bags.

I step away, letting them do their job and giving them space. Brooklyn stands next to me, looking around with tears in her eyes so I wrap my arms around her and we stand vigilantly as the EMTs take vitals and tell Dorothy they’re going to transport her to the hospital and will do an ECG en route.

Before we know what's happening, the EMTs are placing Dorothy on a gurney and telling Brooklyn and me we can follow them to the hospital.

Though, our Uber has come and gone so I have to find a new one. "Wait! We don't have a car. Which hospital are you going to?"

I quickly request a new car and am so grateful that one is only a few minutes away. Likely the one that we ignored earlier because it's the same type of car.

As they're loading Dorothy into the back of the ambulance, I step to her side. "We'll be there as soon as we can, okay?"

She nods, an oxygen mask now covering her mouth and nose.

"Love you," I whisper, kissing her cheek before stepping back so the EMTs can finish and get to the hospital quickly.

I jump when their sirens echo around me and the lights start flashing.

Sirens and lights.

They need all the warning they can get.

Two police cars are ahead of the ambulance. I didn't even notice them earlier.

Having three emergency vehicles for her transport to the hospital does nothing to calm my or Brooklyn's nerves. We're huddled close, Brooklyn crying and me doing my best to hold it together when the Uber pulls up.

We hop in, telling him which hospital we need to go to.

Brooklyn's typing away on her phone and when she notices me watching she tells me, "Dad. I'm telling him what's going on so he knows."

I nod. "Good."

"What about Grandma and Grandpa?"

I shrug. "I'm not worried about that right now. Our focus is Aunt Dorothy at the moment and when we know more, we'll deal with that headache."

"Okay," she replies. "Is Aunt Dorothy going to be okay?"

"I hope so, honey. I'd love to promise you she will be but I can't do that."

"I'm scared," Brooklyn admits.

"Me, too," I agree, trying to be transparent. "But, remember Aunt Dorothy is strong."

The rest of the ride is too long for my liking but soon enough we're pulling up to the emergency doors and I'm double checking the Uber app that I put an extra tip on my payment for the driver.

We race to the counter and give them Dorothy's full name, letting them know that we're family (fibbing a bit by saying I'm her daughter rather than niece because I'm worried that she won't give me all the answers I need if I don't).

"Have a seat in the waiting area and a nurse will be out shortly."

"Okay, thank you."

"You're welcome."

Brooklyn and I take a seat and bounce our knees in anticipation of someone coming out to give us an update on

our beloved aunt.

The wait is killing us both, but we endure it knowing that if it means they're taking care of her, that's where the doctors and nurses need to be.

Chapter Ten

CASH

Before going to work, I swing by the diner to see if it's open.

I do this for two reasons.

One, because Hadley still hasn't replied to my texts and second, I want to see if Dorothy's at the diner. I told Hadley I wasn't a stalker, but my actions over the last several hours prove otherwise.

The fact that the diner is still closed up gives me an incredibly uneasy feeling so I call Ryker again.

"No word yet," he tells me by way of answering.

"Diner's still closed."

"Saw that. No one's heard anything except for last night Dorothy closed up early and rushed everyone out the door."

"Shit."

"You haven't heard from your girl today?"

"Not my girl but no, I haven't."

"Rumor has it she's your girl even if she's not officially your girl."

“Yeah, well, time will tell, I guess.”

“I’ll do some more digging when I’m on duty today,” he promises.

“Thanks, man. Appreciate it.”

“I know. Talk later.”

We hang up as I pull into my regular parking spot at Lake Electrical. I know I’m about to be bombarded by my siblings about last night and I’m not sure I have the energy today to deal with it so I back out of my spot and pull around to the back where the shop is located, hoping I can sneak in that way.

Only a few of our guys (and one gal who is a freaking *kick ass* mechanic) notice me when I come in. Of course they give me a weird look since I never come into work this way, but they don’t comment other than saying good morning.

Bridget, our head mechanic, calls out my name just before I walk through the back door into the office.

“What’s up?”

“Was going to come in a little later to give you an update on truck eight. Transmission’s out.”

“Shit.”

“I can replace it. It’s gonna be expensive but less expensive than replacing the entire truck. Figured I’d let y’all know, though.”

We discuss the details of truck eight along with a few other vehicles she’s working on at the moment. I give her the go-ahead to do what she does best and head to my office.

For one blissful hour I’m left alone to my work.

Then...

Brock walks into the office, sits down in a huff, and gives me a knowing look.

“What happened?”

I sit back in my chair and let out a heavy sigh. “Not a clue. Haven’t heard from her since about four yesterday afternoon. Diner’s locked up tight and hasn’t been open.”

His eyes narrow. “Sounds like something happened.”

“No shit,” I snap.

“Don’t be an ass to me, I didn’t do anything wrong here. I meant something happened that’s not her ditching you. Have you asked Ryker if he heard anything?”

“Of course I have. Nothing from him, either.”

“The fact that the diner’s closed means she didn’t ditch you,” he repeats.

“Hoping so. But the alternative to that means there’s some family emergency or something and that doesn’t sit well, either.”

“Right.”

“I’ll text her again later, see if she responds. If she doesn’t, I don’t want to keep badgering her if she’s in the middle of something.”

“Let me know. I’ll tell Corbin and Boone.”

“Thanks.”

“You got it. Need the day off?”

“Hell no. I’ll go crazy at home. Might as well get some work done.”

He nods and leaves my office without another word, shutting the door behind him.

Before I get back to work, I reach for my phone and shoot off another text to Hadley.

Me: Worried, Hadley. Let me know what's going on as soon as you can. Saw the diner's closed.

Three little bubbles pop up and disappear again and my heart starts racing.

She's replying.

Thank fuck.

The bubbles disappear and I sit here staring at my phone like an idiot, waiting to see what she's typing.

Nothing comes up and finally... my phone rings.

"Hadley?" I answer immediately.

"Cash. I'm so sorry. Last night. Oh my gosh, it was a shit show. I'm so sorry I didn't reach out sooner."

"Are you okay?" That's my main concern.

"Kind of. Not really? I don't know."

"Talk to me. What happened?"

"First of all, around five last night I got a text from Trotter that was a 9-1-1 text. We never abuse that so I knew it was an emergency. He told me I needed to get to Nashville and naturally I assumed there was a medical emergency, which turned out to be true but not because of what he told me. Anyway, since I thought it was that, I had Brooklyn and Aunt Dorothy come along. My parents' plane was still in Gatlinburg so we took that because that's what Trotter told me to do in the text. I know it sounds –"

I interrupt her with, “It doesn’t sound any sort of way, don’t think I’m going to judge you for a private plane or whatever else. I understand.”

She blows out a breath. “Thank you. It sounds so uppity, I know, but that’s just who they are.”

“Yup. Kind of figured that out already.”

She goes on, “On the way to the airport, I called Trotter and he told me my parents were in jail.”

“Jail!” I shout.

“Crazy, right? My parents. My dad not really, just in the drunk tank or whatever that means because he was freaking hammered out of his mind. Never seen that before so I can’t begin to imagine what that even looked like. My mom for other reasons. I’m not sure why Dad isn’t out yet, though. Unless he started acting up at the police station, which is very possible, unfortunately.” She lets out a laugh but it lacks all traces of humor.

“Your parents... are in *jail?!?*” I repeat because that’s the craziest thing I’ve heard in a *long* time.

“I know. That’s not even the entire story. Anyway, we landed in Nashville and yeah, the night went to hell fast after that. Aunt Dorothy wasn’t feeling well after the flight so she asked for some Sprite and next thing we know, she’s lightheaded and vomiting and her chest was hurting. She’s in the hospital in Nashville because she had a freaking heart attack.”

“What the hell!”

“She’ll be okay,” she rushes to explain. “She had to have emergency bypass surgery last night and my parents are still in

jail so I'm in an Uber right now heading to the jail to bail them out. Something I never thought I'd have to say."

As she's talking, I'm looking around my office, sure I'm on candid camera. Her prim and proper parents. In jail? No way. There's no way. Dorothy had a heart attack? The woman who hustles and still runs the diner like she's in her prime?

"Uh. I'm not sure where to start. You're sure Dorothy is going to be okay?"

"Yeah. Doctors are confident she'll recover fine but it'll be a slow process. Or, at least, slower than she's used to. Good thing I'm taking over the diner so she won't have that on her shoulders."

"Damn. She's strong so I'm sure you're right. And stubborn as ever which will be fun for you to deal with when you're trying to keep her at a slow pace but a good thing for her because it'll make her determined to get well as quickly as possible."

"Right."

"Hadley. How are *you* doing?"

I hear her snuffle and it breaks me, knowing she's alone and crying. "Exhausted. Brooklyn and I stayed in a hotel last night but didn't get there until after midnight. My phone died, Brooklyn's phone died, too. As soon as I woke up, I went to the Walgreen's that was just down the street this morning and bought a couple chargers and a few other necessities then back to the hotel to shower and change into the clean underwear I bought at Walgreen's, which is gross because they haven't been washed but at least they're cleaner than what we were wearing. I bought both of us cheeky Nashville sweatshirts at the hotel gift shop along with some shorts so we're both

sweating like beasts and will need to keep tapping into the deodorant I bought at Walgreen's but whatever. It's not the worst thing we could live with. Sorry, that was way too much information but you know how I get. I babble. Anyway, we'll be at the hotel again tonight. Neither of us want to leave here until we're able to bring Aunt Dorothy with us."

"Do you know when that will be?"

"At the earliest tomorrow. Maybe the day after."

"How are you getting back to Red Oak?"

"Not sure yet. I think I'll have a car service pick us up."

"Nah. I'll come get you. Give me the details and I'll be there."

"Cash, no. You don't have to do that."

"Good thing it's my choice then, huh? Do we need to do anything for the diner? Is there someone who can at least open it? Franky?"

"I texted him this morning and he's going to open around ten. His fiancée is going to serve customers. We lost a lot of our workers to college starting back up and haven't had the chance to fill positions yet."

"I'll head over there and see what I can do to fill in."

"Stop, that's asking too much."

"You didn't ask. I offered. Stop telling me what I don't have to do and let me help you."

"Cash..."

"This is what we do. We help each other out in time of need."

"Small town life, huh?"

“Small town life,” I agree.

“I’m so sorry I ditched you last night.”

“Hadley, it’s fine. You had some major shit happening so I get it. I was just worried about you.”

“Still, it was rude of me not to let you know.”

“You can make it up to me later.”

I can hear the smile in her voice when she replies, “Oh, yeah? I’ll have to put my thinking cap on and see if I can come up with some good ways to do that.”

“I’ve got plenty of ideas.”

“Oh, I’m sure you do,” she says, her voice sexy and husky.

Sobering, I ask, “Your parents?”

She snorts a laugh. “Right? In the clink. Who knew? I’ll get more details when I get to the police station, I guess.”

“You’ve had a busy, what, eighteen hours, huh?”

“I’ll say. Oh, we’re pulling into the station parking lot now. I’ll text you later, okay? Promise this time.”

“Take care of what you need to. Let me know what you need from your house. From Dorothy’s, too. I’ll check in at the diner and head to Nashville as soon as you give me the go-ahead.”

“Thank you,” she says quietly. “I... just, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Take care of yourself, yeah? You eating? Staying hydrated?”

“Not as much as I should but I will.”

“Make sure of it. You’ll need your strength up when you make it up to me.”

She laughs. “Right. Of course for that. Not the taking care of my elderly aunt who just had a heart attack or breaking my parents out of jail and seeing that Brooklyn isn’t a complete basket case because she’s only fifteen and doesn’t know how to handle this?”

I smile. “Exactly.”

After a beat or two of silence, I add, “In all seriousness, please take care of yourself. I know how easy it is to get caught up in helping others but you won’t be good for anyone if you’re not healthy yourself.”

“I will. I like food too much to forget to eat.”

That makes me chuckle. “Relatable.”

With a heavy sigh, she says, “Well, I guess I better go get my parents out of jail.”

“I can’t wait to hear more about this.”

“Me either. So weird.”

“Take care, you. I’m only a phone call or text away, yeah?”

“Thanks, Cash. See you soon.”

“That you will.”

We hang up and I set my phone down, leave my office, and tell my siblings I need them to meet me in the conference room.

All three see the seriousness on my face and don’t hesitate to follow me.

As soon as they take a seat, I launch in. “Not going into all the details because they’re not mine to tell but it’s time to step up for one of our own. Dorothy needs us. She had a heart attack last night.” Corbin gasps and my brothers both curse

under their breath. “She’s in the hospital in Nashville and from what I understand, she’ll be okay. Hadley thinks she’ll be in the hospital until tomorrow or the next day and from there, I don’t know what recovery looks like. Franky will do his part at the diner but they’ll need more help than that. I’ll call Mom and fill her in about what’s happening and see if she can help or know people who can.”

“Tell us what you need from us,” Boone says.

I fill him in on what I’m working on so things here don’t go sideways while I help Dorothy and Hadley.

“And what else?” Brock asks, his eyes on me. “Will she need anything done at the house before she gets home?”

“Honestly? I don’t know for sure. I told Hadley to keep me in the loop.” I turn to Corbin. “Would you mind if I borrow your car when I go to Nashville to pick them up? I think Dorothy would be more comfortable in your Durango than having to climb up into my truck.”

“You’re going to pick them up?”

“They don’t have a car there.”

My siblings look at each other with a confused look then transfer that look my direction.

“Another long story. They took her parents’ private plane to Nashville from Gatlinburg.”

Brock’s eyebrows shoot up and Boone’s eyes grow wide.

“Private plane?” Corbin wonders.

I nod. “They’ve got money.”

Boone replies, “Well, clearly but I didn’t realize it was private plane to go see your daughter money.”

“Appears that way.”

“Damn.”

“I’m going to call Mom, figure she’ll know what to do at the diner, and then I’ll go over there, too.”

Corbin gasps suddenly, “Dorothy’s dog!”

“Oh no. I’ll do it,” Boone offers. “I know where she keeps her key because I’ve gone there a few times to do work at the house.”

“Thank you.”

“No need to thank me. This is what we do.”

“Still, appreciate it.”

With our plans set, Boone leaves so he can go to Dorothy’s to take care of her dog and I call Mom from my office.

“Cash! Hi!”

“Hi, Mom.”

“What’s wrong?”

How does she do that? Mom has always had this ability to sense when something was wrong just by hearing the sound of our voice or looking at our face. Even when we’d lie and tell her we were fine, she wouldn’t let up until we confessed what was wrong.

“Dorothy had a heart attack.”

“Oh, dear,” Mom whispers.

“She’s in a hospital in Nashville right now. Her niece is with her and Franky will need help. He’s going to open the diner at ten and his fiancée is going to help serve customers but she’ll need help.”

I hear rustling in the background and know exactly what she's about to tell me. "I need ten minutes to change clothes and I'll be there."

"Thanks, Mom. I have no idea what I'm doing there and –"

"Say no more. I'm on it. I'll text a couple friends and get them over there, too."

"All right. I'm heading there soon, too."

She lets out a little giggle. "I can't wait to see this. You. Waiting on customers? Do you even know what do to?"

"I've been there enough. Can't be that hard."

That gets me a full-blown laugh. "Oh, yeah, this is going to be fun."

I roll my eyes. She has no faith in me.

Chapter Eleven

CASH

Mom was right.

She was also wrong.

It's definitely fun for her, hustling around the diner, taking orders and filling them. Helping in the kitchen because she can't stop herself from doing so.

Fun for me? Not so much.

It's definitely, *definitely*, way harder than I thought it would be.

I'm sweating, dropping trays, giving people the wrong food.

An hour into me working at the diner, Mom stationed me at the cash register and told me I wasn't allowed to move until told otherwise.

I didn't argue.

Chapter Twelve

HADLEY

“So... how was your time in Nashville?” I ask my parents with a smirk.

“Don’t be a brat, Hadley,” Mom snaps.

I lift my hands in mock surrender. “Hey, I’m truly wondering. I’m not the one who ended up behind bars.”

“Nashville is the devil,” Dad mumbles. “It’s not our fault.”

I snort. “Right. It’s Nashville’s fault.”

Mom narrows her eyes while we stand outside of the police station, waiting for the car to pick us up. They’ve never been in an Uber before which makes the entire situation even more fun. For me, anyway.

“What even happened?”

“Martinis,” Dad explains.

Mom uncharacteristically gags. She looks like hell. Her hair’s a mess. Her clothes are unkempt. The exact same clothes she was wearing when she was at the diner two days ago. Makeup smudged. To top it off, one of her heels broke off

so she's walking with a limp. If I didn't have Dorothy to worry about, I'd say this was one of the best days of my life.

"Lots and lots of martinis?" I guess.

"Yes."

"They did you dirty, huh?" I laugh at myself. "Get it? Dirty? Like dirty martinis?"

Dad glares at me. "Very clever."

"Tequila," Mom mutters.

My eyes grow huge. "You drank tequila? Like... shots?"

Dad groans. "It was Nashville's fault!" he shouts. "And that stupid party!"

I laugh. "What party?"

"It was a bachelorette party. Or maybe bachelor?"

"Both. They did it jointly, remember?"

"Oh, boy. You went to a party, then?"

"Can we stop talking about this?"

I pretend to think for a moment. "I don't think so."

Our car pulls up, a bright blue small sedan. I open the front passenger door, confirm the driver's name, and hold it open for Dad.

"Sir, your ride is here," I joke.

He rolls his eyes and huffs, folding his large body into the front seat while Mom and I climb into the back.

Giving the driver the address to our hotel, we sit in silence as he maneuvers through traffic.

"Where are we going?" Mom whispers.

“The hotel. I’ll explain when we get there.”

Dad makes small talk with the driver, seeming interested in “this whole Uber thing he’s heard so much about”. The guy is so out of touch with the ninety-nine percent of the world who doesn’t have his kind of money.

When Dad asks him how he got into this line of work, the driver tells us it’s his second job and that his wife also has two jobs. They both work for their kids’ school district. His wife is a lunch lady and he substitute teaches as often as he gets called in for. His wife is trying to grow her online boutique.

“Your wife works, too?” Mom asks.

He glances in the rearview mirror. “Yes, ma’am. We do what is necessary to keep a roof over our heads and food in our bellies and not get behind on bills.”

“How old are your children?” my father wonders.

“Ten, nine, and six,” he says proudly. “Two girls and a boy. Boy’s the youngest so he’s got a couple extra mothers.” He chuckles. “Caught our oldest trying to feed him once. Saw her mama doing it, you know...” he gestures to his chest, “and thought she could, too. Didn’t work out so well.”

“Wow. You’re busy, huh?” I say, laughing. I can just picture a little four-year-old trying to nurse her baby brother because she figured that’s how it was supposed to be done.

“Good busy, ma’am. They keep us on our toes for sure.”

My mom looks out the window and I wish so badly I knew what she was thinking.

“So you substitute teach?” my dad asks.

He nods. “Yeah. We moved here from Ohio to Mt. Juliet to be closer to my mother-in-law after she had a bad fall. She

needed help with her recovery and we didn't want her to be stuck in a nursing home or assisted living. She couldn't afford the in-home care that would be necessary 'cause she couldn't even go to the bathroom or shower on her own." He shakes his head and takes a left at a stop sign. "Felt so bad for her. Only forty-five and lost the freedom to do those basic things for herself? Had to be awful for her. But she never complained. Anyway, we moved here, bought a place that she could move into with us, and got her out of her apartment. Before I could get a new teaching job, I had to get certified for teaching in Tennessee. Instead of just sitting around waiting for a job to come up, I put my name in to substitute. The school knows I'm looking for more but also that I'm willing to sub as much as possible so I get called about four times a week."

"That's commendable, to step up like that for your mother-in-law. I don't know many people who would do that."

No, he doesn't. Because in his circle, they'd pay someone to do what this guy did on his own.

He shrugs off the compliment and shakes his head. "Not sure there's any other way, sir. She's family and needed us."

He says it so plainly. Exactly how it should be. The way Cash's family is, from what I've seen.

I glance over at my mom who's still staring out the window.

What is she thinking?

Is she even listening to the conversation?

"Don't downplay what you did. There's plenty of folks out there who wouldn't uproot their lives for someone. And working two jobs, both of you, to support your family is hard and noble."

“Thank you, sir,” he responds, though he still seems like he’s unaware of why it’s such a big deal.

A few minutes later we pull up to the hotel and I add an extra fifty onto my tip through the app.

“Thank you,” I tell him as I’m getting out of the car. “Liked hearing your story.”

He glances at his phone that’s in a mount on his dash and darts his eyes to me still standing in the door by the back seat. “You didn’t…”

“Yes. I did. Thank you for being a good human.”

He nods and swallows hard and that’s when I notice several crisp one hundred-dollar bills in his cupholder.

Dad.

He sees where I’m looking and his head jerks to where my father is helping my mom out of the car.

“Sir…”

“Thanks for the ride,” Dad says with a firm nod. “You inspired me today. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he replies, seemingly at a loss for words.

I have no idea how much money Dad gave him, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it was a couple thousand. Dad carries a lot of cash at all times. He’s old school and doesn’t like to use cards of any kind.

We make our way into the hotel and I let them into our hotel room so they can clean up. While Mom is in the shower, Dad takes a seat and leans his head back.

“You okay?”

“Been better.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“Your mom, she asked our driver to take us to Nashville after we left the diner. She’d seen stuff on social media and wanted to see what it was all about. I was surprised when she said she wanted to go, and that she wanted to go by car. You know her, she doesn’t travel at a slow pace. But she likes the mountains. Wanted to see the scenery.”

My head jerks back. “Huh? Mom?”

He nods, his eyes closed. “Surprised about that, too. Figured she was thinking about our time with you at the diner and we didn’t need to be back in Chicago. Thought it would be fun.”

“Was it?”

“For a while.” He smirks. “Then it went sideways.”

“What happened?”

“Your mom got into it with some people who bumped into her and spilled their drinks on her. She’d had too much to drink and this gal, she didn’t take too kindly to your mom’s words. I’ve never seen a catfight before. Don’t care to see one again.”

My jaw drops. “Mom got into a physical fight?”

“Sure did.”

“Was the other girl arrested, too?”

“The other girl didn’t spit at and punch a cop.”

My eyes have to be the size of saucers. “She did *what?!?*” I shout.

He nods slowly. "It was quite a night. I don't think we'll have martinis or tequila again. Ever."

"Oh my gosh," I whisper then start hysterically laughing. "I can't... Man, I wish I could have seen that."

"Probably can. I'm sure it'll be circling social media. Lots of people were taking videos on their phones. Which is why she punched the cop. He wouldn't put a stop to them recording the incident and I guess it tipped her over the edge."

"Dad... that's assault on a police officer."

He nods again. "Yup. Not sure what's all happening now."

"Well, I hate to add to your stress, but..."

He lifts his head and catches my eye. "What?"

"Dorothy and Brooklyn came with me yesterday. When we landed in Nashville, Dorothy wasn't feeling very well. Ended up needing to call an ambulance and that's why you weren't rescued from jail last night. Dorothy had a heart attack and we spent the night at the hospital while she had bypass surgery."

"Holy shit," he says quietly. "Is she okay?"

"She will be. She'll be there at least through tomorrow. Maybe another day."

He scrubs a hand down his face that's covered in stubble.

"Your mom and I just figured you were making us wait to teach us a lesson."

"Good lesson you needed to learn, I guess."

"Yeah," he agrees. "Can we visit her? Is she up for that?"

I wince. "Not sure. I'll call Brooklyn in a bit. She's there with her now."

“As soon as your mom is out of the shower, I’ll get in. Not sure what we’re going to wear.”

I grin like the cat that got the cream. “I picked some stuff up for you from Target. Had the Uber driver that drove me to the police station make a quick pit stop.”

“By the look on your face, whatever you picked out for us to wear is not going to be something you’ve ever seen on us before.”

Oh, he has *no* idea.

I’m practically rubbing my hands together in glee, excited to see them wear these outfits.

“I can’t wear this.”

My mother’s reaction is exactly how I expected it to be. Horrified.

“What else do you plan to wear?”

She narrows her eyes, wrapped in a towel with her hair dripping wet.

“This is pajamas.”

“No. It’s leggings and a t-shirt, Mom. This is what people wear. We’re going to the hospital, not a fashion show.”

“This isn’t appropriate to wear in public.”

I roll my eyes. “Mom! It’s perfectly acceptable. Everyone wears black leggings. The t-shirt is a bit oversized so it’ll cover your butt. It’s clean and your size. What else do you want? I’m not running around to find some designer outfit just so you can visit Aunt Dorothy in the hospital.”

“Did you at least pick up clean underwear? And what shoes am I supposed to wear?”

“Yes, I have clean underwear and I picked up these.” I reach down to the floor, knowing that this will be the straw that broke the camel’s back. She’s going to flip out.

I lift up the sandals I bought and present them to her as if I’m handing over a pile of gold.

“What on *earth* are *those*?”

“They’re what we call flip-flops.”

“They look like something a college kid would wear to the shower room.”

I press my lips together because that’s basically what they are. Rubber sandals.

“Mom. Listen. I know you’re all stuck on wearing the best of the best at all times but there is absolutely nothing wrong with these clothes. You’ve worn sandals like these before.”

“Right. But they’re Gucci and absolutely *nothing* like this atrocity.”

I’m losing my patience and fast with how snotty she’s behaving. “These aren’t an atrocity and if you continue to act like a stuck-up snob who’s too good to wear something I graciously bought you considering you were in *jail* and I had to go bail you out, then I’ll keep them for myself and you can explain to Dad why you won’t be joining us at the hospital to check on his aunt who just had a heart attack. A heart attack she had in an airport because she was coming with me to offer support when I had to go to, again, bail you out of jail.”

If it was possible to have smoke coming out of her ears right now, she would.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Immensely.”

She huffs then motions for me to turn around so she can get dressed in her new clothes.

The shower turns off and I knock on the door to the bathroom.

“Dad?”

“Yes?”

“Your clothes are on the floor by the door.”

“Thanks, darling.”

“You’re welcome.”

“He’s not going to be happy, Hadley.”

“He’ll survive.”

When Mom turns around I smile as if everything is perfectly normal.

“Well?” she grumps. “Is it as bad as I think it is?”

“You look great, Mom.”

She rolls her eyes and grabs the brush off the dresser. “Right. I look ridiculous.”

I glance down at myself in my shorts and Nashville sweatshirt. “Do I look ridiculous to you?”

“No, because this is what you are used to wearing. This isn’t me.”

“It could be. Are you comfortable?”

“That’s not the point.”

That means yes. “It is exactly the point. You don’t have to dress to impress every single day. Wear what’s comfortable and makes you feel good. I bet those leggings make your butt look great,” I add with a grin.

“Hadley!” she gasps.

“It’s true. Look.”

“I will do no such thing.”

“Lift your shirt and turn around.”

“This is absurd.”

“Do it.”

She does what I ask and I snap a picture of her.

“See? Look at your booty pop.”

“My what do what?”

I laugh. “It means look how good your butt looks.”

She looks at the screen before she can hide it, and I see a ghost of a smile cross her face.

“I suppose it looks okay.”

I shake my head. She’s so transparent.

“Do you have any mascara or concealer?”

“Yup. I’ll warn you. It’s from the drug store so it’s not your usual brand but it works.”

She takes a deep breath, probably counting to ten so she doesn’t act like a foolish snob again, and eventually nods. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Dad! How you coming in there?” I ask, knowing he grabbed the clothes already when I heard the door open and close quickly.

“It’s uh... interesting. I can’t say that I’ve worn these type of pants before.”

I bet he hasn’t.

He emerges from the bathroom and Mom’s hand stalls from where she’s standing in front of the mirror applying mascara.

“Robert.”

“How do I look?”

“Great!” I shout, a little too loudly.

Dressed in a pair of faded blue jeans and a Led Zeppelin t-shirt, he looks nothing like the dad I am used to. But I must say, he pulls it off pretty well.

“Your face,” Mom says. “You didn’t shave?”

“Didn’t have a razor.” He shrugs. “Do I just wear my dress shoes?”

I bark out a laugh. “No. I picked up some canvas slip-on shoes for you. They’re pretty comfortable, actually.”

After Mom dries her hair, complaining a little more about the lack of product and tools to get it just right, we head out the door.

“You look nice, Celeste.”

“Don’t be rude, Robert.”

“How is that rude? I was giving you a compliment. I mean it. I really like those pants.”

“I sound silly, walking around making all this noise with these sandals.”

“No, you don’t, Mom.”

“How are we getting to the hospital?” Dad wonders.

“It’s only three blocks away so we’ll just walk there. Fresh air will do you both some good. There’s a Starbucks along the way so we can pick up some coffee and something to eat.”

“Coffee,” Mom practically moans. “I think I’ll need three to get through the day.”

I laugh. “I need three cups on a normal day.”

As we’re walking along, I notice Mom and Dad lightening up, taking in their surroundings. Mom continues to fuss with her clothes but Dad looks confident and relaxed, all things considered.

“Here we are,” I tell them, opening the door to the Starbucks.

We place our order for coffee and sandwiches and each grab a bottle of water and protein box that has some fruit, cheese, and crackers for later. I pick up something for Brooklyn as well, knowing she’ll likely be pretty hungry by the time we get there.

“Are we eating this at the hospital?”

“I’d like to get back there, yeah. Brooklyn’s been alone with Aunt Dorothy for a few hours and it would be nice to give her a break.”

Dad nods. “Sounds good.”

He lifts the bag of food from the counter and hands Mom her coffee while I carry mine and Brooklyn’s Refresher and I lead the way to the hospital.

We check in at reception to let them know which room we’re going to and ride the elevator up to the third floor and walk down the hallway to Aunt Dorothy’s room.

I knock lightly and hear Brooklyn say, “Come in.”

“Hey,” I whisper when Brooklyn lifts a finger indicating to be quiet. “How did the morning go?”

“Okay. She’s been sleeping a lot. Well, when they’re not coming in to mess with her, anyway. They’re always checking things.”

“That’s good, honey. They’re doing their job.”

“I know, but they keep waking her up.”

I hand her drink to her and she grins, taking a sip. “Thank you. I was getting pretty hungry. Did you happen to bring food, too?”

I motion with my head to look behind me and her face falls slack.

“Hi, Grandma. Hi, Grandpa,” she says with zero enthusiasm.

“Hi, peanut,” Dad replies. “How are you doing?”

“Okay.”

“We have lunch,” he says, lifting the bag.

She offers up a tiny smile in return and stands from her place next to Aunt Dorothy.

Dad places the bag on the little table next to the hospital bed and moves to get a closer look at his aunt.

“What are the doctors saying?”

“Not much new this morning. The nurse this morning said she’s supposed to come by later this afternoon.”

Dad hands out the sandwiches and I can’t help but laugh as Brooklyn takes in their attire. Her eyes dart back and forth

between them and me comically and she raises her eyebrows in question. I shake my head slightly, hoping she gets the hint not to ask questions.

“Thanks for bringing lunch,” she says.

We unwrap our sandwiches and Brooklyn and I sit, mouths agape, as we watch my parents tear into their food like ravenous dogs.

“Were you hungry?” I ask.

“Starving,” Dad grumbles. “We haven’t eaten since yesterday.”

“We were offered a soggy sandwich,” Mom grouses. “I wasn’t sure why it was soggy but I wasn’t going to risk it.”

“Glad we picked up some protein boxes, too,” I remark, still in awe of how quickly they’re eating.

Dad polishes off his sandwich in no time and I hand him the other half of mine, which he graciously accepts.

“There’s chips and cookies in the vending machine. Or I can run back to Starbucks for more,” Brooklyn offers.

“Chips and cookies, you say? I could go for both. Want to go for a walk with me?” he asks Brooklyn. “My treat. I saw some at Starbucks, too. You probably need some fresh air. Why don’t we take a walk?”

This is a good move. I know Dad would like to spend time with Brooklyn so he can have the chance to show her that he loves her no matter what. It would be good for her to get out of the hospital for a bit.

Brooklyn glances my way and I assure her with a smile and head nod that she should go with her grandpa.

“Can I finish my sandwich first?”

“Of course.” The way he sits up a little straighter tells me he thought she wouldn’t agree to go with him and the fact she did makes him incredibly happy.

Once her sandwich is gone, Dad and Brooklyn head out to Starbucks. Brooklyn looks a little nervous and Dad looks excited to have some alone time with her, even if it’s only for a few minutes.

“She’s beautiful,” my mother murmurs.

“Yeah, she is.”

“Where did we go wrong?”

“With what?”

“You.”

Chapter Thirteen

CASH

“I’m exhausted,” I complain.

Mom laughs at me, still buzzing around the diner the next morning during the breakfast rush. She’s in her element here. Meanwhile, I am not cut out for this.

Last night Hadley and I texted back and forth. She wanted to know how things were going at the diner and I wanted to know how both she and Dorothy were doing.

It sounds like she got her parents picked up and they flew out of Nashville last night, heading home to Chicago. She didn’t give me more details than that, and I didn’t push. I figure she’ll tell me when, and if, she wants to.

As of last night, they thought Dorothy would be released first thing tomorrow morning. She gave me a list of a few things she and Brooklyn needed as well as Dorothy so I’m swinging by their houses pretty soon then will head to Nashville. She reserved a hotel room for me so that I could just stay the night rather than driving to Nashville early tomorrow.

“Poor baby,” Mom coos. “All tuckered out. You can’t handle working with the big kids, huh?”

I roll my eyes. “I didn’t say I couldn’t handle it.”

She pats me on the cheek as she walks past to deliver drinks to a table. “Just stay right where you are and take it easy. Mama’s got it covered.”

Of that I have no doubt.

The morning passes by smoothly, thanks to my mom and her merry friends, and we’ve barely finished cleaning up from breakfast when lunchtime hits. I’ve chugged more coffee than I thought was possible and eaten enough to feed the town of Red Oak. But how could I not? Franky’s in the kitchen making all the incredible food and it’s not like I have the willpower to resist it.

“Time to head out,” Mom tells me, shooing me away from where she stationed me behind the register.

“You sure?”

“Positive. You’re needed elsewhere. I’m sure we can handle the register.”

I sag with relief. I’m ready to get home and shower.

“Thanks, Mom. I really appreciate the help these past two days.”

“Don’t even mention it. Dorothy is family to us.”

“I know. Call me if you need anything else, okay?”

“We’ll be fine. Go. Make sure you tell Dorothy I’ll be by her place when she gets home. I have a couple of meals ready for her and will help with whatever else she needs.”

My mom.

Superwoman.

I kiss her cheek and give her a hug, lifting her off the floor and set her back on her feet. She laughs and swats my arm.

“Love you.”

“Love you, too, Cash. Drive safe, you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I knock on Hadley’s hotel room door and pray I have the right room number. She told me last night in our texts but I forgot to double check it when I got here.

The door swings open and thank the Lord above it’s her.

“Hey,” she sighs, smiling up at me.

“Hey, you.”

She swings the door wider so I can walk in. As I pass by, I have the urge to give her a kiss on the forehead but I suppress it.

“Hey, Brooklyn.”

“Hi, Cash. Thanks for bringing our stuff.”

“You’re welcome.” I place the bag on the floor and stand awkwardly, not knowing what to say or do next.

“Have you eaten?” Hadley blurts out. “We just ordered some pizza and wings. You’re welcome to join us.”

For the first time in my life I’m not hungry because I ate so much at the diner today, but I’m also not about to turn down her offer.

“Sounds great.” I smile. “How’s Dorothy doing?”

“So much better. She has some color back and she’s not feeling as weak and tired as she was.”

“Awesome. You two doing okay? Did you nap today?”

Hadley had told me neither of them have been sleeping well, which I assume is because they’re worried about Dorothy.

“We did. Dorothy kicked us out of the hospital room around two this afternoon and sent us here. She said she didn’t want to see us again until tomorrow. The doctor assured me she was doing well and reminded me we needed our rest, too.”

“Good for her. Glad you listened.”

“I think the past few days just really caught up with us. We crashed, didn’t we, Brooklyn?”

Her eyes get big. “We did. I don’t think I’ve ever fallen asleep that fast.”

Hadley laughs. “Or snored that loud.”

Brooklyn’s cheeks grow red. “Mom!”

Ignoring her daughter’s embarrassment, she asks, “Did you get checked in?”

“Yeah. Dropped my stuff off in my room before I came down to yours.”

“Good. Thank you, again, for doing this.”

“You’re welcome.”

I can’t stop staring into her eyes. She’s so beautiful. I remember how gorgeous she was the night I met her and couldn’t have imagined that it was possible for her to look even better all these years later. But it happened.

“I’m going to grab drinks before our pizza gets here,” Brooklyn announces, startling us both.

“Oh, okay, honey. The gift shop has bottles. Can you get some waters, too?”

“Yup.”

“You should be able to charge it to the room.”

“I know, Mom. Not my first time in a hotel,” she teases. “Cash? What would you like to drink?”

“Coke is fine, thanks, Brooklyn.”

“You’re welcome,” she mumbles. “Be back soon,” she tells us, lifting her room key to show her mom she has it with her.

As soon as the door closes to the room, Hadley’s in my arms. It catches me so off guard that I stumble back a step before wrapping my arms around her.

I hold her tightly as she lets out the emotions of the last two days.

“I was so scared,” she admits. “When Aunt Dorothy was in that ambulance and we didn’t know any details, I just kept thinking I haven’t had enough time with her yet. Brooklyn hasn’t had enough time with her. We just found her and it felt like she was being ripped away. I never had someone in my life like Dorothy and I couldn’t...” She lets out a shaky breath. “All my life, I only needed someone who spent time with me and cared. She’s the mother figure I missed out on. The grandma Brooklyn never got. And then my parents,” she mutters. “So stupid. That whole thing was ridiculous. When I should have been focused on her, I couldn’t be because they acted a fool.”

I rub up and down her back, listening as she releases all the frustrations and fears that she's no doubt been bottling up in order to put on a strong front for her daughter.

"Shh," I soothe. "Dorothy's okay. She's not going anywhere. And your parents are back in Chicago. I'm here to shoulder some of this."

"Thank you," she cries. "I can't believe... ugh, I'm such a *girl*. Crying on your shoulder right now and whining about how bad I've had it when I'm not the one stuck in a hospital bed hooked up to monitors."

"There's not a competition for who has it worse. Just because you're not the one in that room doesn't mean you can't feel overwhelmed with everything that happened."

She nods against my chest and I move us to sit down on the bed.

"I know. I *know*. I just feel like a wimp right now because I understand that she's going to be okay but I can't shake this feeling of fear. I'm not equipped for things to go all wonky. I've been too coddled. My stupid parents didn't make me suffer for things enough."

I start laughing. "You're probably the only person in the universe upset about the fact that your parents gave you all the things you wanted in life."

"Except what I really wanted," she explains.

"There's that. And I doubt anyone would argue with me on this but what you really wanted is more important than what you received."

"Exactly. Sorry I broke down on you just now. It all hit me at once. I've not been great about sharing things in front of Brooklyn, which isn't okay. She's only seen me strong and

capable because that's what I was taught. Don't let anyone see you vulnerable or they'll use it against you. That's how I was raised."

"That's bullshit and if anyone does use it against you, they're not the people you should surround yourself with. Feeling isn't equal to being vulnerable. It's called being human."

She nods, wiping away her tears and reaching behind her to grab a tissue off the nightstand.

"Do you want to talk about your parents?" I ask quietly.

"Not really. They're back in Chicago, thank goodness. Dad was okay. Mom was... well, Mom. We had a long talk. She asked where she went wrong with me and I immediately put up my defense, thinking she meant it in a mean way."

My guard goes up and I feel my body stiffen. "How'd she mean it?"

"She wondered how we didn't have a relationship like other mothers and daughters. Like I have with Brooklyn."

I relax a little. "What did you tell her?"

"The truth. That she never wanted that with me and showed me that I was just in the way most of my life. She argued at first, but then Dorothy woke up and gave it to her in a way she understood. From another perspective, I guess. Dorothy lived with it, too, and helped Mom to see things a little more clearly. Mom didn't like to hear that she was never a *mom* to me, so it wasn't a pleasant conversation to have but I believe she's starting to see, I think. At the very least, she has something to think about. What she does with it, only time will tell. Things between my parents and I will never be *good*, but I think – or at least hope – that they'll be better. Dad made a

little bit of progress with Brooklyn, too. They spent some time together and Brooklyn said not once did he try to tell her what to do or change anything. That's a huge step. He listened and showed her he cared and that might seem like nothing, but it's actually a big difference to what he's normally like."

"You stood up for yourself in the diner. I was proud of you. And that's not nothing; that seems like he's learning quickly what it's going to take to be in both your lives."

She smiles, looking up at me from under her lashes. "Thanks. It was a long time coming."

"I bet."

"Can I admit something that might make you think even less of them?"

I cringe, wondering how I could think less of them after what I overheard at the diner. "Go for it."

"It felt good to be with them and not argue. All my life, it feels like that's all we've done. At least privately. In public, we've always put on a good show. Behind closed doors, though, it was a different story. They dictated everything about my life because they wanted to make sure I was representing the family in a certain way. I tried so hard for too many years to be what they wanted me to be and when I finally stopped, all we did was argue and fight. We never laughed or had inside jokes as a family. My memories aren't warm and cozy, if that makes sense. But now, even if it's because I had to pick them up from jail so we had some real-life funny stuff to start us off on a different path, it feels like we finally have something to talk about."

She goes on to tell me about their Uber driver and how her parents were in awe of the fact that both he and his wife

worked two jobs and they took care of his mother-in-law.

“It probably seems so normal to you, but to my parents it isn’t. They were really impressed. Well, Dad was, anyway. I think Mom was, too, but she didn’t show it as much as Dad did.”

“You realize that you’re changing them, right?”

She gives me a confused look. “Me?”

“You’re introducing them to new things, even if you don’t realize it. You didn’t see what I saw at the diner. Your dad was proud of you but didn’t know how to say it. Your mom is a tougher cookie to crack, but when she stormed out I don’t think it was because you weren’t falling to her demands. I think it was because she was seeing and hearing things that made her uncomfortable. It was hard for her to take in, so rather than let those hits come at her, she bolted. Just wait. I bet you’ll continue to see changes in both of them.”

She thinks about what I said, turning her head to look out the window. “I don’t know if I want them to change so much as open their minds.”

“Change will come with that, though.”

“True,” she murmurs. “I guess *some* change would be nice.” She smirks and I laugh.

“Your parents are lucky to have you. They’d be stuck in their bubble forever if you didn’t care enough to help them see the outside world and how big it is.”

“Cash...” she whispers. “You’re going to make me cry.”

“Come here.” I pull her close and hug her from the side. “You’re a good person, Hadley. Your parents see that now. Maybe it was the Uber driver’s words that clicked, but you’ve

been doing the groundwork for it. My guess is what happened here in Nashville with them drinking their weight in booze was a direct result of their eyes being opened and hearts shattering a bit because they knew you were right when you stood up for yourself at the diner.”

She nods and sighs. “Maybe.”

“No maybe. I’m sure of it.”

“Thank you. Not just for bringing our stuff and coming to pick us up, but for helping at the diner and being here for me. It means a lot to me.”

“You’re welcome.”

We stare at one another and I lean in, wanting to kiss her more than ever before. The pull between us is strong. We’re a breath apart, our lips so close to touching.

We’re interrupted by the door unlocking. We jerk apart, Hadley jumping off the bed and straightening her shirt just before Brooklyn walks in, carrying a bag full of drinks.

“I got snacks, too! Candy and chips. Sorry, Mom. I couldn’t help myself. I needed a Snickers.”

“Snickers? I could go for a Snickers,” Hadley replies.

“Good thing I got three then, huh? I figured if he eats anything like Cody does, we’d have to wrestle him for it if he got it first.”

I grin. “My nephew takes after the coolest uncle. He likes his food.”

“He also has a hefty ego on him. Does that come from you, too?”

“Guilty.” I smile shamelessly. “Mom’s fault. She talked us up too much.”

“Does she know you blame it on her?”

“Of course,” I tell them.

“Oh, boy,” Brooklyn mumbles.

The rest of the night is nothing short of perfect. The only thing that would be better is if I was the one curled up on the other bed with Hadley rather than Brooklyn. But Hadley and I laughing at Brooklyn’s commentary while we watch an old Adam Sandler movie before moving on to an old Jim Carrey movie makes up for it.

I see why Brooklyn and Cody get along so well. She gives as good as she gets, has a quick wit, and has a wicked sense of humor.

At eleven o’clock, I realize no one else is talking so I turn off the TV and lights and sneak out of the room.

Five minutes after I get into my room, my phone buzzes with a text.

Hadley: Good night, Cash.

Me: Sweet dreams, Hadley.

I sleep better than I have in a while. And it has nothing to do with how exhausted I am from the long day.

It has everything to do with that sweet woman.

Chapter Fourteen

HADLEY

We've been back in Red Oak for a week. School started for Hadley two days ago and even though she said she wasn't nervous, the morning of the first day she was a bundle of nerves. I couldn't fault her for that, though. A brand-new school would be scary for anyone.

Luckily, it's gone incredibly well for her. She likes almost all of her teachers, has met some new people, and plans to go to her very first high school football game this Friday night.

The first two nights back from Nashville, we stayed with Aunt Dorothy and since then, we've felt comfortable enough for her to be alone at night as long as I'm there first thing in the morning.

Today, though, I'm going back to the diner.

I miss it.

I'm grateful Cash's mom and her friends have been there and Franky, too, who will be getting a raise. But it's time for me to get back into it. Dorothy demanded it, too. She's recovering well and feels much better.

Like Cash said, she's stubborn and that makes her determined to get back on her feet. She's following doctor's orders right down to the letter, which is a relief. I was afraid she'd try to buck the system a bit.

The doorbell rings and Brooklyn shouts, "I'll get it! It's probably my ride!"

"I'm not taking you? And why so early?"

She grins as she runs past me, ready for school.

I scrunch my eyes, confused, and follow her to the door.

Where a boy is standing with a nervous smile.

A boy who is not so much a boy but someone who is becoming a man.

My eyes dart between this boy who is obviously turning into a man and my daughter and see something I wasn't prepared for.

Attraction.

"Hi," she says in a quiet voice.

"Hey, you look cute."

She looks down at her feet. "Thanks."

He looks to me. "I'm Weston."

I stick out my hand and he shakes it. "Hadley, Brooklyn's mom."

"Nice to meet you."

"Same."

"Ready to go?"

"Yup!" Brooklyn says a little too excitedly.

Back in Chicago she had boys who were friends. She had crushes. But she never looked at any of them the way she's looking up at Weston.

"You don't have a motorcycle, do you?"

"No, ma'am," he says with a smile. "I drive a Dodge truck. It was my dad's. I just turned seventeen, I'm a junior, play football, and get good grades. Hope to become an electrician, like my dad."

Like Cash, I think.

I see the appeal for Brooklyn.

He's tall, what I assume is attractive but since I don't look at teenage boys that way, I can't say for sure. His hair is floppy and has bright blue eyes.

"Mom."

"Right. Be careful and drive safe. That's my baby and next time, I would like to be asked and informed ahead of time so I'm not blindsided."

"Okay. So, can we leave now? I don't want to be late for school."

"Have a good day. Love you."

"Love you, too."

She gives me a quick hug and out the door they go.

I watch as he opens the door for her and she climbs into a boy's truck.

My heart feels like it's in my throat.

I wasn't prepared for this.

Once they're out of eyesight, I grab my phone and call Cash.

"Hey, you," he answers, happy to hear my voice.

"Who's Weston? Does his dad work for you? Is he a good person?"

Cash goes quiet for a few beats. "Does this have something to do with Brooklyn?"

"He just picked her up for school. I wasn't prepared. I didn't know anything until this boy shows up at my house and Brooklyn is looking at him with googly eyes."

"Shit."

I furrow my brow. "That's not reassuring, Cash."

"He's a good kid," he rushes to add. "His dad works for us. One of our head guys, actually. And yes, he's a good man, too."

"Then why did you say shit?"

"Because now I have to beat the hell out of him."

That makes me smile. "I'm not sure that's necessary. You said he was a good kid and that's the vibe I got from him."

"He is and so is his dad," he repeats.

"So what's the problem?"

"I was a seventeen-year-old boy once, Hadley."

"Oh."

"He works here after practice some, and on the weekends. I'll make sure he knows what's up."

"That's not necessary."

“Yeah, it is. I’ll just make him aware that Brooklyn means the world to someone who means something to me and not to mess around with her heart... or anything else.”

I press my lips together but can’t stop the big smile that emerges from his words.

“Thank you, Cash.”

His voice is gruff when he announces, “About time for that date, Hadley.”

“Date? I thought we were just getting together.”

“We’re past that, don’t you think?”

“Maybe?”

“No maybes about it. I’m not going to force you, but this is me officially asking you on a date. Saturday night. Friday night is a home football game and I think you’d enjoy it but that’s not a date.”

I walk to the kitchen to get another cup of coffee. “The football game sounds fun.”

“Great. So I’ll see you Friday for the game. I’ll pick you up. We can grab dinner at the game – it’s junk food but good to support the school. Saturday night we’ll do the date.”

I stop pouring my creamer and say, “Wait. I thought I said yes to Friday.”

“You did. In addition to our actual date.” I can hear the smile in his voice.

“Awful demanding, aren’t you?”

“If you remember the night we met, you know I’m only demanding in one place.”

All the air rushes out of my lungs. If I remember? Of course I remember. It would be impossible to forget the night we spent together.

“Hadley?”

“Um.”

“You remember.”

I don't say anything and he says low, almost to himself, “She remembers.”

“Right. So Friday night? The game?”

“I'll pick you up at six-thirty. Do you have any Red Oak gear?”

I laugh. “That would be a no.”

“I'll bring something for you. Find out if Brooklyn needs something, too.”

“I'll ask her.”

“You heading to the diner today?”

“Pretty soon, yeah. I need to get back into my routine.”

“I get that but you don't need to rush. Mom's having a blast at the diner and Franky seems to be handling himself well.”

“He needs a raise. And I need to pay your mom.”

“Good luck with that,” he replies, chuckling. “I'll see you around lunch.”

He's coming to the diner for lunch. Likely, also to see me.

“Looking forward to it.”

“Looking forward to this weekend, too.”

“I don’t remember saying yes,” I joke.

“If it’s a no, I’ll just have to keep working to convince you.”

I almost want to say no just to see... *crap!*

I groan. “Oh, no. I just remembered something.”

“Whatever it is, I don’t think I’ll like it.”

“It’s not bad. Trotter and his boyfriend are coming this weekend to see Brooklyn.”

He thinks for a moment. “So they can come to the game Friday with us. I’m sure Brooklyn will want to go to it anyway, especially since Weston plays, and then Saturday night they can spend with Brooklyn while you and I go on our date.”

“Such a problem solver.”

“See? All the more reason to say yes.”

I take a sip of my coffee, smiling around my mug. “You really need to hear it?”

“It’d be nice.”

“What if I want to make you sweat a little bit?”

“Hadley,” he warns.

I giggle. “Fine. The answer is yes. I’ll let Trotter know what the plan is.”

“Sounds good. If they want a Red Oak tee also, let me know their sizes.”

I burst out laughing at the thought of Logan or Trotter wearing a high school sports’ shirt but promise him I’ll ask anyway.

Thirty minutes later, after I've checked on Dorothy who has a home health nurse with her for the day, I arrive at the diner. The breakfast rush is about over so I help with clean up before getting started on the mountain I have waiting for me in the office.

I never realized how much I would enjoy having an office or having a job in general. It's a good feeling.

Paperwork doesn't seem like a burden and checking stock on the food isn't either. But the one thing I miss most is being in the kitchen baking pies and other desserts. Since Dorothy's heart attack, I haven't had the time to do any baking. We ordered them from a place out of town and I made sure the customers were aware of that, but Leah, Cash's mom, told me everyone is eager for my desserts to be back on the menu.

Once I'm done in the office, I start gathering ingredients and get to work.

First I make the pie dough, enough that I can make a dozen pies out of the dough. I'll put the dough that I don't use in the fridge and it will stay good for a few days.

Then I start on the filling.

Peach.

Apple.

Cherry.

Peel, slice, chop.

I repeat the process for what feels like minutes but is actually a couple hours. Working around Franky as he continues his prep for lunch and when the lunch rush starts, I have three pies baked and cooling, ready to be served.

"Someone's here to see you," Leah says with a smile.

I wipe my hands on my apron after washing them and rush out to the dining room, expecting to see Cash.

But it's not Cash who's waiting for me.

"Trotter!" I squeal, running to him.

"Babycakes! Look at you! You're all domestic!"

He wraps me in a bear hug that I return.

After he releases me, I punch him in the shoulder. "What are you doing here?"

"Ouch!" He grabs his arm. "Why are you so mean? And strong? What the hell?!"

I show off my guns. "It's from actually doing stuff for myself for the first time in my life. You should try it."

"I'll have you know I do my own laundry now."

"No, you don't," Logan interrupts. "I do it and you watch."

"She didn't need to know that."

"Hey, Hadley." Logan grins, giving me a hug.

After our hellos are finished, I walk them to a booth next to the window. "Best seat in the house."

"Is that so?" Trotter wonders, looking around at all the tables that look the same.

"I said it so it's true. What can I get ya?"

"You just assume we're eating here?"

I give him a look and he takes a seat quickly.

"We're eating here," Logan agrees quietly. "Coke, please."

"Same."

"When did you switch from diet?"

“When I told him all the fake sugar can cause cancer. We’d both rather be chubby and drink sugar than end up with cancer.”

I poke Trotter in the side. “Thought I could see a few extra pounds on you.”

His mouth drops open and he glares at Logan. “You said it wasn’t noticeable!”

Logan shrugs. “Maybe I like my men with a little meat on their bones.”

I try to suppress my laughter but it’s impossible. I sound like Kitty on *That 70’s Show* when she holds back her giggle before it explodes from her throat.

“I’ll let you two chubby bunnies battle that one out and be back with your drinks. Menus are right there.” I point to the back of the booth behind the condiments.

“Oh, how cute!” Trotter says, lifting it in the air.

“Cute?”

“It’s only two sides!”

“Don’t be condescending,” I snap.

His eyes widen and Logan shrinks back away from me.

“I’m not. I promise. I think it’s great. I just... sorry. It came out rude because you know me as being an ass like that but I swear I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I’ll let it slide. This time. But don’t be a dick about Red Oak or the diner or my home you’ll see later. Got it?”

He nods quickly. “Got it.”

“Be right back. Oh! And I recommend the patty melt. It’s Franky’s specialty. And the onion rings. I’ll save a couple

pieces of pie for you, too.”

“Holy shit. She likes us chubby, too,” Logan whispers. “This is the greatest place on earth.”

“We’ll take that. But I want a mushroom and Swiss burger. And don’t think I didn’t see you have fried green beans. We need those. And fries.”

“That’s the spirit. I’ll put your order in, then introduce you to a few people, yeah?”

“Sounds great.”

I fill their drinks, turning their order in to Franky before dropping their drinks off and sliding in next to Logan. He scoots over, throwing an arm over the back of the booth.

“So, what’s the deal? You’re here two days early.”

Trotter takes a drink of his Coke and makes a loud “ahh” noise. “Full throttle is so much better than diet.” After another drink he explains, “I missed Brooklyn. And you, but mostly Brooklyn.” He winks at me with a huge grin.

“She’ll be excited to see you. I haven’t had the chance to tell you this yet but a *boy* picked her up for school today.”

Trotter sets his glass down on the table and Logan watches for his reaction.

“What kind of a boy?”

“How many kinds are there?” I ask, my head turned to the side.

“Plenty.” He lifts his hand, ticking off the list one by one by lifting a finger. “There’s the studios, the jocks, the skaters, the gamers, the stoners, the ones who don’t really have a place

because they're a mash up of everything, and the country boys."

"His name is Weston. He's a football player," I tell him, shrugging. "And he works for Cash. That's about all I know."

"That's *all* you know? Did you not ask questions? When did this punk start coming around?"

"Relax. It was this morning. He drives a big truck, was very polite, opened the door for her and said he wants to be an electrician. I called Cash right away and he assured me he's a good kid but he plans to talk with him and make sure he knows what's up."

"Isn't that my job?" Trotter asks, seemingly a bit offended.

"Well, yes, but I didn't know you were coming here today and Cash knows the kid already."

"You trying to replace me?" Trotter whines.

I roll my eyes. "Oh, stop. Do you want to have a talk with the boy? I'm sure Brooklyn would introduce the two of you so her dad can get to know the kid she literally just started talking to."

Logan snorts.

"Well, it would have been nice to be asked."

"I just did."

"When are we going to meet Cash, anyway?" he asks, deflecting.

"Is now a good time?" A deep voice comes from over my shoulder.

I spin in my seat and look up to see a grinning Cash.

"Hey!"

He gives my shoulder a squeeze and winks. “Hey, you.”

“Oh, sweet Jesus. *This* is Cash?” Trotter asks in wonder and Logan whispers, “Holy hell.”

I nod, smiling at the two of them. I get it. Cash is one handsome guy. More than handsome, really, but he is on another level of good looking. Cash takes a seat next to Trotter and his eyes grow enormous.

“Trotter, this is Cash. Cash, my ex-husband, Trotter.”

Trotter lifts his hand when Cash extends his to shake.

“Nice to meet you.”

“Same.”

“And this is Logan, Trotter’s boyfriend.”

They shake hands as well and exchange nice to meet you’s.

“I’ve heard a lot about y’all,” Cash says.

“*Y’all*. Oh my word,” Trotter sighs, practically swooning. “A bona fide southern boy.”

He grins and the sight of it makes Logan nudge me in the side. I swat at him beneath the table.

“Guilty.”

“Want me to put an order in for you?”

“That would be great, darlin’. Thanks.”

“Darlin’,” Trotter repeats. “If I wasn’t spoken for, I’d be...”

“You’d be what?” Logan challenges.

“Absolutely nothing, sugar plum.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Cash and I laugh at the two of them bickering and I reach across the table, gripping Cash's hand briefly. "Be right back," I tell him, standing up.

"Don't you need his order?" Logan wonders.

"I trust her. She knows what I like."

I hear Trotter mutter, "I'll just bet she does."

Cash chuckles. "Haven't gotten there yet."

My cheeks flush and I add today's special, hot beef with mashed potatoes, to Trotter and Logan's order, fill a Coke for Cash, and drop it off for him before returning to the kitchen to help Franky.

I hear Leah say hello to her son and introduce herself to Trotter and Logan but soon customers are filing in quickly and we're too busy to sit and have a conversation.

"Did you prep for more pies?" Leah asks as she's snagging an order off the counter.

I nod. "I have everything ready but they all need to bake yet."

"I suggest you do that. We've got the front covered. Word is out that you're back and so are your pies and the floodgates are opening up."

That makes me ridiculously happy. "Really?"

"Really." She beams and bumps her hip against mine. "Better get to cracking."

As quick as I can, I assemble three more pies, rolling out the dough and pressing them into the pie pans, filling them with the fruit I prepared, and tossing them in the oven.

I'm using the back of my hand to wipe my forehead when Leah tells me Cash wants to say goodbye before he heads back to work.

"Hey," I greet him when I get to where he's standing by the door. "Your mom said you're going back to work?"

"Unfortunately."

"How was lunch?"

"Filling," he says, patting his stomach. "Delicious, though. Trotter's something else."

I chuckle. "That's one way to put it. Didn't really plan for him to show up today."

Cash shrugs. "Good way to meet him."

"Did you tell him the plans for the weekend?"

"Yeah. They're both on board with going to the game and hanging with Brooklyn Saturday night. Trotter said he was hoping they could ditch you at some point so he could have some time with her."

I snicker. "I have no doubt he actually said those exact same words."

He grabs my hand and tugs me so I'm a little closer. "Works for me."

"Me, too," I agree. "It's been a while since Danny and Sandra D have had time together."

"Looking forward to it. Was going to do something big, but I'm second-guessing myself after the last few weeks. Okay with you to come over to my place and I'll cook you dinner?"

I lean into him and his hand trails up my arm.

My entire body tingles from his touch and I have to resist the urge to curl into him.

“Sounds perfect.”

“Can’t come soon enough.”

“Get a room!” Trotter shouts and all the customers laugh.

I blush fiercely and Cash laughs quietly. “We’ll talk tonight. Have a good afternoon.”

“You, too.”

After the door closes behind Cash, Trotter asks loudly, “Anyone else feel that sexual tension?”

“Sure did.”

“Uh huh.”

“It’s pretty obvious.”

I can actually feel the flames in my cheeks when I sit next to Trotter.

He pulls me against him with his arm around my shoulder. “Looks good on you. Missed seeing you this happy.”

Chapter Fifteen

CASH

I'm rushing around the house, making sure everything is cleaned up and in its place for my date with Hadley.

Last night I picked up Hadley, Trotter, and Logan for the football game and to say the entire night was interesting, would be putting it mildly.

Trotter and Logan were absolutely hysterical. Yelling at the refs and getting the crowd worked up, cheering along with the cheerleaders and acting like super fans of Red Oak High. It was absolutely awesome. I'm still not sure where they found foam fingers and airhorns but most of the crowd seemed entertained by their enthusiasm. Most, anyway.

Apparently back in the day, Trotter was one of the star football players at he and Hadley's high school. Hadley whispered to me that they didn't have what one would call a 'winning team', but that didn't stop Trotter from reliving his entire four years while watching last night's game. At one point, Logan got up and made someone sit between them. A complete stranger. Five minutes later, she made Logan switch seats once again. Trotter didn't seem bothered one bit; he kept telling stories of his glory days.

After the game, Brooklyn introduced Trotter to Weston, who seemed a little overwhelmed by Trotter and his play-by-play of the night's game. The game that Weston played in and clearly didn't need someone to tell him what happened, but he was a good sport about it.

Trotter and Logan are clearly huge football fans and I don't mind one bit because after the game last night they went online and bought tickets to an upcoming Tennessee Volunteers game – Go Vols! – and bought tickets for me, my brothers, and nephew to join them.

The way Trotter is seemingly adopting the Lake family makes me think he's expecting us to be around for a while. It might be premature to think that way, but I'm not mad about it either.

Ever since Hadley texted me the night before Dorothy's heart attack, we've been growing closer and closer. We text throughout the day, and she stops in at the office with coffee or pastries from the bakery – I found out later she was the one who brought the box of pastries the day we were supposed to get together before it all went south. But to spend quality time together face-to-face? It hasn't happened yet.

Last night we might have been sitting next to each other, hip to hip, in fact, but we were surrounded by a crowd of fans and her ex-husband and his boyfriend, which means we didn't have privacy.

I can't say I'm upset about our time talking and texting, though.

We've gotten to know each other pretty well that way.

I know she loves the holidays and is planning to decorate the house on November first. Her favorite food is something I

didn't expect. Meatloaf with mashed potatoes and canned green beans. It's a meal she never had growing up and one of the first Dorothy made for her when she moved to Red Oak. She had Dorothy teach her how to make it so now she makes it once a week.

We've talked about what her dreams are with the diner, what life was really like growing up as a rich kid, what it was like for me growing up in Red Oak. She knows my dad asked Mom for a divorce when Boone and Brock were in high school, rocking all our worlds.

I explained how it seemed to come out of nowhere and how since then he hasn't been a big part of our lives.

We've talked about Brooklyn and my family and hers. She's interested in understanding things about Lake Electrical and how we work together as a family. It's fascinating to her how well we all get along and I assure her we aren't perfect and argue like any other family. We get annoyed with each other and bicker and aren't always nice. There have been fights that last longer than they should, considering we're stubborn and we have a hard time admitting we're wrong. I don't want her to get the wrong impression about us. Yes, we love each other and have a great relationship for the most part, but we're flawed like anyone else.

One night when we were on the phone together, she broke down and admitted that after Brooklyn was born, her mom badgered her about losing weight to the point where she ended up with an eating disorder. Her mother thought she looked better than ever, but Trotter stepped in. She thinks that's when his eyes were officially opened to understanding that their life wasn't golden just because they had money.

When she started gaining weight back, her mom tried once again to get in her head but she was stronger and smarter, her words. It's hard for me to imagine Hadley avoiding food because it just doesn't match up with the woman she is now. I wonder if that's one of the reasons why she has dived head first into the diner and baking. Maybe it helps her to continue to overcome that time in her life when she thought of food as the enemy.

With thirty minutes to kill before Hadley arrives, I take a quick shower then start the pot of water to boil for the pasta.

I'm not a great cook like my mom, but I do all right in the kitchen with a few things. One of those is macaroni and cheese. Not from a box, but with four different kinds of cheese that I shredded myself this afternoon. It's creamy and delicious and easy to make. And because I'm super fancy, I'm going to throw some hot dogs on the grill, too. Lucky for me, according to Dorothy, macaroni and cheese with hot dogs is one of her favorites. She saw it on an episode of *Friends* once and since she had never had it, thought she'd give it a try. If it was good enough for Monica to make for Chandler, it was good enough for her, too.

The doorbell chimes and I rush to greet Hadley.

Something about tonight feels bigger than just having her over for dinner and the expression on her face when I open the door tells me she feels the same.

"Hey, you." I lean in and kiss her cheek, something I haven't done since she moved to Red Oak. I've kissed the top of her head, given her a hug, but my lips haven't touched her skin in sixteen years and my lips tingle in response.

"Hey," she breathes on a sigh.

“You look beautiful. Come in.”

She’s wearing a pair of navy-blue shorts and a white long sleeve button down shirt that’s half tucked in and half out. It looks silky and soft and the way it drapes over one shoulder is sexy as hell. Her long brown hair falls down her back in big waves and her makeup is subtle. Absolutely gorgeous. She kicks off her brown sandals at the door and hands me the bag she’s carrying.

“Thank you. I brought dessert.”

I peek inside the bag and grin. “Chocolate cake?”

She nods. “Triple chocolate layered cake, actually.”

“You talked to my mom.”

“A lady never tells her secrets.”

“Come on. Let’s put this in the kitchen. I’m going simple tonight. Macaroni and cheese and hot dogs.”

“And you talked to Dorothy.”

I look at her over my shoulder. “A gentleman never tells his secrets.”

“Seems we had the same idea about tonight.”

I hope her ideas include making out like a couple of teenagers on my couch later on. Because mine certainly do.

“Want a drink? I have a bottle of wine Corbin recommended because I’m not a wine drinker. Beer. Soda. Water.”

“I’ll take a beer, actually. As long as it’s not an IPA or super dark brew.”

I reach into the fridge and grab a couple bottles of a local brew that’s pretty light and pop the top off both before handing

one to her.

I clink my bottle against hers and say, “To reconnections.”

“And possibilities,” she adds.

We take a drink, eyes on each other, and I think her addition was absolutely perfect. Possibilities.

“Is there anything I can help with?”

“Nope. Sit back and relax. You’ve been running hard the last few weeks and it’s time for you to soak in someone doing something for you.”

She takes a seat on a bar stool and props her feet up on the one next to it. “Ahh. Don’t mind if I do,” she sighs.

“Guess I don’t need to tell you to get comfortable,” I tease.

“Nope. I don’t kick a gift horse in the mouth. You tell me you’re taking care of it, I won’t argue.”

“I was going to grill the hot dogs. Would you rather I just boil them?”

“Boil ‘em. It’s easier.”

“I can do that.”

We make small talk as I finish the cheese sauce for the macaroni and cheese and boil the hot dogs.

“Trotter and Logan are looking for a place in Nashville,” she explains. “They asked if Brooklyn could join them tomorrow when they look at a couple houses.”

“Does she want to go?”

“She said she would. And she’s staying at their hotel with them tonight. They’re going to eat in Gatlinburg at the pizza

place your sister recommended then go back to the hotel to swim.”

So, she’s free the entire night.

“That sounds like fun.”

Hadley looks at me from under her thick black lashes, her eyes twinkling. “Mm hmm.”

“Does that mean you don’t have a curfew?” I joke.

“Seems so.”

“Interesting.”

“Isn’t it?”

I mix the cheese and pasta together, scoop healthy portions into bowls, and place the hot dogs, buns, ketchup, and mustard on the counter along with plates, napkins, and silverware.

“Looks amazing.”

“Trust me. It is. It’s one of the few things Mom admits I make better than her.”

“So humble.”

My grin is shameless. “Sometimes I am.”

We dig in and her moan with the first bite has me thinking a little too much about the fact that she doesn’t need to be home tonight.

“This is incredible.”

“I know.”

She laughs, covering her mouth. “You’re something else, you know that?”

“I do. I’m a lot, I know that. I have my moments where I might come across as cocky but I don’t try to be. I’m confident

and for the most part, I always have been. If it bothers you, I can tone it down.”

“Don’t change who you are for me. It doesn’t bother me and you don’t come across as full of yourself. I wish I had your self-confidence, though. Too often I second-guess who I am and need to work on that.”

“From what you’ve told me, you didn’t necessarily have people in your life to help build that up.”

She thinks for a moment, continuing to eat and dressing her hot dog the way she likes. “Growing up, my confidence was always superficial. Like in how I dressed or how my makeup looked that day. I went to a private school, you know, and it was full of rich kids. Everyone was pretty full of themselves but I look back and wonder if it was all fake confidence.”

I shrug. “It’s possible. I’m sure some of the kids had it but if they were challenged in a way that is more real, like the rest of us live, they might have crumbled.”

“Maybe. It’s weird, looking back now, though. We thought we had it all figured out and had the world at our fingertips.”

“That’s not so different from when I was a teenager, though. I was pretty sure I knew everything and life was easy. I had no idea my parents were actually smart and knew shit about life.” I chuckle.

“Gah. That’s so true. Sometimes Brooklyn looks at me like I’m the biggest idiot on the planet when I give her advice.”

“Haha, yup, sounds about right. She’ll learn. We all did. It just took a few of life’s lessons to kick us in the teeth before we realized it.”

“Yeah,” she says quietly.

I reach over and place a hand on her thigh. “I think you’re doing great with her.”

“Moving from Chicago was hard. It was all she knew.”

“But she’s happy here, right?”

She nods. “Very. Trotter and I tried very hard not to spoil her, even though we had the means to, and still don’t. We didn’t want her growing up with the rich kid mentality we were surrounded with. That we both had at one time. It took longer for Trotter than me, as you know, but it still burns that we used to think we were better than others just because our parents had money. That rules didn’t apply to us and we could get by with stuff just because our parents had deep pockets.”

I give her thigh a squeeze. “If it makes you feel any better, I don’t see it in any of you.”

She places her hand on mine and her fingers flex against mine. “That means a lot. Thank you.”

We finish eating and she helps clean up, even though I tell her I’ve got it covered.

“Want to sit outside? I can start a fire.”

“That sounds great. Is that allowed here in town?”

“Yeah. I have a table that runs on propane for the fire.”

“Awesome. I just need to use your restroom before we go out.”

While she’s using the guest bathroom, I use the one off my bedroom and wait for her at the back door with two more beers.

With her hand in mine, I lead her to the back patio to the chairs and table.

Sitting in front of the fire with Hadley next to me as the sun begins to set at the horizon, I don't think I've ever been so content in my life. I have country music serenading us softly in the background through my speaker system and when Gary LeVox's voice begins to sing about finding the one after traveling a broken road to get to her, I stand and extend my hand to her.

"Dance with me."

She gives me a shy smile and joins me, fitting perfectly in my arms as we sway back and forth, dancing under the darkening sky.

With our hands clasped together against my rapidly beating heart, her cheek pressed to my chest, I lean down and kiss the top of her head.

"I shouldn't have let you go," I whisper. "Knew it. That morning when I watched you walk to your gate at the airport, something in me said to chase you. I didn't. I fucked that up for us. I let you walk away from me, and it felt like I was letting go of a part of me."

She takes a deep breath and nods against my chest. "I didn't want to leave you. I kept wishing things were different and I didn't have to go back to Chicago. But, if I hadn't, I wouldn't have Brooklyn and I don't have any regrets for that."

"That's the only reason I'm okay with making the stupidest decision of my life. I knew you lived in Chicago. Thought a million times I should come find you. Had no idea where I would have started."

"I thought about it, too."

I lean back. "You did?"

She looks up at me, her eyes glistening. “Yes. I told you, when I found out Dorothy lived in Tennessee, something was niggling in the back of my mind. I didn’t know if you still even lived here. Didn’t know you lived in Red Oak, but the moment I learned where she lived, I knew I had to come.”

“Spent one night with you and I’ve missed you for sixteen years,” I admit. “You got in my heart and I haven’t been able to get you out. Almost proposed to someone once and knew I couldn’t go through with it. It didn’t feel right for either of us, considering she cheated on me. The kicker was it didn’t bother me like it should have. I broke up with her and haven’t dated anyone since.”

“How long ago was that?”

I hesitate to admit what I’m about to but I do anyway. “Five years.”

Her eyes grow big. “You haven’t dated in five years?”

“Apparently, I’m picky.”

I let my hand resting on her lower back trail up until it’s cupping the back of her neck and dip my head, finally allowing our lips to touch in a whisper of a kiss.

She raises up on her toes, giving me her mouth.

My heart is beating against my chest and I can feel my pulse racing. I want to go fast. I want to go slow. I don’t want to push and I want to pull her so deeply into me that we don’t know where we begin or end. The desire to lift her up, wrap her legs around me, and carry her to my bedroom is so strong I have to root my feet to the floor in order to stop myself from rushing this night.

Testing the waters, I trace her soft lips with my tongue and almost shed a tear of happiness when she opens up for me to

taste her.

Hadley's head tilts to the side for a better angle and our tongues tangle together as the next song in my playlist begins.

A song about looking to the stars and wishing the other one was near. How many times did I wonder about Hadley. How she was and where she was. Too many to count.

"How can it be?" I whisper against her lips.

"What?"

"How can it be that I spent one night with you a lifetime ago and you're here with me now, and you still take my breath away? How did I never stop wanting you all that time?"

She tastes her lips, eyes never straying from me and replies, "I don't know. But it was the same for me."

"We missed a lot of years together."

"We did but we made it. Somehow, God brought us back together again. That says something, don't you think?"

"It does," I agree, taking her in a brutal kiss, one I hope she remembers until she takes her last breath. After that, talk is forgotten. Our words are swallowed up by the passion circling around us.

Her hands slip around my neck, holding on tight as we kiss the way I've been wanting to kiss her. I bend her over my arm, my mouth moving over hers slow and tenderly. She tastes of the cinnamon gum she popped in her mouth after supper with a hint of beer. It's delicious. Of course, I'm pretty sure she'd taste just as good if she had been eating raw onions and garlic.

After righting us, I do exactly what I was wanting to earlier. Lift her up, help her in wrapping her legs around me, bend over with her still in my arms and flip the switch off the

fire, and slide open the patio door, walking us into the house and to the couch.

I spin around, sitting down first with her straddling my lap.

She laughs, her smile bigger than I've ever seen it. "I've never been carried before."

"You liked that?"

"It was hot," she confirms, nodding.

"Noted." I give her hips a squeeze and another quick kiss. "Hadley, I don't have expectations for tonight. I didn't invite you here instead of going out because I was hoping for anything other than time alone with you and to give you a night where you could relax a bit. I'm not going to rush this because if I'm not completely off here, I think what we have has the chance to go the distance."

Her eyes go soft and she whispers, "Cash."

"I know it's soon. I know we just started our first official date a few hours ago but it feels like we've been skirting around this since you walked through the back door of the diner and you looked into my eyes. I think we can both agree that the night we spent together in New York City was unforgettable and we're both hoping to repeat that, but I don't want to rush us through the steps."

"I agree, but I don't. You said you don't want to rush things, but I've been waiting for this for *years*." She grinds against me to emphasize her point.

"Years..."

"*Years.*"

I lift my hips just barely, pressing up against her in response.

Hadley moans, her grip on my neck tightening as her mouth crushes against mine.

“Five years?” she asks when I trail my lips down her neck.

I nod.

“Six.”

“Huh?” I ask, sucking on the skin beneath her ear. She shivers.

“You remembered.”

“Your sweet spot? Impossible to forget.”

“Six for me,” she explains. “That’s how long it’s been. Six years.”

“So it’s gonna go fast. For both of us.”

“Well, it’s not like I haven’t... you know.”

“Pleased yourself?” I guess.

“Right,” she moans, dropping her head back. “Oh hell, don’t stop doing that.”

I continue kissing down her neck, moving the thin material of her shirt aside so her shoulder is exposed. “Tell me more about this time you’ve spent pleasuring yourself. Were toys involved?”

“Cash,” she whispers, her hips gyrating against me.

“Trust me,” I beg.

Her body freezes and she looks down at me, her eyes staring deep into my soul.

“Vibrator. And a thing that sucks, too. I hadn’t used either much. Only when my fingers wouldn’t cut it. Since I moved here...” she trails off, shrugging and looking away.

I give her hips a squeeze. “Since you moved here?” I prod gently.

Her cheeks pink just slightly. “I, uh, have done it a little more.”

I grin and give her what I hope is reassurance that she’s not alone in what she’s feeling. “My hand has seen a lot more action these past few weeks, too.”

Her expression shifts to one not of lust but to one I don’t like.

“I left that day in New York and took you with me, but I didn’t take you with me.”

“I got home in Tennessee and you were with me, but you weren’t.”

“How can this be?”

“Don’t understand it myself,” I admit. “But all I know is that whatever happened in New York stuck with us in a way that it’s never going away. And now you’re here. And if you leave again, I’ll be having to make some changes because I’m not watching you walk away again.”

Chapter Sixteen

HADLEY

I stare into his eyes, the color of dark coffee. “I want you,” I murmur, leaning down to kiss him, a hot and heavy kiss loaded with promise and what I hope is to come.

When we come up for air, he’s breathing heavy. “That much is obvious. And I hope you get that I return those feelings.”

I nod, smiling.

“I want to carry you to the bedroom but honestly I’m not sure I can walk normally right now let alone carry you there, too.”

That makes my grin widen even more. I let out a cheerful cry when he squeezes my butt and ravishes the sensitive skin of my neck.

“I can’t get enough of you,” he mutters against me. “It’s been too long, and I don’t mean in general. I mean since I’ve had you.”

I slide off his lap slowly and stand in front of him, extending my hand.

“Take me to bed, Cash.”

He grins, standing up and towering over me. “Really thought you were going to *Top Gun* me there and say ‘take me to bed or lose me forever’.”

That makes me giggle. “Dammit! What a missed opportunity!”

He tugs me behind him, looking back over his shoulder and grinning. “Right? You messed up.”

“I’ll do better next time,” I promise.

“Just glad you’re already knowing there’s going to be a next time.”

How could I not? He’s all I’ve thought about since I saw him in the diner, and every time I touched myself in the last sixteen years his face was who I saw when I cried out in pleasure.

For a brief second, I’m afraid I’ll be nervous when we get to his bedroom but when he turns to look at me, I don’t feel even a smidge of nerves.

My stomach flutters in anticipation and I reach out, tugging at the bottom of his shirt.

“This needs to come off.”

He shakes his head. “You first. I’ve been dying to see all of you.”

And that’s when the nerves kick in. “I’m not...” I stutter. “I’m not the same.”

“You’re better.”

“No, Cash. I’ve had a baby and love to eat now that I don’t have my mother around me constantly trying to tell me what I

can and cannot eat. I...”

He steps close, threading his fingers through my hair and cupping my cheeks. “You’re better. You’re beautiful, Hadley. The most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen in my life. Whatever changes have occurred to your body, I’ll love them as much as I loved having your body sixteen years ago. You have nothing to be nervous about. Not with me. Here you’re safe and cherished for exactly who you are.”

“Cash...”

“You with me?” His question came out soft, but it was a demand. He needs to know that not just my body, but my heart and mind are right here with him. That I believe he’ll want what he sees not just because I’m attractive to him, but because he wants all of me.

I nod. “I’m with you,” I whisper. “I’m so with you.”

“Thank fuck,” he growls, slamming his lips down onto mine in a kiss I’ll never forget. *Marked*. That’s how I feel. It’s a kiss of new beginnings. The start of something new. He wants me. *Me*. Not the girl with all the money or the girl who said ‘I do’ so her husband could live a double life. The realization is heady. I’ve never been wanted like this before. Even before Trotter, the boys I dated never looked at me the way Cash does. I never felt this way. Only one other time in my life. Sixteen years ago in a hotel room with snow falling down outside, preventing the outside world from seeping into our haven.

With gentle fingers, he pulls my shirt up and over my head, dropping it on the floor next to us before stepping back and taking in his fill.

“I was right,” he rasps. “Even better. My memory didn’t serve justice.”

My hands tremble as I unbutton my shorts, letting them pool at my feet before stepping out of them and reaching behind my back to unfasten my bra. Our eyes are connected the entire time. My bra joins my shirt and shorts on the plush carpet beneath our feet.

“Fuck,” he grumbles, scrubbing a hand down his face. “I’m not going to last, Hadley. You’re more stunning than I remembered. You’re... everything.”

“We have all night, Cash,” I reply in a quiet voice. “Your turn. I’ve waited long enough to get a look at you again.”

He reaches behind his neck and tugs his shirt off, quickly undoes his shorts, and drops them to the floor.

“No boxers?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

He smirks and grips himself with his hand, shaking his head. “No.”

I’m not sure if it’s for my benefit or if he never wears them, but I’m enjoying every inch. My eyes travel slowly up and down the length of his gorgeous body.

“You’re gorgeous,” I tell him.

“Right back at you. But you’re too far away.”

I’m not. I’m a foot away, but I understand what he means.

“Then get over here.”

“Demanding little thing, aren’t you?” His mouth curves up in a promising smirk. “I seem to remember you bending to my will in New York.”

My breath catches, recalling how dominant he was in bed. I hadn't expected it then.

"Maybe I need a refresher."

"My pleasure." The sound he makes is low, deep in his throat, when he lifts me in his strong arms, wrapping my legs around his hips once again, spinning us so I'm pressed against the coolness of the wall. My insides buzz, ready for whatever he's planning.

With swiftness, he has my arms pinned above my head and my nipples harden at the feel of him between my legs. He reaches between us, flicking me over the thin material of my panties and I squirm against him, loving the feel of how I'm affecting him.

"Kiss me before I lose my mind," I demand.

He obeys, slamming his mouth against mine in a hot and fast kiss. His tongue thrusts into my mouth, demanding mine to play along. Every inch of him is strong. Manly. He shoves his hand down the backside of my panties, cupping my ass and squeezing firmly. My hips shift, giving him more access.

Our actions lack all grace. We're frantic, our movements more like a race against each other than a coordinated dance.

We aren't just hungry for each other.

We're starving.

I'm soaked and aching. Wanting more and to get to the end and never get there all at once.

When I hear a rip, I cry out. The remnants of what were my underwear are now in pieces on the floor.

How did he do that? One handed, no less!

“Eager much?”

“I’ll buy you new ones later. They were in my way.”

“I could have taken them off, you know,” I tease, licking his earlobe before nipping at it with my teeth.

He groans, his head dipping toward my shoulder as he breathes heavy.

With one arm wrapped firmly under me and the other holding the back of my head, he spins us around, dropping me onto his mattress. Cash’s strong body covers mine, my nails clawing at his back as we continue the assault on each other’s mouths.

I wiggle around, needing everything he can give me.

“More,” I moan.

He caresses the sensitive skin behind my knee before making his way down my body, squeezing one breast before sucking on my taut nipple, brushing against it with his teeth.

“Oh, shit!” I cry out.

I feel him smile against my skin and don’t even care that I’m feeding his ego. He deserves it. With just his tongue on my nipple, I’m about to come completely undone.

He shifts to the other side, giving it the same attention before kissing his way down my stomach. I’ve always been a bit self-conscious about my stomach, even before having Brooklyn. According to my mother, it’s a problem area and I should have done something about it surgically.

But right now, with Cash worshiping my body the way he is, I don’t feel a single bit of doubt that I’m exactly the way I’m supposed to be.

He not only makes me feel wanted; he makes me feel like it's okay to be me.

“Cash,” I whisper.

“Shh. Let me take care of you,” he murmurs, wedging his shoulders between my thighs and opening myself up to him. The most intimate part of me on full display. “So fucking gorgeous. I could stare at you for hours.”

“Me or...”

“Or?” he asks in a teasing tone.

“Are you going to make me say it?”

“I’ll let you off the hook for tonight. Your pussy. I could stare at you *and* your pussy for hours and never tire of it.”

His crass words, words that I was raised to believe were used only by those who weren’t intelligent enough to speak properly, do something to me.

“Say it again.”

“I could stare at. Lick. Suck. Devour your pussy for hours. Are you going to let me do that, sweetheart?”

“Yes. Please, Cash.”

And he does. With two fingers twisting and tangling inside me, he plunges deep and allows his tongue to work magic I didn’t know existed. I’m thrashing against the bed, my head moving back and forth, fingers clenching the comforter so tightly I’m afraid I’m going to rip it.

When my orgasm hits me, I feel like I’m being torn in two. I clench my eyes closed tightly and scream his name.

He doesn’t let up, though. He continues his assault, wringing another orgasm out of me. Or maybe it’s just an

extension of the first.

“Are you protected?” he asks, his face still buried between my legs.

“Huh?”

“Do I need a condom? I’m clean. I would never put you in that position. And you know it’s been a while for me.”

“I’m clean. I have an IUD.”

“Want me to use a condom?”

He’s now kissing up my body and when he looks down into my eyes I see the sincerity in his question. If I want him to use protection, he will. No questions asked. But I trust him. Maybe it’s naïve and stupid, but I do.

“I want to feel all of you.”

“You sure?”

“Positive,” I promise, kissing him and tasting myself on his tongue. It’s something I’ve never done before and it lights something new inside me. A lot of firsts for me tonight.

I reach between us, gripping him and stroking up and down.

His eyes close briefly. “Fuck,” he groans.

“I want to feel you inside me, all of you,” I repeat.

With one swift thrust, he enters me. I don’t know who grunts or moans or curses or speaks in tongues. Possibly, likely, both of us.

He lifts up onto his knees, bringing my calves to rest on his shoulders and licks his thumb before flicking it against my center, making me explode from the inside out.

I try to touch him. Any part of him I can grasp and hold.

“I need to kiss you. Fuck,” he growls.

And then I’m up, in his lap with us still connected, my legs now tangled in his. The kiss is clumsy at best. We’re all tongues and teeth and lips, fighting for dominance.

He kisses his way down to my chest and I arch my back, giving him access to my breasts. I never realized how sensitive my nipples were until Cash gave them so much attention. Now I can’t get enough.

He continues his punishing rhythm, driving in and out of me in smooth, powerful thrusts until we’re both cresting over the edge.

“Hadley!” he cries out, slamming hard into me with a final groan.

After a few moments, we untangle ourselves and sprawl our spent bodies on his bed, our chests both heaving, bodies slick with sweat.

“Holy shit,” I whisper.

“Four?” he asks and I try to playfully slap him but I don’t have the energy.

“I told you it’d been a while.”

He grins and gives me a sweet kiss. “Want to clean up?”

“Yeah.” I nod and scoot off the bed as gingerly and carefully as I can. He joins me in the bathroom as if we’d done this a thousand times before, wetting a wash cloth and helping to clean me up along with himself. He leaves me to use the toilet and I do my business quickly, washing my hands after.

When I get to his room, he's lying on top of the covers like some Greek God, his dark hair mussed up, olive skin still glistening.

"Want some dessert?" he asks, his eyes running up and down my body in a heated gaze.

"Isn't that what we just had?"

He grins. "Time for chocolate cake. Then round two. And three. And you're sleeping in my bed tonight and I'm making you breakfast in the morning. Soon, when you're ready, you're going to re-introduce me to Brooklyn as your man and not your friend but when you're comfortable with it. What happened tonight? All of it. Not just the sex – which was fucking phenomenal – we're going to repeat on a regular basis."

I almost swoon.

"You with me?" he asks.

Instead of answering, I decide cake is for later.

"Good answer," he murmurs when I climb on top of him.

He traps my hands behind me, pressing them against my lower back and he rears up, taking my mouth in a bruising kiss.

"You up for something a little different?" he murmurs against my mouth.

"How different are we talking? Trotter tried to convince me to try something *different* a few times but I knew I would be the one left out of that trio."

He throws his head back and laughs. "Not that kind of different. I don't share and have no plans for any other dicks to be in my bed – or in you – ever. I'm talking toys. Blindfolds."

My eyes widen and I lick my lips. “I’ve never used a blindfold.”

“Been tied up?”

I shake my head, biting my lip and cursing the way my cheeks heat.

“Is it something you want to try?” With his mouth assaulting *the spot* below my ear, I would agree to just about anything.

“Yes,” I whisper. “I’m up for it.”

With lightning speed, he has me on my back and he’s off the bed, digging through one of his dresser drawers.

“Tied up or blindfolded?”

“Umm...” I don’t know which to ask for because both sound incredibly hot.

“Blindfold,” he decides. “We’ll tie you up later.”

“What if I want to tie *you* up?”

“I’m open to that. Whatever I do to you, you can do to me,” he promises.

My breath comes out in a tremble, excited for what’s not just next to come for me, but for the fun we’ll have with me tying him up.

With tender movements, he binds the silky material around my head, cloaking me in darkness.

“You trust me?”

“Completely.”

“Good. Can you see?”

“Only a little bit of light.”

“Good girl. You were honest with me.”

My legs rub together at the term *good girl*.

Without my eyesight, every sensation is heightened. The way his calloused fingertips trail over my soft skin. His woodsy, spicy scent mixed with sex. The sound of our heavy breathing.

“Hang tight,” he tells me and I feel the bed shift.

“Cash?”

“I’ll be right back,” he says, but I can tell he’s not next to me.

I wait impatiently for him to return and feel him climb onto the bed. The sound of ice clinking in a glass alerts me of what’s about to happen.

I tense up at the first touch of ice to my scorching skin, over my nipple, down the center of my stomach, across my smooth mound.

The air around us feels as if it’s crackling.

“Ahh!” I cry out when he slides the ice cube over my most sensitive part.

All while he’s murmuring sweet words that feel like a caress.

My hands reach for him and he chuckles. “Not your turn, babe.”

“I want to touch you.”

“Leave your hands on the bed or I’ll tie you up, too.”

I can hardly breathe, I’m so turned on.

I hear him reach into the glass for another ice cube and he places it once again between my legs before trailing it up my body, over my nipple. “Open.”

Cash traces my lips with the ice cube before placing it in my open mouth. “Suck.”

I suck and he asks, “Do you taste yourself?”

“Mmm,” I hum, letting him know I do taste myself on the ice and that I love it.

“Good girl,” he repeats words to me he used earlier that had me squirming beneath him.

“I’m going to fuck you now, Hadley. It’s not going to be gentle or soft and you’re going to keep this blindfold over your eyes the entire time. You understand?”

“Yes. Please, Cash, I need you.”

With no more warning, he pushes inside me fast and deep.

I can only hang on while he uses my body.

His wraps a hand around my calf and places one leg over his shoulder.

“That’s right. You’re mine, Hadley. Give me everything.”

“Yes. God, yes!”

“You like it when you’re out of control, don’t you? Your pussy is pulsing around me, sucking me in. You want more of me?”

“Yes!”

He’s so deep, his hips moving in a punishing pace.

With the new angle, his dirty words, and the way my body was already keyed up, I explode.

He follows shortly behind me.

“Fuck!” he roars, pulsing inside me before collapsing half on top of me and half on the bed.

A giggle bursts from my chest when he removes my blindfold and I see the wild look in his eyes.

“That was hot.”

He’s still breathing heavy and he kisses me hard. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“Heck no.”

“Good. Time for cake?”

“Definitely time for cake.”

Chapter Seventeen

CASH

“Holy shit!” I shout, resisting the urge to knife up. If I did that, though, I’d break the connection that roused me from sleep. A connection I decided right this second is the best way to wake up.

I feel her smile around me, and she hums causing a buzz to hit the tip of my hardness that’s currently being sucked and licked. My hips thrust up of their own will, pressing deeper into her throat. Hadley doesn’t react, though. She just keeps going.

My hands are tied together above my head. How she managed to do that while I was asleep, I have no idea.

“You tied me up?”

She giggles. “I can’t believe you didn’t wake up,” she says, looking up at me with twinkling eyes. “You’re right though.”

“About?”

“How powerful I feel.”

“I never said anything about that.”

“It was in your eyes. The thought of tying me up so I was at your mercy. I couldn’t stop thinking about it.”

Looking down at her with my arms pinned above me, I can’t help but to agree.

“Then do your best, baby. I’m all yours.”

“Damn right, you are.” She grins, getting back to work. She kisses all over my chest, my stomach, raking her nails against my skin and squeezing my thighs. Her silky hair is draped all over me and as much as I want to touch her, I have to admit it’s the sexiest thing in the world. To have her take control.

Her hand slips between her legs, and then circles around my base, twisting and tightening around me with her wetness.

“Fuck,” I groan. “That’s hot, Hadley.”

I won’t last. I know I won’t. Not when her hot mouth is wrapped around me and her hand is working magic.

“If you don’t want to swallow down your efforts, I suggest you get your sweet ass up here. And untie me. Now.”

She doesn’t stop so I give her another warning. “Hadley,” I growl. “Get up here and ride me.”

With a pop, she releases me and climbs on top of me, straddling my hips with her hand wrapped around me. She lines us up and slowly lowers herself onto me, filling her up.

“I love being inside you,” I grumble.

“I love you being inside me,” she agrees.

“Perfection. You’re mine, Hadley.”

“Yes!”

“I need to touch you.”

She shakes her head, smiling at me with a wanton expression.

“Hadley,” I warn.

“Shush.”

Without the use of my hands, I thrust my hips up to match her movements.

The push and pull is too much and exactly right.

She slides her thumb into my mouth and I suck hard before she pulls it away and rubs it over her tight nub. “Get there,” I growl. “Get there, Hadley,” I command, pistoning my hips faster.

My demand causes her to tip over the edge and I follow right behind her.

Hadley falls on top of me, our bodies melding together.

“Good morning,” she pants.

I choke on a laugh. “I would say that it’s a great morning.”

She lifts up and smiles down at me. Her hair is a mess and she has a little bit of makeup smudged under her eyes, her lips are swollen, and her cheeks are flushed.

“You’re beautiful,” I croak.

“I’m a mess.”

“Yes, but you’re still beautiful.”

She playfully slaps my arm and laughs. “Thanks for the honesty.”

“You’re welcome.”

She rolls her eyes and reaches above me, pressing her breasts in my face to untie me. Of course, I take advantage of

our new position and do a little licking and sucking of my own. She moans and her hands fumble with the restraints.

“Cash...”

The second my hands are freed up, I wrap one around her, squeezing her ass and the other tweaks her other nipple.

“You’re going to get me worked up again.”

“I’m always worked up around you.”

She slowly slides down my chest and I pull her down next to me. “Just a minute and I’ll let you clean up.”

I bring my face to hers and she gasps. “Morning breath.”

“Don’t care.”

She melts into me and I give her the kiss I’ve been aching for since I woke up to her sucking the life out of me in the best way.

When I’ve had my fill, for now, I release her and we clean up in the bathroom. I pull a new toothbrush out of the drawer for her and we brush our teeth side by side. Her in front of what is now “her sink” and me in front of mine.

She smiles at me around the foam of the toothpaste and when I’m done, knowing she’ll want to use the toilet, I slap her on the ass and leave her to it.

I throw on a pair of shorts and toss a t-shirt on the bed for her to wear and make my way to the kitchen to start coffee.

Leaning a hip against the counter while the coffee brews, I look around the kitchen that wasn’t cleaned up last night after we came up for air and devoured the chocolate cake. It brings a smile to my face remembering the enormous leap that we made together.

I wasn't lying to her when I said I didn't have expectations and didn't want to rush the steps but I can't deny that I'm damn happy with the way the night turned out.

In the bedroom, Hadley's adventurous and up for anything.

She's sweet and kind and strong and there is absolutely no way I can let her go again.

"Mm. That smells amazing," she says, walking into my kitchen in my t-shirt.

I spread out an arm and she comes to me immediately. Tucking her close, I kiss the top of her head. "Hungry?"

She wraps her arms around my waist and gives me a squeeze. "Mmm. Definitely."

"How do you like your eggs?"

"Should we make omelets? What fixings do you have?"

"Cheese, onions, peppers. I might have some ham, too."

"Perfect."

After pouring our coffee and doctoring it up the way we like it – I learn she usually drinks hers with a flavor of creamer I've never heard of so I mentally add it to my next grocery list – we get to work on our breakfast.

"What do you have planned for the day?" I ask her, flipping over one omelet with less than expert skill.

"You tell me."

"I have you for the entire day? Do you need to go to the diner at all?"

She shakes her head. "Nope. I hired someone to manage the diner. I'll keep working there, baking pies and helping as often as I can. But after Dorothy's heart attack, I realized that I

can't just rely on everyone's graciousness. In a few weeks, Dorothy and I will sign the papers for me to officially buy the diner from her, something that should have happened a while ago but we kept putting it off for one reason or another."

"You didn't tell me," I say, hoping I don't sound annoyed. I place one omelet on a plate and start on the next.

"I know. Forks?" I point to the drawer and she gets two out, placing them on the counter. "This, buying the diner and having that responsibility, has been a lot to take in for me but I needed to know I could do it on my own without anyone holding my hand along the way. I grew up with people doing everything for us. My parents didn't even do our own laundry. When I moved here to Red Oak, I had to basically learn how to do everything on my own."

"What about when you and Trotter were married?" I ask, my eyes still focused on the pan.

"As you know, Trotter liked the lifestyle our money brought us. We had a housekeeper, someone who prepared our meals, a driver. It's crazy to think about now, because I can't imagine not doing those things for myself. And I enjoy it, but it was a learning curve. Dorothy was the one who told me I had to separate clothes. I felt so stupid."

"It's not stupid," I explain. "It's all about how you were raised. My mom was bad about teaching us how to do those things as well, because she did it all on her own. It wasn't until my parents divorced that she realized we needed to know how to take care of ourselves, too. When I was in college, I'd just bring home all my dirty laundry and she'd have it washed and folded by the time I was heading back to school." I shake my head. "When I think about how we all took advantage of that,

it breaks my heart. She always did so much for us and we just expected it.”

“And rather than my parents doing anything for me, they had people do it for them, and I came to expect it as well.”

“Exactly. See, you’re not much different than me. We all have to learn some time.”

She nods. “I guess so.”

I slide the other omelet onto a plate and we sit at the island to eat.

“Back to the diner...” I begin. “You have a manager now?”

She smiles around a bite of eggs. “Yes. And she’s going to hire an assistant manager, too. I told Sarah, that’s the manager, I would like to be involved in the hiring but she has final say. Dorothy heard through the grapevine the building next to the diner is coming up for lease and I’ve been thinking of expanding. I’m not sure what we will do.”

“Red Oak needs more options for eating out,” I comment. “A good pizza place, maybe something a little nicer for date nights.”

Hadley nods, agreeing with me. “That’s what I’ve been thinking, too. Obviously Red Oak isn’t large enough to have an upscale restaurant, but something fancier would be nice.”

We toss ideas around while we finish our breakfast, clean up the dishes, and drink another cup of coffee. We’re still discussing all the possibilities when her phone buzzes on the coffee table.

She flinches. “I didn’t even charge it last night. I hope Brooklyn’s okay.”

I wince. “Sorry. That was my bad. Got a little carried away.”

“I was right there with you. It’s not your fault.”

She reaches for her phone and her face breaks out into a smile. “Brooklyn. She noticed through our Ring camera app that I never came home last night. And reminded me Kevin is probably hungry.”

“Who’s Kevin?”

“Our cat. He’s a temperamental little shit, but he loves Brooklyn and me.”

“Aren’t all cats temperamental?”

Her cute little nose scrunches up. “Maybe, but he’s on the next level.”

I chuckle. “Better go feed him then. Care if I tag along?”

“I’d love that.”

She types away on her phone, replying to Brooklyn.

“Will it bother her to know you were with me all night?”

Hadley’s eyes meet mine. “No. She understands. With the way her father and I were together, how he is with Logan, she gets that adults have adult nights. And she approves, too, in case you were wondering.”

I blow out a breath. “That’s a relief.”

“Yeah,” she agrees quietly in a way I can tell there’s more on her mind.

“What is it?” I prod, nudging her side to get her to look at me.

She takes a deep breath and drops her head to the back of the couch, twisting to look at me. “She’s my priority.”

“Yup.”

“No, what I mean is, nights like last night? They’ll be few and far between. I’m her full-time parent and she’s only fifteen. I can’t just leave her for the night.”

“Yup.”

Her face goes blank. “I don’t think...”

“I understand, Hadley. That’s why I didn’t want to go out for our date last night. I get it. I’m dating a single mom and that means I will always come after Brooklyn. I’m okay with that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Do I look sure?”

Her eyes probe my expression, probably trying to see if I’m lying.

Whatever she sees relaxes her. “Yes. You look sure.”

“That’s because I am. I won’t ever lie to you, Hadley. I need to earn that trust, I’m okay with that. But I need you to believe more than anything that I will never get angry or upset with you for putting Brooklyn first, for building the diner up to what you want it to be. I don’t want to be a background character in your life, but I’m not going to throw a fit when I’m not the star.”

“This might not say much about me, but I wouldn’t mind being the star in yours.”

“I’m okay with that.”

“You’re pretty wonderful,” she tells me, kissing me softly.

“Right back at you. I’m going to shower then we can go to your place, see if Kevin likes me or hates me and I pray his opinion of me isn’t a deal breaker in case he hates me.”

She giggles. “Oh, trust me, he’ll hate you. He hates everyone but Brooklyn and me.”

“This sounds fun. Want to shower with me?”

“Thought you’d never ask.”

I practically sprint to the bathroom, tugging her behind me.

Kevin hates me. The minute we walk into Hadley’s house, he rushes to her meowing his displeasure of being left alone and obviously starving. Hadley picks him up and he rubs his dark gray and black face against hers, purring and being absolutely pathetic until he opens his yellow eyes and sees me.

He hisses immediately, jumping out of Hadley’s arms and rushing me, batting his little paws at my feet with his ears laid back.

I jump out of the way as Hadley laughs.

“Oh, Kevin, stop it!”

“Yeah, Kevin, stop it!”

But he doesn’t. He continues to hit me, hiss in my direction, and growl. I bend down, hoping he’ll smell me and have that animal instinct that I’m not a terrible person, but he lunges instead.

I yank my hand away. “Holy shit, you’re feisty.”

“Told you,” Hadley singsongs, filling his food bowl and water – out of the fridge filter rather than the kitchen faucet.

She places his food and water on the floor and he immediately circles her legs, rubbing up against her and purring away as if he wasn't just trying to kill me with his eyes and claw me to death.

“Wait. Did you just give him filtered water?”

She gives me a look. “Of course. He doesn't like it from the faucet.”

I blanch. “Are you serious?”

She looks confused, glancing between me and the evil cat who's still growling while looking at me and eating his breakfast.

“Yes?”

“Hadley.” I chuckle. “There's no way he'll know the difference.”

“He does, though.”

I shake my head and reach a hand out to Kevin, hoping he'll be distracted enough by his eating to let me pet him and possibly win him over but I have no such luck. He, once again, attacks me, this time biting my feet in the process. His teeth are sharp and I let out a – very manly – howl, stepping back and tripping over his quick movements around me.

I land on my ass with a heavy thud and he scrambles out of my path.

I'm lying on the floor, groaning, when, rather than check to see if I'm okay, he takes advantage of my weakness and jumps on my face. His sharp claws bite into my cheeks before he retracts them and runs away.

I look up at Hadley from my place on the hard tile floor. Her mouth is hanging open as she takes in the scene. Kevin is

licking between his legs, as if nothing just happened. As if he isn't about to create a little voodoo doll and poke the doll's eyes out with his claws.

“Oh my gosh! Are you okay?” She asks it like it's the polite thing to do but I can tell she's trying not to laugh.

“I'm too old for this shit,” I moan, getting to my feet.

“I'm so...” she lets out a giggle... “sorry.”

“You don't sound sorry.”

She snorts, covering her mouth with her hand. “You went down so hard.” She laughs. “I'm sorry! I'm not trying to laugh but holy crap. I wish I'd have had that on video.”

“Could have won you that ten thousand dollars from *America's Funniest Videos*, I'm sure. Or at the very least, gone viral on social media.”

“Maybe I need to have cameras installed inside to catch the next one.”

“Next one?”

“You know Kevin isn't going to give up so easily now. He's the lion and you're his prey.”

“Shit. Why is he so mean?”

She laughs, shaking her head, her fingers flying across her phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Texting Brooklyn to tell her what just happened.”

In a flash I have her in my arms, yanking her phone out of her hand and holding it out of reach. “We don't need the entire town knowing about Kevin dominating me.”

That makes her laugh harder. “Oh, yes we do. Maybe I need to get Kevin a little kitty whip so he can really dominate you.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? After tying me up this morning, I’m sure you’ll be bringing out the flogger, too. Need a Red Room also?”

Her breath hitches and she stops fighting me. “Now that’s an idea.”

“I’ve created a monster.” I grin, kissing her.

“Oh, gross.” I hear a deep voice mutter. “Keep it in the bedroom, will ya?”

I look up to see Trotter walking into the kitchen, placing a bag on the counter.

“What are you doing here?” Hadley wonders.

“Bringing our daughter home?”

“I thought you were bringing her home at five?”

“Clearly. Cash, nice to see you again.”

“Trotter.” I nod. “How was Gatlinburg?”

“Great. We have something to talk about with you, Hadley.”

Kevin walks into the kitchen and sees Trotter, hisses at him then at me, and runs away.

“Uh oh,” she mutters.

“Nothing bad,” Logan explains, walking in the house with Brooklyn.

“They want to start a brick oven pizza place in Red Oak,” Brooklyn announces. “Wouldn’t that be awesome?”

“What?!” Hadley exclaims.

“Hi, Mom.” Brooklyn gives her mom a hug and then tells me hello as well.

Kevin returns, acting like a lovely pet to Brooklyn. She picks him up and they touch noses.

“Hey, sweetie. How was your weekend?”

“Awesome. Yours?”

“Fantastic.” I wink at Hadley and she blushes.

“Eww.”

I chuckle along with Logan and Trotter who says, “About time.”

Kevin jumps out of her arms and glares at all the men.

“Why is your cat such a psycho?” Logan wonders.

“I’m going to put my stuff in my room before I throw up. After watching these two give each other googly eyes and now you two, I think I’m gonna be sick.” Kevin follows after Brooklyn with his tail high in the air without a backward glance at the rest of us.

I grin at her back and Hadley asks Trotter and Logan if they want a drink.

“Wine?” Trotter asks.

“Of course. Red or white?”

“Whatever.”

“Logan? Cash?”

“Beer if you got it,” I say and Logan agrees. “I’ll help.”

After we get drinks ready, we move to the cozy living room. The furniture is a deep rich blue, soft material and

there's about a million throw pillows on the couch and chairs in different shades of white. Hadley places her glass of wine on the table that's setting on the ottoman and pulls a pillow over her chest.

“What's this about a pizza place?”

For the next two hours, the four of us discuss what Trotter and Logan are thinking. Brooklyn had told them about the building coming up for lease and they had the same idea as Hadley. Open another restaurant. This would be a quaint little Italian restaurant that focuses on brick oven pizza but includes specialty pasta dishes and desserts.

“Can you picture it? Red and white checkered tablecloths, simple candles on the tables. A good wine and beer selection.”

I look at Logan and can't help but picture his vision clearly.

“It would be awesome,” I agree. “But do either of you know anything about running a restaurant?”

“Hell no. But we know people.”

“My mom is Italian. I'm sure she'd love to be part of it. I don't think she would want to run it, or the kitchen, but her food is amazing.”

“Get her over here, if she can. I'd love to talk more.”

“Excited much?” Hadley teases Trotter.

He lifts his hand in the air and ticks off on his fingers, “You, Brooklyn, and this guy right here. Those are the three people in my life who I care about. I've never had anything else. This, right here, is right up there with you three. I need this, Hadley. Something that I'm passionate about but makes me feel useful, too.”

Her face softens. “I get it.”

I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone, shooting off a text to my mom and ask her if she’ll come to Hadley’s. She replies “yes” immediately.

“Mom’s on her way.”

“Does she know why?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“You asked her to come here and she’s just... coming here?” Trotter asks, bewildered.

“It’s weird, right?” Hadley asks Trotter.

“Uh, yeah. Can you imagine if we asked our parents to drop what they were doing for us?”

Hadley snorts. “They’d have to shuffle around a few things first then pencil us in for a few weeks later.”

“God, they suck so bad.”

Ten minutes later, the doorbell rings and Hadley lets my mom in, Cody trailing behind her.

“Brooklyn home?” Cody asks.

“In her room,” I tell him.

“See ya,” he says, beelining it in the direction Hadley shows him.

“Can I get you a glass of wine, Leah?” Hadley asks after Mom greets Logan and Trotter.

“Am I going to need it?”

I laugh. “No.”

“I’ll have one anyway. I never say no to wine.”

“She’s not lying.”

She hits me with the back of her hand. “Oh, hush.”

After she’s settled in with her wine, and our drinks refilled, Trotter explains his dream of opening an Italian restaurant. The entire time, I watch Mom’s face brighten and grow with excitement.

“I’m in,” she says as soon as he’s done talking. “However that looks, this is a fantastic idea. I can give recipes, help in the kitchen, help plan, be a financial backer. Whatever but I think this is amazing and I want to be a part of it.”

Hadley and Trotter look perplexed but happy. “This is... wow. I didn’t expect this,” Trotter admits.

“Stick with us, kids. We’ll show you what it’s like to be a part of the Lake family. You’re ours now.”

I couldn’t love my mother more than I do right now.

Chapter Eighteen

HADLEY

Over the next two months, life seems to go by in a blur. Between Brooklyn and Weston officially dating, Trotter and Logan moving to Red Oak, the diner, the new restaurant, Bella, and spending as much time with Cash as possible, life is good.

Better than it's ever been.

Cash's family, as I suspected, is absolutely wonderful. We gather for family dinner at his mom and stepdad's house every Sunday night, Leah invited Brooklyn and me to join her, Corbin, and Naomi for a girls' shopping trip before Brock and Naomi's wedding, and I was included in the bachelorette party Corbin hosted for Naomi, too. It was a night at a spa in Gatlinburg they'd been to a few times before. We laughed, relaxed with spa treatments, ordered food to the suite, and had a wonderful time.

When Trotter told me he and Logan were moving to Red Oak, I was shocked. It's a small town and he's not a small-town guy, but he fell in love with the charm that is Red Oak. With its constant festivals for seemingly any occasion, the people and gossip he gets to hear about when he's at the

bakery or coffee shop, and the way he's adopted Leah as his new best friend, I don't think he'll ever leave.

Brooklyn's happy, too, because she has both her parents in the same town and that means she doesn't have to split her time by going to Chicago or the guys coming here and renting a place to stay. It also means that Cash and I get more alone time than we would have otherwise.

And that alone time isn't only spent naked. Though, a lot of it is. I never realized I had such a strong sexual appetite until Cash came back into my life. We've made a habit of attending the high school football games weekly, even if they're out of town, and go on dates together, meet for lunch and make dinner together several times a week.

Brooklyn adores him.

Trotter has gotten used to Cash's incredibly good looks and no longer swoons every time he's around.

Kevin hasn't warmed up to him much, but that's just Kevin. He's a cat and does what he wants when he wants.

All of this to say, things are more than good.

They're fantastic.

I'm happier than I've ever been. All of the people I love most in the world are together and thriving.

Which means, I've been waiting for the inevitable.

Life is simply too good for it to continue without a hiccup of some sort.

And when I see my mother's name pop up on my cell, I know it's something bad.

Because it's a simple text.

Mom: Call me.

She's not a texter. She usually calls me or I call her. No more than once a week because I can't handle any more than that.

"Shit," I mutter, placing my coffee cup on the counter.

Rather than jump to do her bidding, calling right away like she expects, I go about my day as if I never saw her text.

I bring lunch from the diner to Cash and we eat together in his office, along with a heavy make-out session with me sitting on his lap and his hardness pressing against my hip.

"Geez, Hadley. So inappropriate," he teases. "Getting me hard while I'm at work."

I shrug and kiss him on the tip of his nose. "It's not my fault you have no control of yourself."

"How am I supposed to have control when your sweet ass is nestled against me?"

I want to tell him I love him more than anything right here in his office. I went way past falling and am now deeply in love with this man who seems to understand me better than anyone. Who doesn't look at me like I'm just a rich kid who's been spoon fed her entire life. He sees me as a hard working, sexy single mother and I love it.

"What else do you have planned for today?"

"Coffee with Naomi," I tell him. Cash's sister-in-law, who's pregnant and just returned from her honeymoon with Brock.

"I'm sure she'll go on and on about their honeymoon," he says. "Brock can't stop talking about it." He tells me this but

it's obvious he doesn't mind one bit to hear all about it. The love Cash has for his siblings runs deep.

"I bet. I'm excited to hear about it, though. A week by the beach in The Keys sounds pretty amazing."

"Not sure they spent much time on the beach," he says, squeezing my hips. "Though, he does have a nice tan so they must have gotten out of the room at some point."

I grin and scoot off his lap. He walks me to my car, kissing me after opening the door for me, and he reminds me he has a late meeting tonight so we won't be able to see each other.

Of course I remembered, which was one of the reasons I brought him lunch today. I've grown addicted to seeing Cash on the daily.

On the drive to the coffee shop, I think about Brock and Naomi's special day.

The wedding two weeks ago was beautiful and simple. They said their nuptials in a private ceremony with only family in attendance, which included Brooklyn and me, and hosted a larger reception in Stone and Leah's backyard. None of it was fancy or overdone, but felt perfectly Naomi and Brock. I loved being a part of their wedding day, and so did Brooklyn. Naomi looked absolutely stunning in her satin gown that showed off her small baby bump. Corbin stood by her side with Boone standing beside Brock's.

It was the first wedding I've attended that didn't have a formal dress code or a four-course meal. The catered food served buffet style was delicious and the cake... oh my gosh, my mouth waters just thinking about it.

Naomi's waiting for me when I walk into the coffee shop and she stands, giving me a hug and motioning to a coffee she

already has waiting for me.

“Thank you.”

“No worries. I had a few errands to run beforehand and got done sooner than I expected so figured I’d just come early.”

“How are you?”

“Great.”

“Honeymoon glow,” I tell her.

She laughs. “I suppose so.”

Naomi tells me about the book she’s writing now and hoping to publish before the baby comes, and we talk about Boone a bit and how he’s being a bum where Paisley is concerned. Paisley is a friend of Naomi and Corbin’s they met when they were in Gatlinburg for a girls’ weekend and she moved to Red Oak for a teaching position.

“It’s driving me crazy. They’re perfect for each other.”

“They are,” I agree. “But as a single parent, I understand how scary it is to start a relationship. I got lucky because, well, Cash...”

“Who’s crazy about you and your daughter. But Paisley’s crazy about Cody and Boone, too.”

I give her a look.

“Okay, she tolerates Boone. But I think it’s her putting up her defense against him. Love and hate, two sides of the same coin, you know?”

“I get it. Maybe you’ll have to write their story. Like enemies to lovers type of thing.”

Her eyes widen. “Exactly! They play argue but it’s like all this foreplay leading up to the big show for them. I know one

day they're going to give in and then we won't be able to tear them apart."

I laugh. "Probably. But Boone seems pretty stubborn and I think he likes having his time with Cody. From what I understand, he was pretty badly burned by Cody's bio mom so I can understand why he doesn't want to jump into anything."

"I know. I get it, I do. But I honestly think the reason they argue at all is because they don't want to admit their feelings for each other."

"Oh, absolutely. But if you push either of them on the issue I think it'll make them run in the other direction. I think it'll happen naturally."

"I hope so," she murmurs. "My pregnancy hormones can't handle much more of it."

I laugh and I reminisce about my time being pregnant with Brooklyn, look at pictures she has from the wedding and honeymoon, and talk a bit about what it's like to have a teenager who's dating.

"It drives me half insane and makes the other half incredibly happy to see her so happy."

"This is why they start as babies. I can't even imagine having to deal with all the teenage junk yet."

"They make you fall in love with them when they're sweet and don't talk back so that when they become sassy know-it-alls, we're already attached."

She laughs at my assessment and we talk a little more before she sighs, saying she needs to get back to writing.

"I'll see you at Leah's for Sunday supper?" she asks.

"I wouldn't miss it."

“Good. Have a good rest of your day,” she says, giving me a hug.

“You, too. Thanks for meeting me.”

“I always have time for you.”

After I get home from my coffee date with Naomi and picking up some groceries, Brooklyn blows through the door, only home long enough to change clothes and get ready to go to the playoff football game in another town. She’s riding with Boone and Cody and sporting Weston’s jersey. Her hair is in a high ponytail and his number is painted onto her cheek.

“Have fun, honey!”

She kisses my cheek and chirps, “I will! See you after the game, okay? Boone said we’re stopping for food before the game.”

I point to the cash on the counter and she snatches it up, stuffing it into her cream-colored belt bag that is actually a fanny pack but this generation doesn’t use real terms and think they are part of new inventions.

“Thanks, Mom. Love you.”

“Love you, too. Thank Boone for me.”

“I will, don’t worry!”

“And tell Weston good game. As long as he has a good game, of course.”

She rolls her eyes. “Okay, Mom.”

A horn beeps outside and she darts to the door. “See ya!”

“Bye!”

Cash has a work meeting tonight to go over an estimate for a big project they just landed so I have the night to myself. I

haven't had that in a while and even though I'd love to spend the night in Cash's arms, I admit I'm looking forward to it.

That is, until I remember my mom's text from this morning.

I sigh heavily and remind myself I'm a grown-up so I give her a call.

"Darling," she coos.

"Hi, Mom."

"What took you so long to call me?"

I roll my eyes. "I had a busy day, Mom."

"Too busy for your mother?"

"I'm calling you now," I remind her. "And if it was urgent, you could have called me."

"Fine. I need you to come home. There's something happening here and you need to be here."

"First of all, I am home. Second of all, what is it?"

"I don't want to discuss something so delicate over the phone, Hadley. I need you here."

"I have a lot going on right now, Mom. Why can't you just explain what's going on? Is it something serious? Is it your health? Dad's?"

She huffs through the phone line. "Of course it's serious!" she snaps. "Why else would I need you home?"

I don't tell her that she could be having a bad hair day and to her that's serious.

"Tomorrow. I'm sending the jet. You need to be on it."

“Mom. No. I can’t just up and leave. I have a business to run and Brooklyn has school.”

“You convinced Trotter to move to that god forsaken town, so he can be there for Brooklyn and I thought you had people to run the diner for you?” The way she says diner like a curse word makes me bite my tongue to prevent myself from lashing out. How she looks down on people is so condescending and ridiculous.

“Why can’t you come here?”

“To Red Oak?” she cries out in horror. “No. You need to be in Chicago for this.”

“Mom. This is all very dramatic. I won’t be on that plane if you don’t tell me what is going on. You can’t expect me just to drop everything when I don’t even know what I’m dropping it for.”

She’s quiet for a moment before she huffs again. “Fine. I’ll tell you but you have to promise me you’ll be on that plane.”

“As long as what I hear warrants a trip to Chicago.”

“Your father has asked me for a divorce.”

I gasp.

“What?”

Dad and I have been growing closer since Aunt Dorothy’s heart attack. We talk or text almost every day and he hasn’t mentioned it once. I know he’s in London right now for business and wonder if he told her before he left? It doesn’t seem like him, though. Sure they’ve had their... *problems* but he’s never mentioned being unhappy with their marriage.

“That’s right. He’s asked me for a divorce and there’s more.”

“What else?” I ask quietly.

“I found a lump. In my right breast. I need you here with me when I hear the results from my doctor. Of course I have the best doctors, but that doesn’t mean I don’t need my daughter here with me.”

I sit quietly. “A lump?”

“Yes. So you see, it’s a delicate situation and with your dad announcing he’s leaving me I don’t want him around. I need you here.”

“I’ll be there,” I promise.

“Good. I’ll send you the details.”

She clicks off and I stare at my phone, thinking that shoe dropped down and exploded like a bomb.

Chapter Nineteen

HADLEY

“Mom?” I yell, walking through the front door of my childhood home. It’s strange that no one opened the door for me, but I shrug it off.

When she comes to the entry, I audibly gasp.

Never, not once in my entire life, have I seen my mother without her hair done, makeup applied perfectly, and in anything remotely like what she’s wearing now. Aside from when she was in the Nashville jail, of course. But she’s wearing actual sweatpants and a ratty t-shirt. I didn’t even think she owned clothes like that.

“Mom? Are you okay?”

“Of course I’m not okay. Your father is abandoning the family and I might have cancer invading my body.”

I reach out and pull her into an awkward hug. We aren’t an affectionate family and I don’t remember the last time I actually hugged her like this.

“Tell me everything.”

She leads me to the kitchen and pours us both a glass of wine.

“Your father is leaving me. What else is there to say?”

“But, that makes no sense. What brought this about?”

“Who knows,” she says, throwing her arms in the air. “He’s lost his mind, I guess. He’s not acting like himself and just told me when he gets home from London he’s moving to the guest house. No explanation.”

“Mom, that doesn’t sound like him.”

She cuts me a harsh look. “You don’t think I know that? He’s my husband, Hadley. Of course this doesn’t sound like him. But I will not beg. If he doesn’t want to be married to me any longer, I won’t fight him but I definitely won’t make it easy on him.”

That’s the mom I know.

“And the lump?”

“I am supposed to be receiving a call from the oncologist in an hour or two.”

“They don’t want you to go into the office?”

“I told them I wasn’t going in there again unless it was absolutely necessary. If they tell me I have cancer, I’ll deal with it then but I won’t step foot in that place if I don’t have to.”

And they agreed to that? What am I thinking? I’m sure she didn’t give them another option other than to agree to her demands.

“Where are your things?” she wonders.

I point to my bag on the floor. “I just brought stuff to stay for the night.”

She glares at me. “You’re staying longer than the night, Hadley. If I have cancer you need to be here. Take me to appointments and help me. I’m your mother. And this whole divorce thing with your father will need a lot of attention. I need you here. I need you to move back here to Chicago and stop this Red Oak foolishness.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “Red Oak foolishness?”

“It’s a phase and I’m over it. You will move back here and that’s final.”

“Mom, Brooklyn and I are happy in Red Oak. I can help you with your appointments if you do have cancer, which we don’t know yet, but I can’t just move back to Chicago. Nor do I want to. It’s not a phase, and it’s not foolishness. We don’t want to move back here. She likes her school, we like our home, and...”

“And that boy you’re seeing is there,” she remarks.

“Yes, Cash, the *man* I’m seeing lives in Red Oak and because I am actually happy living there, I don’t intend to move away.”

“You were always so ungrateful. After all I’ve done for you?”

All she’s done for me? Thrown money at me and thought that’s all she needed to do to be a parent? “I can’t just yank Brooklyn away from her home. Do you not hear me? She’s *happy* there. Truly happy. Mom, you need to be realistic.”

“I am being realistic. You can’t desert me at a time like this.”

I sigh heavily, deciding it's an argument for later.

“What time is your doctor calling?”

“Noon. Or maybe one o'clock. I don't recall.”

“You don't recall?” I ask.

She snaps at me. “No, Hadley. This is hardly something I'm used to. Having to go around a doctor's schedule. They said I'd get the call early afternoon so I assume that means by one. I doubt they'll make me wait.”

“Okay, then I'm going to use the restroom and put my stuff in one of the guest rooms. I'll be back shortly so I don't miss the phone call.”

“Use your old room. It's all set up for you. We have a guest for dinner tonight. If you didn't bring proper attire, I have set some clothes in your room for you.”

“A guest? Tonight? Mom, don't you think we need to be focusing on your health? Maybe have a quiet night?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Who's the guest?”

“A business associate. This dinner has been planned for weeks and I won't let a silly thing like this get in the way.”

“Cancer is not a silly thing, Mom.”

“Of course it isn't, but it's an inconvenience and I won't allow it to rule my life. Now go get freshened up and be back soon.”

Feeling dismissed, I leave her to do as she asked.

In my old bedroom, I notice the clothes she set out for me are fancier than what should be worn for just any guest to come for dinner.

A black cocktail dress that I can see just by holding it up will show a lot of cleavage and leg. “What the hell?”

I toss the dress down onto the bed and shake my head. There’s no way I’m wearing that.

As I make my way back downstairs, I hear her on the phone and pick up the pace, rushing to her side and taking a seat on the arm of the chair.

“Yes, Doctor. Thank you for calling. Yes, I understand.” She listens as they speak on the other end, nodding with her head down. “We’ll be in touch. Thank you again.”

She places her phone down, staring at her lap.

“Well?”

“I have it.”

I gasp. “Oh, Mom,” I whisper, hugging her stiff body.

“It’ll be fine. I’ll be fine. No need to cry or whine. This is a hiccup and a nuisance, for sure, but nothing we can’t handle.”

“Mom, cancer is more than a nuisance. What else did they say? What stage? What do they say about a treatment plan? Are they scheduling surgery now?”

She balks at me, flipping her hand as if I’m acting irrationally and asking questions that aren’t legit questions to ask.

“I don’t have time to worry about it now. Alastair will be here in a few hours and we need to prepare for his arrival. This dinner is important and I need you on your A-game.”

“Alastair?”

I can sense her temper rising, annoyance that begins with me being curious about what’s going on.

“Yes, Alastair. He’ll be here at six-thirty and I fired the chef yesterday so I need you to work some magic.”

“Mom! Stop a second. You fired your chef? Why?”

“He tried to make me eat a bagel. A bagel! Said I needed something more substantial than my morning protein smoothie. Can you believe that?”

“The nerve of him. Trying to give you carbs and fill your stomach,” I say sarcastically.

“Exactly,” she agrees, glossing over my sarcasm. “And since you know how to cook now, I need you to put together something elegant and delicious.”

I look around, thinking I have to be on an episode of *Candid Camera*. “Where’s Georgina?”

Mom huffs and stands. “What’s with all the questions? She’s gone.”

“Gone? Where? She’s been with you for years.”

Georgina is – or was – my parents’ full-time housekeeper. Quite honestly, she was more than that. She was my mother’s right hand most days and my only friend in this house.

“Stop asking stupid questions, Hadley. It’s time you grow up and understand your obligations. You’ll fill in tonight and with Georgina gone, I need to find someone to answer the door and serve dinner because what will Alastair think if we serve ourselves and answer the door?” She asks this like it’s the most preposterous thing in the world.

“Oh my gosh, Mom. Will you take a breath for a second? You’re acting ridiculous right now.”

The look she gives me would have made me wither to nothing in the past but I’m stronger now. She doesn’t scare me

or intimidate me like she once did.

“I’m not ridiculous.”

I stand up so I’m facing her and take her hand in mine. It’s cold and clammy, but that’s normal for her.

“Listen to me. You wanted me here so I could be with you when you heard from the doctor and this is me being here after you found out you have cancer. Can you sit for a minute and we can talk about it?”

“You think I want to talk about the fact that some disease is trying to destroy everything I’ve worked for? I need to focus on something else, Hadley. Give me this night and we’ll figure everything out tomorrow.”

I take a deep breath, feeling off about something but I can’t put my finger on it.

She’s acting cagey and peculiar, even for her.

“Okay, fine. If that’s what you need, I’ll give you tonight. What did you plan to serve for dinner tonight?”

“Salmon of course.”

“Of course,” I murmur. It’s her favorite so I don’t know what I was thinking.

“The meal needs to be healthy. None of that diner food, you understand me? Alastair is a specimen of health and is very conscious of what he puts into his body.”

“Boring food. Got it. Anything else?”

“Chill a few bottles of chardonnay. There should be plenty in the wine cellar but we need it upstairs so we don’t have to go in search of it.”

She continues to list all the things that need to be done before this Alastair arrives and informs me she's going to be busy for a few hours. She has someone coming to do her hair and makeup and with a few outfit choices because 'she has absolutely nothing to wear'. The woman with three closets full of designer clothes has nothing to wear. Right.

The doorbell rings, a haughty cadence that has always annoyed me.

"That should be my style team. Get the door, will you?"

"That's what I'm here for," I tell her, feeling like it's absolutely why I'm here.

A horrifying thought hits me at that moment.

Is Alastair here for a... date? Am I her servant because she fired everyone else?

I think I'm going to be sick.

I guide Mom's *style team* – blech – to her room where she's waiting for them and then pull my phone out of my pocket to call Cash.

"Hey, you. How's it going?"

"I have no idea what's going on here but it's strange."

"What do you mean?"

"First of all, Mom thinks I'm moving back permanently, like this isn't just a one-day visit."

"Fuck that."

"Exactly. I was upstairs when her doctor called and told her she does have cancer but that's the extent of what she would tell me."

"Shit."

“I know nothing else because she won’t talk about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I ask her questions and she acts like I’m crazy. I don’t know if she’s just pretending it’s not real or if she assumes it’ll just go away if she doesn’t talk about it. She fired all the staff in the house, who have been with her for ages. Claims Dad asked her for a divorce but I honestly am wondering if that’s true or not. I haven’t been able to reach him because of the time difference. On top of that, I have to cook dinner for some *guest* named Alastair who’s coming tonight. With diet restrictions of the boring sort. I’m now allowed to cook anything that tastes good. Just food that’s healthy because according to my mother this Alastair is a health nut and cares about the food he puts into his body.”

“What the fuck?”

“Right? It’s all so weird. I’m starting to think she’s gone off the deep end. Like more than she already was. Tell me something good so I can ignore the dumpster fire that’s happening here.”

“Got more details on Mom’s Granny basketball thing she’s doing.”

I let out a loud laugh that echoes in the living room from the tall ceilings. “Please tell me everything.”

“Get this. It’s like *granny* Granny basketball. She’s the youngest one on the team. By far. And by far I mean decades. There are a few ninety-year-olds playing. And playing is a very loose term. They aren’t allowed to run or jump. It’s six-on-six so they don’t go past the center line, which is probably good considering most, if not all of them, likely have heart conditions.”

“Oh my gosh.” I giggle.

“I know. Take a wild guess as to what the grannies wear during their basketball games.”

“Shorts and a t-shirt?” I guess the most logical uniform.

“Not even close. They can’t show skin aside from their faces and hands.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard that right. Bloomers, tall socks, long sleeve shirt things that look straight out of the nineteenth century. It’s awesome. I cannot *wait* for the first game. We’re going to be so obnoxious.”

“This is going to be epic. Did she know all of this when she signed up?”

“She didn’t say but to make it even better... Mom was recruited for the team. Probably because she’s the one person who doesn’t have a fake hip.”

“Yet.”

“I’m telling her you said that.”

I grin. “Honestly, this is exactly what I needed to hear. Mama Leah’s dressing up like a woman from the Pioneer days to play basketball with women who could be her mom.”

“I know. It’s fantastic. But she’s really looking forward to it. I think she’s curious what it’s going to be like but also you know her, she just enjoys socializing and adores the older generation. For her, this will just be fun and something she doesn’t take too seriously.”

“I bet some of the other ladies will take it seriously. I wonder if we’ll see anyone get physical?”

“It’s not roller derby, Had,” he says, chuckling.

“We need to put that on the list for her to get into.”

“Hard no on that one. Granny basketball is safe. Have you seen roller derby? Those women are ruthless.”

“True,” I murmur.

He’s quiet on the other end before asking, “Did that help?”

“It did. Thank you.”

“I miss you.”

I sigh. “I miss you, too. I’ll be home tomorrow, though, regardless of what Mom says.”

“Take all the time you need. We’ve got everything covered here. I’m picking up Brooklyn from school today because Trotter and Logan had to meet with the contractors.”

“Oh, crap! I completely forgot about that.”

“It’s okay. They understand. Tomorrow the boys play in the football finals so if it’s okay with you, I’ll take Brooklyn to the game.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know I don’t, but I like to go to the games anyway and Boone’s busy tomorrow night. Cody wants to go so it’ll be like last night, just with me instead of Boone. But I wanted to get your okay for the plans first.”

“I’m okay with that.”

“Good. I’m looking forward to spending a little more time with Brooklyn. Not that I don’t love having you around, obviously, but I think she and I need this time together.”

“With Cody,” I remind him.

“Well, yeah, there’s that. But she and I have after school today, too, so that will be good. I figure we’ll grab something at the bakery and she’s going to tag along with me while I run for some parts from one of our suppliers and run to Costco for a few things. I texted her today to let her know I’d be the one picking her up and she sent me a picture of her with a thumb’s up so I take it as a good sign.”

“She likes you. And even more, she likes you for me.”

“Glad to hear it,” he says in a low voice.

In the background I hear a phone ringing and Cash lets out a soft curse. “Babe, I have to get this call. Are you going to be okay? Need me to juggle things and come there?”

I love that he offered to be here with me. He did last night, too. As did Trotter, but Cash’s offer means more.

“I appreciate the offer, I really do, but I’ll be home soon.”

“Text or call when you need to talk.”

“I will.”

We say our goodbyes so he can take his work call and I make my way to the wine cellar, pulling out three bottles rather than two. One for now because I have a feeling I’ll need to be liquored up for whatever this evening holds.

Chapter Twenty

CASH

I feel it in my gut. Something is off. Really off.

I can't put my finger on it, but I wouldn't be one bit surprised if this dinner with this Alastair guy is a set-up. Celeste knows Hadley and I are dating and has voiced her displeasure about it many times. I'm beneath Hadley, which I don't argue with, and I don't deserve her. I argue that one because I have self-esteem and recognize my worth.

Celeste is one of those people who has to be in control at all times.

I feel for her. Cancer is awful and I wouldn't wish it upon anyone, but it's weird to me that she's more concerned about a dinner with some guy than about being diagnosed with cancer.

Maybe it's her coping mechanism, which is very likely, but I can't stop the churning in my gut that tells me it's something else.

And why can't Hadley reach Robert? They've gotten much closer since she bailed them out of jail in Nashville, talking often and figuring out what their father/daughter relationship looks like.

Things with her dad are a work in progress, but they're at a place together where I can't believe her dad wouldn't have told her he plans to ask for a divorce from her mother.

He's been opening up a lot more with her and in return she's been doing the same.

Robert and I have even had conversations when she's on FaceTime with him and I'm around. As much as I don't want to admit it, I like the guy.

A few weeks ago, he admitted that he was jealous of the relationship Hadley and I have. The obvious love we have for each other, even though we haven't said the words to each other yet. Robert told us he wanted things to be different between him and Celeste and was working on getting their marriage back on the right track.

That's why it's so hard for me to believe he wouldn't have told Hadley if he was planning to ask for a divorce.

The fact that he's in London right now instead of in Chicago when his wife was getting the report back to find out if she had cancer irks me, as well. He wouldn't be there if he knew that was going on. At least, I don't think he would.

The man has faults, as we all do, but I don't see him bailing on his wife during a time like this.

Something is up.

And I intend to find out what it is.

Chapter Twenty-One

HADLEY

“Hadley, you need to get dressed. Alastair will be here shortly.”

“I am dressed,” I tell her, looking down at myself. I’m in black pants, a white silky shirt, and stilettos. I’m sure she doesn’t approve of the leopard print on my shoes, but I love them.

“You look like the help.”

I smirk, putting the finishing touches on our dinner. “Isn’t that kind of what I am? I’m answering the door and cooking for your dinner.”

She told me she couldn’t find someone to fill in for Georgina, but I have doubts she even tried.

“Don’t be a smart ass. It’s beneath you. Go and change quickly.”

I roll my eyes, something she’s seen me do a lot of today, and untie my apron, hanging it on the back of the pantry door.

She’s wearing a sleeveless bright blue corset dress and silver stilettos. Half of her breasts are spilling over the top of

the dress and her hair and makeup are done up perfectly. Her hair is in a fancy chignon and eye makeup smoky and sultry. A little over the top for a dinner at home, but I'm not about to begin that conversation with her.

"Fine. I'll change into the tiny dress you laid out for me so I can look the part for whatever this dinner is for. It would be nice if I had a few more details but I'm sure you wouldn't give them to me even if I asked."

"Go change before he gets here. And you need more highlighter. Maybe a swipe of bronzer. Another spritz of perfume, too."

"Geez, Mom. It's not a date."

"It's an important evening, Hadley. Don't screw this up."

Up in my old bedroom, I change into the dress she laid out for me. I feel ridiculous but admit I look pretty great in it. I snap a picture of myself in the full-length mirror and send it to Cash.

Cash: You're killing me. Why are you wearing the sexiest dress on the planet right now? I want to peel it off you inch by inch.

Me: My mother. Long story. You should see what she's wearing.

Cash: Who is this guy and why are you so dressed up?

Me: No clue on both accounts. I'm confused but going along with it because it seems to be making her happy and I think this is her way of coping with her news today.

Cash: Weird way to me, but I'm not her.

Me: Thank goodness for that. I miss you so much.

Cash: I miss you, too.

Me: How was Brooklyn?

Cash: Great. She's coming with me to Mom's for dinner. Mom's making carbonara because I'm obviously her favorite.

I snort.

All her kids are her favorite.

Me: Obviously. I wish I was there with you two.

Cash: Me, too.

Mom calls for me from downstairs and I groan.

Me: I'm being beckoned. I'll text you later.

Cash: Enjoy your evening if you can, and, Hadley?

Me: Yes?

Cash: That dress is coming home with you. And the next time you wear it won't be for another guy and my hands will be the one taking it off.

Me: That's a fun promise.

Cash: xoxo

Me: xoxo

I want so badly to tell him I love him but I haven't found the courage to yet. Soon, though. I don't know how much longer I can hold off letting him know my true feelings for him.

On the flight here, I had a lot of time to think about, well, everything. Including what's holding me back from telling him. I came to the conclusion that he's the first man I've ever been in love with and therefore I'm absolutely terrified. Not just of saying the words, but of what they mean. He has the

power to break my heart in a way that it's never been broken before and I don't know what to do with that.

I loved Trotter, but never the way I love Cash. We were friends, and a few times friends with benefits, but beyond that, we know when we tell each other I love you that it doesn't mean we're in love.

Everything with Cash is different but is it too soon to be throwing the L word out there? And what if he isn't there yet and doesn't say it back?

I think I would want to crawl in a hole and die. For real. How embarrassing!

He told me about his past and that he almost proposed to a woman so I assume he's said the words to another woman before.

The obnoxious doorbell chimes so I take another look in the mirror, rubbing a finger around the edge of my lips to clean up my lipstick a bit then make my way back downstairs.

"I'll get it," I tell Mom.

She nods, sitting primly in a chair in the sitting room as if she expected nothing less than me to open the door for whoever this Alastair person is.

My stomach drops as soon as I see the man on the other side of the door.

Holding a bouquet of my favorite flower: purple tulips.

"Hello, I'm Hadley," I introduce myself, years of training overcoming my nerves and bad feeling.

"Alastair," he replies, leaning in to kiss both my cheeks.

I've grown up with this. Greeting new people with cheek kisses. It doesn't change the fact that it makes me want to crawl out of my skin.

“Pleasure to meet you, Hadley.”

“And you,” I reply, moving to the side to let him through the door.

He hands me the tulips. “I brought these for you.”

“Thank you. They're beautiful.”

“As are you.”

With his back turned to me, I'm afforded the opportunity to pull a face at him. My mother catches it but Alastair doesn't.

“Celeste, looking beautiful as always. You and your daughter could be sisters.”

“Oh hush, you,” my mom gushes. “Look at you, handsome as ever. Your suit is to die for. Is it new?”

He nods, leaning down to kiss her cheek, placing a hand on her upper arm. Mom closes her eyes briefly at his touch and I pull a face. “Just picked it up yesterday.”

“Custom, of course,” Mom says rather than asks.

“Is there any other way?”

“Not for anyone who wants to prove himself in this world. Buying a suit off the rack is tacky.”

He laughs, a sickening wheeze that sounds incredibly fake.

“So true.”

I'm very close to vomiting.

“I’m just going to put these in some water,” I announce, fleeing the room.

I take my time “finding” a vase, deciding to chug down a glass of wine while I’m searching high and low for a vase that I just can’t seem to locate. Strange how that happened. The vases have been in the same place my entire life and suddenly I just can’t seem to locate them.

Maybe it’s childish to hide away in the kitchen pretending I can’t find a vase, and unfortunately my moment of privacy is short lived when Alastair walks in.

“Need help?”

I spin around from my place in front of the open cupboard. “Just choosing the right one.”

He reaches above me, his spicy scent overwhelming me. Did he use the entire bottle of cologne?

“What about this one?” he says, handing a crystal vase to me.

“That’ll work great. Thanks.”

“Any time.”

I busy myself arranging the tulips in the vase and filling it with water.

“Your mom tells me you made the dinner for tonight?”

“Mm hmm,” I reply, not facing him.

“You enjoy cooking?”

I turn and look at him over my shoulder. “Very much. I own a diner and even though we have someone who does the cooking, I help when I can and I also love to bake.”

He grins, and I want to squirm. “What do you bake?”

“Anything. Do you want a glass of wine?”

“That would be great.”

I pour each of us a glass and another for my mother.
“Should we join Mom?”

“So soon?”

“Yes.”

I don't wait to see if he follows, I can feel him practically breathing down my back.

He places a hand on my lower back and I discreetly move out of his reach, picking up my pace to get back to my mother to dump the wine right in her lap for putting me in this position tonight.

“Wine?” I ask her, handing her the glass along with a glare.

She smiles brightly, knowing exactly what she's doing.

“Sure, sweetie, thank you. Did you find a vase?”

“I helped,” Alastair announces as if he just accomplished something monumental rather than simply handed me a vase.

“Oh, that's so sweet of you. You're such a gentleman, Alastair. Tell me, how is work?”

He adjusts his tie and takes a seat in the chair across from Mom. “Great. I had a productive day.”

“That means he made lots of money,” Mom clarifies, looking at me.

Alastair chuckles. “That's part of it, yes.”

The rest of the evening goes as awkward as it began.

Only it gets worse.

Much, much worse.

Mom continues to talk up Alastair as if he was the first man to discover chocolate. And Alastair continues to inch closer and closer, praising me for how amazing the dinner is and how the dress I'm wearing is just made for me.

He touches me far more than what's appropriate or wanted.

Mom bats her eyes at him in a flirtatious move that has me wrinkling my nose.

When I offer the cheesecake I made for dessert, my mother presses a hand to her stomach and announces she wouldn't dream of eating something so fattening.

"With your figure? You can indulge a little, Celeste."

"Oh, maybe one bite, then," she coos. "It's been so long since I've had sugar, I don't know how my body will react."

Alastair's eyes focus on her breasts and he says, "I'm sure your *body* will react just fine to a little sugar."

Gross.

I, on the other hand, am not afraid of what a little sugar will do to me and eat two slices.

When it's time to say good night, I breathe a sigh of relief until...

"What do you say, Hadley?"

"Hmm?" I ask, picking up the plates from the table to bring them to the kitchen.

"I asked if you'd like to go dancing."

"Oh, what a great idea! Sounds fun!" Mom exclaims.

“Why don’t you go on, then, Mom? I need to talk to Brooklyn anyway.”

Alastair fumbles but recovers quickly, agreeing to take my mom dancing. She protests, but only for a moment. She’s staring up at Alastair with stars in her eyes and her chest pushed out.

“It was nice to meet you,” I say to Alastair.

Mom’s eyes widen and she grabs my arm in a firm grip. “Are you sure you can’t join us? Brooklyn will understand, sweetie.”

“We can wait for a bit so you can talk with her first,” Alastair suggests.

“What a wonderful idea! Go along. Call Brooklyn and we’ll wait. Ten minutes?”

“No, Mom, I...”

“Hush. I need to go out dancing. This sounds like the perfect way to clear my head. You know, from everything that’s going on.”

Her meaningful look is only a guilt trip and I hate myself a little when I cave.

“Fine,” I sigh. “I’ll be back.”

“This was such a wonderful idea!” Mom cries out, shimmying in her place by the high-top table.

It actually wasn’t. It was a terrible idea. Alastair keeps asking if I’ll dance with him, my mom continues to push us together while flirting shamelessly with Alastair and any other

man who approaches her, and I just want to go home. The music is too loud, there are too many bodies around me, and my feet are killing me from these stupid shoes.

“Just one dance,” Alastair begs.

I glance at Mom who motions with her head to join him.

Two can play this game.

“Why don’t you two go ahead?”

Alastair blinks and clears his expression. “You’re next,” he tells me then takes my mom’s hand and leads her to the dance floor.

I watch Mom and Alastair dance through one song, then another, and another when it turns slow and sultry. I shake my head when I see Alastair’s eyes once again focusing on Mom’s cleavage and take that as my cue to leave.

By the way they’re looking at each other, their bodies fused together and his hands on my mom’s ass, I don’t think I’ll be missed.

It makes me wonder how upset Mom really is about Dad asking for a divorce. Though, to be fair, she’s never been shy about the fact that she sleeps with other men.

I open my Uber app and wait for a few minutes for my request to go through. When the car is only a minute away, I make my exit, throwing my coat on and practically skipping toward the door. Suddenly my feet don’t hurt and I have a renewed energy.

I confirm the Uber driver’s name and hop in the back and sigh in relief.

“Long night?”

“You have no idea,” I grumble.

She chuckles. “Sounds like there’s a story there.”

“It’s too long to get into.”

“One of those, huh?”

“Do you get along with your mother?” I ask out of nowhere.

To her credit, she doesn’t seem confused by my sudden change of topic. “For the most part, yes. We’re a lot alike which means we push each other’s buttons pretty often.”

I laugh. “Yeah, I can’t relate to that at all. We’re basically opposites and have nothing in common.”

“That’s too bad. So you don’t get along then?”

“Not really, no. Though, I can’t say one way or another really because we don’t have much of a relationship.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Been this way my entire life, so I should be used to it.”

“What about your dad?” she asks, looking at me in the rearview mirror.

“Up until a few months ago, we rarely spoke but now we talk almost every day.”

She nods, turning left at a green light. “That’s good.”

“Yeah,” I agree.

We fall into silence and I grab my phone, texting Cash to let him know I’m on my way back to my parents’ house.

Cash: *All danced out?*

Me: *I never danced but I’m still danced out.*

Cash: *Sounds like you needed a better dance partner.*

Cash: *I'm talking about me, in case you didn't catch that.*

I laugh.

Me: *Yeah, I got it. You're right, though. That was terrible.*

Cash: *Are you okay?*

Me: *Yeah. I'm just ready to come home.*

Cash: *I'm ready for you to come home, too. Good news is, your daughter turned out to be a great sidekick while I was at the supplier and Costco and loves Mom's carbonara. Trotter and Logan found out what Mom was serving and joined us. Then they freaked out and begged Mom for the recipe to put it on the menu.*

Me: *I can't believe I'm here and missed all the fun. Trotter's hilarious to watch eat pasta, isn't he?*

Cash: *It's like he's been starved all day.*

Me: *I know. He shovels it in like it's going to run away from him if he isn't an inch away from the plate.*

Cash: *Mom loved it. Nothing outside of her family makes her happier than people enjoying her food.*

Me: *Brooklyn okay?*

Cash: *She's great. Staying at Trotter's tonight and I'll pick her up from school tomorrow to take her to the game.*

Me: *Sounds good.*

Cash: *You coming home tomorrow?*

Me: *I hope so. I want to talk to Mom's doctor. And try to get ahold of Dad, too.*

Cash: *About that...*

Cash: Trotter texted him today, said you needed to talk to him and he replied he hadn't heard from you in days.

Me: What? That's not true. I've been trying to reach him and haven't heard back.

Cash: That's what Trotter told him. I don't know what's going on. You didn't accidentally block him, did you?

Me: No. And if I did, wouldn't it be him not able to reach me? I'm so confused.

Cash: I'll figure it out, okay? He mentioned his phone was acting up in London and that his assistant had to take it somewhere to get looked at. Maybe that's the problem. Try not to worry about that on top of everything else.

Me: I'll try. What a mess.

Cash: I know it feels that way now but remember I'm here for you. So are Brooklyn, Trotter, Logan, and the rest of my family. We'll be alongside you to help you through it. And you'll feel better after you get more details from your mom's doctor, too.

Me: That's what is bothering me almost more than the divorce. It's not like I've had illusions that they had a great marriage or anything.

"We're here," the driver tells me.

"Oh! Sorry!"

I shoot off a quick text to Cash letting him know that we'll talk later since I just got to Mom's house.

"It's okay. Can you type in the code to get through the gate?"

"Yup. Sorry about that – I was distracted."

I roll down the window and punch in the code and the gate opens up. She drives through and winds around the long driveway.

“Texting your man?”

“How could you tell?”

“The smile on your face. The way your body relaxed when you started talking to him. He’s the one, huh?”

I nod. “I think so. I hope so, anyway.”

“New love,” she coos, pulling to a stop by the front door. “You going to be okay?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, honey. Have a good rest of your night.”

“I’m going to take a long bath and then go to bed.”

“Sounds perfect.”

I add her tip to the app and climb out, using the code to get into the front door and shutting the door behind me before setting the alarm.

After a bath with lavender bath salts, I climb into bed.

I try one more time to call my dad but the call doesn’t go through so I try to text him.

When it goes unanswered, I put my phone on the charger and try to get some sleep.

The next morning, I’m woken by a text from Brooklyn, telling me good morning and that she’ll call me when she’s on the road to the game with Cash.

I’m anxious for my day to start so I can get back home but when I go to the kitchen, all thoughts of a productive day

escape me.

Alastair stands in the kitchen in nothing but boxer briefs, my mother in a satin robe and what can only be described as sex hair, and my father with his arms crossed standing in front of them.

Chapter Twenty-Two

CASH

I haven't been able to reach Hadley all day.

My texts go unread.

My calls go unanswered.

Trotter can't get ahold of her, either.

The only reason I'm not completely freaking out is because Robert texted Trotter around noon and said he'd explain everything soon and not to worry.

Right.

Don't worry that I can't reach the woman I'm in love with and have no idea where she is or if she's okay?

I put on a happy face when I pull up to the school to pick up Brooklyn for the game. She bounces toward my pickup wearing Weston's jersey and face paint.

"Hey there."

"Hi!"

"We've gotta get Cody from the middle school. I packed some drinks and a few snacks but figured we'd grab

something for dinner when we get closer to the stadium.”

“Perfect. When we went to the game a few nights ago, we went to this burger place and it was really good. Cody ate two giant cheeseburgers.”

“I know the place. You saying you want to go there again?”

“I wouldn’t object to it,” she says cheekily.

“Then that’s where we’ll go. How was school?”

“Great. We had a pep assembly to get everyone pumped up for the game and all my classes were basically just us talking and not doing much because no one could focus on school work.”

“Sounds like a good day.”

“Definitely,” she agrees.

We pull into the middle school pickup line to get Cody and he rushes over, climbs into the back seat of my truck, and drops his backpack on the floor behind my seat.

“Hey. You brought snacks, right?”

“Hi, Cody. Nice to see you. I had a good day, how was yours?”

He’s already ripping open a Rice Krispies treat package he found in the canvas grocery bag I stashed back there and he mumbles around a bite of the gooey treat, “Sorry. I’m starved. Lunch sucked today.”

“Can you pass me one of those?” Brooklyn asks and for some reason it warms my heart that she feels comfortable enough around me to ask for food. A lot of teenage girls are

nervous to eat around people they don't know well, but she's really blossomed the last few weeks especially.

At my mom's last night, she didn't seem nervous at all. Of course, Cody being there helped, and when her dad showed up, that helped also, but I have a feeling even without them there, she would have been comfortable.

She seems to adore my mother, and the feeling is mutual. They got into a deep conversation about a specific brand of makeup, if makeup can be deep. I guess to women it can. Corbin Rae showed up, too, and the conversation continued. Corbin and Brooklyn broke off from the group, huddling close and talking in a hushed tone.

When I asked Corbin what it was about she just smiled and shook her head.

I have a feeling it had something to do with boys. Weston, in particular.

Corbin seems to be adopting Brooklyn as her niece already. It makes me a little worried. If things don't work out between Hadley and me – which I'll be devastated if they don't – it's not just Hadley's and my heart that will be at stake here. My family has grown to love the two of them.

“Me, too.”

Cody hands both of us a Rice Krispies treat and we tear into them.

The one-and-a-half-hour drive goes by quickly, conversation revolving around school and the upcoming game. I notice Brooklyn keeps checking her phone and I assure her that her mom is okay and will call as soon as she can.

During halftime, my phone rings and I stand from my seat, climbing the stairs two at a time and answering along the way.

“Hadley, thank God.”

“I know. I’m so sorry. If I thought yesterday was bad, that was nothing in comparison to today. Do you have time to talk?”

“Yeah. The kids are sitting in the student section but I have eyes on them. It’s halftime time right now so if I see them moving from their seats to get a drink or something, I’ll have to call you back.”

“Thank you for watching over my girl,” she says in a contented voice. “It means so much to me.”

“It’s no trouble at all. I like being around her, you know that.”

“Yeah. Still...”

“Hadley, are you okay?”

“I will be. Um, Dad’s going to be staying with me for a few days.”

“Pardon?”

“Yeah. Let’s just say Mom moved to a whole different level of devious.”

“Oh, no.”

“The only thing she didn’t lie about was that my parents are getting a divorce. Of course, she lied at the time because my dad just asked my mom for it today.”

“Uh oh.”

“It’s been... interesting to say the least.”

“Sounds like it.”

“Are you able to catch Brooklyn’s eye? I wouldn’t mind talking to her quickly.”

“Sure. Hang on.”

I stick two fingers in my mouth and let out a loud whistle. Cody immediately turns his head, recognizing the sound.

I gesture to him to get Brooklyn and he nods, moving through the crowd to get to her. He points at me and I lift my phone in the air.

She crawls over other students to get to the aisle.

“She’s coming. You’re sure you’re okay?”

“I’ll be home by the time you get there so yes, I’m okay.”

“Good. See you soon, then?”

“Yeah.”

“Here’s Brooklyn.” I hand the phone to her and say, “It’s your mom.”

I see relief wash over her face and she grabs the phone from my hand. “Mom? Where have you been?”

She listens intently, plugging one ear so she can hear better when the crowd starts to get loud from the players entering the stadium again.

Cody’s watching us rather than the field and I give him the thumb’s up, hoping he understands all is good and he doesn’t need to worry.

“You’re home?” Brooklyn asks and she nods. “Oh, okay. But you’ll be there when we get home?”

I place a hand on her shoulder and give her a squeeze and she tucks in close to me. “Good. I miss you, too.” There’s a

pause then, “Yeah, it’s a good game. We’re up by seven now.”
Another pause. “Okay, I will. Love you, too, Mom.”

She hangs up and hands the phone back to me.

“Good to hear her voice?”

“Definitely.”

“I agree.”

“Thanks, Cash,” she says, wrapping her little arms around me and giving me a tight hug.

“You’re welcome, honey.” I kiss the top of her head.
“Game’s about to start back up. You need anything to eat or drink while you’re up?”

She shakes her head. “I still have some Coke left and Cody got me a candy bar earlier.”

“Oh, to be young again. Eating candy bars and drinking caffeine this late?”

She laughs and shoves me. “You’re so old.”

I place a hand on my chest and stagger backward. “You wound me.”

With a grin she returns to her seat by her friends. I watch as Cody and her make eye contact, nodding at each other in some unspoken code.

It’s so easy for me to picture her as a permanent part of our family. She’s fitting right in, just like Hadley has. And, because they’ve pushed their way in and none of us mind, so have Trotter and Logan.

The Volunteers game they got tickets for is next weekend and as much as I’m looking forward to it, I don’t know what’s

going to happen with Hadley and her dad now staying with her.

I try to focus on the game, but it's impossible. When we get to the last minute and the score is tied, I pray for a touchdown so we don't go into overtime. Everyone in the crowd is cheering loudly on pins and needles as we watch the final seconds tick off the clock.

And somehow, with only thirteen seconds left in the game, Red Oak scores.

Thank goodness.

I can't decide if I'm happier the game is over or if we won the game. It's honestly a toss-up.

I laugh as most of the high school students storm the field, Hadley finding Weston immediately. My eyes narrow when he lifts her off the ground and spins her around before kissing her. A little too hard for my liking.

They talk for a few minutes and then she gives him another kiss and heads my way.

"They're so gross," Cody announces to me.

I laugh and rub his head.

"Ready?" Brooklyn asks when she steps up to us.

"Yup. You?"

"Yeah. I told Weston I needed to get home because Mom was there and he said he'd call me when the bus got back to town. They aren't allowed to have their phones with them on the bus."

"Sounds good. Let's roll out, then."

By the time we make it through traffic and get back to Red Oak, it's a little after ten. I drop off Cody first then drive to Hadley's.

The door opens when we pull into the driveway, Hadley stepping out onto the porch.

Brooklyn rushes to her, hugging her tightly before going inside, announcing she has to pee and also wants to see her grandpa.

"Hey, you."

"Hi. They won?"

"Yeah. At the last minute."

"Good game then."

"I was pretty distracted, wanting to get to you, but yes, it was."

"Dad's inside."

"Figured that much already when you told me he was going to be staying with you and that Brooklyn wanted to see him. What happened?"

"Mom. That's what happened. Lied about everything. She'd been having an affair with Alastair and he gave her an ultimatum. Him or dad. She decided to try and set the two of us up and for some strange reason, he was on board with the idea. Guess he figured that'd still get him her. I don't know."

"Hate to even ask this, but the cancer?"

"All a lie. Can you believe that? There are people actually suffering from cancer, *dying* from cancer and people burying their loved ones and she uses it as a reason for me to get home. I couldn't believe it when she finally admitted it. Even for her,

that's pretty bad. All because she's sleeping with a man who could be her son."

"What the fuck?"

"I know. It's crazy. Like I'll be seeking therapy after today but it's over. Dad is here for a few days but the house has been in his family for years so it's his and he's kicking her out. A guy from his security team is watching the house to make sure she doesn't do something stupid. There was a lot of screaming and yelling on her part."

"I bet. Is he okay?"

She shrugs her shoulders. "I think so. He's obviously upset but he was level headed the entire day. Never once raised his voice until he realized all that she'd put me through just to get what she wanted. It's not as if their marriage was based on love, but I always thought they at least cared for one another. When they married, she signed a prenup because even though her family had money, his had more and that's just what they did. That's what she's mainly mad about. Money. It always comes down to money."

I have no idea what to say to that. I've never had the kind of money she grew up with and can't imagine what it's like to have a parent so obviously choose that over me.

Rather than say something that won't help the situation, I do the next best thing.

"Come here." I wrap my arms around her and hug her tightly. She cries into my shoulder for a few minutes.

"Thank you. I needed that."

"I wish I'd have been there with you today."

“Me, too,” she admits. “It probably would have made things worse but I wouldn’t have cared. She knows you and I are together and she thought she could manipulate me into being her little puppet so she could keep her boy toy around.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but your mom sounds like a psychopath.”

She bursts out laughing. “Not sure how else I would take it but I agree with you. She’s gone off the deep end big time.”

“You gonna be okay?”

She wraps her arms around me tightly and cranes her neck to look up at me. “I have Brooklyn and you. So yup. I’ll be okay.”

My arms convulse around her. “You do have me.”

“I know.”

I take a deep breath and tell her, “There’s something I’ve been wanting to tell you for a while and maybe it’s shit timing but I need to tell you.”

Her face grows weary. “What is it?”

“I love you. In love with you,” I correct.

Before I know what’s happening, she’s jumping into my arms and kissing me. “I love you, too. I was so nervous to tell you. You’re the first man I’ve ever loved.”

“And the last.”

She nods, kissing me again.

Before we get too carried away, I remind her, “Baby, your dad’s inside and is probably wondering what’s taking you so long.”

“He’ll deal with it.”

God help me, I don't care what the guy thinks. I'm in love with his daughter and plan to do right by her for as long as she'll have me. I'm going to stand out here on the porch and kiss her as long as I want.

Minutes later, the porch light flickers on and off.

"Uh oh. We've been caught."

We both laugh and untangle from each other, wiping our mouths and trying to look presentable before going inside to greet her dad.

"You done attacking my daughter's mouth so we can be properly introduced in person?"

"Yes, sir. I'm Cash," I say to Robert.

"Robert. Heard a lot about you."

"Same."

"Probably not as much good stuff but I plan to change that."

I nod. "Sounds like you've had a rough day?"

"It's been a day, that's for sure. Brooklyn's already asleep. Or, she's in bed, anyway. Said something about waiting up to talk to Weston."

"He played a helluva game tonight. You a football fan?"

He shifts his head side to side. "Sometimes. It's not how I spend my entire weekend, but I enjoy it. Care for a beer? I was just about to get another from the fridge."

"I'd love one."

Over a few beers, we talk about a little of everything. We avoid the topic of Celeste and focus on other things. Happier,

lighter topics. He listens as I explain how we started up Lake Electrical and what it was like growing up here in Red Oak.

“You’re a good man, Cash. Thank you for taking care of my girls.”

“Easy to take care of, sir.”

“Call me Robert.”

And that’s how I got the approval from Hadley’s father.

Chapter Twenty-Three

HADLEY

Cash crooks a finger at me in a come-hither motion that has my entire body tingling. Even from fifteen feet away, I can see the heat in his eyes. From his outside speaker, “She Will Be Loved” by Maroon 5 begins to play. I know exactly what he’s doing and I’m so here for it. I immediately understand why he requested I wear this specific clothing tonight.

One night when we were lying in bed, wrapped in each other’s arms, I shared some of my fantasies with him. Since that night, he’s showed me that my fantasies were nothing like the reality.

Everything Cash does, he does sexy. The way he walks, his accent, the way he is with Brooklyn and Cody. How he tries so hard to cuddle with Kevin after swearing he wasn’t a cat guy but is determined to make Kevin love him.

But right now, crooking a finger and giving me another one of my fantasies? Nothing could be sexier. I’ve watched the MTV Movie Awards best kiss video from 2005 more times than I care to admit, and never imagined it would happen for me one day. With a man I’m desperately in love with.

I grin and shrug off my leather bomber jacket and we walk toward each other with purpose. My entire body is a live wire. Two more steps and I jump into his arms. His hand curves around the back of my head and I drop my face to his in a heated, bruising kiss.

His fingers flex against the flesh of my butt under the skirt of my dress and I dig the tips of my fingers into his scalp. His hair is silky against my skin and I can't get enough of it. Of him.

I'm pressed up against his strong body, one leg wrapped around his hip, his fingers digging into my butt, our tongues tangled together in the hottest kiss I've ever received, and that includes all the extremely hot kisses we've shared together.

"Missed you," he murmurs.

"I missed you, too."

"Been too long."

"Definitely."

My dad's stay that was only supposed to be a few days turned into a week partly because Mom was dragging her feet and throwing one fit after another, and partly because Dad realized he liked it here in Red Oak. He headed home to Chicago yesterday morning, though. While he was here, he spent time working remotely but also was on the phone for over an hour with his lawyer the day after we got to Red Oak. And several other times.

Mom tried to call me but I let it go to voice mail.

To my surprise, she actually left a message. She was crying and demanded I speak with my father and get him to change his mind. I would have considered it for a second but then she added something about how it will look to their circle

of friends and brought up the “ridiculous prenup” that won’t hold up in court.

That’s when I knew it was still all about the money and deleted the message. I considered blocking her number, but that felt a little extreme. Even though she somehow managed to convince his assistant – who is a male and likely sleeping with my mother as well – to swipe Dad’s phone and block my number. Which is why my calls weren’t going through. Explains the whole situation where he had to take Dad’s phone to get it looked at.

Shortly after Dad left for Chicago, the guys headed out for the Volunteers’ game this morning. They stayed in a hotel last night so they could tailgate before the game. From the numerous pictures Cash sent throughout the day, they had a great time. Especially since the Volunteers won. Cody was beyond excited to be there, his smile a permanent fixture on his face the entire time.

I was at the diner when the guys rolled back into town, filling in for a server who called in sick, and came straight to Cash’s when I was finished working. He had texted me to come to the backyard when I got here and damn, I’m so glad I did.

“Cash.”

“Hmm?”

He’s sucking on the skin where my shoulder and neck meet and suddenly I have no idea what I was going to say.

“Cash.”

“Right here, baby.”

“Glaze me like a doughnut.”

Wait. What did I just say?

Cash's head jerks back and he looks appropriately confused. Humored, but confused.

“What was that?” he asks with a sparkle in his eyes.

I drop my face to his shoulder before sliding down his body so my feet are firmly back on the ground. Where they belong after that line.

I cover my face with my hands. “I have no idea why I said that. I heard it on TikTok. This super funny guy I watch. Someone said it to him in his comments and it stuck with me I guess.”

“*Glaze* me like a *doughnut*? Seriously?”

I nod, still covering my face. “I know. It's so bad. And it wasn't even the worst one!”

“I'm honestly at a loss for words right now.”

“Hey, I could have said crack me open like a new book. Or split me in half like a pistachio.”

“I'm not sure glaze you like a doughnut is better.”

“I ruined the mood, didn't I?”

He curves a hand around the back of my neck and tilts my head back so my eyes meet his. “Impossible. This was just a detour, and now I'm wondering what it would be like to cover you in frosting and lick it off. So really, it was a quite pleasant detour.”

My knees buckle at the thought of him doing just that.

I lick my lips. “Maybe I want to lick it off you?”

Cash shakes his head. “Me first.”

He picks me up bridal style, like he's carrying me over the threshold. One of my legs kicks up and I let out a soft cry before circling my arms around his neck.

“Well, hello there.”

“Hi.”

“What's your plan?” I ask, even though I know what his plan is.

A night full of him and me and sex and no distractions. No parents or ex-husbands or siblings or daughters, who isn't a distraction but does prevent us from having all the sex.

“Little of this and little of that.”

“There's nothing little about you.”

“Now that's a good line.”

“Why thank you. Came up with it all on my own. No help from TikTok.”

He's moving through the house as if I weigh nothing in his arms and this might make me sound like I'm anti-feminist, but it makes me feel girly and little and like he can take care of me. I like it.

We make it to the kitchen and he places me down on the counter, spreads my legs apart, and steps between them.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I reply.

“And you trust me?”

“You know I do.”

“Good. Because you're about to be at my mercy.”

Out of his back pocket, he pulls a long bright red piece of silky material and winks as he pulls off my black tank top. With my breasts bared to him, I arch my back and he dives in, working at the button and zipper of my jeans.

I place my hands on the counter and lift up and he tugs them down my legs. I toe off my booties at the same time, his mouth never leaving my nipple.

Multitasking at its finest.

Now only in my thong, he traps my hands behind me, binding them together at my wrists with the silk ribbon.

“I’ve had a taste for you and I’m about to get my fill,” he growls.

“Oh my hell,” I mumble, falling back on my forearms. My feet are propped on his shoulders and his shoulders spread my thighs apart to the point they’re burning.

Over the thin material of my thong, he sucks hard before moving it to the side and plunging two fingers inside of me.

He curls his fingers and twists them together all the while his mouth is continuing its assault on me.

Suddenly I feel cool air and I’m being lifted, turned around, and planted with my cheek against the counter, my ass in the air, and my underwear tugged down my legs.

“Cash,” I whisper.

“I’ve been dreaming of this for weeks, Hadley. If you’re ever uncomfortable and don’t want this, you tell me.”

“What are you...?”

I’m cut off by the feel of something pressing against the tightness between my butt cheeks.

“Have you ever tried this?”

“Are we... are we doing anal?”

“Doing anal?” he asks, chuckling. “No, not tonight, sweetheart. We’re going to play, though.”

I breathe out a sigh of relief then tense up again. “What do you mean by play?” I ask, trying to look at him over my shoulder.

“Trust me.”

“I don’t know about this.”

Behind me, he squirts something into his hand and rubs it around my center then presses an object against my tight hole. I squirm beneath him but then he drops to his knees, using his tongue between my legs as he gently presses the unseen – to me, anyway – object slowly inside of me. I stretch around it, wincing at the pleasure pain it brings me, and try to stay relaxed.

I’ve read enough romance books to know that relaxing is key.

Hell, even on an incredibly drunken night, Trotter and I talked about his first time with a man and I’ll never forget his “words of wisdom” regarding the subject.

Shaking my head to clear that memory, I shift my feet, spreading myself open farther for him.

“Good girl,” he mutters against me.

With one hand holding my hips still, his other continues to work at pushing the toy in slowly.

He stands behind me, pressing his erection against my ass and grinds against me.

“I love seeing you like this,” he says lowly in my ear.

I shiver at the feel of his breath.

“Is it hurting?”

“A little,” I admit, wiggling around a bit, “but it’s a good hurt.”

“That’s good. If it gets too much, you need to tell me, okay?”

I hear the sound of his zipper and then his jeans dropping to the floor.

With one hand on my lower back, he rubs his erection against my center.

“Are you ready?”

Am I ready? I have no idea. The plug is still inside me and he’s about to enter me, too.

“Yes.” I nod, my cheek rubbing against the countertop.

“I’ll go slow,” he promises.

With gentleness I didn’t know he had with sex, he eases inside, slowly filling me up.

He groans at the tightness and I make a low noise from the back of my throat.

“Holy shit. It’s always amazing with you but this is...”

“Out of this world,” I answer for him.

“Yeah. Can I move? I need to move, Had.”

“Yes, please. Slow but I need more of you.”

Inch by inch he slides in, filling me up more than ever before. With the angle and the plug still inside me, my eyes roll to the back of my head and sweat beads on my forehead.

“Oh my gosh,” I moan.

“Good?” he grunts.

“So good. Faster.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes, Cash. I need you to move faster and fuck me already!”

I have no idea where the words come from, but it seems to trigger something in him. He picks up the pace, pounding against me while holding my hands at the base of my back and his other hand keeping the plug in place.

The mix of our bodies slapping together and our heavy pants is so erotic.

Cash releases my hands and slips a hand around to rub his thumb against my clit.

“I’m close. So... c..c...lose.”

“Me, too,” he growls.

He comes immediately after me. Carnal shouts echo around us in his kitchen.

My body goes lax as we come down from our highs, his chest pressed against my back.

He slowly pulls out and then removes the plug.

As full as I felt moments ago, now I feel completely empty.

He unties my hands, tracing my skin with the silky ribbon before dropping it on the counter.

“That was unexpected,” I finally say when I’ve gotten my breath.

“Good or bad unexpected?”

I turn to face him, a little weak in the knees.

“Definitely good.”

He smiles my favorite smile. The one where I see a very tiny dimple pop in his left cheek.

“Want to take a bath?”

“Together?”

“Of course together.”

I bite my lower lip and nod. “Absolutely.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

CASH

“Are you sure it’s okay if Dad joins us for Thanksgiving?” Hadley asks. We’re in the kitchen, prepping the sides Mom asked us to bring for dinner and her dad is in the shower.

“Now’s not really the best time to question that,” I point out, gesturing toward the guest bathroom with my head.

“I know.” She drops her head. “But I don’t want to just assume.”

“Stop questioning it. Mom is happy to have him join the family. The more the merrier, according to her. Stone smoked a huge turkey and Mom’s roasting one. They’re excited to meet your father.”

“But...”

“Don’t even worry about the past with him, you hear me? They don’t hold it against him because what’s in the past is done. It’s how he’s moving forward that they care about.”

He’s truly become the father she never had since that day she bailed him and Celeste out of jail. He sees what he missed all those years and doesn’t take her time with him now for

granted. Robert may not have been father of the year while Hadley was growing up, but he's making up for it now.

He even purchased two pieces of land. I'm not sure what he's doing with one, but the other he's building a house on. At first Hadley objected to it, afraid he was going to build some huge. colossal home, but he swore it wasn't what he wanted. He's not even planning to live in Red Oak full time.

Robert's plans are to keep living in Chicago but have a second home here in Red Oak so he has a place to stay when he visits.

Seems a little excessive to me, but hey, he has the money and if that's what he wants, so be it.

"He really has changed, don't you think?"

I nod. "Even that day in the diner, before he got thrown in the slammer in Nashville," I smirk, "I noticed it. I could tell you got through to him that day."

"It makes me wonder if it's been there all along, but my mom was always in his ear, you know?"

I shrug. "I've thought the same."

She sighs. "You think he and Stone will get along?"

I give her a look. "Uh, yeah. Stone's a self-made man and he may not have the money your father does, but he does pretty good for himself considering he builds furniture for a living. Your dad likes that in a guy. And if they don't," I reach behind me and lift up a bottle of Jameson, "we always have this as a backup."

She laughs and shakes her head. "Always thinking."

"Don't worry, okay? Today is going to be great. We'll eat until we have to pop a button on our pants, take a nap, maybe

play some football with Cody, eat some more, and Mom will demand Christmas lists from everyone before we leave the house.”

Brooklyn comes bouncing into the kitchen, her hair in big waves and looking way too grown up for my liking in a rust-colored suede skirt and black sweater.

“Weston’s almost here, Mom.”

“Okay, honey. We want you to Leah’s by three o’clock, and no later, okay?”

“And it’s okay if Weston joins us?”

“No,” I answer for Hadley.

The girls both roll their eyes at me and Brooklyn pops up on the ball of one foot, giving me a kiss on the cheek. “We’ll be there by three. Promise. And I won’t eat too much at Weston’s because I already know Leah’s going to have enough food to feed the entire town.”

“Good plan,” Hadley agrees. “Love you, honey. Tell Weston and his family Happy Thanksgiving for us.”

The doorbell rings and she practically skips to the door.

“Hey!”

“Hi. You look... wow. You look really pretty, Brooklyn.”

I watch as her cheeks turn a little pink and raise my eyebrows when Weston catches me watching them. He was totally checking out her breasts.

Busted.

He clears his throat and says hello to us before grabbing Brooklyn’s hand and leading her to his truck.

“I don’t like this,” I mumble.

“Oh, stop it.”

“Did you see how he was looking at her?”

“What’d I miss?”

“Weston picked up Brooklyn and *stared*.” I pointedly look at Robert’s chest and back up again.

“He did *what*?” Robert roars, moving quickly to the door, as if he’s going to stop them from leaving.

“See? Your father gets it.”

The two of us watch out the front window as Weston leans across the console and gives her a quick kiss before backing out of the driveway.

“I don’t like this,” Robert grumbles. “How are you okay with this?” he demands to know. I’m not sure if his question is directed at Hadley or myself, but I simply put my hands up then point to Hadley.

I’m not going down for this one. It’s Hadley’s fault. Not mine.

“This isn’t on me. This is on your daughter. Blame her.”

“You’re supposed to stop this! She’s a child!”

“She’s fifteen, Dad. Almost sixteen, actually.”

“That means nothing. She shouldn’t be dating. And kissing. And he was looking at her,” he points to my chest, “you know.”

“Oh, how do you know? You weren’t out here.”

He tosses a thumb in my direction. “Cash told me so.”

Hadley throws her hands up in the air and marches back to the kitchen. “Y’all are ridiculous. They’re cute together.

Weston is respectful with her and she's happy. If either of you interfere with that, she won't be as happy. Do you want to be the one to make her unhappy?"

"No," we both mumble.

"I'm glad we can agree on something. Now, I need you two to get over here and help me with the dressing and cutting the vegetables for the crudité."

"Yes, ma'am," we say together.

As we're walking to the kitchen, Robert whispers to me, "When did she get so bossy?"

I shrug. "Not a clue."

"I heard that!"

"You're in trouble."

He nods and pours himself a cup of coffee before picking up a knife. He stares at it and then with a sheepish look says, "I have no idea what I'm doing with this."

Hadley laughs. "I'll show you. About time you learned to do stuff for yourself."

I watch the two out of the corner of my eye while I mix the ingredients for the dressing together. Hadley is holding the knife above Robert's hand, helping him cut carrots and celery. Encouraging him when he makes a good cut and correcting him when he holds the knife wrong.

It's such a backward scenario, the child teaching something to the parent, but neither of them seems to mind. And Robert appears to be enjoying himself.

Once my task is complete, I switch gears for the corn casserole and place both casserole dishes into the fridge until

we're ready to leave.

"I need to shower and change," Hadley announces, wiping her hands on a towel. "The veggies can go in the fridge. I think there's room."

"We're leaving in an hour? Is that right?" Robert asks.

"Yeah. I won't be long."

Much like Brooklyn did with me, she kisses him on the cheek and as she's walking past me, slaps me on the butt.

"He got a kiss and you hit me?"

She looks over her shoulder and winks.

Robert and I settle on the couch, watching the parade that always bores me to tears but he seems excited to watch it.

"You going to ask her?"

"Huh?" I tear my eyes away from watching Snoopy float over New York City.

"To marry you. Are you planning to ask her?"

I choke on absolutely nothing and he grins, patting me on the back.

"So? What's your answer?"

"Yes, I plan to. And before you say anything, I also intended to speak with you first. We might be older but I'm a man of tradition and I would never propose without your blessing."

"Well, you have it. She's happier than I've ever seen her. And trust me, I know what she went through to get here. Her mom and I didn't do much right in raising her, which means I can't take credit for how incredible she is, but I do know my daughter well enough to see the change in her. I know part of

that is moving away from Chicago but the biggest difference is you. You're good for her, and my granddaughter, too. Even Trotter and Logan have mentioned it as well. I'm not saying Trotter isn't a good dad, because he is. Of course, he didn't start off that way. He was stuck in the lifestyle for longer than Hadley was, but he learned and grew up. In a way that took me a lot longer. I'm ashamed of the way I was."

I swallow hard and open my mouth to say, what, I don't know, but he holds up a hand to stop me.

"I don't say any of this to get your pity or accolades on all the changes I've made in myself, Cash. I say it because you need to know the truth. Hadley had a silver spoon in her mouth from the moment she was born and we thought that was all she needed. Turns out, what she needed was to go out on her own and discover herself. She's the strongest woman I know. Definitely the smartest. And she's choosing you. Let that sink in, son. She chooses you. That wonderful, talented, sweet and kind woman loves you with her entire heart. Do right by her and don't take it for granted like I did."

"Sir..."

"Robert. I know I've asked you to call me Robert."

I clear my throat and lean forward so my elbows are resting on my knees. "Robert, Hadley adores you."

"Now. She didn't before."

"Well, you've put in the work and made an effort to be the father she needs in her life. But if you need reassurance about my intentions, I love your daughter with everything in me. And Brooklyn has Trotter but I figure no child suffers from having more people love her. I love her as if she's my own. I

know how incredible Hadley is and it still floors me that she did choose me. You know we met a long time ago, right?”

He nods. “She told me.”

“I’ve never gotten her out of my head. Since that night, I’ve thought about her countless times. When she walked back into my life that night at the diner, I almost fainted. No lie. I thought I’d never see her again and here she was in Red Oak. I’ve thanked God every single day for bringing her back to me, and that’s no lie, either. He worked His magic and gave me the best gift in the entire world. I’ll never, not for a single day, take her for granted. And that’s a promise.”

He slaps me on the shoulder and gives me a hardy squeeze. “That’s all I needed to hear. If you need a jeweler when you’re ready to get that ring, you let me know. I have a guy.”

I chuckle. “I’m guessing your guy is a bit out of my price range.”

He laughs, too. “Maybe, but I’ve given him enough business over the years that he can give you a good discount.”

Shaking my head, I tell him, “Appreciate the offer, but I’d rather do this one on my own. She might not get as big of a diamond as she had with Trotter, but the meaning behind it is much bigger, if you get what I mean.”

He takes a deep breath and lets it out, leaning his head back. “Thatta, boy.”

I need to take a shower, too, so I excuse myself and take a shower while Hadley’s doing her makeup.

When I climb out, she looks me up and down, focusing on my dick before spinning back to face the mirror.

“See something you like?”

“Hmm,” she hums. “I do. But I’m not sure we have time.”

“And your dad is in the living room.”

“There’s that, too.”

She turns around and watches as I put on my deodorant.

“I love you, you know.”

I grin. “I love you, too.”

“It’s funny, isn’t it?”

“What’s that?”

“The way we came together. The way we fell for each other? It seemed almost...”

“Effortless?”

Her eyes grow big. “That’s exactly what I was going to say!”

I wrap her in my arms, my naked body pressed against hers covered in a robe. “The path to get here might not have been, but loving you definitely is.”

“We’re being cheesy on Thanksgiving Day.”

“One more thing to be thankful for today. Being cheesy with the woman I love before I go and stuff my face.”

She giggles and gives me a playful slap on my bare ass.

“You’re awful hitty today.”

“Hitty isn’t a word.”

“Well, you are. Does this mean you’re ready for the whips and chains?” I tease, knowing she isn’t. And I’m not either. Tying each other up and using toys is one thing. I can’t see myself using a flogger against her skin.

“Cash!” she admonishes. “Absolutely not.”

“I’m just teasing. How much longer do you need? Want me to start loading the car after I get dressed?”

“Sure. I need ten minutes. Fifteen tops.”

“Thirty it is.”

She shoots me a mock glare before I leave her to finish getting ready.

I throw on a pair of jeans and a dark green Henley shirt, knowing already what she picked out to wear because she’s fretted about it all week. Mom always likes to get a big family picture during Thanksgiving so she can use it on her Christmas card and Hadley mentioned possibly getting one as well.

The thought of us having a family picture together makes me think I should move up the timeline on that proposal Robert was asking me about.

The ring has been hiding in my locked desk drawer at work for two weeks now but I haven’t decided the right time to give it to her. Or how. I want it to be special, but I also just want to ask her so she finally has my ring on her finger.

Quick decision made, I pop my head into the bathroom. “I forgot something at the office. I’ll grab it quick and be back in fifteen minutes.”

“We can stop along the way.”

“Wrong direction, babe. I’ll be right back.”

“Oh, okay.”

I give her a kiss and tell Robert I’ll be back soon then climb in my pickup and make the short trip to the office.

Maybe we’ll have something else to be thankful for today.

Chapter Twenty-Five

CASH

“All right, everyone, gather around the big tree. Picture time.”

A lot of the men groan but I hop up, anxious to get to this portion of the day.

Weston agreed to take our big family picture. Brooklyn argued that he needed to be in it but he told her next year, and I think we all relaxed a little when we avoided that issue. It’s not that we don’t like the guy, but being in a family picture is kind of a big deal. At least, that’s what Mom says.

She was upset for a bit, but Hadley spoke with her and whatever she said, she seemed to understand.

There are a lot more people in the picture this year. Mom insisted Dorothy, Trotter, Logan, and Robert were included and of course, Hadley and Brooklyn. Our family grew by six overnight. All because the woman of my dreams walked back into my life.

After everyone gets in their places, I hand Weston my phone to use for the picture and take my place next to Hadley. I drape an arm around her waist and tuck her in close.

Weston takes several pictures and when Mom feels like she's gotten all she needs, and then some, he lowers the phone.

“Wait a second, Weston. One more, okay?”

Everyone groans and then gasps when they see me drop to one knee. Hadley, who was looking at Brooklyn looks around to see what everyone is gasping for.

When she turns my way and sees me on one knee holding up a ring box, her hands fly up to cover her mouth and tears immediately flood her eyes.

“Cash,” she whispers softly.

“Hadley. I got onto an airplane with only half of my heart years ago. Ever since, I was always searching for something that I couldn't find with anyone else. The day you walked into the diner was the best day of my life. You were back. God sent you back to me and if you'll let me, I'll spend the rest of our lives showing you exactly how grateful I am that you're mine. I know we haven't been back together that long, but you were the one for me then and you still are. Always will be. Will you marry me, Hadley?”

She nods, tears streaming down her cheeks and smiles. “Yes. Of course I'll marry you, Cash!”

I stand up and spin her around, planting a kiss on her in front of everyone we love.

Taking her left hand, I slip the ring on her finger. She doesn't even look at it. She's watching me.

Our families erupt in cheers and congratulations, everyone pulling her away from me to give her hugs.

After about five minutes, I've had enough and yank her out of Trotter's clutches.

He laughs at me. “I wasn’t planning to keep her.”

“Good thing. You had your chance.”

I pull her around to the back of the house so I can have her alone before the family crowds around us once again.

“I love you,” she says, kissing me hard on the mouth and clinging to me like a little monkey.

“I love you, too. Do you like the ring?”

“I haven’t even looked at it yet!”

“What?”

“I got my guy. It doesn’t matter what the ring looks like.”

“While I love that answer, I still want you to like looking at the ring that’s planted on your finger for the rest of your life.”

She glances down and smiles. “It’s gorgeous. Absolutely perfect.”

I blow out a breath. I didn’t realize I was nervous about that until Robert mentioned using his guy to get a ring. I knew she probably had a diamond rock on her finger from Trotter, but I also knew that ring didn’t hold any meaning, either.

“Were you worried I wouldn’t like it?”

“A little,” I admit.

“It’s exactly what I would have chosen.”

“Yeah?”

She nods, admiring her finger. “Yes. Thank you for making loving you so effortless.”

“We’re being cheesy again.”

“Well, it is still Thanksgiving. Might as well continue it.”

“Good point. Love you, Hadley Lake.”

“Oooh.” She grins. “I like the sound of that. Hadley Lake. It sounds good, doesn’t it?”

“Damn right, it does.”

“I can’t believe you proposed to me in front of your entire family after Thanksgiving pictures.”

“Was it bad? I wanted to make it special and then your dad and I were talking while you were in the shower and I got a little anxious.”

“You were talking about this?”

“He gave me his blessing.”

“Cash... I’m going to cry again.”

“No more crying. Even happy tears.”

“I’ll do my best,” she promises. “Love you.”

“Love you. Thank you for coming back to me.”

“Best decision I ever made was to come to Red Oak.”

Epilogue

HADLEY

I stare at the bathroom counter, at the sticks lined up, all the same result.

Positive.

“Oh my gosh.”

I look again, hardly believing my eyes.

Cash and I decided to try for a baby approximately one hour after we got engaged. Our wedding was on New Year’s Day in the church Cash grew up in, with the reception at a small dining hall in Red Oak.

Neither of us wanted anything big and we also didn’t want to wait to get married.

My dad walked me down the aisle.

My mother wasn’t invited.

I’m sure she knows we got married, but according to her I chose Dad over her. We haven’t spoken in months.

For a wedding gift, Dad gave us the other piece of land he purchased. He tried to tell us he’d pay for the house as well, but Cash wouldn’t accept it. It was hard for my dad to

understand at first, but I reminded him Cash isn't with me for the money. He doesn't think of me as a rich kid with even richer parents.

We'll sell both our homes after the house is built but for now, we're living in my house. Dad is staying in Cash's while his is being built whenever he visits.

"Honey? Will you come in here?" I call to Cash who was still in bed when I came to the bathroom five minutes ago.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Just... come here."

He opens the door looking incredibly sexy with no shirt on, sleep pants, and sleepy eyes. His hair is a mess, and he yawns loudly, stretching his arms above his head.

"What's up?"

I point to the counter and all sleepiness evaporates.

"Yes?"

I nod. "Yes."

"You're pregnant?"

"I am. At least according to the five tests I peed on this morning."

"You're pregnant?" he asks again.

Biting my lip, I pick up one of the tests and show him the results. "Pregnant."

The test flies out of my hand when he picks me up and kisses me. "Oh my gosh," he mumbles. "You're pregnant?"

"Yes, Cash, I'm pregnant."

He gently sets me down on my feet and cradles my belly, dropping to the floor on his knees. “Hi, little one. I’m your daddy.”

Cash looks at me from his place on the floor with tears in his eyes. “We’re having a baby.”

“We are. You ready for this?”

“Absolutely not but yes.”

I laugh at his truthfulness. “Same.”

“Holy shit. We’re having a baby, Had.”

“We are.”

“I can’t believe it. Do you know how happy I am right now?”

“I hope really happy.”

“Unbelievably happy. I can’t wait until you start showing. You’re going to be the sexiest woman in the world with a baby bump.”

“Hardly.”

He lifts me up once again and carries me back to bed. “If you don’t believe it, I’ll just have to show you every day how sexy I think you are. Starting with right now.”

I let him show me.

And every day, or mostly every day, after.

8 months later.

“Ryker, I need a police escort and I need it right this fucking second!” Cash shouts into the phone.

“Cash, honey, we have plenty of time.”

He shoots me a look that has me pressing my lips together to keep from laughing.

“My wife is in labor, Ryker! Get your ass over here so I can get her to the hospital.”

I grab my bag, placing it on the counter, and wince when another contraction hits.

“No, they’re about four minutes apart.” He pauses. “No, I don’t see a damn head. Are you fucking kidding me right now? Get your ass over here!”

After he listens a few more seconds, he growls, “This isn’t funny, asshole!” And hangs up the phone.

“You know, the police in this town really suck.”

“Listen to me, will you? We have time to get to the hospital. It’s seven minutes from here when we drive the speed limit. I’m not giving birth in seven minutes.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I know the longer we sit around here arguing the more time we’re wasting.”

“Point taken. Let’s go.”

About forty-five minutes later, he’s glaring at me while holding our baby boy.

He covers the baby’s ears and says, “Had time my ass. We almost didn’t make it.”

The doctor laughs. “I have to admit, that was one of the fastest deliveries I’ve been a part of.”

“You mean it could have gone faster?” Cash asks, appalled.

She nods, walking over to where he’s standing. “But look at it this way, less time means you get your perfect baby boy quicker. The nurse will be back in soon to help you get started with his first feeding.”

“He is pretty perfect,” Cash agrees, looking down at him.

“Can I hold him?” I ask.

Cash actually seems to consider my question before he brings him to me.

“Isn’t he beautiful?”

“Look at that dark hair. Is it too soon to think he looks like you?”

I swear I see his chest puff out. “Of course he does.”

“Is Brooklyn here yet?”

He looks at his phone and checks the location detector app. “Three minutes away.”

“I feel so bad. She wanted to be here.”

“I’m going to pull out my gentleman card and not remind you that you were the one who said it wouldn’t happen this fast.”

I choke on a laugh, which stirs the baby. “That’s very kind of you.”

“You’re welcome. Hadley?”

“Hmm?”

He leans down and kisses my forehead, then presses his against mine. “Thank you. You amaze me. You were so strong

and calm and I'm sorry for freaking out before we got here."

"You were pretty amazing once we got here, though. I was only calm because of you."

"I was a mess on the inside."

I reach up a hand and cup his cheek. "I know."

There's a soft knock on the door and a nurse pops her head in. "You have your first visitor."

I smile, knowing it's Brooklyn.

"Oh my gosh," Brooklyn cries, rushing to my side. "I have a brother," she coos.

I gently place him in her arms and she takes a seat in the chair next to the bed.

"What's his name?"

"We wanted you to be here to help us decide. We're still between the three names."

"Well, you know I already vetoed Bronx. We're not going to be that family."

Cash laughs. "Come on, wouldn't that be cute? Brooklyn and Bronx?"

"It's bad enough that I'm named after the place where you two first hooked up, which still makes me feel all kinds of gross to even know. We aren't naming him Bronx."

Cash and I were just messing with her the night we mentioned that name. Not that it's not a cute name, but it's not for us.

"Okay, so that leaves..."

"Elias. We'll call him Eli for short."

That wasn't one of our names but I like it. I look to Cash who's nodding, leaning over Brooklyn to place a hand on our baby. "Elias Matthew Lake, welcome to the world, little man. You are so very loved."

Elias begins to fuss a little and Brooklyn hands him over to me. "Is he hungry?"

"Probably."

"Do you need me to get the nurse?"

I shake my head then change my mind. "I remember what to do but I better have them come in."

He steps out and quietly asks for a nurse to come in.

Once he's latched on, the nurse says, "You have a crowd waiting to come in. I won't send them in all at once, but when you're ready, let me know. And if you don't want visitors yet, I'll let them know."

"You'd have a riot on your hands if you don't let them come in. I'm up for visitors when he finishes."

She nods and tells us she'll be back to check on us soon.

"If you don't want everyone to come in, just say," Cash says. "They can come later. Or when we get home."

"I feel good and I know everyone is excited to see him."

We enjoy our quiet while Elias nurses and then Cash helps me use the restroom before the nurse starts letting the family in.

Leah, Stone, and my dad are the first to come in. My dad cries, so does Leah. Stone simply looks happy. When it's his turn to hold him, he says, "Hi there, Elias. I'm your papa. I'm going to teach you so many things."

Before my dad leaves, he gives me a kiss on the cheek. “I’m so proud of you, Hadley. Thank you for giving me the gift of being a grandad to your children.”

“Dad,” I say quietly.

“I love you, honey. Get some rest.”

“I will,” I promise.

Two hours later, I’m starting to feel a bit overwhelmed by so many people coming into the room and Cash notices so he begins to usher everyone out.

Trotter is the one who practically needs shoved out the door. I’m afraid he’ll be a pest, wanting to come over to see the baby daily.

Corbin hangs back because she and Brooklyn are having a girls’ night.

There’s a soft knock on the door and the nurse enters when Cash says, “Come in.”

“I’m so sorry, Hadley. There’s um, a police officer here? He says he needs to speak with you.”

I sit up. “What?”

“He said it’s important.”

“What the hell?” Cash grumbles.

Brooklyn holds up her hands. “I didn’t do anything.”

The door opens and an incredibly handsome man in uniform walks in. I’m positive I’ve met him before but I can’t place him.

“Ryker, you son of a bitch. I was about to start panicking wondering why a cop was here to see us.” They exchange a brief hug. “What are you doing here?”

He grins and if I wasn't ridiculously in love with my husband, I'm pretty sure I'd swoon.

"Had to meet the new member of the family."

"Did you use your badge to get in here?"

He shrugs a broad shoulder. "It has its perks. Hadley, we only met briefly at your reception before I got called in to work. So here's my official introduction. I'm Ryker. Cash and I went to school together."

"Nice to meet you. Officially."

"How are you feeling?"

"Tired."

"I'm sure." He nods, walking closer to me to get a peek at Elias.

"Name?" he asks Cash over his shoulder.

"Elias. Nine pounds, six ounces and twenty-one inches long."

Ryker's eyebrows raise. "Big boy."

"I'll have you know; she was dilated to a nine when we got to the hospital."

"Good thing you got here in time," he replies with a smirk, not bothered at all by Cash's comment. "He's a good-looking boy, you two. Congrats."

"Thanks, man."

"Freaking out yet?" Ryker wonders with a grin.

"Little bit," Cash admits. "When I got this one, she was already through this stage," he explains, pointing at Brooklyn.

"Brooklyn, right?"

She nods. “Yup.”

“I have a girl a few years younger than you. Her name’s Luna.”

Brooklyn’s eyes widen. “Luna?”

“Yeah. You know her?”

“No, but my cousin has mentioned her before.”

“Cody?” I question.

“Well, it’s certainly not Lydia. She’s not talking yet.”

Ryker gives Cash a look then I watch as his eyes meet Corbin, who’s been suspiciously quiet in the corner of the room.

“Corbin, why are you hiding back there?”

“Taking it all in,” she replies. “How ya doing, Ryker?”

“Pretty good. You?”

“Better now. I’ve got a new nephew to spoil. Brooklyn and I were just about to head out, though.”

“I’ll walk you.”

“Thanks for coming by.”

“Couldn’t resist.”

Once everyone is out the door, Cash takes Elias from my arms and cradles him against his chest.

“Maybe I’m way off here, but I think there’s something between Ryker and Corbin.”

“Pardon?”

“Did you really not hear me or are you wondering why I said that?”

“There’s nothing between my sister and my best friend.”

“If you say so. I saw something when they looked at each other.”

“No way. You’re way off.”

“We’ll see.”

“Yeah. We will. We’ll see that I’m right and you’re wrong.”

“Okay.”

“I’m serious. There’s nothing there.”

“I’m not the one arguing about it anymore.”

But I know what I saw. The way Corbin was staring at Ryker while he was talking to us and how Ryker’s eyes lit up when he saw her... there’s something there. Maybe they don’t realize it yet, but I see the next Lake sibling falling soon.

Acknowledgments

If you receive my newsletter, you know 2022 wasn't our year. It started out pretty good but from May through the end of November, we had our share of struggles. I don't say this to make anyone feel bad for me as I know that others have much harder challenges than we faced this year. However, the fact that I'm able to sit here and type these acknowledgments for Effortless means so much to me. For months I couldn't write. I'd open my computer and nothing would come out of my brain. And then it clicked. And I'm so dang grateful.

God was with us this year so many times. From saving our son from what should have been a fatal accident, me from what could have been a fatal allergic reaction to a hornet sting, and countless other times we felt His presence in our lives. He's the reason I find peace in the chaos. A month ago I was feeling particularly overwhelmed. To the point that I locked myself in our bedroom closet and simply cried out to Him. I remember feeling so broken that day. As if everything around me was falling apart and I was grasping for help. He gave me the help I needed. I was at a low point and He lifted me out of the trenches and held my hand. A couple days after those moments in the closet, the words started coming to me for Effortless. He is the One to thank over and over again not just for this book, but for the plethora of other blessings in my life.

My husband and children deserve a round of applause for their support. I almost gave up writing. I was so ready to throw in the towel because I could no longer see it working for me. Sales were way down. The words weren't coming – at all. But

they encouraged me to keep trying. To keep going. And if they hadn't done so, this book wouldn't be in your hands right now.

Mom, if you're reading this, I sincerely hope you avoided the chapters I begged you not to read. If you didn't, well, it's your own fault and you have no one to blame but yourself.

Jill, I came to you in desperation and you didn't even blink at once again being my emotional support. You truly amaze me and I can't thank you enough.

Kate, not only do you create the most beautiful covers and teasers, seeing your name pop up on my phone is one of the highlights of my day. Thanks for being my friend. Let's eat some nuggies from McDoodles to celebrate.

Rach, when I was at a low point, I reached out to you and you gave me what I needed. Friendship. Thank you for offering me a moment of peace and understanding.

Julie Deaton, girl. I'M SO SORRY I PUT YOU THROUGH THAT. Every release I think I'm going to do better but this year... well, you were there. You know how often I pushed the deadline and you never wavered. You are my hero.

Kaitie, thanks for being my friend and constant with every release.

Author friends, you know who you are. Thanks for being sounding boards and simply awesome humans.

Bloggers, thank you for sticking with me. Your support in every single release means so much to me. And know that your work is seen and appreciated.

Early readers, wow. Your words of love for Effortless made the struggles to get here so worth it.

[Jennifer's Java Girls](#), what can I say except THANK YOU.
From the bottom of my mushy heart, thank you.

And to you, the reader of Effortless. I hope you loved it.
Thank you for choosing my book to read when there are
thousands others to choose from.

Forbidden Preview

RYKER AND HADLEY'S book is coming soon!

Keep reading for a sneak peek of Forbidden, the next book in the Lake Family series of novels!

Forbidden (c) Jennifer Van Wyk 2022

Unedited and subject to change

Prologue

Ryker

17-years-old

“We can't leave yet. Corbin's going to be here in a few minutes and she wants to see us before we leave.”

My heart beats double time just hearing Corbin's name.

I glance at my date for prom and can't help but wish it was Corbin instead. I would never have had the courage to ask her, though. Especially considering she's in college now and I'm her little brother's friend. I can only imagine what Cash would

have had to say about that. Dating his sister has always felt forbidden. An unspoken rule not to even consider breaking.

Cash's date huffs in annoyance and his mom, Leah, does her best to make everything better by offering to take more pictures of us.

That seems to help a little.

We stand dutifully in the backyard as Leah takes more pictures, all the while his younger brothers, Brock and Boone and Brock's friend Naomi stand to the side making fun of us.

"Oh my gosh! Look at you!" Corbin's voice floats over to me and my eyes immediately dart in her direction.

She's even more gorgeous than she was the last time I saw her. She's wearing a pair of running shorts and a Tennessee Volunteers t-shirt with her hair up in a high ponytail. There's nothing particularly special about what she's wearing that should give me this type of reaction but here I am, sucking in air to stop myself from getting an erection in front of Cash's entire family and my date. Tuxedo pants are not good erection hidiers.

"Hey, Cor, nice of you to finally show up," Cash grumbles.

She cocks one hip to the side and places a hand on it. "Sorry that I needed to stop for gas. But I'm here now. Can I get a picture with you two before you go?"

Both of us?

There's no way I can stand near her.

I've had a serious crush on Corbin Rae for going on five years and have done my best to steer clear as much as possible.

"Get over here," Cash tells her.

“Us too?” Cash’s date asks and he shakes his head.

“No,” he says simply.

The girls look mildly hurt but move out of the way when Corbin stands between us, wrapping her arms around both our waists.

“Smile!” Leah cheers as she snaps what has to be a hundred of us in the exact same pose. “Boys and Naomi, get in there, too,” she orders to Brock and Boone.

“Why us?” while Naomi cheers, “Yay!”

“Because I’m your mother and I said so.”

They grumble but don’t argue anymore.

After another couple of minutes of picture taking where Brock and Boone suddenly decided it was fun and had to come up with funny poses for all of us, we’re finally released.

I tug on the bow tie around my neck, feeling as if it’s choking the life out of me and it comes undone.

“You’re hopeless,” Corbin teases, pushing my hands away when I fumble around the material to get it put back on. “Let me.”

I turn my head to the side, willing myself not to inhale to get a whiff of her floral scent, and fist my hands at my sides.

Her fingers brush against the skin of my neck causing a ripple of awareness through my body and when I look down at her out of the corner of my eye, all I see is the top of her head.

Thank goodness I can’t look into her eyes.

That would have done me in. Green with flecks of brown sprinkled through them.

Her eyes should be in commercials for makeup.

“There,” she says. “That’s better. You had it a notch too tight.”

“Thanks,” I croak, taking two steps back from her before I do something that will end up getting me punched by her brothers, and likely her.

“You’re welcome. Have fun tonight!” she chirps, as if her mere presence isn’t wreaking havoc on my body.

I clear my throat. “Yeah. We will.”

Once we’re in the car, I breathe a sigh of relief. I made it through being around Corbin and didn’t make a fool of myself. Didn’t drop down on one knee and profess my love for her and beg her to give us a chance.

I might only be seventeen-years-old but that doesn’t mean I don’t know how I feel.

And Corbin Rae is the one for me.

I just have to get her to see it first.

25-years-old

“I’m pregnant.”

“Say what?” I shout.

“I’m pregnant, Ryker.”

“How? I mean, we’ve been so careful!”

“I don’t know. Honestly, I don’t. This isn’t exactly how I planned my life to go, either.”

“Amber. We’re not ready for this. We’ve only been together a few months.”

She cries and I immediately feel bad for saying what I just did.

“Sorry, sorry. This just... it surprised me is all.”

“Surprised me, too. I took seven tests. All were positive, in case you were wondering.”

“Shit. Sorry, I didn’t mean that. Again.”

“Oh trust me, I’ve been saying much worse.”

“Did the condom break? I don’t remember that happening, though.”

She shakes her head and shrugs. “Honestly, I have no clue, either. I’m on birth control and we always used condoms. Even that time we got carried away in the bathroom at the bar in Nashville, you still put one on.”

“This is crazy. We’re having a baby?”

“Is that what you want?”

“Well, it’s not like we’re in high school anymore. This isn’t ideal but a baby is always a blessing, right?” I ask.

I’m all for pro-choice, but for me personally, I believe that abortion should only be considered in certain situations.

She blows out a breath. “Yes. I think the same.”

“I guess we’re going to be parents then.”

“Wow. Parents. I’m way too immature for this,” she laughs.

I chuckle. “I guess we’ll figure it out, right?”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“Hey.” I pull her close, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and kissing the top of her head. “This isn’t on you. We were both involved whenever it happened.”

She nods. “I know. But for some reason I feel responsible.”

“There’s no one to blame here, Amber. We’ve been thrown a curve ball but that doesn’t mean we have to strike out.”

“Did you just reference baseball after I told you I was having a baby?” she jokes.

“I panicked. It was the first thing I could think of that made sense.”

She sighs and sits up. “Are we really doing this?”

“Yup. We’re really doing this. We’re going to have a baby together.”

“Wow. Don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t even know if I’m in love with you.”

That makes me laugh. Hard. “I’m not sure, either, but maybe we’ll get there eventually. Maybe we won’t. If we don’t, we’ll have to figure out how to co-parent like the badasses we are. And if we do, maybe we can think of long term. That’s for our future selves to worry about.”

“Okay. That’s a good plan. We’ll let future Ryker and future Amber deal with it.”

I smile at her. “See? It’ll all work out.”

30-years-old

It didn't work out. At all.

Amber and I fell in love. Or at least thought we did.

But it didn't last long before she realized being a wife and mother and working part time at the Red Oak police station where I'm an officer wasn't for her.

Maybe it was the fact that we rushed it after feeling the pressure to get married and do the right thing.

Maybe it was the fact that I work weird hours.

Maybe it was moving to Red Oak, my hometown, where she didn't know anyone and felt trapped in the small town.

Or, more likely, it was all of it combined with her realizing that she'd rather be with the guy she cheated on me with.

The only good thing that came out of the clusterfuck of the last five years was Luna. My daughter is absolutely the best thing, hands down, that has ever happened to me.

I don't know what Amber was thinking, leaving the both of us the way she did, but it's her loss, not mine. If she doesn't want to be a mother, then I'll be the best father *and* mother anyone has ever seen.

Help me Out?

Help me out?

Did you enjoy your time spent with Cash, Hadley and the entire Lake Family? I'd love to hear your thoughts! Reviews are so vital for authors. They not only help other readers decide whether or not to pick up a book, they also help us improve our craft. If you are able, I'd love for you to leave a quick review on Amazon, Goodreads and/or BookBub. It doesn't need to be long or detailed – short and sweet works just as great!

Thank you so much!

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[JVW Blogger List](#)

About the Author

From the Ground Up was Jennifer's first published novel and now that she was bitten by the writing bug, has no intention of ever stopping. Jennifer makes her home in small town Iowa with her high school sweetheart, three beautiful, hilarious and amazing kids, one crazy Jack Russell terrier and a snotty cat. This is where her love for all things reading, baking, and cooking happen. Jennifer's family enjoys camping, boating, and spending time outside as much as possible. You'll be her best friend if you can make her laugh and follow up with asking her what to read next. When she's not writing, you can find her cheering the loudest at her kids' sporting events (read as: embarrassing them), sipping coffee on her deck or iced tea out of a mason jar with her Kindle in her lap or binging on Netflix with her family.

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